



H.O.M.E
HOUSE OF OMEGA

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OF
OMEGA

A SWEETANGST NOVEL

ROXY COLLINS

House of Omega
(A Reverse Harem Omegaverse)

A Sweetangst Novel

By Roxy Collins

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House of Omega is a full-length standalone omegaverse reverse harem romance in the Pack Companion world. It is recommended for 18+ due to mature language, and sexual situations, including male/male interactions. See the Author's Note for tropes and trigger warnings.

Contents

[Author's Note](#)

[1. GRACE](#)

[2. GRACE](#)

[3. GRACE](#)

[4. GRACE](#)

[5. GRACE](#)

[6. MAX](#)

[7. GRACE](#)

[8. DANIEL](#)

[9. GRACE](#)

[10. GRACE](#)

[11. GRACE](#)

[12. JOSHUA](#)

[13. MAX](#)

[14. GRACE](#)

[15. GRACE](#)

[16. DANIEL](#)

[17. GRACE](#)

[18. GRACE](#)

[19. GRACE](#)

[20. JOSHUA](#)

[21. GRACE](#)

[22. GRACE](#)

[23. GARTH](#)

[24. GRACE](#)

[25. RICHARD](#)

[26. GRACE](#)

[27. GARTH](#)

[28. EPILOGUE - GRACE](#)

[Further Reading](#)

[Acknowledgements – Roxy’s Readerverse Rocks!](#)

Author's Note

Here's a quick peek into the world you're about to enter:

Omegaverse – this book is all about omegas, with the heats, adaptive body parts, and knotting associated with this genre. If you are not sure what that means, the Omegaverse is an alternate universe where humans fit into three categories – alphas, betas, or omegas – and have both human and animalistic traits. Relationships are often driven by the sexual, beast-like connection formed between alphas and omegas. **If you don't enjoy people acting on impulse, instinct, and animal attraction, this book won't be for you!**

Shifters – there are NO werewolves in this Omegaverse. When the characters talk about their beast, wolves, or their alpha/beta/omega, they are referring to their designation. If you like shifters in your omegaverse, try my Blood Brothers series.

Reverse Harem / Poly Relationships – this is a 'why choose' story, so the female main character will end up with more than one partner. It's also important to me that ALL characters feel loved and accepted. No character gets left behind. Because this is a pack story, many of the characters have long-term feelings and relationships (not always sexual) before they meet the female character. This includes MM (male with male) relationships. If you want the story to be exclusively about the female, this might not work for you.

Steam – This begins as more of a slow burn, but there are lots of spicy bits in this book. Fair warning! There is also MM (male with male) activity. It is important to the story, but take note if this isn't for you.

Romance and Reality – This is a section I've added to my Author's Note following some conversations I've seen on social media about how romance is depicted in fiction, compared to real life. This is obviously a fantasy, and even has some paranormal elements. While I try to make the setting and characters as believable as possible, this is a fast-paced, insta-love kind of story. As an omegaverse, there's a lot going on at

the hormonal level, (*ah, the sweet smell of omega slick and alpha pheromones*), which also puts a spin on the sexual interactions. Safe sex in the real world is very different to pack heats and ruts as depicted in this story.

On a final note, I've made a deliberate effort to avoid making this a dubious consent or stalker romance. Nothing Kayden Sawyer does to his stepsister is okay. Coercive control is a real and very dangerous form of abuse, and I don't condone it in any form.

Trigger Warnings

Please take care if you are sensitive to any of the following:

- Mild violence and threats of extreme violence (not from love interests)
- Bullying from a step-sibling (not a love interest) and members of his pack, including references to stalking, childhood trauma, and sexual assault (not on page)
- Consensual sexual acts, including multiple partners, group scenes, and MM (male with male) activity
- Mild domination between consenting adults
- Bad language of all stripes, including lots of dirty talk!



1. GRACE

“Name?” The alpha doorman inspects me over his tablet, my best party outfit doing little to soften the judgment in his eyes.

I tug the sleeves of my silk blouse down past the cuffs of my coat and cross my arms over my chest. It’s cool out, the energy around me borderline hostile, and I can feel the pep talk I gave myself in the cab dissolving like mist. I’m a master at avoiding confrontation, but more and more often these days, I feel a lick of anger down my spine to go along with my sweat-soaked blouse and the pinched pain behind my eyes. “Grace. Grace Worth. I have an invitation.”

One I accidentally left on the kitchen counter in my haste to leave. I was already running late, and there is nothing fashionable about being the last to arrive at your future-sister-in-law’s bonding party. As the only beta in her friendship circle, I’m expected to be neither seen nor heard. I’m background filler, invited because of the connection to my stepbrother. Fetching her drinks, making toasts, and even holding her hair back if she overindulges are the rights of her omega sisters.

“The thing is...” the doorman says while I try to ignore the impatient rumblings behind me, “you’re a beta, love. This is an omega club.”

A reality I’m obviously aware of, since I’m the only beta in sight. At Parfum, the hottest club in the city, omegas are welcomed with open arms, but betas are discouraged, and alphas have to queue up and make their pitch for entry. Which means the entirety of the line behind me is made up of irritated alphas, all waiting their turn to sweet-talk the doorman.

Which I am clearly failing to do.

“It’s my friend’s party,” I explain with as much patience as I can muster. “Jasmine Crenshaw. She’s an omega, and has a private room booked. Could you please check the list again?”

Questioning an alpha is a tricky business. Omegas can get away with it because alphas are genetically wired to give them whatever they want. But betas have to use more subtle means. And growing up the way I did, I was too busy tiptoeing around the alphas in my life to learn anything but the most basic survival skills.

Which clearly doesn’t include wooing an irritated doorman. “Look, love, there’s a very nice beta bar down the block...”

“Why don’t you just let her in?” The alpha behind me has a pleasant voice, but it still makes me stiffen. I can smell his scent, which tells me he’s above average in the pheromones department. My beta nose is fairly well developed for my designation, so I can pick out the contrasting steel and citrus notes. If I was an omega, that mix of protective and playful would probably have me turning to him with a flirty smile. But since I’m a beta, I keep my face firmly forward. Especially when he continues to argue my case in his reasonable way. “She said her friend is inside and they’ve booked a room. What harm can it do for her to join them?”

“I’m not trying to be an asshole,” the doorman says in a low rumble, telling me exactly how pathetic he thinks I look right now. “But there’s a list, and there’s no Grace Worth on it.”

I bite back a growl and take a deep, steadying breath. “Could you check for Gray Sawyer? My stepbrother is Kayden Sawyer and he might’ve got it wrong on your list.”

I clench my arms tighter, not wanting to think about how my name was butchered when my mom remarried and I inherited the Sawyer label. Because that’s all it has ever been. A tag to tell the world I belong to my stepbrother Kayden Sawyer.

“Sawyer! You mean you’re with *that* Sawyer? He’s booked the premium VIP package.” The doorman frowns at me, like I somehow tricked him by fudging my last name. “Yeah, of course. Come on through.”

But just as he reaches down to unhook the silk rope, a firm hand bites into my shoulder, and a familiar voice growls in my ear, “Gray! What the hell are you doing out here? We’re waiting for you inside.”

My stomach clenches in alarm, same as it’s been doing since I was fifteen and my stepbrother told me I was the sister he never knew he wanted.

“I’m sorry, Kayden,” I say quickly, looking up at him through my lashes. Does it make my insides raw to force the appeasing smile to my lips? Of course, it does. But pride and survival rarely go hand-in-hand. “I couldn’t get a cab,” I fib, knowing he won’t be able to sense the lie in my subtle scent.

It doesn’t stop Kayden from squeezing the bones of my shoulder until the smile falls from my lips. I’m not delicate like an omega, but even the most underdeveloped alpha has the ability to snap a collarbone if he’s motivated. And for reasons I’ve never really understood, my stepbrother has always been motivated to hurt me.

“Well, hurry up. It’s fucking freezing out here.”

Kayden slings an arm over my throbbing shoulder, pulling me tight to his side as he scowls at the doorman. The guy bobs his head, scurrying to pull the door open, the veneer of power stripped away with one sneer from my stepbrother.

Because on a scale from zero to alpha, my mom had the misfortune of marrying into a pack who is off-the-charts dominant. The Sawyers aren’t influential because of their bloodline, like more respectable packs in New York, but because they’re unmatched when it comes to brute force. They run the biggest gambling ring in the city, and no doubt other seedier ventures they keep from the public eye. Although, since my stepfather died last year, Kayden has been working on his image, which is one of the reasons he’s planning to bring Jasmine Crenshaw into the pack.

“You should go find Jasmine,” I tell him as he leads me into the club. Omega perfume hangs heavily in the air, and I can feel the way his body responds to its allure. It’s enough to make the bile rise in the back of my throat, but I push it down. Because my logical side knows that if Kayden is distracted by omegas, he has no reason to amuse himself with me. “I’m just going to put my coat away.”

“Good idea,” he mutters, nudging me with his hip until we’re both crammed into the small cloakroom. There’s a dim light burning to illuminate the rack of coats, but unfortunately, it’s an honor system. Which means there’s no helpful coat-check girl to witness what my stepbrother is about to do to me.

“Kayden!” I protest as he peels my coat off my shoulders. “We should - I should – I need to go apologize to Jasmine for being late.”

“She won’t care,” he says bluntly, his hands encircling my neck on both sides while his gaze locks on my hammering pulse. “I’m the one you need to make it up to.”

