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# BRO AND THE BEAST

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# **BRO AND THE BEAST**

## PART V

L.C. DAVIS

JOEL ABERNATHY

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## **It's about to get meta.**

After the portal back to the world of *The Wolf's Mate* fast-forwarded Brad into the final days of his pregnancy, things are weirder than ever, and there's little time left for him and Raul to keep the infamous alpha Constantine from threatening their Happily Ever After.

When Constantine shows up offering a trade in exchange for a truce between their packs, he seeks the one thing Brad isn't willing to give up for peace: his twin brother, Devon.

With Raul and the rest of the pack more than willing to back him up, Brad is ready for the final countdown. He just isn't counting on Devon to be the one to introduce a plot twist that will change everything.

CHAPTER  
**ONE**



My fur bristles as Constantine approaches, his lupine form towering over us both. I keep myself between him and Mina, snarling protectively even though he hasn't made a move for either of us.

*Mina, go back to the house,* I tell her telepathically, struggling to sound calm even though I'm freaking the hell out.

She hesitates, staring up at his golden eyes, frozen in place.

*Go!* I snap, baring my teeth as I try to break her out of her trance.

She startles, then runs off into the woods.

"Hello again, Brad," Constantine says calmly as he shifts back into his human form, which is no less menacing. His gaze travels over me, a hint of curiosity in his eyes. "You look... different from the last time we met."

I snarl in response. Is this motherfucker calling me fat?

Why did he shift back into his human form? That's the only thing keeping me from pissing myself at this point. If he meant to attack, he'd still be a wolf... I think.

My hackles raise as he takes another step forward, human or not.

A roar shatters the silence as Raul charges through the trees, slamming into Constantine. They crash into an oak together, wood splintering beneath their combined weight.

Raul pins Constantine against the trunk, claws digging into his shoulders. Constantine grunts but doesn't fight back, gaze locked on mine.

"I mean you no harm," he says, voice hard as stone. "If I did, I would have come with an army."

Raul growls, unconvinced, and tightens his grip on the other alpha.

*Raul. Calm down,* I plead with my mate through our bond, begging him not to provoke Constantine into an all-out war.

*Calm down?* Raul echoes. *Now who's a hypocrite?*



I roll my eyes. *If he's here in his human form, he wants to talk. Just... hear him out. No telling whether he has backup watching.*

Raul hesitates, but I can tell he's considering my warning. He reluctantly loosens his hold on Constantine and steps back, but stays coiled between us, hackles raised.

"Speak, then leave," Raul snarls as he shifts back into his human form, and I do the same. "Before I kill you for trespassing on my territory."

Constantine's eyes narrow. "I could say the same for you. Yet here we are."

My heart pounds as the tension thickens. One wrong move could send us spiraling into violence. I inch closer to Raul, pressing against his side to calm him. He exhales slowly, but keeps his gaze fixed on Constantine.

"I only set foot on your land to get my mate," Raul snarls.

"A mate who wasn't present on Grayridge lands, despite your rash assumptions," Constantine counters. "And for the record, I'm here for the very same reason."

I see the rage flare up in Raul's eyes in response to those words, and for a moment, I'm afraid he's going to snap and attack him. Instead, he clenches his fists, voice low and guttural as he growls, "Brad is *not* your fucking mate."

Constantine holds his stare, calm and calculating as ever as his eyes flicker over to me, then back at Raul. "I wasn't speaking of him."

It takes a few seconds for me to process what he's saying, but I can tell from the look on Raul's face he still has no idea what Constantine is talking about.

I wish I could say the same.

The feeling of dread that's been pooling in my stomach ever since Devon told me about the strange dreams he's been having about a wolf with light fur becomes a flood sloshing over the dam of my mind, drenching everything in its path.

"No!" I snarl with enough force that even Raul looks at me in confusion.

A hint of a smirk tugs on Constantine's lips, turning his face even more smug than usual. "It seems I've struck a nerve."

Raul looks between us, his eyes narrowing as he studies Constantine with even greater suspicion.

Constantine sighs, regarding us with a mix of irritation and resignation. "Fate has a cruel sense of humor. Your brother has been dreaming of me, just as I have been dreaming of him, has he not?" he challenges, his gaze drifting over to me.

I bristle as he confirms what I was already afraid of. The one outcome that's even worse than Constantine coming here to try to take me again. "Not Devon," I say through my teeth. "He's not yours."

Raul's eyes widen as the rest of the puzzle pieces fit into place. He scoffs. "You're joking."

"I'm afraid not," Constantine says in a rueful tone. Now I have to add being insulted on Devon's behalf to everything else I'm feeling at this moment.

"This is absurd," Raul says, frowning. "You haven't even met him."

"That isn't exactly true," Constantine says, giving me a look of challenge. "Is it, Brad?"

I grit my teeth, my nails digging into my palms. It's all I can do not to launch myself at this guy like a fucking football. "The portal," I mutter, thinking back to the way Constantine looked when he was staring through it. He was frozen, like time was standing still, and now I know the truth.

He was seeing Devon, too.

"I imprinted on him then," Constantine says in a matter-of-fact tone. Like he's already gone over all this before, and he's weary of having to repeat himself a second time.

"That's impossible," Raul insists. "You can't imprint through a fucking portal!"

"And yet here we are," Constantine says. "What benefit would I receive for making this up, or telling you, of all people? When I saw him, I felt it. Here." He taps the center of his chest, like that explains anything.

Like that makes this okay.

Raul looks ready to explode, which is still a hell of a lot calmer than I am at the moment. "Stay away from him," he snarls. "Devon belongs to my pack. To my family."

I'm touched that Raul is coming to my twin's defense, even if I'm still afraid this scene is going to turn bloody.

And this time, there's no benevolent neurotic writer around to make sure all the frayed edges get sewn into a nice and neat happily ever after.

"I'd rather not resort to violence," Constantine says, his tone infuriatingly reasonable. "But Devon is my mate. I won't stop until I've claimed what's mine."

"He's not a possession for you to claim!" I shout. I can't hold back anymore. The urge to rip out Constantine's throat with my teeth is primal and undeniable. "You were making our lives hell until you disappeared. You fucking kidnapped me! And now you want me to hand over my twin because you got smacked up the side of the head with some dumbass werewolf soul boner?"

Constantine blinks and glances over at Raul. "Is he always so...?"

"Vulgar?" Raul offers proudly. "Yes."

Constantine sighs. "Imprinting or not, the fact remains that a treaty with the Blue Ridge pack has been signed, making Brad my rightful mate. However," he adds pointedly, like he's doing us all a great favor, "I am willing to forego my claim and come to a peace agreement that would forestall the impending war between our packs in exchange for Devon."

Holy shit. This guy is serious.

That realization occurs right before the fear sets in that Raul is going to consider his offer. I know he cares about Devon because I do, and because he's just that kind of alpha—that kind of person—but the fact remains that war between Grayridge and Stone Hollow has been a constant threat for years.

A war that's already claimed so many lives, Raul's parents included.

Rather than show any sign of backing down, though, his golden eyes steel. "Devon is a member of my pack," he repeats, no room for challenge or hesitation in his steady voice. "He won't be going anywhere. Certainly not with you."

Constantine's eyes narrow, and for a few moments, they have some kind of alpha male staring contest that leaves the air so tense you could walk on it. I can tell this isn't the way Constantine thought this encounter would be going.

And why would it be? He's used to getting his way by force.

Why would he expect this to be any different?

Unfortunately for him, this time he's set his sights on something that belongs to me, and no amount of entitlement is going to convince me to hand it over. Knowing I have my mate to back me up means more than I can say.

"There's something I don't get," I say, hoping to defuse the tension before it can boil over. "You've been gone ever since we got back. If you imprinted on him through the portal, why didn't you just try to take him then?"

"It's a good question," Raul says, folding his arms as he continues standing between us. I can tell he hasn't let his guard down once. That makes two of us.

Constantine seems annoyed by the question, but if he thinks I'm just going to hand Devon over because he "asked nicely"—or at all—he's not quite the cliché evil genius he's written to be.

"There was much to consider," he finally answers, and for the first time since I've met him, I get the feeling he's choosing his words carefully. "Much to process."

A flash of overprotective indignation runs through me. "What the hell is there to process?" I snap. "What, you think you're too good for my brother?"

Constantine blinks at me, and even Raul doesn't seem to know what to do with my outburst.

"We don't want him to take Devon, remember?" Raul mutters to me.

"I know that!" I hiss. "But that doesn't mean he's gotta be uppity about it. Fuckin' prick."

Raul sighs.

"You just got through throwing a tantrum over my claim to your brother," Constantine says, arching an eyebrow. "And now you're angry that I took this long to claim him?"

"I can feel two things at once, asshole!" Hell, now that I'm pregnant, I can feel about a thousand things at once, half of them conflicting.

Constantine's eyes glimmer with something too close to amusement for his wellbeing, and when I feel Raul place a hand on my shoulder like he's the one that needs to hold me back, I realize I'm wound tight like I'm gonna spring.

"You have your hands full," Constantine remarks.

"Happily," Raul counters.

"In any case," Constantine continues, "as you've already found out, time passes differently on this side of the portal." He pauses to cast a pointed glance at my pregnant belly. "I made the choice not to follow you back into your world, and I came through what I would estimate to be a matter of minutes before you did, and yet I've been here for months. More than enough time to plan and launch an attack on your pack, if I wished to do so."

I clench my jaw, annoyed by the fact that he's right. He could have done a lot of damage, which lends more credibility to the fact that he's serious about imprinting on Devon. And that scares me even more than anything else he might have planned. "So what, you were just sitting around with your thumb up your ass, trying to decide if you want to 'burden' yourself with my brother?"

Irritation flashes briefly across the alpha's face. "Contrary to what you seem to believe, it's no intended slight against your brother. But imprinting itself is a burden. A weakness."

"If you think that, then you're still the same selfish manchild you always were," Raul snaps before I can say anything, leaving me as surprised as Constantine seems. "To imprint on an omega is to be bestowed a rare and priceless honor. A gift to be cherished, not a burden to be weighed."

I can't help but smile a little, despite our current circumstances. There's that over-the-top nobility that made it impossible not to fall in love with him.

Cliché as hell, but noble.

The scowl on Constantine's face makes it clear that trait is lost on him. "A responsibility, then," he concedes.

"You didn't seem to have any problem with taking on that 'responsibility' when you made me the Princess Peach to your Bowser," I said pointedly.

Constantine blinks at me. "The what now?"

"Nothing. I forget this is an alternate universe," I mutter, pinching the bridge of my nose. "My point still stands."

"Imprinting is different," Raul says pointedly, still staring Constantine down in challenge. He sneers as he adds, "Any omega can be taken as a mate to be sequestered and trotted out as a status symbol for special occasions, but a destined mate? For someone who's lived a selfish life devoted only to conquest and power, it's damn near a travesty. For the first time in his life, it means he might actually have to think about something greater than himself."

I can tell those words have struck a nerve, and for a second, I think Constantine is going to attack here and now. Instead, he looks between us, curling his lip slightly in disdain. "I will take my leave, but

this isn't over," he says firmly as he walks off, casting a pointed glance over his shoulder. "You'll be hearing from me soon."

"Don't be in any rush," Raul says in a bone-dry tone, earning another glare from Constantine before the other alpha shifts back into his wolf form and disappears into the shadows of the woods in a white flash.

"And here I didn't think you had any smartassery in you," I say once I'm sure he's out of earshot.

Raul turns to face me, a small smile on his face as the tension melts off us both. "I learned from the best," he teases, pulling me into his arms.

I relax against him, finally letting myself breathe. "Thanks for having my back. And Devon's."

Raul looks confused as he stares down at me, stroking the hair out of my eyes. "You're my mate, and now, he's my brother too. No one is going to touch either of you as long as I'm here."

I know those words are meant to be comforting, and they are. But they're also an unwelcome reminder of just how badly this can go.

I know what Constantine does to people who stand in the way of what he wants.

And the people I love most just happen to be on both sides of that equation.

CHAPTER  
**TWO**





By the time we get back within sight of the mansion, Curtis, Lenore, and the others are all swarming. I take it Mina delivered the message of Constantine's arrival.

Lenore rushes over to us, glancing at us both with concern in her eyes, and Trent is close behind. "Are you all right?" she asks, looking between us. "Mina said Constantine--?"

"He was here," Raul says in a grave tone. "But he left. Send out a perimeter check to make sure it stays that way," he adds, turning to Curtis.

The other alpha nods and shifts seamlessly into his wolf form, letting out a howl to stir the other troops into formation. Within seconds, wolves with fur in every color are spilling out of the woods and disappearing back into the foliage we just emerged from to protect the pack lands.

I know they won't find him, though. Constantine is too smart for that—and he's right about one thing. If he wanted to come here with the intention of attacking while our guard was down, he would have, and we never would have seen it coming.

I find myself zoning out as Raul gives the others the rundown on everything that just happened before heading back into the mansion to check on Mina. She's sitting with Luna and Devon in the living room and leaps up as soon as I come in, tears brimming in her eyes as she runs to me.

"Brad!" she cries, throwing her arms as far around my belly as they'll wrap.

I hug her back, petting her hair. "It's okay, kid. Raul's fine. Constantine left already."

"Why was he here?" she asks, her eyes still shining with uncharacteristic fear.

I force a smile, stuffing my nerves down for her sake. She's already been through enough and I don't want to add anything to that. "He just came here to talk. Grown-up stuff." I can tell from the look in her eyes she doesn't buy it, but I nod toward the stairs anyway. "Now go on. I know for a fact you didn't finish all your math homework earlier."

I half-expect her to argue, and I can tell she's upset if only by the fact that she doesn't. Chaos and disobedience are kind of Mina's default state, so when she minds, it's a red flag. "Okay," she murmurs, trudging upstairs.

Luna casts a worried glance after her, then comes over to meet me alongside Devon. "Constantine

really just left?" she asks doubtfully.

"It's complicated," I mutter, looking over at my brother. A part of me wants to tell him this alone, but Luna is the one who literally wrote the book on all this, even if it has clearly deviated from her original plan. Maybe she knows something I can use to get us out of this.

"Complicated how?" Devon asks, frowning in concern. I can tell from the look in his eye he knows something's up. And it figures, since he knows me better than anyone else.

I take a deep breath, trying to figure out where to even start. "Constantine thinks he... imprinted on you," I finally blurt out.

Devon blinks at me, startled. "What? Please tell me you're joking..."

"Trust me, this isn't my idea of funny," I grumble.

Devon's eyes just get wider. "How is that even possible?"

"I don't know," I admit. "But he seemed pretty damn sure of it."

"That's ridiculous," Devon protests. "We haven't even met!"

"I know," I say. "Trust me, you're preaching to the choir. For all we know, it's just bullshit." Something occurs to me and I glance over at Luna, who seems as confused as the rest of us. "Hey, did Constantine ever imprint on anyone in the book?"

She hesitates. "No. I mean, I originally planned on him getting killed off in the series finale by Catalina, but that obviously didn't happen."

"So he never had a romantic arc?" I press. "There's no one from this universe that Devon could've gotten swapped for like I did with Catalina?"

Luna pauses like she's considering it. "No, I don't think so. But it's pretty clear this isn't the world I came up with. Not completely."

"You got that right," I mutter, looking up as Raul walks in through the front door. "Look, Dev, don't worry about it. We told him to fuck off. That creep's not coming anywhere near you."

Devon frowns as Raul comes over to drape an arm around my shoulder. "What do you mean, you told him to fuck off? He's got an army."

"As do we," says Raul. "You're a member of my pack, and as such, you're under my protection. Constantine can't try to take you by force without it being a declaration of war."

"Yeah, and isn't that what everyone's been trying to avoid?" Devon challenges. "War?"

"What are you saying?" I ask, staring him down. "Don't tell me you actually want to go with that asshole."

"No, of course not," Devon mumbles, looking away. "I'm just saying, it's probably not the best idea to piss him off. Not when everything is already on such shaky ground."

He has a point, even if it's not one I want to acknowledge. I'm trying to turn over a new leaf and be less pushy, but when it comes to him wanting to throw himself on the pyre with someone I know to be extremely dangerous, how the hell am I supposed to just sit back and let it happen?

"We're not going to war," I say firmly. "But we're not handing you over either. That's out of the question."

Devon is giving me that look again. That stubborn look that says he can't be reasoned with. I'd know, considering it's practically like looking into a mirror.

Man, I'm annoying sometimes. Especially when I make that face he's wearing.

"I should... let you guys discuss this as a family," Luna says awkwardly before slipping out of the room. I have no idea where Reese is, since he's usually following her like a lost puppy. Probably hogging the gourmet kitchen, considering how much of a food nerd the guy is.

"There's nothing to discuss," Devon says with an edge in his tone as he glances up at me. "Brad has spoken. As usual."

"What the hell is that supposed to mean?" I call after him.

He ignores me, of course.

I let out a growl of frustration. Whenever my emotions spike, I get reminded of the beast that lives inside my skin now, but other than that, it feels like things are pretty much the same. Almost like it was always there, even when I didn't realize it.

Raul puts a hand on my shoulder, squeezing gently. "It's fine," he says. "We're not going to let anything happen to Devon. I promise."

I take a deep breath, trying to steady myself. Raul's touch helps, his warmth seeping into my skin. "I know you won't," I say. "I just don't get why Devon's acting so... chill about all this. Constantine's dangerous. He's not someone you want to mess with. Devon read the book, he knows what that guy is capable of."

"Perhaps he's trying not to panic," Raul suggests. "This is a lot to take in, even for someone who's familiar with our world. Imprinting, alphas, omegas... it's different experiencing it versus just reading about it, I'm sure."

"Yeah, but..." I shake my head. "Devon's smarter than this. He wouldn't just roll over for Constantine. Not if he understands the kind of monster that guy is."

"Fear can make people do strange things. Things they normally wouldn't consider." His hand slides down to my lower back, pulling me in against his side. "Just try to be patient."

I sigh, leaning into his warmth. "You're too good at calming me down, you know that?"

Raul's chest rumbles with a low chuckle. "One of the many benefits of being an alpha. We're good at soothing our omegas."

"Yeah, yeah." I roll my eyes, but I can't stop smiling. Raul has a way of making me feel... safe.

Protected. Like everything will be okay as long as I'm with him.

Guess imprinting isn't all bad after all.

CHAPTER

# THREE



The cribs are *perfect*.

White wood, hand-carved vines twisting along the slats and posts, football-printed sheets, fluffy blankets.

Everything is ready to welcome our little bundles of joy into the world, and I'm more than ready to be rid of the constant indigestion and morning sickness, so why the hell don't I feel ready?

It's been a little over two weeks since Constantine showed up, smirking like the smug son of a bitch he is. Devon hasn't spoken to me much at all since, and while he isn't exactly giving me the silent treatment, hell could freeze over from those icy stares across the table.

All of a sudden, I'm starting to feel like the villain rather than the main character.

It isn't like he's the only one who wants to prevent a war. Raul has been out at one meeting after the next, and while I know he's trying to keep me on a need-to-know basis to avoid stressing me out, I'm not as pissed as I usually would be about that.

The truth is, I'm already nearing my limit. I haven't had any more dreams of Constantine since his appearance in the woods, but that doesn't stop him from occupying my every waking thought.

He's somehow even more menacing in reality.

And now he wants my brother.

Somehow, that's a hell of a lot worse than when he just wanted me.

I want to believe that Stone Hollow would wipe the floor with Constantine and his merry band of bitches if it comes down to a conflict, but history and the nervous energy that hangs around Raul and the others like a dark cloud is proof enough that that's wishful thinking.

But when the alternative is handing over my brother to that fucking psycho, there's no real alternative. We just have to wait, and prepare, and hope Constantine backs off.

Considering his words in the forest, I'm still holding out hope that's a possibility. He makes it sound like imprinting on Devon is a burden, and as much as that enrages me, it beats the idea of him running off with my brother.



I'm so lost in thought I don't even realize I'm alone until I looked up and see Devon outside the room. It's rare for me to get caught off guard these days, but I guess my wolfy nature hasn't fully integrated yet.

Devon is leaning against the doorframe, arms crossed over his chest as he watches me. "Haven't you folded those same onesies a thousand times by this point?"

Heat creeps up the back of my neck. I glance down at the pile of clothes in my hands, tiny socks and shirts I've been meticulously sorting by size and color for the past hour.

"The nesting instincts are kicking in, I guess," I mumble.

Devon sighs and pushes off the doorframe, coming to sit on the floor beside me. "Look, I'm sorry I've been so cold lately. I know this whole situation with Constantine showing up out of nowhere has been stressful for you too."

I busy myself with folding a particularly stubborn blanket. "Stressful is one way to put it."

He purses his lips and I can tell he wants to say something else. Something he doesn't seem to know how to approach, and I hate how common that's become for both of us. Especially when we could once tell each other everything and anything.

"You gonna tell me what's really going on, or do I have to guess?" I ask.

"I've been having the dreams again," he says quietly, surprising me with straightforwardness when I expect more evasion and half-truths.

"About Constantine?" I ask warily, even though I'm not sure I want to know the answer.

Devon nods. "They're getting more intense. More vivid. I can smell him, feel him, hear him..." He swallows hard. "When I wake up, it's hard to know what's real and what's not."

"It's simple," I say, setting the stack of clothes in my hands down to face him, holding his gaze. "Everything Constantine says is a lie, and everything he does is calculated manipulation. You can't trust him, Devon."

"I know that," he mutters.

"Do you?" I challenge. "Because it sure seems like you're getting caught up in his bullshit and you haven't even met the guy."

"Look, I know you're just trying to protect me," Devon says with that fiery look in his eyes. "You're always trying to protect me, but at some point, you're going to have to let me handle things for myself. Especially now that you're about to become a dad."

I bristle at his words. "If you think I can't be overprotective of you, then, Mina, and everyone else in this circus, you seriously underestimate my multitasking capabilities."

Devon snorts a laugh, but his amusement doesn't touch his eyes. There are dark circles underneath them, like he hasn't been sleeping well, and I can guess why.

Before he can say anything else, the doorbell rings, and even though it's usually an innocuous sound,

I'm so on edge it makes me jump.

"I'll get it," Devon says, already heading for the stairs.

"No, stay here," I tell him. "I don't want you answering the door right now."

He frowns. "Why not?"

"Just let me handle it."

I hurry downstairs, bracing myself for whatever's on the other side of that door. Reese is already there, hand on the knob, and he shoots me a look over his shoulder.

"It's cool, I got this," he says.

"Wait." I put my hand on his arm before he can open it.

Through the frosted glass, I can make out the vague shape of a man on the porch. Too big to be human. My heart kicks into overdrive.

"Brad," Reese says in a low voice. "You're freaking out over nothing. It's probably just a package delivery or something."

"Then why does it feel like the air before a storm?" I whisper.

Realizing he's right, and I'm being way too paranoid, I let him open the door. There's no way with all the security Raul has prowling through the woods these days Constantine would just be able to traipse up to our front door.

The shifter on the other side is tall and broad, but he's definitely a beta. I'm at least in tune enough with my wolfy side that I can pick up on the distinct scents of an alpha, and other omegas. Betas just smell like regular people.

"Good afternoon. My name is Gray. I'm a representative of the Council, and I'm looking for Raul," the wolf says gruffly.

"He's not here right now," I reply, squaring my shoulders. "I'm his mate. What do you want?"

The wolf's eyes rake over me dismissively. He holds out a folded piece of paper. "For him. From Constantine."

I snatch it from his hand, a spike of anger flaring in me at the audacity. Now he's got the Council acting like his gophers?

"Hey, you can't—" The messenger grimaces as I tear into the envelope like it's a half-price basket of wings during happy hour.

I scan the contents of the envelope quickly. It's an official summons from the Council, requesting Raul's presence for negotiations on neutral territory. I crumple the paper in my fist.

"Tell the Council to fuck off," I say coldly.

The messenger arches an eyebrow and looks from me to Reese and Devon, who's behind me in the

landing now. "The Council has requested an immediate response. If we haven't received one by tomorrow morning, we'll send another message," he says pointedly, making it clear this isn't going to be the last I have to deal with him.

I shut the door before the asshole's even off the step, my heart and thoughts racing.

"Brad!" Devon cries, snatching the crumpled paper out of my hand. "You can't do that."

"I just did, didn't I?" I mutter, even though I know that's not going to be the end of it.

If only my life were that fucking simple.

CHAPTER  
**FOUR**



The crumpled tan paper crackles as Raul smooths it open. His eyes scan the summons, brows furrowed as we stand together in the locked study since Mina has a habit of making surprise appearances. Hell, even Curtis can't be bothered to fucking knock half the time.

I'm still reeling from the visit, and I guess my foolproof plan of tossing the summons in the trash wasn't so ironclad after all. I wish I could tell what Raul is thinking as he reads the writing intently, then glances back at me, folding out another crease.

"Did it come like that?" he asks in a dry tone that makes it clear he already knows the answer to that question.

I glance at the paper. "You're lucky I sent the messenger away in his original condition."

Raul chuckles, golden eyes gleaming in the dim light of the study. "We'll get through this," he says. "If Constantine is using the Council as his middlemen, that means he has no plans to attack anytime soon. He's trying to handle this diplomatically."

My hands curl into fists. "It means he hasn't given up."

"No," Raul agrees. "And I don't expect he will."

"Why the hell not?" I demand, frustration laced in my words. "It's clear that asshole doesn't want a mate for any of the usual reasons."

"It's not that simple," Raul answers. "Most alphas desire an omega because it's in our nature, yes, but there are practical benefits as well. More than that... there are drawbacks to not being with your mate."

"Drawbacks?" I ask warily. "You mean the whole feral thing?"

"Constantine hasn't marked Devon, and they haven't even met in person, so it would be limited," he says thoughtfully. "But there would still be discomfort. On Constantine's end, at least."

"What about Devon?" I ask, feeling another spike of panic.

"He's human," Raul answers. "And he's an omega in this world, just like you. He should be fine."

My shoulders sink down as I let out a breath I didn't realize I was holding.

Because apparently, I'm that cliché now.

"Is there anything he can force the Council to do?" My voice strains with the question that's been plaguing me ever since that fucker came to the door. "Can they make you hand him over?"

Raul's shoulders tense. He doesn't meet my gaze.

Dread pools in my gut. I know what's coming before he even says the words.

"Technically, yes," he answers. "But I won't let that happen."

"And what'll happen if you don't?" I press. "What can the Council do?"

More hesitation. "The Council takes mating very seriously. Constantine would need Devon's testimony to prove that he imprinted, most likely, but if he somehow managed and we refused to hand over his rightful mate... Stone Hollow would be considered in opposition to the Council."

"And what's the punishment for that?" I ask around the knot in my throat.

Raul has a somber expression and a tense tone as he answers. "Immediate expulsion from the Council."

His words hit me like a freight train. The fact that Constantine doesn't want to take on the entire Council all at once is the only real reason we're not at war right now, and if that barrier is removed...

We both know what's going to happen. Bloodshed. Our friends and family members on the front lines.

*Raul* on the front lines.

"It won't come to that," Raul says in a soft, reassuring tone. I'm not sure he can guarantee that, but when he talks in that soothing voice, it's easy to let myself live in delusion land.

"When do you have to go before the Council?" I ask.

"Getting it over sooner than later would be for the best," he answers, pausing like he's going to say something I dislike even more. "They'll want Devon there."

"Fuck no!" I blurt out. "If Constantine sees him in person--"

"I know," Raul assures me, crossing the room in a few quick strides. His arms wrap around me, enveloping me in his scent. "It's okay. They didn't specify it in the letter, so I can pretend like I didn't know. Buy us more time."

I bury my face in his chest, breathing him in. The anxious energy rushes through my veins, but with each inhale, my muscles start to unwind.

We stand entwined, the crumpled summons forgotten on the desk behind us. Raul's steady heartbeat pulses against my cheek. Here, wrapped in his arms, some of the fear fades away.

"I'm going with you," I mutter into his chest.

Raul heaves a weary sigh. "I suppose this is the point where we have a lengthy back and forth argument, where I say, 'Absolutely not,' and you say, 'Fuck you, I do what I want,' ad nauseum until



you try to punch me, sprain your wrist, and I have to distract you with a kiss."

I look up at him, mustering a half-hearted glare. "We can skip to the 'fuck you' part right now."

There's a gleam of mischief in his eyes as he reaches down to stroke his fingertips along the edge of my jaw. "Or we could skip really far ahead, right to the fucking part."

Heat flames in my face in response to his words, and that's not the only place it goes. I've given up on resisting the instantaneous horniness he's capable of stirring up in me with a single look, but it's still embarrassing.

Not enough to care half as much as I should, though.

"Just skip the whole argument and accept that I'm not letting you go without me, huh?" I ask dryly.

A smirk tugs at his lips, his eyes darkening with lust as they travel down my body. "You know, theoretically, I'm supposed to be the one in charge here."

"Yeah, sounds like a great theory to ponder in a study," I quip. "Not sure it's gonna hold out there, though."

Raul chuckles, leaning down to press his lips to mine. I'm not about to be swayed, but I have to admit, his tongue in my mouth makes a far more compelling argument than his words.

I moan as I slip my arms around his neck, pulling him closer. He growls in response, the sound vibrating through his chest into mine.

His hands slide down to grip my ass, squeezing hard enough to bruise as he grinds his hips against me. I can feel the hard length of his cock pressing into my stomach, and my own cock throbs in response.

"You think you're so clever, don't you?" Raul murmurs against my lips. "But I know exactly how to make you beg, little omega."

A shiver runs down my spine at the promise in his voice. I know he's not exaggerating. Raul has turned me inside out with pleasure too many times for me to doubt his skills.

"Little?" I echo in a flat tone. "Even you can barely get your arms around me."

"Now that isn't true," he says, proving it as he pulls me closer, still being gentle around the swollen beach ball under my shirt.

I tilt my head back as his lips move down my throat, baring my neck in submission that's more show than actual surrender. He's gonna have to work a little harder for that.

Raul growls again, the sound sending heat pooling low in my belly as he runs his tongue up along my neck. His hands tighten on my ass, grinding my cock against the hard muscle of his thigh.

I let out a low moan, my hands coming up to grip his shoulders. Raul knows exactly how to play my body, touching and teasing until I'm practically begging for more.

"Raul," I gasp out as he sucks a mark into the skin just above my collarbone.

He pulls back to look me in the eyes, his own dark with lust. "Yes, my love?"

"Fuck," I breathe. "I... I need you."

Those words darken his gaze, and he takes a step forward, pushing me back. He gently pushes me down onto the sofa, and my eyes widen as he sinks to his knees in front of me, spreading my legs open to settle between them.

"Kind of a hard angle," I remark, feeling a twinge of self-consciousness as his hands settle on my belly. Bizarre to go from having a six-pack to a full keg in such a short time.

"We'll make it work," Raul assures me, already unbuttoning my belt with haste that makes me realize he's still as attracted to me as he was before. And seeing this huge alpha who rules over not only his pack but all the others in the region down on his knees, hungry for my cock, is a mindfuck to say the least.

A good one.

I lean back to make it a little easier for him as he frees my cock from the confines of my jeans and boxers, trying to stifle a moan since we're not exactly alone in the house as he takes me into his mouth.

Fuck, he's good with his tongue.

And his hands... and everything else.

I bite my lip, trying to muffle the sounds trying to escape as Raul works me over with his talented mouth. His tongue swirls around the head of my cock before taking me deep, hollowing his cheeks as he sucks. I have to dig my fingers into his hair just to ground myself.

"Fuck," I gasp out as he does that thing with his tongue that never fails to make my toes curl.

The only warning I get is a rumbling growl before he's doubling down, sucking me hard enough that my vision whites out for a second.

It's too much—the risk of getting caught, the pregnancy hormones surging through me, the way he looks on his knees worshipping my cock. I'm already embarrassingly close, my balls tightening up.

"Raul, I'm gonna—" I try to warn him, tugging at his hair, but he just growls again and takes me even deeper. My orgasm hits me like a freight train, and I have to shove a fist in my mouth to muffle my cries as I come down his throat.

He works me through it until I'm shaking, oversensitive, and ready to beg for mercy. Only once I'm fully spent does he finally pull off, looking inordinately pleased with himself.

Okay, so maybe it's ordinally after all that.

I just slump bonelessly back against the couch, catching my breath. "You know, if you ever get tired of being regional alpha, you could make bank as a professional cock sucker."

"I think that's supposed to be a compliment?" he asks dryly, his tongue flicking out to lick the traces of my come off his lips in a gesture that immediately has me starving for more, even though I just came. As he stands, the unmistakable bulge in his jeans has my mouth watering.

"Come here," I purr, reaching for his hips to pull him closer. I might not be dexterous enough to get down on my hands and knees right now, but I can find a workaround. And I'm desperate to have his cock inside some part of me.

He obliges willingly, stepping between my spread knees as I sit on the edge of the couch. I rub my cheek against his erection, feeling it jerk under the rough denim. "You want this, don't you?"

His fingers tighten in my hair. "Don't tease."

I grin up at him as I unzip his fly. "Who's teasing?"

With a low growl, he shoves his jeans down just far enough to free his cock, already dripping for me. I don't waste time, leaning in to suck the tip into my mouth.

Above me, Raul curses, hips bucking. I take him as deep as I can, until I gag, then pull back to focus my attention on the sensitive head.

"Just like that," he rasps, guiding my head with a firm but gentle hand. I let him set the pace, relaxing my throat to take him even deeper. The ache in my jaw is nothing compared to how fucking turned on I am. I'm already getting hard again, my dick rubbing against the couch.

Fuck, he tastes good.

"Your mouth," Raul gasps, his fingers curling around my short hair as he gives a gentle tug. "You're so warm."

Raul's praise spurs me on, and I redouble my efforts, swirling my tongue around him as I bob my head.

I never thought I'd be sucking another dude's cock, let alone thirsting for his come down my throat, but I am. And somehow, it feels so familiar, so right, even though technically, we haven't been together all that long.

But in some ways, I feel like I started living—actually living—when he came into my world.

Or rather, when I fell ass-first into his.

I suck him deeper, cupping his heavy balls in my palm, feeling the way they tighten under my touch. I can tell he's getting close by the way his thighs tense under my hands.

He's buried in my throat to the knot, and I let my tongue slip out enough to tease the edge of it on the other side of my lips. Raul moans, his hips jerking slightly in response before he reins himself in, but knowing it's that easy for me to make the big, strong alpha lose control like that is a power trip.

"I'm gonna come," he warns, trying to pull back.

I shake my head, grabbing his hips to hold him in place as I suck hard, hollowing my cheeks. With a loud groan, he spills down my throat in hot pulses. I swallow every drop eagerly, licking him clean before I finally release him.

Chest heaving, Raul steps back just far enough to collapse between my legs again, pulling me in for a searing kiss. Even on his knees, he's eye level with me sitting on the damn couch. I still taste my own

arousal on his tongue as it enters my mouth, mixing with his.

His hands find my hips, fingers digging in almost painfully as he kisses me with a fierce intensity. I whimper into his mouth, instinct taking over once more.

Raul breaks the kiss first, gazing down at me with nothing shy of adoration. "I love you. You know that?"

"Really?" I ask in a deadpan tone, slipping my arms around his neck again. "You haven't said anything since lunch, so I wasn't sure."

He smirks, leaning in to kiss me again. "Now that's unacceptable. I'll just have to make it up to you."

"I think you just did," I murmur against his lips. "But I wouldn't complain about another round after dinner."

CHAPTER  
**FIVE**



My heart pounds against my ribs as Raul and I walk down the huge staircase. We had to wake up at the ass crack of dawn, and I'm already not in a great mood considering my morning sickness is in overdrive and the nature of today's meeting, so I can tell it's gonna be one hell of a morning.

Probably shouldn't have stayed up so late letting him fuck my brains out, but I can't say I have any real regrets, either.

At the bottom of the stairs, familiar raised voices drift from the entryway. Trent and Lenore have been getting closer lately, but from the sounds of things, they're knee-deep in a total bitch fit. I don't think two grumpier people have ever been in the same room.

Trent stands with his back to us, hands clenched. "You can't stop me from going!"

Lenore blocks his path, arms crossed. "Actually, as pack beta, I can," she retorts in a frigid tone I know all too well. "Don't be stupid. The Council will have your furry hide if you show up."

"I'm not letting you guys walk into the lion's den alone!" Trent counters.

Lenore gives an exhausted sigh, flashing a bit of fang. "You'll only make it worse if you come."

Trent growls, a low rumble in his throat. "Why are you so fucking stubborn?"

"Oh, and you're one to talk?" she challenges.

Something about the nature of their conversation feels...intimate. Even if it's an argument.

Lenore catches sight of us and her entire demeanor changes, her posture stiffening like the other soldiers in the pack when Raul enters a room. "Good. You're here," she mutters, looking between us. "Someone help me convince this idiot he's not coming to the Council meeting."

Trent whips around, eyes narrowing at the sight of us. "You're not leaving without me."

Raul lifts a dark brow. "Is that so?" His tone is mild, but there's an unspoken threat in his words. As alpha, he could easily put Trent in his place.

Trent squares his shoulders, refusing to back down. "You know it's not safe. Blue Fang—"



"Will not dare interfere with Council proceedings," Raul finishes. "You will remain here."

Trent snarls in outrage. He looks about ready to lunge for Raul's throat.

Which would be incredibly stupid. Raul could rip him to shreds.

But he's clearly not being rational right now.

Before Trent can do something he'll regret, I step between them. "Hey. Knock it off." I face Trent, meeting his blazing gaze. "We'll be fine. No one's gonna cause a scene at a Council meeting."

I sound more confident than I am, considering I've been dreading this bullshit. Especially if they try to force us to hand Devon over to Constantine.

"You don't know that," Trent grits out. "You need as much backup as you can get."

"You're still wanted by Blue Fang," Raul says pointedly, calmer than most alphas would be in his position. Just because he can put anyone in their place whenever he wants doesn't mean he exercises that ability, and somehow, that makes him all the more intimidating.

And hot, if I'm being honest.

"Yeah, but—"

Raul silences him with a look. "My mate has already insisted on being present, so I need this to go as smoothly as possible. Technically, you are a prisoner of war, and that's the only justification I have for keeping you here. If I parade you around in front of Blue Fang and the Council, it's only going to exacerbate tensions. The matter is settled. Do I make myself clear?"