There’s no way I can hide the way my blouse is sticking to my back, or the icy shiver that runs over my skin. It’s a bone-deep reaction to the feel of my stepbrother’s hands as they drag from my neck down over my breasts, then around to my wrists. Sometimes he lingers, but tonight he’s in a mood, and he grunts as he pulls at the tight cuff of my sleeve. It has a row of tiny pearl buttons that his thick fingers have no hope of undoing.

“Let me see,” he growls, his blunt nails scratching my skin.

“Wait!” My voice is sharp in the tight space. “I’ll undo it. Don’t tear it.”

He flashes me a narrow-eyed glare, which just makes his pale eyes all the more unsettling. My mom had eyes like cornflowers, but the Sawyer men have always been able to freeze me with a look. The only time iced water doesn’t run in Kayden’s veins is when someone pisses him off and his rage overflows like lava.

I fumble under that stare, but eventually I peel the cuff back and he presses a thumb over the wound. It hurts; the skin is raw and inflamed, but that's not why he's frowning. "It's healing up."

The thick possession in his voice makes me shudder, but I don't tug my wrist away. Right now, it's just a shallow, ugly gash shaped like his mouth. But if I show him how much I really hate him marking me up, I know he'll bite me for real. And then I'll be bound to his pack, for them to do with as they please.

"It's still tender," I tell him, hoping to satisfy that hungry glint in his eye.

"Mm, but I think it would look better with a little top up."

I flinch, my instincts overpowering my self-preservation. He hates the way I shrink away from him, even though he smiles almost fondly at me when I cry. Pain is good, resistance is bad. He's proven that to me so many times you'd think I'd have learned my lesson by now.

But right as his furious gaze snaps to my face, someone clears their throat behind us. "Everything okay in here?"

The shock makes me gasp and I curl my wrist against my chest, which is suddenly heaving like I can't get enough air. But that steel and citrus scent gives me the courage to turn my back on Kayden and step into the corridor. The alpha who spoke up for me – twice - is lean and blond with a kind smile. Basically, everything my stepbrother is not.

"I'm fine," I say quickly, not wanting to drag him any further into my drama. "I'm just going to pop to the restroom."

I can feel their eyes on my back as I scurry through the crowd, but I don't turn to look. Hopefully, they parted ways without a fuss, but knowing Kayden, he had some choice words for the other alpha. Something along the lines of *stick your nose in my business again and I'll smash it with my boot*.

The smile is still plastered on my face as I step into the restroom, almost tripping over Jasmine, the guest of honor and my future sister-in-law.

She's the reflection I longed to see in my mirror all through my teens: bright green eyes, dewy skin, golden curls, and delicate features that make every passing alpha stop in their tracks. I've never liked the idea of being stalked by a man, but when I look at Jasmine's doe-like beauty, I can almost understand their need to catch and possess omegas like her.

"S-sorry I'm late," I huff out, my gaze sliding past her to the stalls.

"It's just us," she says, drawing me over to the vanity. "What's wrong? You're so pale." I open my mouth, but since Jasmine knows all my secrets, she can read me like a book. "You've seen him already, haven't you?"

"At the door." I press my throbbing wrist across my middle. "He's in a mood."

She sighs, but the news doesn't take any of the steel out of her gaze. Jasmine might look like prey, but she has the instincts of a wolf. "I'll distract him," she tells me. "Go out the back way, grab a cab, and get ready for the morning. If he asks, I'll say you think you're coming down with the flu. It'll give you an excuse to stay holed up in your room until after your interview."

I breathe out a trembling breath, a small, excited smile curving my lips. "I can't believe you talked House of Omega into seeing me."

"It wasn't *me*," she scoffs, although her excitement is almost as palpable as mine. "You convinced them with that portfolio you sent in."

I grin, hoping Jasmine's right. I'm pretty happy with my submission, although I struggled to get it down to the three signature pieces the interviewers asked for. The truth is, I have enough designs to fill a warehouse, and there's plenty more bubbling away in my head.

I just need a foot in the door, and those ideas can become a reality.

A big ask for a beta with an online degree, but I have to try. Because while my mom, who was an artist, once said that

madness feeds genius, I know it's desperation. There's nothing like knowing you could be bonded to the worst pack in the city to inspire you to aim higher.

"Wait!" Jasmine says as I step towards the door. She grips my shoulders, right over Kayden's bruise, but her hands are warm and gentle as she pulls me in for a hug. "Good luck for tomorrow. You deserve your dreams, Gracie. Believe that, and House of Omega will help them come true."

I'm misting up as I step out into the corridor, but I quickly blink the moisture away when I find Porter, one of Kayden's packmates, leaning against the wall. All of my stepbrother's friends give off the same dark menace, their brutality blurring their features until I can barely tell them apart. But Porter was the first to join his pack, so I know him the best. Or the worst, given the things I've seen him do at my brother's side.

"Are you waiting for me?" I ask, confused why he's lurking here instead of drinking in the VIP section with Kayden. It's a mistake, his gaze zeroing in on me with a smirk. But before I can backtrack, there's a loud thud behind the restroom door. There's a sign on the front saying it's reserved for staff, and I instantly know why one of my brother's thugs is guarding it.

"I was just trying to help her get into the club!" a familiar male voice groans, right before there's another sickly thud. "Fuck! She looked *scared*, man..."

"Good." That's Kayden, all cruel sneers and venom. "She should be. But not as scared as you, right?"

I sway away from the door, but I can't get my feet to move. I don't even know his name, but I'm certain it's the alpha with the steel and citrus scent. The one with the kind smile, who cared enough to check on me in the cloakroom.

"Next time you look at something that belongs to me," my stepbrother growls, "remember what the world looks like through two black eyes."

There's another thud and my stomach flips, but as I step towards the door, Porter grabs my arm. "This way, your Good

Samaritan ends up in the hospital. You go in there and try to talk your brother down, Kayden will put him in the morgue.”

“That’s crazy! All he did was try to get me past the doorman.”

“What’s crazy is you acting surprised.” Porter squeezes my wrist, his thumb stroking the wound under my cuff, and my face burns. I go to a lot of effort to keep Kayden’s mark hidden, but there are no secrets in his pack. And I can clearly smell the arousal in Porter’s scent as his thumbnail digs into the raw skin. “You’re ours, little beta. And don’t you ever forget it.”



2. GRACE

“That smells divine. Is it from the Godiva range?”

I look away from the bus window to find a guy sliding into the seat next to me. I get a whiff of honey, amber, and rose oil – male omega – before I’m distracted by his long silver-blond hair. He has it tucked back behind his ears, but it still brushes his shoulders, and my curious gaze quickly travels down the long lines of his body. He’s tall, his knees folding sideways in the small gap, and broad enough that his shoulders are brushing mine.

But it’s his face that strikes me mute. It’s all sharp angles and hollows, with tilted green eyes beneath sweeping brows. It’s the kind of face that should be too striking to be pretty, but I’m fairly certain he’s the most beautiful man I’ve ever seen.

When the silence starts to turn awkward, he points at my hand cream. “I’ve been secretly sniffing you from the back seat, but I had to come and take a closer look.”

“Oh. No, it’s not Godiva’s. It’s my own brand, actually.” I quickly tug the cuff of my blouse, hoping he didn’t catch sight of the bite mark on my wrist. All that manhandling last night made the wound flare up, and I’ve been rubbing cream into the tender skin since breakfast. “I make them myself. This one is lavender, cedarwood, and shea butter.”

He looks with interest at the little gold tube with my design name – WORTHY - stamped on the side. But when I hold it out, he shakes his head, looking rueful. “I wish I could, but I’m on a scent ban. I can’t touch anything that might transfer onto my skin.” A faint blush touches his cheeks and he laughs. “And yes, I know how ridiculous that sounds. But I’m not even supposed to be on the bus. They told me to arrive by private car with a five-star sterility rating.” He scoffs and

pushes his beautiful hair back. “Like there’s one of those on every corner in my neighborhood.”

I blink, fascinated. I know some alphas can be weird about their omegas clouding their natural scent, but then why didn’t his beau drive him wherever he’s going? Alphas, typically, don’t even know buses exist.

He scrunches down in his seat a bit, like he’s about to share a secret. “Plus, I need safety in numbers.” He tips his head towards the back. “I swear, the guy in the corner was just about to pounce on me before I came over here.”

I glance back to see a middle-aged beta in a cheap suit watching us with a hungry expression. Or watching my seat buddy, to be precise. I can’t really blame him, but the pouncing part is seriously uncool, so I narrow my eyes until he glances away, looking flustered.

The omega’s eyes sparkle, clearly impressed. “Ooh! Well done. How do I learn to shoot death rays out of my eyeballs?”

I smirk, feeling ridiculously powerful for a moment. Maybe Kayden’s intimidation techniques are rubbing off on me. “Some guys just need to be reminded of their manners.”

The understatement of my life, but just because I rarely see it in practice doesn’t mean I don’t believe it. If I ever get the chance to choose, I’d take a boring guy with nice manners over a sexy Neanderthal any day of the week.

Although my first choice would definitely be the gorgeous omega at my side. His pink lips are softly curved, and I find myself studying their shape. I’ve seen plenty of omegas with beautiful smiles, but never a perfect cupid’s bow. I have the crazy urge to reach out and touch that dent in his top lip but instead, twist my hands into a knot. *How creepy can you get, Grace?* And after scowling at the backseat sleazebag for drooling, it would also make me a complete hypocrite.

But my companion seems to be studying me just as hard, his head tilting as he looks me over. “So, why are *you* on the bus? It can’t be a lack of money, because I know for a fact that’s a Chanel blouse.”