Trent looks like he wants to argue more, but he deflates with a sigh. The fight goes out of him as he rakes a hand through his hair. "Crystal," he grits out.

"Good," Raul says, putting a hand on my shoulder. "Let's go. Curtis and the others are waiting."

As we make it out to the black SUV waiting on the curb, I'm relieved, but only tentatively. We're getting this stupid meeting over with, sure, but I know Constantine is going to be there. And the guy gives me the fucking creeps.

Especially now that he's dead set on claiming my brother as his omega.

An omega he doesn't even *want*.

How is it even possible to hate someone for so many reasons? Reasons that should be contradictory, at that?

Lenore trails after us, her boots crunching on the gravel. "What the hell was his problem?" she asks, jerking her chin back toward the house.

I give her a look. "Are you seriously that oblivious?"

She frowns, crossing her arms over her chest. "What's that supposed to mean?"

I snort. "Nothing. Forget I said anything."

"No, I want to know what you're implying," she snaps. Her cheeks flush slightly, and I wonder if maybe she's not as oblivious as she's letting on.

Interesting.

"It's not my place to say," I tell her with a shrug, climbing into the SUV.

Raul slides in beside me, and I feel the tension ease out of my shoulders. I reach over and take his hand, lacing our fingers together and squeezing. He smiles and presses a quick kiss to my temple.

"It will be fine," he murmurs against my skin.

I want to believe him. I do.

But there are too many ways this could all go to shit, and if Constantine gets his way, I have a feeling things are about to get a hell of a lot more complicated.

Raul's thumb strokes soothingly over the back of my hand as we make the drive into neutral territory. I stare out the window, watching the scenery fly by without really seeing it.

My leg bounces with nervous energy. I hate not knowing how this is going to play out. I hate having to walk in there and face that asshole Constantine like I'm not still pissed as hell about what he tried to do to me. And I hate that I have to play nice for diplomacy's sake when all I really want to do is tell him to go fuck himself.

Raul gives my hand a gentle squeeze, as if sensing my spiraling thoughts. I glance over at him gratefully. No matter what happens in there, at least I'll have him by my side. And if push comes to shove, he can hold me back.

Still, my heart pounds as we pull up to the neutral meeting house.

Time to face the music.

I take a deep breath and remind myself I've never backed down from a fight in my life. Even if this is a fight with words.

Kinda wishing I'd paid attention in debate class now instead of drawing fake eyes on my eyelids and napping the whole time.

The Council members rise as we enter, a sea of unfamiliar faces that look like they're trying to read us like pages in a book. All except one.

Constantine locks eyes with me from across the room, a smug little smirk tugging at the corner of his mouth. Like he already knows he's won.

Heat flares in my chest and I have to clench my jaw to keep from snarling at him. I might be new to this whole shifting thing, but that doesn't stop my wolf from being ready to show its teeth. Raul's hand tightens on my arm in warning. I take a deep breath through my nose and flip Constantine the bird behind Raul's back, since most of the Council is focused on Raul.

A not-so-subtle little "fuck you."

To my surprise, Constantine actually huffs out a quiet laugh at that and shakes his head.

We take our seats at the table across from Constantine and his pack. Raul pulls out my chair first, and for once, I don't bitch, since we've got an audience.

The Council mediator rises once everyone else has sat down, smoothing her hands down the front of her pantsuit. "Thank you all for coming," she says, her voice crisp and professional. "We are here today to discuss the petition brought before the Council by Alpha Constantine of the Grayridge pack. Alpha Constantine, you may address the Council."

My hands curl into fists under the table. Here we go.

Constantine leans forward, steepling his fingers under his chin. His eyes gleam like cold steel. "As you all know, Brad here does not belong to the Stone Hollow pack. In fact, he was promised to me as my mate under a binding contract with the Blue Fang pack."

That elicits a few low murmurs, even though it's technically old news, considering the fact that an alliance between Blue Fang and Grayridge has never been in the Council's interest.

"Be that as it may," Constantine continues in a smooth, calculated tone that somehow makes me trust him even less when I already thought my opinion of him had dropped to the lowest possible levels. "I have chosen to forego my claim as a courtesy, in the interest of keeping peace between our lands."

"He is my rightful mate," Raul bursts out, his lip curled back in a snarl that reveals the tips of his fangs. And here I thought I was going to be the one to lose it.

Can't take him anywhere.

"A fact which does not void my claim," Constantine counters. "According to your own laws, such a matter would require being settled on the battlefield." All the air seems to drain from the room as he speaks, making it clear the bastard knows how to manage an audience. When the tension is at its peak, he adds, "However, it is my belief that neither of us wishes to see such bloodshed. Certainly not in response to a matter as sacred as a mating bond."

The rest of the crowd seems a little less tense, but I can tell from the way Raul's eyes narrow, unblinking as they fix on Constantine, he's as suspicious of the shady fucker as I am.

"That is quite magnanimous of you, Alpha Constantine," the mediator says in a diplomatic tone. "But it does beg the question of why we're gathered here today."

I clench my jaw, fists balled up in my lap. I know what's coming.

Constantine's eyes meet mine once more, a satisfied gleam in them. "As I said, a mating bond is sacred. But unfortunately, the Stone Hollow alpha does not seem to hold the same views, considering he recently denied my own claim."

That gets the attention of everyone else in the room. The mediator raises her hand to silence the confused, scandalized chatter that's rising up everywhere, like a dozen little fires.

Even Lenore, who could probably sit through a nuclear bomb without blinking, looks anxious.

"I'm afraid I don't understand," the mediator says, glancing over at Raul. "Would you care to shed some light on this situation, Alpha Raul?"

Raul looks cool and calm on the outside, but I can tell from the subtle shift in his body language, and his familiar scent, that he's ruffled. "Alpha Constantine has made some very recent claims that I find to be of a dubious nature. To put it lightly," he says through his teeth.

"How hypocritical," Constantine sneers. "But the matter is easy enough to settle."

"Gentlemen, please," the mediator says, looking like she's nursing a headache. Can't say I blame her. "Someone needs to tell the Council exactly what's going on. Which omega are we speaking of?"

"Devon. The twin brother of the mate of the Alpha of the Stone Hollow pack," Constantine answers, his head held high and his voice full of conviction. "He is my mate."

"Bullshit!" I snarl, slamming my fist down on the table in front of me.

Lenore puts a hand over her face and sinks a little lower into her chair. Curtis mutters something under his breath.

Well, I tried.

"Order, please," the mediator huffs, looking to Raul. "Alpha Raul, if you wouldn't mind keeping your mate under control."

"I wouldn't mind," Raul retorts in a dry tone. "If you have a means of doing so, I'm all ears."

She doesn't seem to know what to make of that, but Lenore snickers.

I've already made a scene, so there's no point in pussyng out now. "He's lying," I blurt out. "He hasn't even met my brother! He's just saying this to try to get under my skin."

Even I don't really believe that—no matter how much I want to—but I'm panicking and I'm willing to do whatever it takes to keep Devon out of Constantine's clutches.

Even if he won't fight for himself.

"That is quite a heavy accusation," the mediator says, glancing warily at Constantine. "But do you have any proof to the contrary?"

Constantine hesitates, and I can tell I've caught him off guard. Is he going to explain the whole portal-to-another-world thing and look like a complete lunatic in front of the Council and his Blue Fang besties?

Even the Blue Fang asshole next to him is looking expectantly, waiting for an answer.

"I haven't met him in person," Constantine finally answers. "I saw him. In a dream."

Another chorus of murmurs runs through the crowd and I lean back in my chair, trying not to laugh my ass off.

"A dream?" The mediator raises an eyebrow. "That's quite convenient, isn't it?"

"It's the truth," Constantine insists through gritted teeth. "And psychic dreams have been a gift in my family for generations. Regardless of your opinion, one can hardly argue with the various victories those premonitions have afforded us."

The room grows silent, and Raul looks like he's going to jump across the table and strangle the other alpha. I guess we're trading off on coming unhinged.

I can't resist twisting the knife a little deeper. "Yeah, I'm sure you have all kinds of sexy dreams about my brother," I say with an exaggerated eye roll. "But that doesn't mean shit."

Constantine's eyes flash with anger and his fists clench on the table. For a second I think he's actually going to lunge across the table and throttle me right here in front of everyone.

But he takes a deep breath and forces his expression neutral again. "I do not ask for your belief, Council members. Only your observation of the facts. And those can be settled quite quickly once the Stone Hollow alpha brings Devon forward."

"No!" I snarl.

"There will be order in these chambers," the mediator scolds, giving me a look that makes me feel like that time our mother caught me trying to make a winter wonderland for my action figures out of the laundry soap flakes. "Omega or not."

"Sorry," I mumble, sinking back into my chair. "But he started it."

The mediator rolls her eyes. "I'm sorry, Alpha Constantine, but I do fail to see how bringing the omega forward will prove one way or another that what you're saying is true."

"It won't," Constantine says in a cool tone, back to his usual stone-hearted self. "Which is why I propose that we let Devon speak for himself."

The room goes dead silent, and even I wasn't expecting that. I can tell from the look on Raul's face that neither was he.

I jump out of my seat, about to argue since I'm starting to panic, and I can already feel this situation slipping out of my control, when I feel a sharp pain in my side and flinch.

"Ow!" I hiss, gripping my side.

"Brad?" Raul cries, already on his feet, his hands on my shoulders to steady me. There's fear in his eyes as he looks me over. Fear that only ever seems to be there in response to me, considering I've seen him face down Constantine without an ounce of hesitation or doubt. "What is it? What's wrong?"

I try to speak through the wrenching pain in my stomach, curling around toward my back now. I haven't felt pain like this since I made the grave mistake of trying Reese's infamous Chili Cheese Omelette.

When the wave of pain finally passes enough to let me speak, I can barely get out the words.

"I think I'm in labor."

CHAPTER  
**SIX**



The moment the "L-word" leaves my lips, Raul's fear turns into panic. He shouts for the medic, voice edged with fear. Even Constantine looks mildly concerned, uncertainty creasing his brow.

Another spasm wracks my body and understanding dawns on Raul's face. He sweeps me into his arms, my usual protests silenced by the vice around my middle.

"Where can I take him?" Raul demands as the others stand around, looking confused and helpless. Apparently, nothing freaks out a room full of alphas and betas like an omega going into labor.

The mediator hesitates a moment before hopping up. "The clinic," she says urgently, holding open the door. "Follow me."

Raul whisks me through the corridor leading out of the room and no one tries to interrupt us. He walks down the hall and out into the sunlight, which makes me squint, following the mediator to what looks like a large house. Inside, I can see it's been renovated from top to bottom and turned into a small but functional hospital. It's definitely more extensive than Dr. Wilson's setup back home, which gives me some sense of hope I might get relief soon.

We're immediately taken to a private room that's not so private as nurses rush around, voices muted and urgent. The pain comes in waves now, each one stronger than the last as Raul places me into a bed and the nurses start poking and prodding with a whole bunch of equipment to take my vitals, making me feel like I've just been abducted by aliens.

Maybe I shouldn't have given Keith so much shit about that time he got wasted and swears up and down he astral projected to space and got probed by a sexy Martian.

I squeeze my eyes shut and ride the next wave of pain out, dimly aware of Raul holding my hand, stroking my hair. At some point, I end up wearing one of those dull white hospital gowns that has the same generic blue print on it that seems to be the one common denominator between this world and mine, but I don't know who changed me and I don't even care at this point.

A beta I assume is the doctor, judging by his long white coat, arrives, snapping on a fresh pair of gloves. "Alpha Raul," he says, nodding toward my mate before he looks over at me. "And who do we have here?"

"This is Brad," Raul answers, and for once, him talking for me doesn't piss me off since I can't exactly speak through the pain. "He's in labor."

"Let's take a look, shall we?" The doctor's movements are brisk and businesslike as he checks under the sheet. I avert my eyes, face burning.

I'm really starting to wish I hadn't put off looking into how all this labor shit works, but I have enough of a vague idea to dread what's coming next.

When the fucker takes out a metal speculum, I realize I'm in way over my head.

"What the fuck is that?" I manage to hiss, scooting further up the bed in an instinctive attempt to escape.

The doctor blinks at me. "I need to check how far your secondary passage has dilated to know if you're truly in labor."

My secondary...?

I vaguely recall Raul mentioning something about that, and I'm pretty sure I conveniently wiped it from my memory. Compartmentalization has always been one of my strong suits.

"Yeah, whatever," I mutter, in too much pain to care as much as I should as the doctor takes out a bottle of familiar-looking clear liquid and slathers the tip of the speculum with it.

Raul growls a little as the doctor places the tip of the speculum at my entrance, but it seems more instinctive than anything, and the doctor doesn't even acknowledge it, so I'm guessing he's used to this.

"Fuck!" I hiss as the speculum makes a clicking noise and stretches my ass open a hell of a lot less gently than Raul usually does.

"My apologies," the doctor says in a professional tone.

Raul looks like a shirt someone starched into a solid line, and I'm starting to think most doctors seeming to be betas is intentional. He's flipping out enough as it is.

I can feel the doctor prodding around inside me, and fortunately I'm in way too much pain and this is way too weird for there to be any awkward boners to worry about.

He emerges a minute or two later, taking out the speculum. "You're roughly four centimeters dilated," he announces. "This baby's coming now."

"For real?" I groan. "Isn't there any way to stop it?"

"How far along is he?" the doctor asks thoughtfully.

"Just a couple weeks shy of his due date," Raul answers.

"He can answer for himself, thank you," I grit out. "But yeah, that."

Raul gives me an apologetic smile.

"In that case, I wouldn't advise it," the doctor answers. "And you're certainly not in any condition to



make the trip home. I'm afraid you're going to have to have this baby right here."

"It's twins," I groan, dropping my head back against the pillows.

Raul grips my shoulder. "You can do this."

I nod, jaw clenched.

The next contraction bowls me over with its force. I crush Raul's hand, groaning through gritted teeth. He whispers encouragement, unfazed by my white-knuckled grip.

"What about the meds?" I gasp suddenly, as soon as the pain lets up enough to speak. "Dr. Wilson said there would be drugs."

The doctor hesitates, glancing over at Raul. Because apparently, this pack is backward as fuck.

"He's the boss," Raul says in a firm tone. "Give him whatever he wants." He pauses. "Within reason."

I roll my eyes at that little caveat, but I can't really say I blame him. Right know, I'd take enough drugs to knock out a fucking horse if I thought it would stop these contractions.

"All right," the doctor says, nodding to the one nurse who's still in the room. "We'll get you started on something and administer more as the delivery progresses. I know this may not be what you planned, but I can assure you, you're in good hands and my team will do whatever it takes to make you as comfortable as possible."

"Thank you, Doctor," Raul says, since I can't speak again. He winces slightly as I grip his hand tighter in response to the next contraction, but he takes it like a champ.

And he damn well better, considering I'm in this mess because of him.

I thought taking his knot all those times would make labor easier, but now I'm not so sure.

Fuck. I really am going to give birth out of my ass.

Why couldn't I have gotten sucked into a LitRPG instead? Or a nice space fantasy? I'd take alien drones over this shit any day.

Raul would make a pretty hot space pirate, too, even if I have decided he's my mortal enemy by the time the next wave of contractions rolls around.

Nurses continue to rush in and out, monitoring my vitals and administering the promised drugs. So far, though, nothing seems to be taking the edge off.

"I don't think the drugs are working," I grit out.

Raul smooths back my sweat-soaked hair. "You're doing great, babe. Just hang in there a little longer."

"Easy for you to say, sitting there in your stupid tie, not trying to shove two watermelons through your 'passage,'" I snap.

Raul looks down at his tie, frowning. "I thought it was a nice color."

"Well, it looks like a leash," I growl. The sound turns into a snorted laugh as the mental image fully forms in my mind. "Heh. Get it, cuz you turn into a dog? Leash..."

Raul arches an eyebrow, glancing up at the bag of fluid connected to my IV. "I think the drugs are starting to work a little."

"Bout fucking time," I groan, sinking back against the pillows behind me.

"Just hold my hand," he coaxes.

I take his hand, doing just that. The next time I feel a contraction the meds haven't fully dulled, I hear a snap as I squeeze the shit out of his hand and I'm pretty sure he regrets the offer from the way he turns pale, but he doesn't bitch.

"Good job," he finally croaks, sounding like I just kneed him in the knot.

Which is pretty appropriate, considering that's what got me into this mess.

The doctor comes back in to check on me, and I'm out of it enough I don't even notice he put the speculum inside me again until he takes it out.

"You're about seven centimeters dilated now," the doctor announces. "Still a way to go, but everything looks normal. You're doing a wonderful job."

"I'm not doing anything," I growl. "You make it sound like I'm making a fucking macramé pot holder over here!"

The doctor glances at the IV and cocks his head. "Perhaps a bit of a higher dose, then," he says before leaving the room.

A nurse comes in a few minutes later to administer another round of Happy Juice, and I feel like I'm floating.

"Oh, fuck," I breathe, finally letting myself relax. "That's nice."

"Better?" Raul asks hopefully, stroking my hair.

I give him a half-hearted glare out of the corner of my eye. "Slightly. But you're not off the hook."

He gives a soft laugh. "I wouldn't dream of it."

While the drugs take the edge off at first, as the contractions progress, I realize there's nothing that's going to make this easy to handle.

Usually, I can find the humor in a situation, even if it is jet black humor. But I can barely get a word out.

"Where's Devon?" I croak in spite of myself as another contraction eases off. It's hard to feel better, knowing the next one is guaranteed to be ten times worse, if the last few have been any indicator.

"He's on his way," Raul says, pressing a fresh cool cloth to my forehead. I've never seen him looking the way he looks now. Helpless. Guilty.

And he should be.

"He is?" I pant in disbelief.

"I texted him an hour ago," Raul assures me. "He insisted on coming to be by your side."

"You shouldn't have let him!" I groan. "What if Constantine's still here?"

"I thought of that, but he said if I didn't send for him, he'd get out on his own and hitchhike," Raul says in a dry tone. "Guess it runs in the family."

I drag a hand down my sweat-slicked face. "It's a problem," I concede.

"I sent some of my best soldiers to escort him, and we made sure this ward is secure," Raul assures me. "He's to be brought straight here."

I can't say I'm exactly relieved, but when another contraction hits, I'm in too much pain to argue. "Fuck, they're not playing around," I grit out. "I think they're gonna be here before he is."

"It's all right," Raul says gently. "You're doing so well, Brad. Just a little longer now."

I reach out to grab his tie, yanking him toward me with force that surprises me as much as him. "You are getting a vasectomy as soon as this is over," I say through gritted teeth that feel sharper than usual. "Capeesh? And if that doesn't work, you're getting a knot-ectomy."

Raul grimaces as the tie constricts around his neck. "I'm not sure that's a thing, love."

"Then I'll DIY it!" I snap, howling as another contraction washes over me. "*Fuck*, that hurts!"

"Look at me." Raul's voice cuts through my panicked thoughts. I open my eyes to find him gazing down at me, eyes glowing with warmth and love. "You are the strongest person I know," he says fiercely. "You can do this. I'm right here with you, every step of the way. Just keep your eyes on me, okay? Focus on my voice."

"Your voice is just making me want to strangle you," I warn him.

He gives a hoarse laugh as I finally release his tie, afraid my newfound strength is going to go overboard the next time I feel a contraction.

Apparently, the whole omega weakness thing doesn't apply during labor. But I'd go back to that hands down.

"Then think about strangling me, if that helps you focus," he says in an infuriatingly patient tone.

Actually, it kind of does.

Then the doctor comes in and starts telling me I need to push. Like I haven't been fucking doing that for the last hour. At least I have a new person to imagine strangling.

If there's any silver lining to this bullshit, I guess it's that I don't have to deal with Dr. Wilson while I'm in labor.

"Doing great," the doctor coaches from between my legs. A fact that should absolutely mortify me, but

at this point, I don't care if the whole world sees my asshole stretched open as long as it's over soon. "I can already see the first head."

"The first head?" I echo. "You make it sound like I'm giving birth to fucking cerberus!"

And then, suddenly, the pain crests and breaks—and there's a sharp cry that isn't my own.

"Another big push and you're home free," the doctor assures me.

I let out another scream of pure, unadulterated rage, and push harder than I ever have. When I feel another intense pain, followed by a scream that fills the room that isn't mine, I gasp.

I slump back against the pillows, panting as those cries swell and fill the room. Kid's gonna be an opera singer.

A baby.

*Our* baby.

Raul's eyes shine with tears as the doctor places a squirming pink bundle in his arms a few seconds later while I'm still catching my breath. "It's a girl," he whispers. "Brad, we have a daughter."

A daughter. I have a daughter.

The thought fills me with a mix of joy and terror. I did this. I brought a new life into the world.

Holy shit.

But I don't have time to dwell on it. Another contraction rips through me without warning. I cry out, clutching at Raul's arm.

Fuck, not again...

"The second baby is coming," the doctor says. "You need to push!"

"What?" Panic rises in my chest. "Already? I can't—I can't do this again!"

Raul presses his forehead to mine, gazing into my eyes. I see my own fear and disbelief reflected in his face, but also determination. And love. So much love.

"Yes, you can," he says firmly. "I believe in you. We can do this together, just like before. Keep your eyes on me."

I take a deep breath and nod.

I bear down with the next contraction, screaming through gritted teeth—and then I hear another cry, louder and more insistent than the first.

"Congratulations," the doctor says. "You have a son and a daughter."

A son? I have a son too?

I slump back against the pillows, trembling with exhaustion. I'm still so sore I'm pretty sure I'm never going to be able to sit down again, but the acute pain is gone, and so is the rage that accompanied it.

Mostly.

There's only exhaustion and a blissful kind of satisfaction and sleepy excitement in its wake, but I manage a weak smile up at Raul. "We did it," I say hoarsely.

"*You* did it," he counters as the doctor places our son, wrapped in a soft blue blanket, in my arms. "We have a family."

I look down at our son, then our daughter, as their crying dies down and they stare up at us with wide, incredulous eyes. Human eyes, much to my relief. I'd almost expected puppies.

"They're perfect," Raul whispers, his tone low and reverent. He leans down and kisses me suddenly, a gesture filled with more pride and love than words could ever hold.

I close my eyes, leaning into his warmth. The pain and fear seem to melt away, leaving behind a deep, quiet peace.

*We have a family.*

I stare down at the two tiny, perfect creatures who came from me. From *us*. The girl has a tuft of dark hair and Raul's nose, while the boy's hair is a bit lighter. She has Raul's eyes, gold and intense, and our son has mine, green as the forest. They're both the most beautiful things I've ever seen.

A sob catches in my throat as I realize the truth.

This is what I've been searching for my whole life without even knowing it. Unconditional love, purpose, meaning—all wrapped up in two fragile new lives, with Raul's strong arms holding us together.

As the doctor leaves to give us a minute alone as a new family, Raul settles on the bed beside me, our daughter still wrapped safely in his arms.

"Thank you," he whispers. "For loving me. For giving me this gift."

He presses a kiss to my neck, just over the mating mark that binds us together.

I smile down at the twins, watching as their little hands clasp each other's instinctively, so tiny but strong.

"Welcome to the world, little bros," I murmur. "It's gonna be one hell of an adventure."

"Bros?" Raul echoes, his eyes glimmering with amusement. "Isn't she more of a sis?"

"Being a bro is a state of mind," I say. "And she's got it. I can tell just by looking at her."

Raul chuckles affectionately, nuzzling my neck. "So she does. You should rest, my love. I'll wake you when Devon arrives."

"Maybe just a little nap," I murmur, my eyes already sliding shut.

I let Raul take our son from my arms, and not a moment too soon, because I feel myself passing the fuck out as hard as I did at my first kegger.

Compared to giving birth, the mega hangover that followed seems like nothing in comparison.  
But I can't complain about the tradeoff.

CHAPTER  
SEVEN



I hold our babies close, counting their tiny little fingers and memorizing their perfect facial features, marveling at how seamlessly Brad's features blend with my own, creating something completely unique.

Completely perfect.

My heart swells as I watch Brad sleep, getting some well-earned rest. His brother should be here any minute now, and it'll be time to introduce our new little bundles of joy to part of our family.

I wasn't planning on this being the day we welcomed them into the world, but now that it's happened and they're here and healthy, I wouldn't want it any other way.

Our son is fairly quiet, staring at me with huge eyes, blinking and curious. Our daughter is already testing her voice, but I've been able to keep her relatively quiet with her bottle. Fortunately, Brad is sleeping soundly, oblivious to any noise she makes.

By the time he finally begins to stir, yawning, the babies have both drifted off. I could place them in the bassinets the nurse brought in, but I'm loathe to let them out of my arms, even for a moment. The fact that I know Constantine is still probably lurking somewhere near on this territory—and we're not at home—is making my protective instincts even more intense.

"Hey," I say quietly. "How are you feeling?"

"Like a train just came outta my ass," he says, his voice still hoarse.

I chuckle. "Well, you certainly sound like your usual self."

"Are they here yet?" Brad asks, yawning again.

"Not yet, but they should be any moment," I assure him.

The door creaks open as if on cue and Devon peeks in, Curtis hovering behind him in the hall.

Devon's eyes light up when he spots Brad awake, and he rushes over to envelop his brother in a hug. "You're okay!"

Brad snorts, patting Devon on the back. "Define okay. Come meet your niece and nephew."



Devon pulls back, eyes shining with unshed tears as he looks between the babies and me. "Can I...?"

I nod, gently transferring our daughter into his arms. Curtis steps forward, gaze soft as he takes our son. They're both already smitten, cooing at the babies and beaming from ear to ear.

"Congratulations," Curtis says, glancing up at me. "They're perfect."

"They really are," Devon agrees, gazing adoringly at our daughter.

A surge of possessive pride rolls through me at their words and I return to sit next to Brad on the bed, draping an arm around his shoulders. "The boy has your eyes," I remark, looking down at Brad.

"How is that even possible?" Brad asks. "I thought all shifters have golden eyes."

"Well, you couldn't shift when you got pregnant," I reason. "Besides, you're full of surprises. Why would our children be any different?"

He rolls his eyes. "Yeah, yeah."

"What are their names?" Devon asks, and Curtis looks on expectantly.

Brad and I look at each other for a few moments of awkward silence.

"Uh... we haven't really figured that out," Brad admits. "Raul didn't like my idea to name them after football players."

Devon looks like he's going to strangle me, so I say, "In my defense, the first and middle names he floated were 'Dick' and 'Butkus.'"

Brad starts laughing so hard he snorts. "That gets me every time, man..."

Devon sighs. "I should have figured."

"They do need names, though," I reason. "I don't think 'the boy' and 'the girl' are going to go very far."

"Kind of sounds like a dystopian novel," Devon muses.

Brad gives him a blank look. "I don't know what that is, but we need names. Now." He pauses, studying our children in their uncles' arms before he glances over at me. "Why don't we each name one? You take the girl, I'll take the boy."

I'm afraid it's going to be easier for him to find a hilarious name for a boy, but considering he did all the hard work, I nod. "Agreed," I say, taking our daughter from Devon's arms.

I gaze down at her little face, her eyes closed in sleep. She looks so much like me—the dark hair, the sharp angles of her features. Yet I can see traces of Brad in her, too, in the shape of her eyes and mouth. But there are traces of another familiar face there as well.

"Rose," I murmur, and immediately see the recognition in Curtis's eyes. "Our mother's name was Derra Rose. I think it would be a good way to honor her."

"Rose," Brad echoes, giving me a smile that melts me even more. "I think that's perfect. Hi, little Rose," he coos to our daughter before looking back at our son. "Now for this little guy. Our dad is

kind of a bitch, so... probably not that."

"Probably not," Devon agrees with a grimace.

"I know," Brad says, his face lighting up. "What about Aiden?"

I consider it. Aiden. Strong, refined, a good name for a future pack leader. "I love it," I answer. "What does it mean?"

"No idea," Brad says with a shrug. "But there was a movie where the totally badass secret agent dude was named Aiden, so I figured it would be sweet."

"Are you serious?" Devon asks flatly.

I chuckle. "I think he looks like an Aiden. It's perfect."

Brad gives his twin a 'see?' look before Curtis hands our son back to him.

"Well, welcome to the world, Rose and Aiden," Curtis says. "You've got one crazy family here, but we love you both already."

Devon nods in agreement. "We're going to spoil you rotten," he promises.

Brad settles back against the pillows. I can tell he's still tired, but he's beaming at our babies like they're the greatest treasures in the world.

And they are.

"All right, I think it's time we let this new little family get some rest," Devon says after a few more moments of admiring the twins.

Curtis nods and stands, putting a hand on my shoulder. "Congratulations again. I'm so happy for you both."

"Thanks," Brad says with a tired smile. "I'm glad you're both here."

"Of course," Devon says. He hugs Brad gently, mindful of the newborn baby in his arms. "Love you. Let me know if you need anything at all."

"I will. Love ya too."

As they leave, something occurs to me and I follow them to the door. "Devon, can I speak with you for a moment?"

Devon looks surprised, but nods, and I follow them both out into the hallway.

"I'll go check in with Lenore and the others," Curtis says before taking his leave.

"What is it?" Devon asks, his brows furrowing in concern. "Is everything okay?"

"Everything is fine," I assure him. "I just didn't want to stress Brad out by reminding him, but... it's about the Council meeting."

Devon's expression darkens. "What about it?"

"Did you see Constantine on your way in?" I ask. "Or any of his wolves?"

Devon shakes his head. "No, your guards escorted us straight here. Why?"

I let out a breath, relieved. At least for now, it seems Constantine hasn't caught wind of Devon's presence. I'm quite sure he'd have found a way past security if he had. Then again, Brad was in labor for long enough that hopefully he gave up and went home. "At the meeting, Constantine said he wanted you to go before the Council. To prove he's telling the truth about imprinting on you."

Devon seems surprised, but not as frightened as he probably should be. Maybe Brad is right to worry about him not taking this seriously enough.

"Oh... what did the Council say?" he asks carefully.

"They didn't have time to come down on a verdict," I answer. "Brad went into labor."

"Damn," Devon says flatly. "He's really dedicated to keeping me away from Constantine if he went into labor just to prevent a Council decision."

I chuckle, even though I'm not completely sure he's kidding.

Or wrong.

"You know Brad," I reply. "If anyone has that kind of willpower, it's him. But he's right, you know. Constantine is... dangerous. It would be better if I sent you home now that you know Brad and the babies are fine."

"I'm not leaving until my brother does," Devon says firmly, folding his arms.

I know that look on his face all too well. I groan. "I'm starting to think you two have more stubbornness than blood running through their veins."

"Maybe," Devon says with an unapologetic shrug. "But I'm not going anywhere all the same."

I heave a heavy sigh, knowing exactly how this argument is going to go. And with my baby half-asleep in my arms, and my mate who's just given birth in the room behind me, I don't want to cause any more drama or stress than necessary.

"Just please be careful," I plead, deciding to appeal to his reason instead. "I don't know where Constantine is, so just stay in your room and don't go anywhere without an escort."

"And here I thought Stone Hollow was supposed to be a progressive pack as far as omegas go," Devon says in a pointed tone.

I give him a look. "This isn't about you being an omega. This is about you being Brad's brother."

"So you're doing his dirty work," Devon accuses, raising an eyebrow.

"Absolutely," I answer without hesitation.

Devon snorts, looking away. "I'll be careful until we leave."

"Thank you," I say sincerely.

We say a few parting words, and all I can do is hope that he keeps his word as I return to the hospital room and find Brad cooing down at our son, a smile on his face brighter than I've ever seen before. The sight takes my breath away, and I wish I could just pause to soak in this moment for a decade or so. Just long enough to fully appreciate the beauty of it.

"Been a while since you did that," Brad remarks without looking up.

"Since I did what?" I ask, walking over to join him.

"Stared at me like a complete weirdo."

I chuckle, sitting next to him on the bed again. "Oh, I do that every morning. I've just gotten good at making sure I stop before you wake up."

He rolls his eyes. "Creep," he says in an affectionate tone.

"I can live with that," I say, leaning in to kiss him.

CHAPTER  
**EIGHT**



We stayed in the North Woods pack for the last two days while I recovered, at least as much as you can recover from birthing two cantaloupe-sized heads from where the sun don't shine.

And it wasn't even like I could blame that on Raul, considering my family was known for being kind of head-y.

Just never thought that was a problem I'd have to deal with, other than having to go for the large-sized football helmets.

I still wasn't anywhere near feeling back to my usual self, but I was more than ready to go home, so I was faking it. Unfortunately, that hadn't stopped the doctor from insisting on me using a wheelchair to get out to the parking lot, and my old memories of breaking my foot and my bros drawing dicks all over my cast came flooding right back.

Guess Dr. Wilson isn't the only annoying MD in the region.

Today, we're finally going home.

Lenore's already up ahead of us, but Curtis and Devon are still with us, and I find myself relieved—and bewildered—that everything's been relatively going according to plan.

Aside from the whole unexpected early labor thing.

But if there's one benefit to premature labor, it's that the Council matters have been delayed. At least for the moment.

Hopefully it'll give me enough time to work up a new distraction.

A less painful one.

Rose squirms in my arms, her tiny fingers clawing at my chest. I shush her gently, running a hand over the soft fuzz covering her head. I have to wonder when it's gonna be fur. These are going to be some cute puppies.

"Chill out, kid, I ain't got anything in those for ya," I say with a little laugh.

"Actually, male omegas can lactate," Curtis says as we walk out of the pack house. When he sees the way I'm looking at him, he shrugs. "What? It's the truth."

"Are you serious?" I cry, turning around so hard I feel my back crack.

Raul winces, like that's a fact he either forgot about or was hoping to tell me later. "I was going to tell you when you were closer to delivery... but, uh... surprise?"

I look down at my pecs, which don't look any different than usual, aside from the general extra padding that's been pretty well distributed all over my body since I got pregnant. Or at least, since I came through the portal.

"I don't feel any different," I mutter warily.

"You weren't quite full term. It will probably take a while," Raul answered. "And if you're not comfortable with chest feeding, there's no reason they can't continue drinking formula. I'm sure Dr. Wilson can answer any questions you have once we get home."

"Great," I mutter. "My favorite person."

And my new least favorite subject.

What the fuck, man?

I'm still processing that revelation as Raul, Devon and Curtis start loading things into the SUV for the long drive home. Then I notice something out of the corner of my eye.

It's a sight I know too well from all my dreams—and recent realities—but my blood still runs cold every damn time I lay eyes on that motherfucker and his white suit.

"Constantine," I snarl.

Raul looks up immediately and pauses, seeming to catch the other alpha's scent a millisecond before he sees him coming through the tree line. In a second, Raul transfers our son into Devon's arms. A monstrous snarl tears from Raul's throat and he's between the car and Constantine in a flash, claws partially shifted, fangs bared in rage.

Constantine raises his hands in a mock gesture of surrender, an infuriating smirk on his smug face. "Easy, Raul. I'm not here to fight."

"Bullshit," Raul spits back. "If that were true, you wouldn't be here at all."

I grip the arms of the wheelchair tightly, ready to leap up despite the shooting pain in my abdomen. Adrenaline is one hell of a drug.

Curtis is already at Raul's side, ready to back his brother up in a fight.

Constantine's golden eyes flicker over each of us in turn before settling on Devon. His expression shifts, softens just a fraction, but I see it.

I fucking see it and I want to rip his throat out.

Meanwhile, Devon just looks... frozen. He's staring at Constantine like he's seeing a ghost.

Constantine takes a step forward and Raul lets out a roar like I've never heard from him before.

"Take one more step closer to what's mine and it'll be your last, Constantine," he snarls.

Fear rushes through me. We're not ready for this fight. Not here, not now. But Constantine just chuckles, unfazed by the massive wolf in front of him.

"So brazen. And on another's territory, no less." Constantine's eyes haven't left Devon, who looks pale but meets the stare without flinching. At first, I think he's finally as afraid as he always should have been of the man before him, but a second glance into his eyes and I see a look I know too well. There's fear there, sure, but that's not all. I just don't want to see anything else. "I just wanted to get a look at what will soon be mine."

"Over my dead body," I snap, only not wheeling this fucking chair into the fray because I have a baby in my arms.

"He is not yours," Raul growls. "And this territory falls within the region I'm in charge of. Or have you forgotten that?"

Constantine finally tears his eyes away from Devon's to meet Raul's and snorts. "Fair enough. As I said, I didn't come to start a fight. Merely to offer my congratulations," he says, his gaze traveling over to the infants Devon and I are holding, but it lingers on Devon.

Constantine's eyes rake over Devon in a way that makes my skin crawl. He's looking at my brother like he's a juicy steak, and it takes everything in me not to lunge at him, wheelchair or not.

"And to confirm what I already knew. But you know it, too, don't you, pet?" the other alpha asks, his voice calm and smug. "You feel it."

Devon opens his mouth as if to speak, but nothing comes out. He hesitates. "I..."

"We'll be going now," Raul says firmly, stepping between Constantine and Devon. "And so will you."

Constantine just shrugs, flashing that infuriating smirk. "Very well. I'll be seeing you again soon, pet," he says to Devon. "Perhaps in your dreams."

With that ominous promise, he turns and saunters away, disappearing into the woods just as quickly as he came. The second he's out of sight, I spin my chair around with my free hand to face Devon.

"What the hell was that about?" I demand.

Devon's face is still pale, but he shakes his head. "Nothing. Let's just go home."

Raul places a gentle hand on my shoulder before I can argue. "He's right, we should get back," he says softly. "Before there are any other surprises."

I want to protest, but one look at the pleading in Devon's eyes and I cave with a frustrated huff. Raul's right, starting a fight here won't do any good.

But I know Constantine, and if he didn't take Devon right then and there, it's because he has something



bigger planned.

The thought makes my blood run cold.

As we make our way back home, I clutch Rose a little tighter to my chest, vowing not to let anyone hurt my family. Not Constantine. Not anyone.

Now that I have fangs and claws of my own, I'll rip that motherfucker apart if I have to.

CHAPTER  
**NINE**



I wake up to silence, and after ten days of living with newborns, that's more jarring than a fucking tornado ripping through the mansion would be. The babies aren't crying and Raul's side of the bed is empty and cold, so somehow, he must have gotten up with them without me noticing.

I rub the sleep from my eyes and sit up, blinking at the nursery door that's attached to the larger suite we moved into.

How long have I been asleep?