I squirm, trying to think up a lie. But there's such open interest in his eyes, I find the truth coming out instead. "My stepbrother's the one with money. He buys my clothes... and he monitors my credit cards."

His smile disappears in a rush, his gaze dropping to my wrist. "That sounds kind of controlling."

I nod. "He's got my life mapped out. And it doesn't include me getting a job at House of Omega."

His vivid green eyes widen. "H.O.M.E? That's where I'm heading, too."

It takes a moment for the dots to connect. "You're one of their models?"

He gives an awkward little shrug as he drops his head on the back of the seat, exposing the long pale line of his throat. Unmarked, because he's unclaimed. Which seems incredulous, given how attractive he is.

"I'm trying out for the Heart of the House position," he tells me, biting his lip. "I did some modeling back on the west coast, but never at this level. And I'm not delusional; I know it's a longshot. They've never had a male face of the company before."

His scent has turned a little raw, like burned sugar, and I realize he's nervous. I could tell him he has nothing to worry about, but that would be insulting. Like me, he's obviously researched the company and knows how rare it is for the Rose Pack to step outside the traditional industry practices.

Omeegas are pretty little blondes with gentle curves, and designers are alphas with a bunch of degrees from fancy art colleges.

We're both a bit subdued as we get off the bus a block from the company headquarters. But then he taps the edge of the leather portfolio I'm clasp to my chest. "I've been trying to guess your name based on your initials. Gloria Wentworth? Too stuffy. Ginny West? Too cutesy." He pulls a pouty face that's beyond adorable, and growls, "Give me a clue, gorgeous woman."

“Grace Worth,” I tell him with a smile, enjoying the glow of interest in his eyes more than I should. “Do you think that’s too plain? Or too pretentious?”

“No, it’s perfect. A princess’ name, but with a backbone.” He gives me a coy smile and turns in a slow circle, so I can look him over. He’s in dark jeans and a white silk shirt with a faded Ramones band tee underneath. He looks effortlessly cool, in the way of people who can fling on anything and stride down a runway like they own it. “Now, do I look like a Max Colt to you? Because I think my dad was trying to thwart the omega gods by giving me a tough guy name. Which is why I used to tell all his stuffy business friends to call me *Maxine*.”

I snort, but we’ve reached the steps of the House of Omega flagship building, and we both fall silent as we take it in with wide eyes. Like everything the company produces, it’s a flawless example of old-world elegance, with polished marble stairs and a copper-framed archway, H.O.M.E. spelled out in gold lettering. I suck in a deep breath, my hands sweaty around the edges of my portfolio. “Not intimidating at all,” I mutter, watching a group of men in sleek business suits stride down the stairs like they’re off to conquer the world.

But Max just holds out a hand to me. “Want to do this, GW?”

I’m not sure I do until I remember the club last night, and the way a kind man – just like Max – took the smallest interest in my life and was punished for it. “Yes. Let’s go.”

But instead of starting up the stairs, he pulls me in for a hug.

“What about the scent ban?” I protest, even as I melt into his arms. God, he feels good and smells like a dream. I know a thing or two about tempting scents, and Max’s is off the charts. I resist the urge to bury my face in his shirt and sniff like a bloodhound, but it’s a close call. “Won’t you get in trouble for having my smell all over you?”

“Screw the rules,” he laughs, squeezing me until my head grows giddy with his allure. “Besides, I’m trying to soak up your boss vibes.”

It's on the tip of my tongue to tell him I'm the opposite of a boss, but it's one little lie I give myself. Aren't we supposed to fake it until we make it? And I'll need all the borrowed confidence I can get if I'm going to ace this interview.

When he eases back, I expect it to feel awkward, but he grins at me. "Don't worry, GW. You smell like pure fresh air. And I'm so sick of my own scent, I'm actually praying for a garbage truck to drive by right now."

I force a laugh, but my heart melts a little more as he curls his fingers around mine, leading me up the stairs to the ornate revolving doors.

There's a doorman who gives us a polite nod, but a more serious-looking man is guarding the foyer as we make our way inside. He's in a sharp suit, his dark hair slicked back, and the H.O.M.E. monogram embroidered on his jacket pocket. "Welcome to House of Omega. How might I help you today?"

I look around for a receptionist, but he's the only member of staff in the foyer. A quick glance takes in the checkerboard marble floors and ornamental molding, but then my gaze catches on a display of House of Omega lifestyle products. There's everything from luxury travel luggage and fragrances in ornate bottles, to strings of pink and black pearls and an elegant chaise lounge for pregnant omegas. Beside the display is a huge headshot of the current Heart of the House – a pretty blonde omega with dimples in her apple cheeks named Ivy Weaver.

"We're here for the interviews," Max says with a confident lift of his chin. "Max Colt for the Heart of the House audition, and Grace Worth to see..."

"Mr. Spade. The designer interview."

That gets a pair of raised eyebrows as he consults his tablet, and I can't help but think of the doorman last night. I brace myself for the inevitable bad news, but he eventually gives a curt nod and walks us over to the elevators. "You both need to check in on the same floor. The receptionist will show you to your respective meetings."

We don't speak until we're whooshing up to the tenth floor and Max grabs my hand again. The elevator is slowing, and my nerves are on the rise. "Good luck, GW. Remember, you're worth every single one of your dreams."

I think it's the first time anyone's played on my name without it being an insult and I feel a flutter under my breastbone. Max is gorgeous in every way, but it's his kindness that makes my throat catch. "You too, Max. And if you don't mind, I'm going to call my next hand cream The Maxine. Honey, amber, and jojoba oil. So I can smell like you every day."

His mouth crimps, and he presses a hand to his heart. "Even if they laugh me out of the room, I'm glad I came. Because now I've met you, GW."

I bite my lip, surprised by the pinch behind my eyes. Getting attached to someone like him is a bad idea, but I'm suddenly fumbling for a way to see him again. Should I suggest a post-interview coffee? Or maybe a drink, just in case we need to drown our sorrows...

But before I can ask, the doors swish open and the receptionist is giving us visitor passes, along with a few eyelash flutters for Max. "You're in the big room down the hall, Mr. Colt," she tells him with an inviting smile. "They're ready to start, so you should probably hurry along."

Max gives her a grateful nod, then shoots me a huge grin as he backs down the hall. "Worth it, GW."

I nod, watching until he's disappeared behind a door. When I finally turn back to the receptionist, she doesn't look impressed. "There's a waiting area for you over there," she tells me, her tone flat. "There's been a lot of interest in the position, so Mr. Spade may not get to everyone today."

I frown, because I called twice to confirm the ten am slot. But there's no use arguing with someone who clearly thinks I shouldn't be here in the first place.

You're worth it, GW.

I repeat Max's affirmation in my head as I clutch my visitor's pass and walk to the waiting area. There are five men – all alphas – holding portfolios like mine, and I feel their eyes on me as I lean against the wall. Unsurprisingly, none of them offer me a seat, and I try to ignore the pinch of my heels and the awkward weight of my portfolio as the minutes tick by. As soon as the receptionist calls one of the men into the interview room, I slide into his chair. But I've barely got settled before the alpha next to me is frowning my way.

"They only employ alphas for technical roles," he tells me in a haughty voice. "They should have told you when you applied."

"I'm pretty sure that's against the law," I reply coolly. "They can't specify a designation any more than they can specify a gender."

"It's tradition," he replies, something in his gaze a little too much like my stepbrother for my liking. "The whole design team are alphas. It just meshes better that way. And everyone knows that's how Richard likes it. A uniform, tight-knit team."

I don't need to ask who Richard is. Not only is he the head designer for the company, but he's also a member of the Rose Pack, and therefore a part owner of House of Omega.

"I'm just saying they need to keep an open mind. Design talent isn't restricted to a particular designation."

"No, but the best universities are," another alpha sneers, fingering the sharp creases in his trousers. "Where did you get *your* qualifications? Because I'm certain it wasn't at an elite technical college."

Seriously? How condescending can you get? "That's none of your business, but excluding betas from any institution isn't just stupid, it should be unlawful too," I snap back, feeling the skin prickle along my nape. I'm used to backing down to alphas in my own home, but these men are no better than me. I don't give a crap about their fancy degrees. We're all applicants here, and we should have the same chance of winning the role. Although, the longer they stare at me with hard, dismissive eyes, the more my confidence wilts.

God, I wish Max was here right now to squeeze my hand...

“Are you saying you’ll *sue* the company if you don’t get the position?”

I’m not exactly sure where the question came from, but I jerk as the scent of irritated alpha washing over me. “No, of course not. But I’ll hold them to a fair and equitable interview process, same as you.”

The receptionist has come out to collect the next alpha, and she’s now frowning in my direction as well. My blush spreads, and I fight the urge to slink down into my seat. But after shutting the door behind the next applicant, she walks over to her desk and picks up her phone. I can’t hear what she’s saying, but after a long pause, she hangs up and walks over to me.

“Ms. Worth?” I nod numbly. “If you’d please come with me, one of our executive team would like a word with you.”



3. GRACE

I can feel the sting of the alphas' smirks between my shoulder blades as the receptionist leads me up a level and along another hallway. There's a pang of disappointment there, too, because I'd been hoping to catch a glimpse of Max when he came out of his audition. But maybe it's for the best. If that's the only time we'll ever meet, I prefer he remembers the boss version of me, not the one with the blotchy blush and a blouse soaked in nervous sweat.