Guilt twists my gut as I stand, dragging on a robe. I never thought I could get so painfully attached to two little football-sized gremlins who do nothing but eat, scream, sleep, and shit, but the twins have become my new obsession. And I don't think that's gonna be changing anytime soon.

In the nursery, the TV is on, playing a commercial for some Enya-type album where a Wall Street guy in a suit is standing on top of a mountain, his arms outstretched like he's waiting for the aliens to swing by and get him. Raul is in the rocking chair, feeding Rose from her bottle in one arm while Aiden sleeps soundly in the other.

My heart swells at the sight. Raul and our babies, not the mountain weirdo. "You should have woken me up."

Raul cracks an eye open. "You needed to rest." His voice is gravelly with exhaustion. How long has he been up?

I cross my arms, fighting a smile. "We're supposed to be partners in this, not you taking care of everything."

"I like taking care of you." Raul's lips quirk. "Even if you are stubborn as hell, which makes it ten times harder than it has to be most of the time."

I roll my eyes, walking over to lean in to kiss his temple. "You love it."

"I do," he admits. He nuzzles my neck, stubble scraping my skin. "Besides, you're the one who did all the hard work."

"Yeah, I'm gonna be milking that for a while," I inform him. "Pushing two werewolves outta my ass. You're never gonna win another argument again."

Raul just laughs. "Fair enough."

Rose gurgles, her little hand grasping at the edge of my robe. I run a finger down over her fist, marveling at how small it is. Small and perfect. Our whole world is wrapped up in two alarmingly fragile packages. "I still can't believe they're really ours."

"Me either," Raul says thoughtfully, gazing down at the twins before looking back at me. "You're amazing, you know that?"

"I've been told," I say dryly. "Here, hand 'em over. You should go get some sleep while they're quiet."

"I'm fine," he says, despite the mammoth yawn he gives the following second. "I'll sleep later when they're down for a nap."

"That's wishful thinking that borders on delusional," I say, raising an eyebrow. "But if you're not gonna sleep, at least let me grab some breakfast. Pretty sure I smelled French toast in my sleep and I'm sure there are leftovers."

"In this house? Now who's delusional?" Raul teases with a glimmer in his eyes. "I don't mind getting the food."

"Even Dr. Douchebag said I was healing well," I remind him. Since I had to put up with another physical yesterday, I'm not about to let him overlook that. "Besides, it's good for me to walk. It's one flight of stairs, not Mount Olympus."

"All right," Raul says with a weary sigh. "Just don't overdo it."

"Yeah, nuking leftovers is really gonna take a lot out of me," I taunt. On my way to the door, I see Raul flipping me off out of the corner of my eye and smirk.

He really is learning my love language.

Downstairs, I find the kitchen empty other than Devon sitting at the table, staring out at the garden through the window with an untouched cup of coffee in front of him. I can tell from one glance he's totally in space. Usually, it's because he's dreaming about a book, and I'm afraid that's still true—even if we're living in one now.

"Yo, earth to Devon," I say in a flat tone, waving a hand in front of his face. "You in there?"

Devon gives me a look that's trying to be casual, but I can see the stress in his eyes.

"Oh hey," he says, coming back to the present. "Didn't hear you come in."

I pull out a chair and sit down across from him. "Yeah, you looked pretty spaced out there. Daydreaming about your book boyfriends again?"

Even though I'm teasing, Devon's cheeks flush pink. "You're one to talk."

"Guilty as charged," I say, holding my hands up. "Come on, fess up. You've been dreaming about him again, haven't you?"

"Who?" Devon asks innocently.

"Dude, you suck at that," I mumble.

"Suck at what?" he presses, his tone defensive.

"Playing ignorant," I answer. "You're too smart. Helps if you're a dumbass. Just ask Steve."

He sighs. "I'll try to remember that."

"Look, I heard what Constantine said before we left," I say, choosing my words carefully. And my tone. He hasn't said anything about it since we got home, but I know what I saw. And I have a bad feeling I know what they saw when they looked at each other.

I've been trying to talk myself out of it ever since we got back, but sitting across from Devon, seeing that look in his eyes...

I don't buy his denial for a second.

"What about it?" Devon asks, his whole demeanor and body language guarded. More than anything, I resent Constantine for creating yet another barrier between us, especially after everything we've done to get back to each other.

I don't want to lose my brother to him, of all people.

"He said he'd see you in your dreams," I murmured. "And I know firsthand he means that literally."

Devon eyes me warily. "I still don't understand how he was able to reach you in your dreams."

"I think I do," I admit. That's another realization I've been in denial about. It's not all that often I get to solve the puzzle a la Wheel of Fortune, so it figures the one time I do, all the letters on the board would basically spell out: *Fuck you, Brad*.

"What?" he asks, leaning in slightly, curiosity glimmering in his eyes.

And that, more than anything else, tells me we're royally fucked, because once Devon gets that look, once his curiosity is piqued, there's nothing that will stop him.

"We're twins," I answer, shrugging. "We share a bond. So if someone has a bond with you, I guess it makes sense that he'd be able to reach out to me, too. If he's powerful enough."

Devon stares at me with an unreadable expression for a few moments while he processes that. "So you... believe him?" he finally asks. "When he says he imprinted on me?"

And here I thought having to have "The Talk" with the twins in a decade or so was gonna be the most awkward conversation of my life. Pretty sure this is at least a close second.

"I know what I want to believe," I admit. "But then, when I saw you see him..." I let out a slow breath, running a hand through my hair. "I know that look. It's the way I felt when I saw Raul for the first time."

"I thought you hated him when you first met," Devon says, raising an eyebrow.

"Oh, I did," I answer. "And a long time after that. Especially when he knocked me up. But I felt

something else, too, and that made me hate him even more."

"What was it like?" Devon asks softly.

It's been a long time since we've talked like this. Since he wanted my input on anything.

And as tempted as I am to put the brakes on, to lie, to do whatever it's going to take to keep him from going down this road, because I'm fucking terrified for him...

A part of me is even more terrified of what's going to happen if Constantine is right, and I'm the thing that stands in the way of Devon being happy.

Of Devon being with his mate.

Damn, just thinking about Constantine being a knobby branch on my family tree makes me wanna puke.

"It was... weird," I say, since that's the word that stands out the most when I think back to that day. The day Raul found me in a bar and changed absolutely everything.

My life. My world. My reality.

Me, more than anything else.

"I felt like everything sort of shifted," I continue. "Time stood still, the earth stopped spinning, and all the other clichés in the book. The whole shebang."

"Yeah," Devon murmurs, looking down at his hands. "That's... pretty much how it felt."

I swallow hard, feeling the dread that's been brewing in my gut like a bad smoothie rising up. I clear my throat. "Guess I kind of figured that."

"I felt it the second he walked out of those woods," he says quietly. "This... this *pull*. Like every cell in my body was drawn to him." His cheeks turn even redder. "And the way he looked at me, I just... I knew. I felt it before, in my dreams, but seeing him in person..."

"Dreams plural, huh?" I echo, not about to let that detail slide by. "So you *have* been seeing him?"

I can tell from the way Devon gulps he knows he's been caught redhanded. "I... yeah," he finally admits with a sigh. "I didn't want to freak you out."

"Is it that, or because you thought I'd be mad at you?" I press.

He seems caught off guard by the question, but I can tell what the answer to that is, and the guilt hits me like a swift boot up the ass.

"I'm sorry," I mutter, which seems to surprise him more than anything.

And I guess that's fair. Apologizing isn't ever something that's come easy to me. Definitely not as easy as fucking up and bulldozing.

"For what?" Devon asks.

"For making you feel like you couldn't talk to me," I answer. "For letting this—him—come between us."

Devon's gaze softens. "I'm the one who's sorry."

"Why?" I ask, blinking. "I'm the asshole. You never do anything."

"I mean, you can be," he concedes. "And pushy. And a loudmouth... and your snoring still keeps me up even from across the house even more than the babies. For Pete's sake, I don't know how Raul ever gets any sleep with—"

"Okay, I get it," I say through my teeth. "FYI, Mr. Perfect, your apology skills are lacking."

Devon laughs. "Sorry. What I'm trying to say is, yeah, you can be... a lot. But it's always for a good reason. You've always protected me and stood up for me, and everyone else who needed a voice. Sometimes when I didn't want you to, but still... I appreciate it." He grows serious, the unmistakable look of hurt in his eyes. "And here I am, getting imprinted on by the guy who tried to kidnap you. The guy who's been leading a war against Raul's pack. Constantine, of all people..."

As he talks, his voice gets more strained and I have to reach across the table to take his hand and hopefully back him off the ledge. All this time, I've been convinced Devon has no idea who or what he was dealing with, so the realization that I clearly had it wrong is jarring.

"Hey, Dev, chill," I say in the gentlest tone I can muster. "You don't need to beat yourself up."

"Yes, I do," he mumbles into his hands as he buries his face in them, digging his fingers into his hair. "Fucking *Constantine*, Brad! I feel like a damn traitor."

All I can do is stare at him as my brain struggles to compute. For weeks now, I've been on the other end of this conversation, trying to convince him how dangerous Constantine is. How crazy it is that he's even entertaining the thought of being near him, even if it is just for diplomatic reasons.

No, especially then.

Now, I'm kind of at a loss.

"Look, I'm the one who's supposed to be saying that," I mutter.

"I know," Devon says, looking up at me. Now I'm starting to think those dark circles under his eyes are about more than just his nocturnal meetups with Constantine. And my alleged snoring. "That's why I've been avoiding you. You're right. I have no business feeling this way, and it's not like anything can come of it. I have no business wanting him, but I..."

"But you do," I offer once I realize he's not going to finish his thought.

The pang of guilt is written all over his face. "Yeah," he says quietly. "I do."

I take a deep breath, because I really can't believe I'm about to say this, but oh fucking well.

There's nothing more important to me than the people I love being happy. And looking at Devon, hearing him talk this way...

As much as I don't want to admit it—and I'd rather have a hemorrhoid the size of Long Island than admit it—I can tell he's not going to be happy if he handles this my way.

"Listen. You didn't choose this. Neither did he," I begin, even though admitting that pains me even more. "Imprinting is just something that happens. And if there's one thing I know, it's that once it happens, there's no going back. You can try to fight it all you want, but the universe is just going to keep doing whatever it has to do in order to bring you back together. That can be a great thing, or a terrifying thing, but it's the truth."

Devon listens in silence, finally asking, "Do you think it can ever be both?"

I snort. "With Constantine? Yeah. I'm pretty sure that's a guarantee."

"So... you're not against it?" Devon ask, a hopeful note in his tone. "Us being together?"

"Oh, I'm very against it," I answer. "But it doesn't matter what I think, or what I want. If he really imprinted on you in person, soon it won't matter what Raul thinks, either," I admit. "The real question here is, what do you want, Devon?"

He seems surprised by the question, and that doesn't surprise me at all. Devon's always lived his life with his head more than his heart, and that's a guaranteed recipe for not knowing what the fuck you actually want.

What you *need*.

"I..." He hesitates, searching the empty space on the table in front of him. "I don't know."

"That's bullshit," I blurt out before I can stop myself. "Like I said, you're a shitty liar and I know you better than anyone. You do know what you want. I can feel you do. But you need to be honest with yourself for once in your life, Dev. Forget me, forget Raul, forget our parents and all the other assholes back home. Forget Constantine. This isn't about any of us. This is about you, and doing what's right for you, so I'm gonna ask you again one more time. What do *you* want?"

He takes a deep breath, and I can tell he feels like he's about to jump off a cliff.

And in a way, he is. But I can't stop him.

Not this time.

"I want him," he admits, his voice quiet but certain. It's even stronger the next time he speaks. "I don't know what that's going to look like, or if it'll work out... if it's even possible for it to work out, but I... I've never felt anything like this before. And I want to see where it goes. I want to try."

As soon as the words are out of his mouth, all his confidence vanishes and the guilt is back full force.

He squeezes my hand and I realize only then I haven't let his go. "What are you thinking?" he asks warily. "You know it makes me nervous when you don't have anything to say."

I can't help but laugh. "Sorry. I was just thinking... I'm proud of you."

"Proud?" he echoes in disbelief. "Why?"



"Because for the first time, I feel like you're actually making a choice for yourself," I answer. "Not for me, not for our parents, just... you."

"What if it's not the right choice?" he protests.

"Might not be," I admit with a shrug. "There's no way to know until you go for it. And I do know that you're going to spend the rest of your life regretting it if you don't."

He grows solemn as he takes in my words. "I guess we'll just have to see."

"I'm sure you'll see him again soon," I add dryly. "Whenever he gets tired of waiting and dials up the Council."

"I don't think he's going to do that," Devon says in a cautious tone that immediately makes me suspicious.

"Why not?" I ask.

His cheeks flush again. "I asked him not to."

The realization sets in, and it all makes sense.

Why it's been so long since we left the other pack, yet the Council hasn't been pestering us like Constantine's own personal battering ram.

"You asked him not to," I echo.

"I told him I needed time the last time he showed up to me in a dream," Devon said with a shrug. "And I definitely wasn't going to go with him willingly if he was using the Council to do his dirty work and threatening my family."

Now I'm the one who's caught off guard. I realize I'm staring at my brother when he tilts his head at me. "What?" he asks.

"Nothing. You're just full of surprises," I say with a snort.

The old Devon couldn't even send back his coffee when it was made the wrong way. Hell, he couldn't even send it back if they gave him a tea instead. He's always had a hard time sticking up for himself, which is the main reason I've always known I have to stand in that gap.

But if he's willing to stand up with Constantine and tell him to fuck off—even if it is in less colorful terms than I'd personally use—maybe there's hope after all.

CHAPTER  
TEN



The scent of pine needles and damp earth fills my nose. My paws crunch over fallen leaves as I lope through the forest, ears pricked. It's my first patrol since Brad gave birth, but the babies are a full two months old now, and while they're far from sleeping through the night, it's not the sheer chaos it was when we first brought them home.

There's a part of me that's already nostalgic for the chaos, though.

Every day, it seems our pups grow like weeds. Time is moving too quickly, and I treasure every moment with them and the mate who gave them to me. I thought being out here would clear my head since I don't want to bring the weight of my thoughts home to them, but all I can think about now is getting back to them.

Constantine's truce smells like a trap.

But Brad believes he won't do anything to upset Devon, and considering how adamantly against the idea of them being mates he was in the beginning, I have to believe him. I take his counsel seriously, even if it grates against my instincts, and my own personal vendettas.

Brad's words the last time we spoke linger in my mind.

"I'm not my father," he'd told me. "Maybe Constantine is, or maybe he isn't—but everyone deserves a chance to prove themselves. So far, he's done that, even if it's only for Devon's sake."

Of course, it remains to be seen whether it will stay that way. But Brad is right. We can't be the thing that stands in the way of Devon and Constantine.

And if that callous bastard feels even a fraction for him what I feel for Brad, anyone who stands in the way of their mating bond will be a fool.

I just hope Constantine understands the unstoppable force he's dealing with, for my brother-in-law's sake.

And for Brad's.

Like it—or loathe it, more accurately—or not, all we can really do is wait and see.

As I run, preparing to loop back around to return home, I hear a rustle in the forest behind me. I whip

around, hackles rising, and spot tawny fur crashing through the underbrush, relaxing immediately as the familiar scent hits me.

Brad.

I pounce through the trees, gently pinning him beneath my greater bulk. *Hasn't anyone taught you not to sneak up on a wild animal?*

*I am a wild animal.* Brad struggles beneath me, green eyes gleaming with challenge.

I chuckle. *So you are. Where are the babies?*

*Reese and Luna are on babysitting duty,* Brad says, giving me a look. *I think baby fever is contagious.*

*Luna?* I ask doubtfully.

*Reese,* he corrects.

*Ahh,* I say, nodding my head. *That makes more sense.*

I'm not sure who those two think they're fooling by pretending they're not a couple, but it's not me. It's painfully obvious from the way he looks at her. Human or wolf, a man in love is as obvious as a full moon in the night sky.

*But it's a long way to the house. You shouldn't be exerting yourself,* I say.

Brad manages to squirm out from under me, shaking out his fur. *The doc gave me a clean bill of health. I'm cleared for all... activities.* His lips curl back in a decidedly human grin. *Running. Fucking. Whatever we want, as long as you don't knot me for another couple of weeks."*

My ears perk at that. *Is that so?* I ask, sidling up to him. My tail wags as I nip at his ear. *Does that mean you want to head back to the house, then?*

*Maybe.* Brad bumps his head against mine. *I've missed being with you. Missed us.*

*I've missed you too, my love.* I lick a stripe up his muzzle. *More than I can say. It's been torture, not being able to touch you.*

*Same.* Brad nuzzles against me. A sudden spark of mischief appears in his eyes, and I know I'm in trouble. *But I'm stir crazy after being cooped up for so long, so you're gonna have to work for it.*

I tilt my head, but before I can ask what he means, he takes off like a shot through the woods, barking a challenge over his shoulder. *Catch me if you can, big guy!*

My alpha instincts flare to life at the blatant challenge. I snarl, excitement and desire flooding my veins, and give chase.

Brad is fast, far faster than I expected so soon after giving birth. He dodges around trees and over logs, using the terrain to throw me off. I push myself harder, my paws pounding against the earth as I run.

He's gotten good at this, I realize with a surge of pride. He's taken to his wolf form like he was born to it, moving with a grace and surety I wouldn't have thought possible just a few months ago.

*You're getting better at this*, I tell him through our mental link. My lungs burn as I run, but it's a good burn. The thrill of the hunt sings in my blood. *I'm impressed.*

*Flattery won't distract me*, comes the smug reply. *You're gonna have to win fair and square.*

*And what if I lose?* I tease, even though I'm quickly gaining ground on him. But I decide to draw it out a little longer.

*Hmmm*, he says as if he's thinking about it, weaving and bobbing through the trees. He's quick, I'll give him that. And all those years of playing football have certainly helped him learn the skill of evasion. *We still fuck, but you have to blow me first.*

I laugh. *That doesn't sound like a punishment to me.*

Brad leaps over a fallen log and scrambles up the side of a rocky incline. I follow, my claws scraping against the stone. He's just out of reach, always seeming to be a second faster than me, and while I thought I was letting him have the advantage at first, I realize he was holding out on me.

I start to realize he has a destination in mind. We're heading deeper into the forest, toward the creek that borders the western edge of our territory.

If he wants to play in the water, I have no objections. Catching my mate will be all the sweeter when I finally run him to ground.

I burst from the trees and skid to a stop on the pebbly bank of the creek.

But Brad isn't there.

I spin around, scanning the forest edge, only to feel a heavy weight slam into my side.

We tumble to the ground in a tangle of fur and claws, and Brad pins me beneath him, his teeth finding the scruff of my neck.

*Gotcha*, he pants.

I go still beneath him, my instincts automatically conceding defeat. My wolf recognizes his mate has bested me, and while the alpha in me bristles at the loss, I can't help the pride I feel over how strong he's become.

Brad releases me and shifts back to his human form, rising to his feet. I follow suit, wiping a few twigs and leaves off my bare skin that was clinging to my fur a moment ago.

"Well?" He folds his arms and arches a brow. "Am I gonna get my prize or not?"

"Oh, you'll have all you can handle," I assure him as I stalk toward him, and he doesn't back down an inch. I cup his face and crush my mouth to his, months of pent-up desire and longing pouring out. He opens for me instantly, a low groan in his throat.