The receptionist hasn't said a word to me since we left the waiting room, but when we reach a heavy wooden door, she eases it open and walks away. I'm left staring apprehensively over the threshold. The carpet is an industrial gray, the furniture heavy, masculine, and expensive. I can see a brass clock on the wall, a mahogany credenza, and the edge of what looks like an imposing desk. It's a corner office, so the view of Central Park is spectacular, but somehow that just makes the room even more oppressive.

"Are you going to come in, or shall we conduct this meeting through the wall?"

There's just enough mockery in the alpha's voice to prod me into the room.

I don't know what I was expecting. Maybe one of Richard Rose's lackeys, ready to turn his nose up at my portfolio and send me on my way. Or, if the receptionist caught any of the exchange with the other applicants, maybe an HR or public relations manager. Someone to thrust a nondisclosure agreement in my face before ejecting me from the building.

But 'lackey' is the last work I think of when I take in the alpha behind the desk. Rumpled. Unshaven. Intimidating.

And sexy as all hell.

I frown at the wayward thought, because he's also dangerous looking, with a shaved head, crooked nose, and a thin, firm mouth. He's watching me with an unnatural stillness, which just adds to the whole predatory vibe. Plus, he's wearing a leather jacket. It's tailored, and probably costs more than my Dior purse, but it's a long way from the traditional suits I saw in the hall.

Oh, my god.

Have they sent me to the guy with knuckledusters in his desk?

There's no helpful nameplate in sight, so I just clutch my portfolio tighter to my chest and try to keep the tremble out of my chin. Instead of diffusing the tension with the usual chit-chat, the alpha just leans back in his chair and stares at me with eyes the color of bruised violets. "Do you know why you're here, Ms. Worth?"

"For an interview," I tell him promptly, pleased to hear my voice come out clear and strong. He can no doubt smell my nervous sweat with his crooked, alpha nose, but at least I don't *sound* like a terrified kitten. "I have an appointment with Mr. Spade for the junior designer position."

"Not in this building. I'm talking about in this office." He gestures at his desk, which other than a computer and phone, is completely barren. "Why are you *here*?"

I look around, but the room is just as soulless from the inside as it was from the doorway. "How can I answer that when I don't know what you do?"

"I work in the company's legal department." I blink, and his mouth quirks up. "Are you surprised?"

There's no point lying, so I settle for a small shrug. "I don't know many lawyers."

Long, thick fingers drum on the edge of his desk, faded tattoos inked on the knuckles. He's watching me like a hawk, but then he suddenly snorts, his eyes narrowing. "I've always believed criminals make the best lawyers, or at least those

familiar with skirting the law.” He taps something on the computer in front of him and turns the screen towards me. “You sure you don’t know a thing or two about that, Ms. Sawyer?”

My stomach sinks into my shoes as I stare at the picture splashed across the screen. Unfortunately, I recognize it only too well. It’s from last night; a grainy shot of me in the hallway outside the Parfum restrooms. Kayden has me backed against the wall, bloodied knuckles on either side of my head, with Porter looking on, the cast of his head clearly taking in the rapid rise of my chest. They look like wolves about to fall on a terrified lamb, especially since Kayden’s mouth is pressed hard to the thundering pulse in my neck. There was resistance in every line of my body, but I’m not sure you can see it in the picture. “This your brother, Kayden Sawyer?”

“Stepbrother,” I mutter, looking away from the screen. “The name on my birth certificate is Worth. And that picture is an invasion of my privacy.”

It’s on the tip of my tongue to ask how he got it, but the lawyer holds up a hand, placating now he’s splashed my trauma across his screen. I curl my fingers into fists, so completely pissed that once again Kayden has ruined things for me. Because, despite this man’s rough appearance, House of Omega is all about elegance, refinement, and old-world charm. And there’s clearly no place for barely educated betas who get mauled in public by their notorious stepbrothers.

Not that the night ended with that photograph. I don’t know what happened to the man who tried to help me, but Kayden, Porter, and their other packmate Derek, took turns marking up my wrist until I was white with pain. A couple of times, my stepbrother came within an inch of claiming me, and by the end of it, I was a wreck on the floor. It took every ounce of courage I had to walk out of the house and come to this interview today...

“I think we’ll leave things there,” the so-called lawyer murmurs, nudging the screen back around. “If anyone asks, you can say it wasn’t a good fit instead of designation discrimination.”

The flush in my cheeks now burns all the way to my hairline. So, the receptionist *did* hear me. I suppose it's my own fault for letting the other applicants get under my skin, but I know I'm not wrong. This was never going to be a fair process. And the fact I got hauled into this thug's office just proves what happens to betas who voice their views aloud.

I turn on my heel, not bothering to respond. But that damn surveillance picture is now imprinted behind my eyes, and when I get to the door, I turn back. Thick black brows quirk over his misshapen nose – clearly from all the people who've surrendered to the urge to punch his smug face.

“Allure Industries might be second to House of Omega in the luxury goods market, but they've already overtaken you in fragrances, and they're nipping at your heels in jewelry. And guess what? They have both betas and omegas in their design department. Many of whom are employed through their blind recruitment drives, just so their hiring teams aren't unconsciously biased towards alphas. Now, *that's* a classy company. And maybe a lesson for the next time you dismiss someone as a bad fit based on a surveillance photo you know nothing about.”

He lets me get to the end of my speech before he starts to laugh. It's a disturbingly rich sound, although there's more amusement than mockery in his dancing eyes. “Maybe we should employ you in the PR team. Or market research. Although, I don't think those pencil pushers could handle you, Ms. Sawyer.”

I narrow my eyes at him. “It's Worth, like I said. And I wouldn't work here now if you begged me.”

Not true. If the CEO, Garth Rose, got down on bended knee, I'd probably cave. But I'm not spending another second in the company of this asshole.

I make it to the elevators before I feel the press of tears. The doors are open, a guy in a navy suit impatiently waiting for me, but there's no way I'm getting trapped in a metal box with another judgmental alpha. So, I head for the stairs, taking a deep, shuddering breath as the heavy door shuts behind me.

Okay, so House of Omega is out. I mean, it was never really *in*, except in my dreams, but it still hurts to have the illusion ripped away from me.

And by a hot-as-hell jackass in a designer leather jacket.

That just feels so... *Gucci*.

I huff my way down a few floors, letting my rage fuel my steps. I'm wearing my favorite cherry red House of Omega pumps and I make a mental note not to start hating on them. The company's products are still to die for, even if it's run by a syndicate of tasteless assholes.

I decide to get out on the next floor, mainly because something delicious is wafting through the heavy metal door. But when I open it, the last thing I expect to be confronted by is a professional photoshoot. There's a white screen, a bank of cameras, and angled spotlights; Nina Simone's smoky voice curling through the air. I'm about to duck back into the stairwell for a more inconspicuous exit when an annoyed voice calls out, "Where's the male omega? Will someone go and see what's taking him so long?"

I freeze with my hand on the door, watching a girl with a lanyard and a high ponytail hurry around the corner. I can't be certain they're talking about Max – this is the home of omegas, after all, and there are probably a dozen male omegas in the building right now – but my feet are already crossing the room. A couple of people glance my way, but my pass and portfolio must convince them I belong, because no one tries to stop me. And then I'm in a dressing room that might as well be a shrine to all things omega.

It smells... *divine*. If they could bottle the air, House of Omega would definitely knock Allure Industries back off its perch. The room is a narrow rectangle with marble floors and huge framed pictures of past company faces on the walls. Running the length of the room is a long vanity with individual stations, each Hollywood-style mirror lit up with soft globes, and every kind of makeup stacked in neat, glossy towers. There are racks of clothing parked behind each station, and whole carts devoted to hairdressing and jewelry

accessories. And dotted amongst this pampering excess are at least a dozen omegas, their attendants all hard at work improving on perfection.

Still, it doesn't take long to spot Max – he stands out like a silver lion amongst all the gold-toned pussycats. Especially given the fierce scowl on his beautiful face.

“I'm telling you, it *itches!*” He's standing in front of one of the vanity stations, his hands on his hips as he glares down at a trim, dark-haired alpha. “Why can't I just do the shoot without it?”

“Because your vibe is Egyptian prince meets St Barts playboy,” the smaller man snaps back, waving a hand at Max's bare chest and linen shorts combo. “And because the collar is one of the key pieces in the next showcase. Do you really want me to go out there and tell Richard Rose you want to ditch his centerpiece because it *itches?*”

“No,” Max grumbles, lifting the white gold necklace away from his neck. It's beautiful – if a bit ornate – but there must be too much nickel in the mix, because there's a raised red rash spreading across Max's collarbones. “I'll wear it, but they better be quick or I'm going to leap out of my skin.”

My gut clenches to see him in pain, and I'm operating on pure instinct as I push past a rack of clothes to reach him. “I've got some cream that might help, Max. Want to give it a try?”

“Grace!” The transformation in his face is shocking – and incredibly flattering. One moment he looks like a bare-chested god about to smite his fury on the world. The next, he's smiling like a delighted angel - with dramatic kohl eyes and glossy pink lips. “Oh, thank fuck! Can you really help? I feel like I've been rolling in poison oak.”

The alpha turns to me, his thin mouth pulled into a suspicious line. “Who are you?”

“Nobody,” I reply, right as Max says in a booming voice, “This is GW. She's my manager.”

I widen my eyes at him, but the alpha just scoffs and steps away, leaving me to root through my bag for my ointment. When I find the right tube, I hold it up in victory. It's a variation of the hand cream I showed him earlier, only this has more soothing ingredients, like peony root extract, aloe vera gel, and rosehip oil. I have tricky skin, so I know it works on me, but with Max's blessing, I test a tiny patch on the inside of his wrist.

"Can you put it on me?" he asks with an irresistible pout. "If I touch myself, I swear I'll explode."

I bite my lip, trying to remind myself he means *explode out of his very itchy skin*, but my hands are shaking as I squeeze the small tube. I'm about to touch Max's bare chest, and my body is already in celebration mode.

I try to brace myself, but as soon as my fingers brush his heated skin, he shivers, dropping onto the stool in front of the vanity. His head slips forward, his hair sweeping across the back of my hands. "Oh, god. It feels *divine*, GW. Can you please just pretend it's ketchup, and I'm a fry, and slather me in it?"

I'm now biting my lip to keep the ridiculous grin from climbing all over my face. Looking at Max is a treat; touching him is a guilty pleasure; but making him shiver in happiness? I feel that in every cell of my body. "This also works as a barrier cream," I tell him in a raspy voice that sounds nothing like me. "It should give you a bit of protection, but you need to take the neckpiece off as soon as you're finished with the shoot."

He nods, his eyes at half-mast as I soothe the cream over his inflamed skin. "Let's just call it what it is. A fancy dog collar."

I shrug. It's not my taste either, but seeing it framed by Max's sweeping collarbones, I can totally get why wealthy alphas would want to buy it.

But I keep my opinions to myself, focusing instead on gently applying the ointment. I'm standing between his legs, but he's tall enough that when he tips his head back, we're nearly eye to eye. I can't help noticing how flawless he is

close up. Not to mention all the lean muscle packed over a swimmer's frame.

I clear my throat, fumbling for some glimmer of professionalism. "They didn't put anything else on your chest? Body shimmer or a correction cream of some kind?"

He makes a rumbling sound and sticks the tip of his tongue between his teeth. "They said I didn't need it."

"Showoff," I mutter, making him chuckle. "But if you have sensitive skin, you should start carrying your own products. Keep this tube for now, and if you'd like, I can send you a few samples of body butter and different highlighters I've put together."

"Really? You'd do that?"

"Of course. And if they give you an option of jewelry to showcase in the future, ask for something with a lower nickel component. You can still wear white gold, but only if they mix it with a different alloy. I personally stay away from zinc and tin, but platinum, cobalt, or silver all work."

I'm wiping the excess lotion from my hands when the alpha appears at my side. "If you've finished," he says in a snippy tone, "Max needs to get to his shoot."

I wiggle lotion-free fingers at him and Max snorts. But as he adjusts the collar and studies his reflection in the mirror, I see the hint of nerves in his eyes. "You're going to be great," I tell him. "They'd be lucky to have you, Max."

"Thanks, GW." He meets my gaze in the mirror, then bends down to brush his lips over my cheek. Now that he's got some relief from the pain, the burned sugar edge is fading from his scent and more pure Max is coming through. I'm pretty sure he can hear me gulping him down, but the alpha is tapping his foot now, and Max gives me a cheeky grin. "You wanna come in the back and watch?"

Seeing Max in his element, and knowing I give him a little boost just by being there... How can I say no?

I follow him out to the photoshoot area, but before he can be dragged off by the staging people, he clicks his tongue in

dismay. “Damn! I’m a *useless* friend. I forgot to ask how your interview went.”

There’s no way I’m getting into that now, so I just shake my head and give him a little shove. His brow furrows, but there are plenty of other hands herding him towards the white screen and I point to the back of the shoot. He nods, but then the spotlight swings his way and he snaps into model mode.

It’s breathtaking watching him work. I’ve always wondered how people who live in front of the camera can bear the attention, but Max seems to soak it up. Everything looks more vibrant – his skin, his smile, the way he moves with a fluid energy that attracts every eye. And I can tell the people watching aren’t just doing it because they’re paid to.

“So, you’re Max’s manager?”

I look up into the face of Richard Rose, Head Designer, and almost choke.



4. GRACE

If there's one person in this building I was dying to meet, it's the man peering down at me, the bright spotlights glinting on the mess of auburn curls tumbling over his broad brow. I've stared at his company headshot often enough, I was certain there had to be some serious airbrushing going on. But I'm surprised to find he's as flawless as his picture, with lightly tanned skin, a slim, straight nose, and unflinching azure eyes. But his elegant good looks barely make an impression, since it's a far more primitive part of my body that has locked onto the alpha in front of me.

Because even with Max's glorious omega scent in my nose, Richard Rose smells *perfect*. And not in the way that different notes and accords speak to me when I'm making my lotions and fragrances.

In a scent match, genetically compatible, partners for life, kind of way.

This is bad, bad, *bad* on so many levels.

Right now, I'm trespassing, misrepresenting myself, and interfering in a House of Omega recruitment process. Any one of those transgressions would get me tossed into the street.

But scent matching with one of the most brilliant, elusive, wealthy bachelors in the country?

That would get me escorted out of the building by Mr. Knuckledusters. Probably with a restraining order in my not-too-distant future.

Because betas don't scent match alphas, let alone ones of Richard Rose's stature.

“No,” I say quickly, surprised my voice doesn’t come out in a whimper. “I was just helping him out.”

Some part of me that’s not lost in a scent haze is taking note of everything about this man. His height, the lean muscles under his slim-fit Prada suit, the bare suggestion of scruff on his honey-toned cheeks... But that doesn’t mean I can read him. With his gaze turned towards the photoshoot, I’m left with his profile, and his voice gives nothing away. “My assistant says you treated his skin allergy. Can you show me the lotion you used?”

I left the tube with Max, but I dig a similar one out of my bag and hand it over. He studies my homemade label before bringing it to his nose. “Ivan also said you gave him some advice about the types of jewelry he should wear.”

I flush hard enough for my ears to burn. “Just to avoid nickel. He obviously has some kind of allergy to it.”

He nods, then hands the cream back. For an excruciating minute we stand side-by-side as his minions work the photoshoot, with Max gleaming like a rising star at the center. I can feel my pulse thumping in my neck, and I almost jump when he finally breaks the silence. “Just so you know, we’re very interested in him.”

Ditto.

I bite back the confession, although Richard’s attention, unsurprisingly, is still glued to Max like cement. It’s clear I’m an afterthought, so why admit his interest to me? He knows I’m not Max’s manager, and I can’t imagine he’s looking for my blessing.

“If he was to showcase one item in our collection, what would it be?”

I peer up at him, wondering if this is some kind of test. If I give him the right answer, will he let me interview for the designer position? “A perfume, probably, since he has such an amazing scent. As to its composition, I’d need to work closely with him to distill his signature, but I’m thinking honey,

amber, rose oil, and maybe a little cedarwood. So everyone who smells it goes, *that's Max Colt in a bottle.*"

I'm still limited to the alpha's profile, but there's no missing the frown that wrinkles his smooth brow. "A Face of the Company doesn't influence our products. They represent them."

I probably shouldn't argue with the head of product development, but I can't seem to stop myself. "I think that's a missed opportunity. Max isn't just a pretty face. And lots of designers have muses."

He slants a glance my way, and there's a strange flicker in his eyes – irritation, disappointment, and something that almost looks like pain. But his voice is coolly dismissive as he says, "It would never sell. Omegas don't like complex perfumes."

He's right. Omegas like light, natural fragrances that play up their own scent, and Max, as a male omega, would only smell like competition. "I'm not talking about fragrances for omegas. I mean, any alpha who saw Max on a runway or billboard would want to know how he smells, right? So, I'd make a range of fragrances that alphas could use, like candles, diffusers, maybe even colognes. That way, everyone gets a little taste of what it would be like to be in Max's company."

Richard turns to look at me, and I'm not prepared for the full force of his attention. "And is that what you want? To be his companion?"

I stiffen at the word. Companion was once a term for betas who were brought into packs to provide omegas with friendship. Sometimes it was more of a job than a relationship, and they functioned as personal assistants or glorified maids. But other times it was a childhood friend of the omega, and the affection carried over to adulthood. "No," I say quietly. "I like Max, but I have my own ambitions, Mr. Rose."

"You want a job?"

At least it's a statement and not a question. "Among other things."

Instead of probing for details, he nods his head and holds out his hand. “Your portfolio, then?” I gape at him, but he’s already plucking it out from under my sweaty arm. “I’ll have a look at it, and get back to you shortly.”

He’s definitely dismissing me now, and I glance back at Max, who’s being primped by a makeup artist between shots. He looks in his element, the perfect professional, and I feel a flush of happiness for him. With Richard Rose showing interest, he must be a shoo-in for the job.

As for the alpha’s complete lack of interest in *me*... Well, that’s probably for the best, too. The second I walk out of this building, the scent haze should fade. I mean, it can’t be all that strong since he’s barely glanced at me, and according to the biology books I remember from high school, a scent match inflames an alpha’s senses. One sniff, and Richard Rose should be hustling me into a dark corner, desperate to consume every inch of my skin...

My cheeks flame, right as I feel a faint trickle in my panties. Oh. My. God. I’m not an omega, so it’s not slick, but this close to my scent-mate, my body clearly has a mind of its own. “Um, I just remembered I need to be somewhere. Can you tell Max I’ll talk to him later?”

Richard’s sea-blue eyes flick over my face and I hold my breath. Can he smell the state of my underwear? I mean, the guy is the nose of the company, not to mention biologically tuned to my scent. If anyone knows I’m aroused right now, it’s him.