I walk him backward until his back hits a tree, my hands roaming over his tanned skin and hard

muscle. He's still a little soft in the middle, and I can't help but dig my fingers into his waist.

We're both already hard and aching for each other, the crisp air doing nothing to dampen the fire raging between us.

"I missed you," I breathe against his mouth. "Every second I couldn't mate with you was torture."

"You have no fucking idea," Brad says, fisting a hand in my hair. His eyes meet mine, soft with emotion. "I'm yours, Raul. So come take it."

I crash my mouth to his again and drop to my knees, running my hands up and down his thick, muscular thighs. He's already dripping precome in anticipation, and I lap it up eagerly before taking him into my mouth.

"Fuck, Raul," he groans, hips jerking. I grip them to hold him still, taking him deeper until he hits the back of my throat. I swallow around him, and he shouts, hands tightening in my hair.

I pull away slowly, tonguing his slit before sinking my mouth back down on him again and again. He's close already, his whole body trembling, but I'm nowhere near done with him. I slide my hands around to grip his ass, kneading the firm muscle as I take him apart with my mouth.

I push my fingers into the cleft of his tight, perfect ass and feel his hole, already slick with arousal and ready for me. But I want to have him moaning and squirming before I bury myself in him to the knot.

He moans at the first invasion of my finger even though I'm being gentler than I usually would. Despite the fact that it's a pleased sound, I take my time, not wanting to hurt him, as I prepare his ass while I continue to suck his cock. By the time I've worked a second finger in, scissoring them to stretch his tight hole, he's writhing and whimpering above me, fingers twisted almost painfully in my hair.

"Raul, please... I need you, please—"

I give his cock one last hard suck and pull off, ignoring his whine of protest. "Patience," I growl, nipping at the inside of his thigh. I crook my fingers, rubbing at the spot that makes him see stars, and his back arches beautifully.

"No more patience," he gasps. "If you don't fuck me right now I swear I'll—"

I chuckle, withdrawing my fingers and pulling him onto the ground with me before he can finish the threat. I flip him onto his hands and knees, enjoying the sight of his beautiful ass presented before me. He goes willingly, bracing himself and tilting his hips up in offering. The sight of him like this, hard and leaking, hole twitching in anticipation, nearly drives me mad with lust.

I grip his hips and position myself, the blunt head of my cock catching on his rim. "Is this what you want?" I ask, pushing in just an inch.

"Yes!" The word comes out as a sob, and I thrust home with a snarl, burying my crown inside him. It takes all my willpower to go no further than that, considering the omega beneath me is writhing and moaning for it.

"Yes, *fuck*," Brad gasps out, his hips already arching, his painfully stiff cock driving into the air. "Fuck, you feel so good. More. Please..."

Hearing my strong, borderline fearless mate beg and whine for me is my undoing. Knowing he needs my cock as much as I need to be buried in his tight hole drives me absolutely insane.

But I know one of us has to use moderation and it's certainly not going to be him, judging by the sound of those desperate cries and the way his ass is grinding into me.

I slide in deeper with a groan, slowly and carefully. "I don't want to hurt you, love."

He gives a sound somewhere between a growl and a whimper in protest, but giving him another inch or two seems to pacify him.

Fuck, he's tight. It's been long enough, it's practically like taking him the first time, and he's not even in heat. Which is a good thing, because I'm quite sure he'd kill me if I impregnated him again.

But man, what a way to go.

"Oh, fuck," Brad pants, hips bucking at a furious rhythm now as I reach around his waist to take his cock in my palm. I stroke the length of it, feeling the warm, velvety flesh against my callused hand. "Yes, Raul, just like that, don't you dare fucking stop."

I give a husky chuckle against his neck, kissing the spot where I marked him. That sight alone is enough to drive me wild with desire. How is it possible to still want someone so much when he's already in my arms?

When neither of us can take it anymore, I move into him deeper, inch by inch, until I'm fully seated inside him, everything but the knot. We both let out growls of relief at the sensation, the familiar stretch and burn as I fill him completely.

"Move," Brad demands, clenching around me. I growl at the sensation, gripping his hips hard enough to bruise as I pull back and thrust in again.

The pace I set is still restrained, compared to my usual, but forceful enough to shake him on his hands and knees. He meets me thrust for thrust, fucking himself on my cock as I pound into him. I bend over his back, biting at the mark on his neck, renewing my claim, taking him as mine.

"Yes, yes, fuck," Brad chants, pushing back into me wildly. I continue to stroke his cock in time with my thrusts. It only takes a few tugs before he's spilling over my fist with a shout, his inner walls clenching down on me.

The added pressure is too much, and with a few more rough thrusts I follow after him, spilling deep inside his channel. I collapse over his back, both of us panting for breath as we come down from the high.

After a long moment, Brad huffs out a laugh. "I think you got your prize."

I chuckle against his neck, kissing over the fresh mark I left there. "And it was worth the chase."

I pull out carefully, not wanting to risk knotting him so soon after he gave birth. Considering he's relaxed from coming and my cock has a mind of its own where he's concerned, it's a wonder I didn't already. I watch in satisfaction as my release trickles from his hole. The sight stirs something possessive in me, a deep satisfaction at having claimed what's mine.

I roll Brad onto his back and lean over him, kissing him slow and deep. His hands come up to cup my face, keeping me close.

When we part, he smiles up at me, eyes shining with affection. "I love you, you know that?"

"And I love you," I tell him solemnly.

My heart swells at his words, as it always does. I never thought I'd find my mate, and certainly not a mate from another world, and yet here Brad is. Strong, beautiful, fiercely loyal Brad, who challenges me and matches me in ways I never expected.

"We should head back," Brad says reluctantly after we've been lying here for a while, wrapped up in each other's arms, only the moon above a witness to the bond we've just shared. "The others will worry about us."

He's right, of course. We've been gone long enough. But it's been nice to have a moment with him all to myself, as much as I love the loud, wonderful chaos our home has become.

I help Brad to his feet before he shifts back to his wolf form. He really is a gorgeous wolf, all tawny fur and muscle.

I shift as well, nudging at him playfully. *Race you back?*

*You wanna lose again?* he taunts as he dances away, tongue lolling out in a wolfy grin.

Challenge accepted.

I throw my head back in a howl and take off after him, chasing my mate through the forest back home.

It's one hunt I'll never grow tired of.



CHAPTER

# ELEVEN



Raul and I shift back near the door of the mansion and change into some of the many clothes stashed around the property. I never got it before I started shifting myself, but now, going for an impromptu run is my equivalent of popping into the local bar for a beer. It's refreshing as hell, and if I don't do it every once in a while, I get cabin fever in my own human skin.

When we walk into the house and I catch sight of Devon sitting on the living room sofa, staring at the floor, my laughter dissolves.

His shoulders are hunched, his face pale. My gut twists up.

I know that look.

Raul's hand lands heavy on my shoulder. "I'll check on the twins," he rumbles. "Give you two some time to talk."

"Thanks," I mutter.

His footsteps disappear upstairs, leaving a painful silence in their wake. I steel myself before walking into the living room.

Ever since we had that talk in the kitchen, I've known this day was coming. Even before then, if I'm being honest with myself. But that doesn't mean it doesn't hit like a Mack truck to the abs now that it's finally here.

I clear my throat, leaning in the doorway with my arms folded over my chest. "Figured this day was coming." My voice sounds too loud in the quiet room.

Devon looks up and flinches. "You don't know what I'm going to say."

I level him with a look. We both know. "So go ahead."

He takes a shaky breath, eyes darting away. "I want to go be with Constantine." The words spill out in a rush. "And I want Raul to call a Council meeting."

My shoulders tense. I expected the first part—not that it makes it any easier to hear—but not the next. "Why involve them?"

"I need Constantine's word on some things. Before I go." Devon's voice wavers, but his eyes blaze

with determination.

"If you can't trust him, you shouldn't go at all." My protective instincts flare even though I told myself I was gonna be chill when this day finally came. Just like when I got to go backstage at that Nickelback concert—but at least this time I'm not gonna get banned from a venue for puking on a celebrity's shoes.

Still pretty early in the night, though.

"I don't trust myself." Devon drags a hand through his hair. "You're the only one I trust."

"Then trust me when I say to just wait a little," I plead, even though I told myself I wasn't going to do this. "At least until the twins are a little bit older and I can go with you."

"Come on, Brad," Devon says with a sigh. "You know Raul would freak out about you being on Grayridge territory."

"Raul isn't in charge of me," I remind him. My mate has finally figured that out, so I'm surprised I need to tell my own brother. "He doesn't get to decide that."

"No, but you wouldn't do that to him," Devon presses.

I clench my jaw, irritated because I know he's right. Raul might be willing to tolerate Constantine for his pack's sake, and for mine and Devon's, but asking him to accept his mate staying in his enemy's territory for any length of time is torture bordering on cruel.

Devon stands up and walks up to me from across the room. "Like you said, we both knew this was coming. Constantine is my mate, and I've waited as long as I could, but I... I'm starting to feel it."

There's guilt in his tone, and also vulnerability, and that keeps me from caving to the kneejerk impulse to argue. When I think back to being away from Raul, as different as our circumstances are, I can understand this is as difficult for him as it is for me.

And as much as I'm going to miss him, if Constantine is really his mate, I can't ask him to endure being separated from him even more just for my comfort.

He's already waited months.

"These things you want the Council to mediate on," I murmur, deciding to at least hear him out. "What are they?"

"For one thing, war has to be completely off the table," he answers. "For another, Blue Fang has to stop fighting to get Trent back and let him become a fully fledged member of Stone Hollow."

"Seems pretty reasonable," I say, relieved he came to that on his own. "But I still don't like the idea of you making yourself a bargaining chip."

"I'm going to have to go to Grayridge eventually," he says with a shrug. "Might as well get things settled before I do. You know, you're not the only one who loves these characters... these *people*," he adds with a smile. "You were just the first one dumb enough to think he could actually rewrite history."

I snort. "Rewriting history's easy enough. Bunch of assholes do it all the time. Rewriting someone else's story and making it your own, though? That's a little harder."

"But you did that," Devon presses, taking another step closer. "And you got your happily ever after with Raul. Now, it's time for me to write my own story."

I take a deep breath, looking away because I don't want him to see the tears stinging my eyes. And I can't even blame it on pregnancy hormones.

In the delivery room, I swore I'd never go through that shit again, but I'm starting to miss all the passes and privileges that came with being a pregnant omega. And now that the twins are growing up in front of my eyes, I'm already starting to wear down just enough to make my dumbest mistake yet.

But the last one turned out pretty fucking good, so what the hell?

"Don't do that," I mutter.

"Do what?" he asks.

"Get all poetic and shit on me," I say. "You know I cry easy now with all this omega bullshit."

"You always cried easily," Devon challenges, folding his arms, a glimmer of mischief in his eyes. He's blending into book world pretty damn well. "You just liked to pretend it was an allergic reaction to Steve."

"I miss that fucker," I grumble. "His outrageous BO was convenient."

Devon snickers. "You know, we have a witch now and a tether to the other world. you could always bring him and your other 'bros' through to keep you company."

"My Kappa Nu bros may be my bros for life, but there's no bro like my real bro," I tell him.

Devon blinks. "You know, that actually made sense, and that scares the shit out of me."

I sigh. "You're making it sound like I'm never gonna see you again."

"Of course you will," he says quickly. "That's my third condition. I get to come back and visit you—and you and Raul can come to Grayridge—any time I want."

"You really think Constantine is gonna go for that?" I ask doubtfully.

Devon shrugs again. "If he wants me, he won't have a choice."

"You know, I kind of like this new, assertive Devon," I admit. "Any chance I could still get the old Devon who listens to what I say once in a while?"

A smile tugs at his lips. "Please, Brad. Just this once... let me be the big brother."

My fucking eyes are burning like a bitch again. I sniff. "You're already the biggest brother I have."

Devon cocks his head. "Thank goodness. *That* made no sense."

I laugh, but the sound dies out in my throat, and if I don't get a hold of myself, the tears are gonna

spill out and leave me standing here feeling like a little bitch. "Are you sure this is what you want, Dev?"

He nods, his eyes bright. "It is. I'm sure."

I swallow hard, fighting the urge to grab him in a hug and never let go. "Then...I'm happy for you. If this is what you really want—if you really think being with Constantine will make you happy—then that's all I ever wanted for you."

Devon smiles softly, holding out his arms. "Come here, you big musclehead."

"You're one to talk, dork," I say affectionately, wrapping him up in a tight hug. Devon makes a croaking sound and I release him a little until he wheezes.

"Easy," he warns, his voice raspy. "You're a werewolf now, remember?"

"Right, sorry," I say, pulling away and running a hand down the back of my head. "Guess I've gotta relearn my own strength."

"Still not sure if I'm going to get a wolf," Devon muses.

"I'm sure you will," I say with a shrug. "Pretty sure it had something to do with me mating with Raul, though. Not that I need that image of you in Constantine in my head."

"How do you think I feel with my brother-in-law's sex scenes rattling around in my head?" Devon challenges. "I'm tempted to find the biggest, tallest roller coaster this world has to offer just to erase those images from my mind."

I laugh. "Yeah, whatever."

"I'm not sure it happened because of Raul, though," Devon adds, tilting his head. "You getting your wolf, I mean."

"What do you mean?" I ask.

"I think it's always been a part of you," Devon answers. "All our lives, it felt like you were the one who fit in so easily wherever we went, but then I came here and saw the way you interact with Raul and the others, the way you interact with your wolf... It's like you were always meant to be here. Like you're finally more... *yourself*."

As I listen to his words, I realize he's saying something I've felt for a long time, but never really had the words for. And considering he's always been the brains of the operation, I guess that checks out.

I smile a little. "Yeah. I guess I am. But you belong here, too."

"For the first time since I got here, I actually feel like that's true," he says quietly. "I know I've always given you a hard time about living in your shadow, but you were right what you said. That night before you got into the accident."

"Dev, come on—"

"It's true," he says, holding my gaze with a determination that wasn't there before. "I mean, you were

an asshole about it, but you were right. I have always lived my life for some imaginary future, waiting for someone to come along and just swoop me up somewhere else. Somewhere I belonged. And the only person I really have to blame for that is myself. But now, I finally have a chance to take matters into my own hands. To shape my own destiny, and make my own choices. I have to take it. No matter how much I'm going to miss you, I have to, Brad."

"I know," I say, the words sticking in my throat. "And I'm happy for you, little bro. I'm proud of you. Always have been."

"That's all I've ever wanted," Devon says, a few tears in his eyes. At least I'm not the only one. "But for the first time in my life, I want to be proud of myself."

"I want that for you, too," I murmur, pulling him in for another bear hug. "C'mere. None of that pansy shit. Breathing is overrated."

Devon groans, but he hugs me back. "You're impossible."

"You tell that asshole if he hurts you, or even pisses you off, I'm gonna spit roast him on a rusty goal post," I grumble in his ear.

Devon winces and I let him go. "Thanks for that haunting mental image. But you can tell him yourself at the Council meeting."

"Oh, I'll tell him all that and more," I assure him. Just because I'm being supportive doesn't mean I have to like it.

If there's any silver lining to this, I guess it's that I can make Constantine's life a living hell a hell of a lot easier if he's my brother in law.

CHAPTER  
TWELVE



The coffee pot gurgles as I shuffle out of the kitchen, bleary-eyed. It's rare I get up before Raul, but he's always the first to jump up when the babies wake up in the middle of the night—the witching hour, as I've started calling it—so I figured I'd make us both some coffee to gear up for the Council meeting.

No matter how much I've wanted to put this day off, it's finally here and there's nothing I can do about it but face it.

Unless Constantine gives me an excuse to tear out his throat.

A guy can dream of silver linings, right?

Lenore's harsh voice pierces the morning quiet. "You can't go, Trent. It's too dangerous."

I pause, listening as their voices drift in from the living room.

"I won't hide like a coward," Trent snaps. "I have to face them eventually."

Lenore's voice softens. "I can't lose you, too."

I listen intently for his response, wondering if they're finally gonna stop doing the hokey-pokey around their obvious feelings, when I realize they've both been silent for too long. I make the mistake of peeking around the corner only to find Lenore's face a few inches of mine, her sharp golden eyes narrow.

"What did you hear?" she snaps, her arms folded.

"Nothing," I say too quickly.

"Were you seriously eavesdropping?" Trent asks.

"I wasn't eavesdropping," I say in my defense. "I was just listening at an opportune time."

Lenore rolls her eyes. "Please."

"Don't let me interrupt," I say, holding my hands up. "It's clear you two were having a moment. I'm happy to give you space to finish your confession."



Lenore's pale cheeks flush pink. "What confession?"

"Oh come on," I say with a sigh. "Are we really still pretending there's nothing between you two? All that bickering is just your weird, messed up way of showing you care."

Trent and Lenore exchange startled looks, both of them blushing furiously now.

"I don't know what you're talking about," Lenore mutters, but her eyes dart away, giving her away.

"Right. Not there yet. You know, usually I'd take your side by default," I tell her. "But Trent's got a point here. After today he won't be part of the Blue Fang pack anymore. I get why he'd want to show up and dunk his balls in his former alpha's face one last time."

Trent nods. "Exactly."

Lenore makes a face. "Ugh. Of course you'd understand that sort of idiotic male posturing."

I shrug. "Guilty as charged." I hear the coffee hiss out its final phase of brewing and wink at her. "That's my cue."

By the time I finish making two cups the way Raul and I both like it, I can hear Lenore and Trent have resumed their bickering. Guess it's their version of foreplay or something.

I carry the mugs upstairs, nudging the door open with my hip. Raul stirs as the aroma of coffee filters into the room, cracking one eye open.

His lips curl into a slow, sleepy smile at the sight of me. The sheet slips down from his torso as he sits up, revealing his sculpted abs. I'm equal parts jealous and turned on, considering mine are still far from back to what they once were. The irrational craving I got for sugar cookies during my pregnancy still hasn't let up months postpartum.

"You didn't have to do that," he says.

"Shh," I murmur, setting the mugs on the nightstand. I lean down to kiss him, my lips finding his with familiar ease. Raul's hand comes up to cup the back of my neck, pulling me in deeper.

"Ready for today?" I ask when we break apart.

"I was going to ask you the same thing," Raul says, sitting up against the headboard. "Devon's not the only one with a big day ahead."

I sit beside him, curling into his side as he wraps an arm around me. "I know," I admit with a sigh. "I'm nervous. But Devon has to make his own choices."

"You've grown a lot." Raul presses a kiss to my hair.

"Don't remind me," I growl, looking down at my padded stomach.

Raul slips his arms around my waist and pulls me closer. "I think it's sexy. And I miss the extra fluff already."

"Don't get any ideas," I half-heartedly growl.

But Raul just laughs, nuzzling into my neck. His stubble tickles in that way that drives me crazy.

"Hmmm. Maybe I'll get you pregnant again," he purrs, licking that spot behind my earlobe that's the only thing keeping him alive after making that kind of suggestion.

A knock on the door makes us both jump.

"You two better not be getting frisky in there!" Curtis bellows from the other side. "We're gonna be late!"

Raul scowls, muttering under his breath, "This is why Lenore is my second-in-command."