I tilt my head back, my traitorous body taking control. My scent gland is just an undeveloped bump on my throat, but I offer it to him, arching my neck. And after one excruciating moment where nothing happens, his nostrils flare, his pupils dilating, and I can suddenly taste the musk of his arousal on my tongue. I take a step towards him, trapped in the heat in his stare. But then, with an iron will I definitely can’t match, he clears his throat and looks away.

“Goodbye, Ms. Worth,” he murmurs, and my stiff legs are moving, some instinctive defense mechanism finally kicking

in. I don't look back as I yank the heavy stairwell door open, flying down the stairs like Mr. Knuckledusters is on my heels. I only slow down when I stumble on a step and imagine tomorrow's headline: *Beta Breaks Her Neck After Failed Interview... Scent-Mate Definitely Not in Mourning.*

I puff out a slightly hysterical laugh as I make it to the foyer. Thank God the rush hour is over, and the guard dog in the slick suit is nowhere to be seen. I hurry through the revolving door and down the marble steps, only taking a real breath when I'm back on the sidewalk.

Back where I belong.

Except...

"Oh God. *I just scent-matched Richard Rose.*"

My chest gives a painful pinch, and I rub it slowly as I start back towards the bus stop. Everything inside me aches, and it feels like I'm walking through a trough of soup. Maybe it's just from running down half a dozen flights of stairs, but the damp spot on my panties says otherwise.

It's because you just walked away from the man who's meant to scent you and sweep you off your feet.

That's how it goes in romance novels, isn't it? Aloof, brilliant alpha ventures down from his lofty tower to scent his sweet, deserving mate? Only in every one of those goddamn fantasies, his perfect match is a button-nosed omega.

Nature's choice. Right down to her blonde curls and superior scent glands.

When my phone buzzes in my pocket, I'm so off-balance I answer it without checking the screen. "Hello?"

"Where are you, Gray?"

The pavement suddenly tilts under my feet and I look around, expecting to find my stepbrother storming my way. "I'm in the city. I went shopping."

He grunts, and I can hear a door slam and the jingle of keys. "Spending up at Gucci? I hope I'm getting my money's worth."

I stare blindly up at the building I'm standing in front of. "You're tracking me?"

"Always. You know I put your safety above all else."

I'm astounded he doesn't choke on the lie, but in his warped mind, he probably thinks all the measures he takes to pin me down are for my benefit. "I want to see you. I'll swing by and pick you up."

"No!" I scramble to come up with an excuse. I have to keep him away. After meeting Max. After scent-matching Richard Rose... If I saw him now, I'd probably do something brave, which would not end well for me at all. "I'm spending the night at Jasmine's. She's having a post-party sleepover."

"And she invited you?"

Is that a hint of suspicion in his voice? Jasmine and I have been very careful not to seem like allies in any way, and for once, I wish I was close enough to my stepbrother to read his face. "I think she feels sorry for me. Because I had to go home early and missed out on the fun."

Kayden's voice drops to a disturbing octave. "You know how I get that itch under my skin when we're apart, little mouse."

I flinch at the pet name. To Kayden, I'm either Gray, or little mouse. He's not picky as long as everyone knows I'm a Sawyer, first and foremost.

"I'll see you tomorrow," I murmur, hoping he doesn't read too much into the tremor in my voice. If he thinks it's anticipation, he's even more delusional than I fear.

And in the blink of an eye, he's back to steely menace. "Be back for breakfast. And no fucking excuses."

I hang up, staring blankly at the beautiful window display in front of me. It's a mannequin pulling a full set of designer luggage along a city sidewalk, her silk scarf flying behind her in some kind of marketing magic. It's pitched at girls like me, but as hard as I try, I can't ever imagine looking as carefree as the smile on her painted lips.

Snapping out of my daze, I hurry towards the bus stop, ready to call Jasmine's number and beg her to let me stay. She currently lives in a sorority house at the local college, and while the other girls aren't exactly welcoming, I know she'd let me sleep in her room. And cry into her pillow, all things considered.

But before I can dial her number, a shadow falls over me and I look up into Max's smiling face. He's back in his street clothes, but the glamor of the photoshoot clings to him like an iridescent second skin.

"Hey, GW. I was hoping I'd find you here." He flops his long length on the bench beside me, shading his face from the sun while I breathe in his delicious scent and try not to melt into the gutter. "I want to ask you something, but here's not the best place. Can you take a ride with me?"

He gestures a little way down the street, and I look in surprise at a sleek limousine. Did he get the job already? "Well, that depends. Does it have a five-star sterility rating?" I ask, tongue in cheek.

He chuckles, then leans in to whisper, "I have a feeling it's in a class of its own. The driver looks like someone out of GQ."

I cock a brow, curious despite myself, and he takes my hand. He doesn't have to use much force to lead me over to the shiny vehicle. When he reaches the passenger door, the driver climbs out and Max is right. The guy looks like a movie star in his sleek black suit and wide, white smile. "Can I bring GW with me?" Max asks.

The driver tips his black cap; exactly what I'd expect from a soap opera chauffeur. "Not a problem, Mr. Colt. Let me grab the door for you."

"Don't bother," Max sings back, pulling it open. "We're extremely low-maintenance."

"Liar," I whisper under my breath as he falls onto the shiny leather seat with a huff. I giggle as I follow him in, oohing at the elegant interior. "So, is this a perk of the new job?"

“Kind of.” He gives me a sheepish sideways grin as we buckle up and the driver pulls away from the curb. “Can I tell you when we get to my place?” I only realize I’m fidgeting when he covers my hands with his. “I’m not up to anything fishy, GW, but I’d love it if you’d come hang out with me.”

Kayden’s snarling face looms in my mind, and my first instinct is to refuse. But Max’s soothing presence is exactly what I need right now, so I just sit back and nod. The trip passes with easy chatter about the music on the radio and places we’ve both been to outside the window. But the further we drive, the less familiar it gets, and my nerves are back as we pull up outside an old stone house.

It’s on a corner block, with a wrought-iron fence hugging the curb. It’s the sort that’s meant to be purely decorative, but the old metal is completely covered with climbing roses. There are the traditional red, pink, and white blooms, but there are also yellow ones with red edges that look almost like they’re on fire. I can smell them through the car’s air-conditioning system before we even climb out.

“I’ll pick you up in the morning, Mr. Colt,” the driver says with another cute tweak of his cap.

Max thanks him sweetly, and we both step through the gate and head up the garden path. The perfume of the roses teases my nose, and fat-bellied bees buzz past my head. It’s no wonder Max smells like a honey-dipped bouquet. Or, for that matter, why the Rose Pack took one look at him and knew he belonged.

I distract myself from the pinch in my chest by studying the house. It needs a little work, but the bones are art nouveau, and the worn brickwork is carved as intricately as an emperor’s tomb. Waving flower stalks and spreading vine tendrils draw us towards the door, where insect wings and woodland animals greet us on the iron façade. It doesn’t surprise me at all that Max lives in a fae prince’s castle. I rub a thumb over the nose of a shy pony half hidden in the carved foliage. “The Colt residence, I presume?”

“That’s a much nicer way to think of my name,” he smiles, and then we’re stepping into an elegant foyer. It’s as worn as the exterior of the house, but there’s an ornately decorated staircase to our left, and the pale stone floor flows into the natural oak parquet of the sitting room. Decorative flourishes are everywhere, and in true art nouveau style, there’s not a straight line or angle in sight. It gives everything a feminine, airy feel and I’m not surprised Max’s shoulders have relaxed, his gaze softening as he looks around.

We slip off our shoes at the door, and my toes curl as we pad into the next room. Stained glass windows cast pools of honey light on the walls, which are painted in forest scenes and decorated with elegant sconces. Pale pillars dot the room, with more nature motives carved into the stone. There’s a floor lamp in the form of a delicate swan’s neck, and beside it, a sofa in peacock blue. The man seated on it is elderly, but he’s as refined as the room, wearing a pale grey suit with his thick white hair slicked back over a high, intelligent brow. When he looks up from the newspaper he’s reading, Max’s eyes stare back from behind his wire-framed glasses.

“This is my grandfather, Jeffrey Colt,” Max says in an eager voice, ushering me forward. “Pop, this is Grace Worth. She’s a very talented designer.”

Jeffrey sets his newspaper aside and looks at me with keen interest. “Pleased to meet you, Ms. Worth. It’s been a long while since Max brought a friend home.”

“I feel very privileged,” I reply with sincerity. “And you have a beautiful home. It’s like being inside Hector Guimard’s head.”

“Ah, a very big compliment. If you plan to stay awhile, I’d love to show you the little features the architect borrowed from the Castel d’Orgeval near Paris.”

“I would love to. Thank you.”

He nods and asks Max about his morning. I move aside to give them some privacy, more than happy to get lost in the beautiful surroundings. When Max touches my arm, his grandfather gives me a soft smile and we head up the ornate

staircase to the second floor. It takes me a moment to realize he's led me into his bedroom, since it's actually a suite, with a sitting area, reading nook, and ensuite attached. The color scheme is elegant and subtle; mustard browns and antique golds, teamed with lilac, salmon, and robin's egg blue. The wallpaper is a stylized panorama of flowers, feathers, birds and dragonflies that carries over to the armchair and bed linen fabrics. It's the first room that has rugs on the floor and my toes caress the worn silk designs as Max plops us down on a window seat.

"Pop's grandparents built this house more than a century ago. Back when this neighborhood was still in fashion," Max tells me with a sad smile, his fingers walking along the faded silk of the sofa. "I know it's not really a castle, but I hate the fact I might be the heir who loses it."

I bite my lip, his burned sugar scent harsh in my nose. "I'm sorry, Max. Is it a money thing?"

"You could say that." He sighs and sweeps the room with a weary look. "You know how I told you I worked on the west coast? Well, I got caught up in some shitty stuff with a pack over there, and Pop had to bail me out. He didn't have the cash, and this place is already mortgaged to the hilt, so he hit up a local loan shark. It got me safely home, but it's only for another sixty days. After that, we pay the full loan plus interest, or the guy takes the house and we're both out on the street."

"Oh, God." I look around at the faded splendor, trying to imagine some slimy loan shark pawing through their belongings to make a quick buck. "That actually makes me sick to the stomach."

He gives me another of his sad smiles as his fingers curl around a lock of my hair. "It's why I went to the Face of the Company audition. It pays better than most campaigns, and I was hoping I could hold the sharks off until I got my first paycheck."

"But didn't you?" I can't read his face all of a sudden, and my heart sinks into my shoes. Is there any way the Rose Pack

chose someone else? I can't imagine it, especially after Richard looked at Max like he was starlight poured into a human mold.

“Not exactly.” He sighs and stretches, his heels digging into the rug and his long, lean body arching off the sofa. “Richard Rose came to see me after the photoshoot and told me he’s interested... but not for a modeling role.” He rubs his thumbs across his eyes, smearing a little of the mascara still clinging to his lashes. When he looks at me, the green color is only more enhanced, but it’s the hopeful gleam that makes me hold my breath. “They want to court me. The whole Rose Pack. They want me to be their omega.”



5. GRACE

I'm no stranger to pack courtships. I've been watching one at close range ever since my stepbrother saw Jasmine at a club and decided he wanted to bond her. I expected Lachlan Crenshaw to laugh in his face, but to my dismay, they struck a deal. It seems Jasmine's father is also having money problems, in the form of a massive gambling debt to my family. The fastest way for him to wipe the slate clean - and keep his kneecaps intact - is to hand his only daughter over to the Sawyer Pack.

But as far as I'm aware, the Rose Pack has never courted anyone. They escort their models to galas and openings, and at their own shows, they always sit together. There's never been a hint of a long-term romantic interest in either the gossip columns or industry news.

"Wow. That's amazing, Max. Congratulations." The words fall from my lips on reflex, but my voice is as thin and strained as a piano wire.

I'm not surprised he squints at me from under his lashes. "Tell me what you really think, GW."

I swallow, because what can I say? I have no actual objection to the pack - they're handsome, wealthy, and on the outside, reputable - although the Sawyer's taught me plenty of fancy houses are built on rotten foundations. But there's never been a whisper of scandal about the Roses. If Max joins them, he will be a glittering jewel in the perfect setting.

But he won't be a scent-mate, like I am...

I shove the thought down so fast I can convince myself it never crossed my mind. "It makes sense, Max. I'm sure it will be a perfect match in every way."

He tugs on his bottom lip, his green eyes still fixed on my face like I've done a poor job of convincing him. But then he leans back and rubs his hands over his knees. "Okay, now it's your turn. How did the interview *really* go?"

I huff out a humorless laugh. "It didn't. I was reminded of their fair and ethical hiring process by a wolf in a suit, and then shown the door."

Max's brow crinkles in confusion. "But Richard had your portfolio. He was looking through it when I spoke to him after the photoshoot."

I sit up straighter. "Really? What did he say?"

"Something about you both sharing a fine eye for beautiful design."

I slump, because it was probably just an example of Richard Rose's courting skills. He was complimenting Max, not my work, and maybe even rubbing my nose in the scent match at the same time.

But that's not Max's fault, and I force a smile. "That's nice to hear, but it doesn't change anything. They made it very clear to me that H.O.M.E. only employ alphas."

Max scoffs. "Well, that's fucking stupid. They're a house dedicated to omegas. Why would they assume talent was only bestowed on their own designation? And I'm sorry, but he was *salivating* over your designs."

Oh, the irony. My scent isn't good enough for Richard Rose, but my talent is? Anger bubbles up inside me, but Max suddenly takes my wrist, his long, cool fingers fiddling with the button on my cuff.

"There's something else I wanted to talk to you about, GW." He takes a deep breath, his gaze falling to my wrist. "I saw something on the bus and I was wondering... are you in trouble with an alpha?"

It's been so long since someone asked me that question, I feel my mouth go dry. For a moment, I picture myself telling him everything, just like he told me about his trouble on the

west coast. But then I carefully pull my arm away. “If I was, there’s nothing you could do to change that, Max.”

I don’t mean to be rude, but even knowing my stepbrother exists is dangerous for him. And if he tried to step in, if he tried to defend me...? Well, I still can’t get the sound of that Good Samaritan’s broken cries out of my head.

“But what if I could?” Max asks. “Would you let me help?”

“No.” I hold his stare, trying to project how dangerous this is for him. “Some things are best left alone, okay?”

But a flash of anger passes through his luminous eyes. “That’s crap, GW. I’ve been there, and if there’s a way out, you have to take it. Anything else is a living hell.”

He’s not wrong. Living with my stepbrother and his pack is a nightmare. But there are nine circles of hell. There’s always a deeper, darker pit you can descend to when the Devil thinks he owns you.

But Max’s fingers are back to stroking the worn thread of his sofa and I can’t bear the way he’s avoiding my eyes. “Okay. Then hypothetically, what do you suggest I do?”

He perks up, his hands quickly clasping together. “You move in with me.”

Of all the things he might have said – go to the police, buy a one-way ticket out of town, join a victim support group – I wasn’t expecting *that*, and he shakes his head as if he expected my confusion. “Not here. I mean in the Rose Tower.”

A picture of an exquisite Beaux Arts building on the Upper East Side flashes through my mind. “What?”

“That’s part of the courting arrangement. I’ll move there, into my own suite. They work so much, it doesn’t make sense to be dashing across the city at midnight for our dates...” He chews on his lip, looking uncertain for a moment. “I would *really* appreciate it if you came with me, GW. Not just as my friend, which would be amazing, but... I can get carried away sometimes.”

I give a gentle chuckle. “Like asking a stranger to move into another stranger’s house with you?”

He huffs a laugh, but he’s back to tugging on that sofa thread. “Yeah, I guess. The truth is, I’m still dealing with that shit on the west coast. I thought I’d found my forever pack. We were courting, I was all in, and then they... *ransomed* me.” His lips thin and he runs a hand through his hair, looking disgusted with himself. “It was awful. Humiliating. But the worst part is it put Pop’s house on the line. And how the hell can I trust my instincts after that?”

If my heart was hurting before, now it’s a flayed, throbbing nerve. “I’m sorry Max.” He gives a half-hearted shrug and I pick my words carefully. “Do you think the Rose Pack might betray you, too?”

He thinks for a moment, then gives a firm shake of his head. “No. I think their offer is genuine. I wouldn’t involve you if I didn’t. But... I’ve been burned before, GW. And to be honest, my hormones aren’t always my friend.”

Because he’s an omega, and the closer he gets to the alpha pack – both in terms of proximity and affection – the harder it will be to separate what feels good to him and what is right for him.

“I have good instincts,” I tell him quietly, because even though my scent-mate just rejected me, I know I wasn’t mistaken about Richard’s scent. Which makes me wonder how he’d react if I suddenly turned up on his doorstep, suitcases in hand. “But I’m not sure the Roses will let me stay.”

Max bobs his head like he’s already thought this through. “We’re meeting on Sunday for breakfast to go through the contract. But... I’ve already told them I want a companion clause added.”

I look at him sharply, remembering what Richard Rose said. “Why?”

“Because I want them to know I’m serious about this.”

I swallow down my protests, trying to sort through my feelings. Kayden first brought up the idea of making me their

pack companion a couple of years ago. I'd just turned twenty-one, my stepfather had passed away, and a family friend asked if I was available to be courted. I think he was offering me a way out of the Sawyer townhouse more than anything, but Kayden got rid of the guy in his usual brutal fashion. I never heard from him again, but the word 'companion' became an inside joke. Most pack companions are there to support the omega, but they left me with no doubt that the only ones I'd be serving in the future were my stepbrother and his friends.

My rational brain knows this isn't what Max is suggesting, but I can't stop the bile gathering in the back of my throat. "I appreciate what you're trying to do, Max..."

"It's a silly term for an outdated idea," he cuts in, rolling his eyes. "I don't want a nanny, or an assistant, or someone to brush my hair and tell me I'm adorable." He takes my hand again, curling his fingers around mine. "I just want to hang out with you, GW."

God, that pinch is back in my heart, but I force myself to slow down and think. Hard to do with his scent in my nose, but I'm meant to be the level-headed one here. "I want to hang out with you too, Max, but I also want a career. That hasn't changed because H.O.M.E. rejected me. I've dreamed about being a designer since I knew what the word meant."

"But you already are!" he exclaims, gesturing at my purse. "I mean, that's like a beauty emporium in there, right? And I'm betting you've already mocked up some of those designs in your portfolio."

"I have," I concede with a smile, "but I need work experience in a real design house to take it to the next level. Otherwise, it's just me and thousands of other wannabes crafting in our bedrooms."

He nods, but he's still tugging on that thread. And when his eyes drop to my wrist, I stiffen. I want to pull away, but the intensity of his gaze holds me still. "And how safe is that bedroom, GW? I'm just basing this on what you said, but that stepbrother who controls your credit card... Is he the one who

puts those shadows in your eyes? Did he... mark up your wrist?"