I chuckle and give him one more quick kiss before climbing out of bed.

We get dressed and head downstairs where the others are waiting. Devon looks nervous, fiddling with the strap of his duffel bag. I go over and squeeze his shoulder.

"It's not too late to change your mind, you know."

But Devon just smiles and shakes his head. "I haven't changed my mind."

I sigh. "All right, then. Let's get this show on the road."

"Aww. You're sounding like a dad already," Devon teases as we load up the car.

"Shaddup," I grunt, but I can't help the small smile tugging at my lips.

My baby brother's all grown up. Bittersweet doesn't begin to cover how I feel right now.

We pile into the car, Raul driving while Lenore takes shotgun to navigate. Curtis, Trent, and Devon climb into the backseat with me, still bickering about who has to sit in the middle.

The drive over is tense and quiet, and my leg bounces the whole time with nerves I can't quite swallow down.

At least we're meeting on neutral territory. That'll go a long way toward keeping everyone on good behavior.

Myself included.

The drive used to be torturous, but this time, it seems to go by in an instant. *Way* too fucking fast. When we get out of the car and the others start unloading Devon's things, Devon comes over to stand beside me, bumping his shoulder against mine.

"You're not losing your brother, you know."

I grunt, keeping my gaze fixed ahead. "I'd better not be. Or I'll haul your ass back home faster than you can blink."

Devon chuckles, the sound easing some of the tension in my chest. "Love you too, big bro."

We head inside the meeting house where Constantine and the other Council members are waiting. My pulse kicks up to a gallop as Constantine's gaze lands on us, piercing and assessing.

It immediately shifts to Devon, though, and it softens the way it did before. The way that seems so unnatural on his face—but also genuine, as little as I want to admit it.

And there's no denying it.

Constantine walks over to greet us and takes Devon's hand, kissing the back of it like the gallant mofo he is. "It's been so long," Constantine remarks.

Devon is clearly a little flustered but keeps his cool. "Not that long," he says in a dry tone.

Constantine cracks a small smile. "A pleasure, all the same."

My hackles rise at the display, but I keep my expression neutral. Have to set a good example and all that.

The mediator thanks us all for coming and invites us to take our seats. Devon sits with Raul and me across from Constantine and his soldiers, and the meeting begins.

I notice the Blue Fang alpha is missing, and I figure it was too much of an ego blow for him to have to turn over Trent with no repercussions. But Constantine is clearly the one calling the shots here. At least in their camp.

"Thank you all for coming," the mediator says, sitting behind the table that connects ours to the one across from it. She glances at the papers in front of her. "To recount, we're all gathered here to discuss the official declaration of peace between the Grayridge pack and the Council territories, on the condition of transfer of one omega from the Stone Hollow pack. Is that correct?"

"That's correct," says Constantine.

Raul inclines his head in acknowledgment when the mediator turns to him.

"Very well." The mediator nods. "Do you have any conditions, Alpha Raul?"

"I do not," he answers, his gaze shifting over to Devon. "But he does."

The mediator looks surprised, and I can tell it's ruffled a few feathers of the other alphas and betas in the room, but she nods. "Go ahead, then, Devon."

Every objection I can think of crowds my tongue, but I swallow them back. This isn't about me. And I'm not going to fuck this up for Devon, even if overriding my protective instincts is damn near impossible.

I meet Devon's gaze, seeing how nervous he is.

I nod in encouragement.

"I have a few conditions, actually," Devon says, facing Constantine directly.

There's a glimmer of amusement in Constantine's eyes, and a smug look on his face I'd like to wipe off with a right hook, but he nods. "I'm listening."

"First things first," Devon says, sounding more confident as he sits up straight. "Trent will be fully

released from Blue Fang, and he will be allowed to live his life as a member of the Stone Hollow pack."

"I've already discussed the matter with the Blue Fang alpha, and he has authorized me to grant your request on his behalf," Constantine says, confirming my suspicion the bastard didn't want to be here on account of Trent. I'm sure that "authorization" came with a lot of arm twisting.

But... wait a minute.

If Constantine already discussed that, then that means he and Devon have been communicating. And not just in dreams.

I glance over at my brother, resisting the urge to roll my eyes. *You sneaky little son of a bitch.*

And I know we share the same mom, but... that's fair enough.

"There's also the matter of peace between our packs, which the mediator has already addressed," Devon considers, sounding like a lawyer. Considering that's what he wanted to be in junior high after he started playing Ace Attorney, that checks out.

"Indeed," Constantine says, his tone low and casual. "Our union will be taken as an act of good will to ensure the peace between our territories. As long as no aggression is levied against us, you have my word that Grayridge will not raise arms against any of the Council lands. Now, omega, are there any more conditions you wish to lay out?"

There's no mistaking the amusement in his voice, which pisses me off in its own right, but Devon seems unphased. And at least the bastard doesn't seem pissy about an omega showing a little spine, unlike the rest of the Blue Fang and Grayridge wolves.

Guess everyone has to have at least one good quality.

"There is, actually," Devon answers. "I want to be permitted to visit my brother and his pack freely. And for them to be able to come visit me in Grayridge. *All* of them."

I can tell from the look on Constantine's face that's one that Devon hasn't actually run by him before. And the fact that he waited to make sure Constantine was under pressure in the middle of negotiations is definitely a power move.

*Well played, little brother.*

And here he never liked sports.

"Visiting Stone Hollow is one thing," Constantine finally answers once he's composed himself. "Having our former enemies on our territory without announcement is quite an ask."

"Consider it an act of good will," Devon says smoothly, throwing Constantine's words back at him. "And a chance to continue fostering positive relations between our territories."

"You drive a hard bargain," Constantine says pointedly.

Devon shrugs. "That is my bargain. Take it or leave it."

I'm pretty sure he's bluffing, and I can tell from the look in Constantine's sharp eyes as he scrutinizes Devon that he's trying to figure out the same.

Instead of calling his bluff, though, the alpha just sighs, his shoulders sagging in defeat. "Very well, then. I agree to your terms."

Devon looks a bit surprised now, even though he kept a perfect poker face during the negotiations. "Good, then. I have no further conditions."

"And you, Alpha Raul?" the mediator asks, glancing over at my mate.

"No objections here, either," Raul answers, but he looks back at Constantine, a look of warning in his gaze. "Devon goes to the Grayridge pack with my blessing—and my protection. Always."

Constantine smirks, holding his stare. "We'll be sure to extend an invitation to the mating ceremony."

"In that case, the negotiations are official, and I declare them concluded," the mediator says, clearly relieved to be finished.

Constantine stands and comes around the table, holding out a hand to Devon to help him out of his chair. "Welcome to the Grayridge pack, omega."

Devon takes his hand, and lets him help him up, but he's still got an unreadable expression on his face. "Devon," he corrects. "I look forward to future relations between our pack."

Constantine chuckles, leaning down to murmur something in Devon's ear that makes him blush.

Before I can punch the other alpha in the gut, because I'm pretty sure it was obscene even if I didn't hear it, Raul puts a hand on my shoulder.

"Congratulations," my mate says. Much to my surprise, he offers a hand to Constantine, which is a big damn deal considering how much of his life he devoted to killing the man.

Knowing he's willing to put aside his vengeance on Constantine's line not only for our pack, but for me, means more than words can even say. But I'm pretty sure I can do a half-decent job later tonight by giving him a blowjob that'll curl his grandpa's toes two generations back.

Constantine stares at Raul's offered hand for a moment, and I'm even more surprised when he takes it. "Thank you. I must say, we've been enemies for so long, it's going to be a struggle to think of you as a brother-in-law."

Raul's smile looks like that time I tried to do '80s laundry and ended up starching everything until our clothes all looked like cardboard. "I assure you, the struggle is even greater for me."

"An ironic twist of fate, no?" Constantine asks in a smug tone, his hand falling away to rest on Devon's shoulders. I have to quiet my wolf down so it doesn't pop out of me like a fucking chestburster and gnaw his hand into a nub. "Us imprinting on two brothers."

"Ironic is a word," Raul says through his teeth.

While the two alphas are having a dicks-for-eyes staring contest, Devon comes over to hug me. I cling to him tightly, blinking back the sting in my eyes. "You better call every week," I warn him. "Or I'll be

hauling your ass right back home."

Devon laughs, but it sounds watery. He pulls back to look up at me, eyes shining with tears he refuses to shed. "You're not getting rid of me that easily."

Raul looks down at Devon, resting a hand on his shoulder. "We'll miss you. But we're always a phone call away."

I can tell it's as much of a reassurance for Devon as it is a threat to Constantine, but it's not quite direct enough. So I walk over to Constantine, grab his tie, and pull him in so we're eye to eye, ignoring the tension of his guards who don't look like they know what to do now that their alpha is being threatened by an omega they legally can't lay a finger on.

"You hurt him, or you even slightly inconvenience him—and I mean waiting more than a millisecond to pass the salt at the fucking dinner table if he asks—and I will come up there to Grayridge and personally rearrange your insides until they look like a damn Picasso painting. That clear, big guy?" I demand.

I half-expect Raul to intervene, but he's just standing there with his hands in his pockets, waiting expectantly for Constantine to answer. "My omega asked you a question," he says calmly.

Constantine cracks a toothy smile, but he looks more amused than threatened. "Crystal."

"Good," I mutter, releasing him.

Devon sighs, leaning in to hug me one last time. "I love you," he says, and I can tell from the look in his eyes he's having as hard of a time with this as I am—and he knows it's not gonna get any easier. Our relationship has finally gotten back to the way it used to be, but goodbye is the one thing I still have a hard time telling him. He pulls away, not meeting my eyes, but he doesn't need to. "I'll call you when we get in, okay?"

"Make sure you do," I murmur, forcing myself to let him go.

"After you," Constantine says, stepping back to make room for Devon to walk ahead of him down the aisle leading out of the meeting hall.

I watch as Devon goes, feeling a mixture of pride and worry, happiness and anger. I know his future is with Constantine, even if he's one of the worst parts of my past, but fuck, that doesn't make it easy to swallow.

Maybe I got a little too used to Devon living in my shadow, for all the shit I used to give him about it. Now, it's time for us both to stand on our own.

"Hey," I call, because there's so much I still want to tell him, and the words are all crushing into each other in the back of my throat like that time Reese's fifteen-layer lasagna gave everyone in the frat house food poisoning at the same time.

Devon stops and looks over his shoulder expectantly. "Yeah?"

I hesitate. I don't really know what I want to say.

All the things I thought were just understood between us...

But now that he's leaving, now that he's not going to be right across the hall anymore, and now that I know what it's like to be without him, that doesn't seem like enough. None of it does. But I settle on the words I've always found the hardest.

Until Raul.

Until not saying them was harder than getting them out.

"I love you, bro," I say, clearing my throat because it sounds a little thin.

Devon cracks a smile, and the nervousness drains from his face. "I love you, too," he says before turning to leave, and all of a sudden, I feel like someone took a two-hundred-pound barbell off my chest.

"Raul. Brad," Constantine says, nodding to us both, even though his smug gaze lingers on me. "Always a pleasure."

"Fuck off, dickwad," I mutter, not quite as under my breath as I hoped.

Constantine just laughs and walks off after Devon to start their new life together. To write the beginning of their story.

Wonder if it's gonna be a comedy, a drama, a romance, or some fucked up mashup of all three?

"Are you all right?" Raul asks, placing a gentle hand on my shoulder.

"Yeah," I say, clearing my throat more successfully this time, since my voice actually sounds steady. "Come on. Let's go home."

"He'll be fine, you know," Raul says gently, taking my hand. "He's strong. Just like you."

"Yeah," I agree, taking a deep breath. "I know he is."

Raul leans down to kiss me, and the background noise of the others lingering after the Council meeting fades to a low murmur. Just like the first time he touched me, time stands still, the world stops, and for the moment our lips meet, there's just me and him.

There's just our story.

And even though our happily ever after is just the beginning, I already know I wouldn't have written it any other way.

# EPILOGUE





"Are you sure about this?" I ask, staring at the magic circle on the ground in the middle of the clearing it seems like we just fell through a few weeks ago—even if the fact that the twins are already starting to crawl around the pack house like drunken little sailors on shore leave proves my emotional perception of time is a little off, to say the least.

The sky is splashed with gold and pink, like a unicorn puked up, but Luna's been working on this damn thing since sunrise. The sigil has become such a familiar shape it's practically burned into my retinas at this point. I have to admit, this one is a hell of a lot more polished than the others.

Luna has really perfected her craft.

And now, she's using it to go home.

Luna meets my gaze, her eyes glinting with determination. She really has been in this damn book for too long. "I'm sure."

My shoulders heave with a deep sigh. I've had a feeling this was coming for a while now. Ever since Luna and Reese's coupling became more than just an obvious secret. Obvious to everyone but them, anyway.

I guess it's true what they say about animals and spring, because every shifter in the pack seems to be pairing off. And I guess it extends to humans, too. Even Lenore and Trent have given up on hiding the lovesick goo-goo eyes they make at each other. When they're not going at each other's throats, that is.

Then again, I'd know better than anyone that makeup sex is where it's at.

When Luna first came to me and floated the idea of opening up another portal to visit my frat bros and see if a few want to come join us this side of werewolf land, I was stoked. So was Raul. As much as I've tried to hide the fact that my brother living in a different pack has left a Devon-shaped hole in my chest that no amount of Reese's seven-layer nachos can fill, I can tell he's worried.

And the truth is, as perfect as our lives are, the only way they could be even more perfect is if I had my original pack with me, too.

Pack. Fraternity. A bunch of idiots you get wasted with on a Saturday night. Doesn't really matter what you call it. It's all family, and if there's one thing falling ass-first into a book taught me, it's that family

matters more than anything.

Raul is already talking about expanding ours, and I have to admit, now that the rugrats are growing like weeds on steroids, I'm not as opposed to the idea as I was when said rugrats' heads were tearing out of a tiny orifice. And I may or may not have ordered a custom-made paternity jersey out of a catalog, because that's apparently something totally common in shifter land.

Just in case.

As much as I've come to see Raul's family as my own, it would be nice to have some of my bros around. I'm even starting to miss Steve's bewildering range of mysterious odors.

Man, I gotta get out more.

"It's not like we're never gonna see each other again, man," Reese says, clapping me on the shoulder. "Luna's a wizard at this shit now. Easy as walking through a door." He nods in the direction of the circle.

"You mean a witch," Luna corrects with a proud little smirk. She's gone from being a witch-in-denial to owning it, and I have to admit I'm proud of her. Even if she is taking one of my best friends back to the so-called real world with her.

"You know, they got publishers here," I tell her, pausing. "I mean, I'm assuming the books aren't all just dummy covers and blank pages. Not about to take the chance and read them."

"Are you seriously still hung up on that?" Luna asks with a sigh.

"Hey, I got sucked into the last one! You think I'm gonna just pick up Moby Dick and end up stripping for fish?" I challenge.

Luna blinks at me. "What exactly do you think Moby Dick is about?" Before I can answer, she holds up her hands and sighs. "No. You know what? I don't even want to know."

"I'm just saying, you guys don't have to leave," I say, even though I promised myself I wasn't going to beg them to stick around like a little bitch.

Again.

But seventh time's the charm, right?

Pretty sure I read that on a shampoo bottle somewhere.

Luna gives me a smile that's a little too familiar and reaches out to take my hand, giving it a squeeze. The gesture surprises me, since she's not exactly the touchy-feely type. And I'm not exactly easy to get along with, so half the time, I'm not even sure if she likes me or if she just tolerates me because I was her ticket to the fantasy world she created.

But considering she's eager to get back to the boring world, where only garlic bread has knots and eyes usually only sparkle when you're chopping onions, I guess it's not that.

"We've been over this, Brad," she says in a patient tone. "This past year... it's been amazing, and I wouldn't trade it for anything. It's every author's dream to visit the world they created, and see their

fantasies come to life, but..."

"But...?" I press, because even if they've already explained it a hundred times, it's going to take a hundred and one for my heart to get on the same page.

"But this world isn't the world I created. It's so much more than that," she says softly, looking around at the clearing that separates the pack house from the woods that wrap around it on all sides for as far as the eye can see, and definitely as far as I can run without getting winded.

Even when I'm on four legs.

"And as incredible as it is, it isn't my world. I've still got more stories to tell, and people I miss. We both do," she says, letting go of my hand to take Reese's. "But I've spent so much of my life telling other people's stories, I never really thought about my own. And honestly, getting to know Reese here, it's made me realize... what I wanted wasn't really a fantasy. It was just someone who gets me. Someone I can dream with. I don't need to live in another world to have that."

He gives her hand a squeeze and smiles bigger than I've ever seen him smile. She may not have literally written the moon above us into the sky, but he sure as hell looks at her like she did. "She's right. I love this place, too, and I'm gonna miss you like hell, but we've got plenty of unfinished business back home. And home is wherever she is."

I can't help but roll my eyes, even if I'm happy for them. "Yeah, you're probably right. That shit's too sappy even for this book, bro."

Reese flips me off affectionately, and I smile a little, biting back the tears welling at the edges of my eyes. I need to hurry up and let Raul knock me up again so I at least have pregnancy hormones as an excuse for turning into a world-class sap myself.

"Trust me, once we fill the guys back home in on everything, they're gonna be diving through that portal," Reese assures me.

"Aww, you really think they miss me that much?" I ask, kind of touched.

He cocks his head to one side. "I mean, I was talkin' about the chance to try omega shifter pussy, but yeah. Sure, man."

"Touching," I mutter, immediately untouched.

"Remember, time passes differently on this side of the portal," says Luna. "It won't close right after we leave. It could take hours for the other to come through."

"Yeah, I got it," I tell her. For once, I wasn't just zoning out when she was explaining the magical physics or whatever behind it.

There's a rock sitting in the pit of my stomach, like that time I nuked a frozen Salisbury steak dinner for twenty minutes because I misread the instructions on the box. What if none of them want to come? What if Reese and Luna walk through that portal and I never see them again?

I came through the last portal ready to leave my old life behind without a second's hesitation, and that's not a decision I regret now, or one I ever could. But that doesn't make it any easier to deal with

the fact that one huge chapter of my life is coming to a close, literally and figuratively.

"You know it sucks out there, right?" I ask, my voice a little throaty. Hell, I'm not even sure what that means. What else would it be? Assy? Pretty sure it's that, too. "Everyone's pissed off all the time, rent's outta control, and half the world's on fire. Even magic is boring."

"It got us here, didn't it?" Luna asks with a smile. "Besides, I could use a little boring. I prefer leaving the over-the-top drama to my stories."

"What, you think I like it?" I scoff.

She raises an eyebrow. "Brad, you're so over-the-top even I couldn't have dreamed you up."

I can't help but laugh, but it comes out kind of choked. Fuck, I'm really not gonna get through this with my dignity intact, am I?

At least when Devon left, I knew I'd see him again, even if I had to blow down Constantine's fortress like the Big Bad Wolf.

And as much as I still don't like the prick, I have to admit, he's been true to his word about letting me and Raul visit as much as we want. They're even coming for a visit next month, which means I'll have my work cut out for me, since I know Raul is gonna be even pricklier around Constantine when the other alpha is on our territory.

Reese drops Luna's hand to walk over and pull me into one of his legendary bear hugs. The kind that hurts even though I'm a shifter now and he's still a human, and it makes me reaffirm my commitment to building up my triceps. But it might be the last one for a while, so I hug him back and decide I'll deal with the back pain later.

Pretty sure whatever Raul has planned for later tonight will blow my back out anyway, and I'm definitely gonna need something to take my focus off the bittersweet ache building in my chest right now.

"We're gonna be fine, bro," Reese says next to my ear. "So is Devon, and a lot of that is because of you. But you gotta let go sometime."

"Yeah, yeah, I know," I sigh, pulling away before I start blubbering like a fucking harbor seal. I turn to Luna and she winces in anticipation as I pull her in for a group hug, but I've been practicing learning to gauge my newfound wolf strength, so I'm careful. "Take care of this idiot, okay? He's your responsibility now, like a baby bird with acid reflux and mommy issues. And don't let him drink Fireball, he'll puke all over your sofa."

"Noted," Luna chokes out, embracing me back before I finally let them both go.

I take a step back, pull my big-boy panties up, and take a deep breath, because I know this isn't gonna get any easier. "All right, go ahead," I say, waving my hand at the sigil. "Do your hocus pocus and get out of here."

Luna nods and turns to the glowing circle etched into the dirt. All the ritual ingredients are placed, with one exception.

Luna takes *The Wolf's Mate* out of her black satchel and I feel a wave of nostalgia wash over me as I look at the cover that features the chiseled pecs and abs I get to fall asleep draped over every night.

"We'll keep this safe," Luna promises.

"I know you will," I say, nodding. I can't think of anyone else's hands I'd rather have it in.

Especially since Raul and I let a five-foot psychopath steal it right out from under our nose. We are seriously not responsible enough to have a portal to another world sitting in our safe. I'm honestly not even sure who files the taxes.

Do taxes even exist in this world? I should probably ask Raul about that.

Luna carefully places the book in the center of the sigil and takes a moment to assess her work. A solemn demeanor always comes over her when she's doing magic now. She's got an air of authority around her and it's impressive to watch.

But I'm still gonna tease her about being budget Elphaba. I've grown as a person, but not that much.

"All right, it's all set," Luna announces, glancing back at us. "I've fine-tuned the ritual, so we don't really need to do the hand-holding anymore, but... once more, for old time's sake?"

"Don't gotta ask me twice," I say, striding over to the circle. The three of us join hands, and I glance over my shoulder, half-expecting to see a familiar black wolf running toward us. I can't help but feel a pang of disappointment when I don't, but I know Raul has been burning the candle at both ends lately, and he'd be here if he could.

"Raul isn't coming?" Luna asks, following my gaze.

I shake my head. "He wanted to be here, but he said there was something important he had to do at the last minute."

Luna nods, but I can tell she's disappointed. In a way, she's known Raul even longer than I have. She shakes it off, though, and begins chanting in latin words I've memorized by heart now, her voice low and rhythmic.

The symbols flare to life, growing brighter with each phrase, and the air starts to shimmer around them. Luna is definitely in the zone. She's got that glazed look in her eyes that she always has when deep in a magic ritual, and Reese is gazing at her adoringly, like she's the most badass and beautiful thing he's ever seen and he knows he hit the jackpot.

In that moment, I get it. I had to go to another world to find my perfect person, but them? They found each other close to home, and I can understand now why they'd want to go back.

Luna stops chanting suddenly and opens her eyes, looking at something on the hill. I turn around to follow her gaze, and my heart skips a beat, not only because I see Raul charging up the hill in his wolf form, looking majestic as ever, but because he's leading the whole damn pack behind him. Most of them, at any rate.

Trent and Lenore, Dr. Wilson, Curtis with close at his heels, Matthew and Kyle... Hannah is the only one who's missing, which means she stayed behind to watch Mina and the twins. And there's one

more wolf with them I don't recognize at first, who was all but hidden behind Raul until a second ago. He's got light brown fur, just a shade or two off from mine, and when our eyes meet, shock and joy collide inside my chest, forming a tornado that leads to me breaking away from the ritual circle, shifting into my own wolf form, and charging down the hillside.

*Devon!* I cry, leaping on the other wolf out of sheer impulsive instinct. We crash into each other and go barreling down the hill like some kind of dumbass wrecking ball.

*Brad!* Devon shrieks, his voice tinged with equal parts exasperation and amusement.

When we finally roll to a stop, I find myself licking his cheek, my tail wagging behind me like a damn golden retriever that just caught a tennis ball.

*All right, enough!* Devon huffs, rolling away from me before he gets back on his feet and shakes his fur out like the prissy little bastard he is. *I've only had this form for like a day, which isn't nearly long enough to get used to your dog breath.*

*You came!* I cry, too happy to see him to be properly insulted. I look over at Raul to see he's loping toward us as the others meet Reese and Luna at the top of the hill, shifting back to say their goodbyes.

*Of course I did,* Devon says as we both shift back, too.

Raul tosses him a change of clothes I realize he must have been carrying in his jaws, which is characteristically thoughtful of him. Being in a frat is practically desensitization to the idea of being in your birthday suit around other people at random, but I know there's no way Devon would be used to that yet if he just started to shift.

Who am I kidding? He's still gonna be a prude about it twenty years from now.

"Your mate thought you were going to need some moral support with Reese and Luna going back home, so he came and got me," Devon explains, hastily stepping into a pair of jeans. He grimaces a little when he puts on the shirt and touches a spot of wolf spit on the side.

"Sorry," Raul says with a grin, coming over to put his arm around me now that he's shifted back.

I lean up to kiss him hard enough he gives a startled sound against my lips, but he quickly returns it. "I should've known you wouldn't miss this," I murmured.

"Look at that," Raul says, amusement glinting in his eyes. I'm never gonna get tired of that. "You still have something left to learn about me."

I snort a laugh, looking back at my brother. "Constantine let you leave?"

"Constantine didn't let me do anything," Devon huffs, folding his arms. "He just thinks he does."

"Glad you're still giving him a run for his money," I say dryly.

I want to ask more about how things are between them, considering Devon's always been coy on our visits and they still don't have any pups to show for it, so I'm assuming they're not banging like rabbits at this point.

On the one hand, that's good news for my ability to hold down a meal, but on the other, they're fated

mates, and I want Devon to be happy. Even if it comes at the price of Constantine being happy, too. But there's time to catch up with him later, and he seems happier than he ever has been.

"Come on," Devon says, taking my hand to lead me up the hill where the others are embracing. Luna and Reese aren't fazed by being surrounded by naked people wishing them well on their journey home, but I'm pretty sure that's one aspect of this world they're not gonna miss.

Normies. I decide to change back into my clothes since I know Reese is gonna bitch otherwise.

After a few more rounds of goodbyes and mostly naked hugs that probably make us look like some kind of weird cult, Luna and Reese manage to pull themselves away and venture back to the circle. It's a hell of a lot bigger as we all join hands, and she leads the familiar chant, but there's a calm feeling softening the rock in my stomach.

Now this is a proper Stone Hollow sendoff, fit for our two honorary packmates.

As the portal roars to life, I watch the faces of my friends and family members who've yet to see magic in person. Dr. Wilson looks like he's gonna lose his dinner, which is just icing on the cake.

Raul squeezes my hand reassuringly as I let go of Devon's, and the others stand back to give Reese and Luna room. They turn to each other, still hand in hand, and when I see the way they smile at each other as they step toward the portal, the last part of me that wants to beg them to stay falls away.

They're making the right decision, and even if we belong to different worlds now, they're always going to be a part of my story.

But it's time for them to live their own.

Reese turns around and gives me the ultra-secret proprietary Kappa Nu fist bump, which is totally against protocol since we're not in private, but I return it anyway. He steps through the portal without hesitation, Luna's hand disappearing with him. Before she steps through, she stops and looks back over her shoulder, and I'm surprised to see tears in her eyes.

Would you look at that? There's some in mine, too. Some bitch has gotta be cutting onions in these woods. Major problem this time of year, wannabe Emeril Lagassés just creeping through the woods like Bigfoot. Raul really needs to look into that.

Time really does seem to stand still for a moment, and with all this magic in the air, who the hell knows? I stare at Luna and she stares back at me, neither of us saying a word, but there's not much that can describe everything we've been through together. Two people who didn't even know each other existed a year ago. A neurotic author and a boneheaded frat bro from worlds as different as it gets, and yet we both fell in love with the same one.

She's leaving it, I'm staying. But that's a bond we'll always share, no matter what.

She smiles, and I smile back, waving like a total dork. She laughs, so I know that's probably gonna end up in a book, but she waves back and grabs *The Wolf's Mate* before she disappears with Reese into the portal.

And then they're gone, just like that. But I don't leave. Not just because I'm expecting—hoping, really

—someone else to step through that portal, but because there's still a teeny, tiny part of me that's hoping they'll come back, even if I'd shove them back in myself if they did.

Of course, they don't.

And no one else comes through, either. At least, not yet.

Most of the others have trickled back down the hillside, but Raul is still here right beside me, his hand wrapped around mine, and Devon is sitting a safe distance from the portal, picking at a blade of grass.

I finally make him go back to the house to get some sleep, but I can't tear myself away from the portal.

Luna is right. It's been well over two hours, possibly even three, but the portal has already shrunk to half its original size. The glow isn't as bright, either.

"I guess they're not coming," I say. I've been meaning to say it for a while now, but it's the first time I've trusted myself to speak without sounding like I deepthroated a two-by-four.

Not that Raul's cock is far off.

"Of course they're coming," Raul says, releasing my hand only to drape his arm around my shoulder, pulling me against his side where we sit a few feet away from the shimmering blue light that seems to shrink a little more each second. Not so much you'd notice it with your eyes, but enough that I feel it in my soul. "Just be patient."

"What makes you so sure?" I mumble.

"Because," Raul says, turning my chin toward him. His eyes soften as they travel down my face, a smile on those lips that have brought me to my knees—literally and figuratively—on more times than I can count. "How could they not?"

That heat only he's capable of bringing out flames in my cheeks. "You're a sap," I grumble, leaning in close enough that the friction of his aura brushes against my lips.

"You love it." Raul closes the distance between us and I melt into the kiss, finding comfort in the solid warmth of his body. It dulls the ache of rejection.

I love my frat bros. They're the family I had to find, since Devon and I sure as fuck didn't have any backup from our blood relatives, but Reese is right. I always knew I had to graduate and leave them behind someday. I thought I could stretch it out another few years, maybe—my GPA is lower than my body fat percentage before Raul got to me—but I knew we'd all have to part ways eventually. I just thought it would be to enter the real world.

The one I got is so much fucking better.

"Dude, that's nasty," a familiar voice calls from in front of us. My head whips around so fast I feel my neck crack. Sure enough, Steve is standing there in his varsity jacket looking like the day I left, his arms folded and a judgmental scowl on his face. "I didn't come all this way to see you suckin' face with your werewolf boyfriend. Oh, and he's naked again. That's great."



"Steve!" I cry, leaping to my feet. I stumble a little in my haste to get to him, my hands landing on his shoulders. I grip him tight just to make sure he's real. "Holy shit, you came?"

Kevin and Nathan were at the top of my list, sure, but Steve was like, at least a solid five.

"Yeah, bro," Steve says, scanning the empty clearing around us as he steps away from the portal, smacking on a wad of gum. "Reese said there were a bunch of hot omega babes just waiting for a big alpha cock to rock their world, so I wasn't about to miss out on that shit."

Okay, maybe a nine.

"Well, you're here and that's what matters," I say, unable to mask my excitement. I pull him into a tight hug and he's still bitching about his spine when I see another shadow emerge from the portal.

"Kevin!" I bellow, shoving Steve aside to run toward him. By the time I wrap him up in a bear hug, Nathan stumbles out of the portal next, looking like he's about to puke.

"Holy shit," Nathan groans, clutching his stomach. "Reese was right, I shouldn't have ate before I came."

"The fifteen-layer lasagna?" I ask, reaching out to steady him.

"My chem prof," he answers, his eyes widening as he looks up at me. "Holy shit, you're really here."

"You're the one who's here," I laugh, pulling them both into a hug that turns into a double-noogie. I can't help it. When I'm overjoyed, my inner third-grade bully jumps out.

"That doesn't make any sense, and bro, let me outta your pit," Nathan groans, struggling in vain. "When the fuck did you get so strong?"

I release them both so I can flex my bicep. "Got that werewolf juice. Better than Crossfit, bro."

"Ew," Steve says, screwing up his nose. "We don't wanna know about your sex life, bro." Kevin shoots him a scolding look and Steve holds up his hands in defense. "It's not a homophobic thing, dude! I just don't need that mental image."

"I'm talking about being a shifter now, you smelly idiot," I snap.

"I'm not smelly," Steve grumbles.

"Dude, I've been in Brad's pit and it still wasn't as potent as working out across the gym from you," Kevin says in a matter-of-fact tone.

"Oh, fuck off," Steve says, flipping us both off.

The portal is shrinking faster now, but it's still just big enough that I could probably fit him back through if I turned him sideways and bent him a little.

I'm still contemplating this when Raul walks up. "It's good to see you all again," he says. "I'm afraid the welcome wagon left a little while ago, but we've got plenty of space prepared back at the packhouse."

"Sweet," Kevin says, swinging the duffel bag he brought with him over his shoulder. "You got any grub?"

"I'm sure Hannah put aside some leftovers," Raul assures him, leading us back to the pack house. He takes my hand and I hold it proudly, realizing there isn't even a small part of me that feels the need to hide who he is to me anymore.

Or who I am.

Steve can just get used to it.

"Dude, sweet digs," Nathan says as we get closer to the house. He looks up at Raul with newfound appreciation. "Is that really your place?"

"It's the family estate," Raul says proudly, smiling back at them over his shoulder. "And now it's your home as well. Welcome to the pack."

Kevin and Nathan look at each other for a second before they high-five and simultaneously shout. "Nice!"

Raul chuckles, looking down at me. The others fall slightly behind us, so I'm pretty sure only I can hear him as he says, "I told you they'd come."

"You were right." I'm more than happy to concede that.

"First time for everything," Raul teases.

"Hey, so when do we figure out what kinda wolves we are?" Steve interrupts, even though I can smell him a split second before his head pops up between us like a growth. "And when do I get my knot? I'm really lookin' to hit the ground running."

"Not everyone who comes through the portal can shift," Raul answers, raising an eyebrow. "Reese and Luna couldn't, and it took Brad months. I only knew Brad and Devon would be capable of it because they smelled like omegas, even when they were human."

"So what do we smell like?" Kevin asks curiously.

Raul hesitates, and I'm not sure if this is some sort of werewolf etiquette thing or if he just doesn't think they're gonna like the answer.

Come to think of it, the others do smell kind of different. As a mated omega, I can tell when another shifter is an alpha, even if Raul is the only one whose scent stirs my primal instincts, and betas smell pretty much like normal humans with a woodsy scent, but I'm nose blind to other omegas. Which means I'm pretty sure Steve isn't one.

"You smell like a beta," Raul answers. "Or rather, just a normal human."

"Huh," Kevin says, sounding pretty okay with that answer.

"What about me?" Nathan asks, looking a little worried. "I'm not an omega, right?"

Raul laughs. "No. You smell like an alpha."

"Thank fuck," Nathan breathes, dropping his head. He gives me a sheepish grin. "No offense, man."

I guess Luna and Reese filled them all in on everything. And they still chose to come through, knowing there was a chance they'd be sucked into it.

"I'm glad enough to see you that I'm gonna choose not to be offended," I say dryly, even though it's hard to feel anything other than relief and excitement.

The five of us come to a stop on the front lawn, the glow of the lights coming through the windows illuminating all the hard work Mina and I did getting the grounds back into shape. This place has felt like home for a long time, and little by little, but it feels good to have a physical marker that I belong here.

"Well, you don't have to tell me what I am," Steve says, rubbing his hands together as he looks up at the house eagerly. "So when do I get my knot?"

Raul and I exchange a look. We don't have to be in our wolf forms to be practically telepathic, at this point.

"About that," Raul says slowly. "I don't think that's going to be happening anytime soon."

Steve's expression falls. "What do you mean?" he whines. "Aw, come on, don't tell me I'm a beta!"

"Oh, don't worry, you're not a beta," Raul answers. He's keeping a straight face, but I know him well enough to recognize the faint tug at his lips as he tries not to show his amusement.

Steve turns a bit paler and looks like he just waited in line at the Cinnabon cart for an hour only to find out they're all out. The one at the mall, not the airport. "No," he says, shaking his head as he backs up. "No fucking way, dude! I'm not a fucking omega!"

"Your scent is, uh, quite unique," Raul muses. "But it's pretty clear cut."

"*No!*" Steve cries in his best horror movie scream, turning on his heel and making a beeline for the portal. "I'm going back!"

I reach out and snatch him by the back of his jacket, yanking him back. "Oh, no you don't," I grunt, holding him still while he scrambles in place like a cartoon roadrunner. "The portal's probably the size of your asshole right now. You try to go through and you'll just end up with a finger or two between dimensions."

I'm not even sure if that's true, but it gets him to freeze. "Seriously?" he groans, dragging his hands through his hair. "I don't wanna be a fucking omega!"

"Hey, relax," I say, draping an arm around his shoulder. "It takes a little getting used to, but there are plenty of perks. You'll get used to it in no time."

He eyes me doubtfully, but Nathan grabs his arm and pulls him toward the door. "Come on, dude, you'll feel better when we eat. They got microwave burritos in the '80s, right?"

"Of course they do," Kevin scoffs, shoving Steve up the steps ahead of him as Nathan throws open the door and looks around like a lion surveying his new territory. "Everyone knows Tesla invented

microwaves in the eighteenth century."

"Even I know that's bullshit," I call after them as the three of them breeze inside.

Raul comes up to stand beside me, putting a hand on my shoulder. "I see they're going to make themselves right at home."

"I did warn you," I say, turning to look at him.

He gives me that sharp white smile that's stopped my heart in its tracks a thousand times over. "You did," he agrees, reaching to pull me closer to him. "So. Did you mean what you told Steve about getting used to being an omega?"

"I did," I admit, draping my arms over his broad shoulders. "Being an omega hasn't bothered me for a while."

I didn't even realize it until this moment, but it's true.

"What changed?" Raul asks, curiosity glinting in his eyes, which are an even more intense shade of gold in the silver moonlight.

I pause to think about it. "Nothing," I finally decide. "I guess I just realized I'm still the same person I was before. It feels like my wolf has always been a part of me, so being an omega has, too. I was afraid I'd turn into something else, but if anything, it feels like I just finally learned to accept who I've always been."

A slow smile spreads across Raul's perfect face, glowing with pride. "Good. Because I wouldn't want you to be anyone or anything else."

He leans down to kiss me, and my lips crash against his, eager for the contact they've been missing all day. Every day, the bond between us grows tighter, and the mark on my neck is just the physical proof, but even if it wasn't there, I could feel it. The imprint of him on every inch of me, body and soul. As the kiss deepens, I drag my nails down his back, wanting to leave a mark of my own, and the low growl against my lips as Raul pushes his tongue into my mouth suggests he approves.

When he finally breaks away, I can see my lust reflected in his eyes. "Why don't we go inside and I'll remind you of some of those perks you were talking about?" he purrs.

"You know what they say," I reply, taking his hand and leading him into the house. "Show, don't tell."

*The End.*

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Best,  
Joel