I gulp and push to my feet, sweat breaking out under my bangs. I drift towards the far wall, even though the clammy heat isn't from the sunshine pooling on Max's floor. "It's not safe in here, either." I rest my hands on the edge of his dresser, staring at my reflection in the faded mirror. "My stepbrother is Kayden Sawyer. He and his pack run most of the gambling rings in the city. And when they bond their omega in a few months' time, they plan to claim me as well."

As a pack companion. But I don't let those bitter words leave my lips.

"Why? I mean, you're already legally related to him. What more does he want from you?"

"We're related by marriage, but I'm not *owned*. Yes, he controls me now, but he's not under my skin." I rub my wrist against my ribs, almost welcoming the sting of the abused flesh. As long as I can feel this without also feeling his claim inside me, I still have a sliver of hope. "Or not all the way, at least."

Max sucks in a breath, clearly imagining all the ways an alpha can claim a beta, especially when he has the morals of a wolf.

"So let me help you!" He's suddenly on his feet, striding across the room to grip the dresser on either side of me. "Once I'm part of the Rose Pack, I'll hire you a permanent bodyguard. You can live with me here, or in any of their places around the world. And if that isn't enough to keep you safe, you'd have a team of lawyers standing between you and the asshole."

I gape at his steely-eyed reflection in the mirror. "That won't work."

He only looks more determined. "We'll *make* it work."

A Kayden-free future? It flickers through my mind like a mirage. Going wherever I want, seeing whoever I choose, without being tracked or grilled or punished on a whim...

God, I can barely imagine it. My stepbrother has haunted me for so long, I feel dizzy at the idea of getting away from him.

But then reality comes crashing down, blowing that mirage to dust. “You want me to turn my life upside down just to play board games and have sleepovers? Why, Max? It doesn’t make sense.”

“It does.” There’s a note of exasperation in his voice, but his face softens as he spins me around. I get a mouthful of his sweet scent, and it only grows stronger as he dips his face to mine. And while I’m still blinking at him, Max presses a soft kiss to my lips. It’s light and quick, but the tingle lingers long after he pulls away. “Does that tell you why I want this?”

I’m so tempted to touch my mouth, but I just shake my head. “Uh. Not really. I mean, you’re being courted by one of the most eligible packs in the city...”

“But I feel something with *you*.” His thumbs rub my collarbone, his eyes green pools I want to drown in. “Can you honestly say you don’t feel a connection, too?”

Relief prickles my skin, because after the scent match nightmare, I thought it was just me. Desperate for a friend. Drunk on his kindness. But I can’t admit *that*, so I force a strained laugh and jerk my thumb at the mirror behind me. “Max. Have you met yourself? You’re irresistible. I’d have to have full body nerve damage not to respond to you.”

“Of course.” He clicks his tongue and stares past me, but I don’t think he’s admiring his reflection. “Omega attraction strikes again.”

More burned sugar that now assaults my heart as much as my senses. “No. Well, not just that. I like you, obviously. I followed you home, and now I’m in your house, wanting to know everything about you... *Yes*, I feel a connection. But I don’t know what to do with that. I’m a beta, you’re an omega, and there’s a crowd of alphas standing between us...”

“Ignore them.” He reaches out and curls a strand of my hair around his finger. “This is between *us*. No one else should get a say in that.”

Is it really so simple? I know it's not. But a part of me- the raw, rejected part - wants to pretend it is. "Well.... okay. No alphas, or at least not until your meeting on Sunday. But then what do you want to do with the rest of today?"

Max places his hands on my shoulders, an impish smile on his bow lips as he massages my collarbones with his thumbs. "Weekend, you mean."

I raise my brows at him, my stomach fizzy with excitement. "You want to hang out all weekend?"

Max smirks, his thumbs drifting over my skin. "I want to get wine from the cellar and cherries from the yard, and I want to play scrabble with you and Pop. And when he's whipped us both, I want to get him to teach us old-timey dances in the parlour. And when you've had enough of our company, I want to come back up here and snuggle in that bed with you."

I don't dare turn around and look at *that bed*. "And tomorrow?"

"Your choice. Anything you want – and my pathetic budget can stretch to – we're doing it."

I duck my head, because more than anything, I just want to stay right here with him. And *snuggle*... "I'll have to make some calls."

"Of course. I'll go down and tell Pop the good news."

That we're playing games and drinking wine? Or that I'll be moving into the Rose Tower as a buffer between him and his suitors?

I shake my head and take out my phone, but the thought of texting Kayden makes me want to hide under the bed. Instead, I sink back on the window seat and call Jasmine. She answers on the second ring. "Please tell me it's good news." It's such an echo of Max's parting comment, I can't find the words to answer right away. "Seriously?" she wails. "How dare those numskulls ignore your brilliance?"

I smirk and trace a line in the ornamental glass. It's a hummingbird, its silky wings an iridescent blur. "It's okay. I appreciate you doing what you did to get me in the door."

Jasmine's dad might be up to his neck in debt, but the Crenshaw name still holds a lot of sway in this city, and one call to her uncle got me on the interview list. "And something else has happened, anyway."

"You met someone."

Jasmine's tone is so unlike her – soft and hopeful; almost like a purr – I actually take the phone from my ear and stare at the screen. "Yes, but it's complicated. I was hoping you could cover for me if Kayden checks up. I told him we're having a sleepover because I left your party early."

"Of course I can," she says promptly, and I smile in relief. Jas has nerves of steel when it comes to my stepbrother. "He can't get in here because of the sorority house rules, so he'll have to take my word for it. And I can give him the runaround for a bit if you want to go away somewhere..." She dangles the invitation, her voice pure temptation. "A cute bed-and-breakfast in the country, maybe?"

"Well, he's invited me to stay at his house tonight, maybe tomorrow. But I really don't know what it means, Jas. I can feel myself wanting-." I break off, because even though I know I should tell her about Richard Rose rejecting me, some confessions are just too hard to share. "I want to forget about the outside world for a while."

"Sounds blissful," she murmurs, and there's no missing the tinge of envy in her voice. "You deserve it, Grace. More than most. So go enjoy yourself and don't worry about anything."

That's a physical impossibility, but I smile all the same. "Thanks Jas. And maybe we can have a real make-up sleepover soon?"

"Definitely. Now I'm late for my afternoon class, and you know how much I adore dusty lectures on the Ancient Roman Empire."

She rings off with her throaty chuckle still echoing between us, and I pocket my phone. *Am I really going to do this?* Not just staying here, which is already shaping up to be one of the best weekends I've ever had, but Max's proposition? He's

basically asking me to be his companion, which is something I've never wanted to be. Except the way he describes it is totally different to how I ever imagined it.

I take a breath and turn to study his bed. It's an antique Italian brass frame with an intricately designed headboard depicting a rising sun. On the curved footboard, a pair of bronze love birds are perched, making it easily the most romantic bed I've ever seen. And on top of it is a cloud of white linen bedding, all soaked in Max's perfect scent. Just imagining him sprawled in it, sleep-tousled and bare-chested, is enough to make my panties damp all over again.

But how would it even work? *This* arrangement is a no-brainer. We snuggle, and I hope I get more of those honey-sweet kisses. But if I'm a guest in the Rose Tower, it's a whole different scenario. I'm not afraid of being Max's voice of reason, if that's what he needs. And even though we just met, I wouldn't hesitate to remove him from danger. But what kind of pack is going to let a beta be written into their omega courting contract?

Especially when her scent-mate wants nothing to do with her.

I have a feeling that Max is about to get a rude shock over his breakfast negotiations on Sunday. But until then... I have a game of Scrabble to win.



6. MAX

Grace has a killer instinct when it comes to board games. Not that I should be surprised. You don't march into an interview at H.O.M.E. without having a hell of a backbone, but she wipes the table first with Scrabble, and then decimates me in chess. I can tell my Pop is already head over heels for her. He taught me a partner with a wily brain beats a pretty façade, hands down. Not that Grace isn't beautiful. She's just... muted. Like a chameleon, who's been taught that being invisible is better than attracting the wrong kind of attention.

I have no doubt her asshole stepbrother is to blame. Five minutes on the internet and I knew Kayden Sawyer is everything I hate most in an alpha. A bully with money from his father, who was also a thug of the first order, he has half of the city in his pocket, and the rest too scared to stand in his way. And his pictures speak volumes. He's a big, hard-faced alpha, with a lip caught in a permanent sneer, and eyes as flat and menacing as a shark.

Just the thought of Grace living under his roof makes my fingers itch for a harpoon.

"Sleep well, my dear. I'm off to study the dictionary so I can sharpen up my Scrabble skills."

I snap away from my murderous thoughts to realize they've packed up the board games and Pop is on his way to bed. I smile as he kisses Grace's hand with real affection, and comes towards me with wiggling eyebrows. I know he likes her, but it still sends a little thrill through me to have him whisper it in my ear as he gives me a goodnight hug. It's so much better than the mountain of disappointment I've dropped on his doorstep lately.

“What now?” Grace asks when he’s disappeared into his suite. “More foxtrot?”

“More wine,” I tell her, grabbing the bottle of sweet port Pop brought up from the cellar and taking her hand. It’s cool and soft in mine, and I can’t blame Pop for stealing a kiss. And she seems pretty swoony for him, too. She does the cute little dance step he taught her as I lead her over to the staircase, humming one of his vintage lounge numbers under her breath.

I love this house. The hardest part of moving to the west coast was leaving Pop, of course, but I missed being here almost as badly. My father hated the place, moving out as soon as he presented as an alpha. He declared the house a shrine to soft men and slow decay, and for the first decade of my life, refused to even let me visit. But when my mom left him to go back to England, he shunted me off on Pop. It was a turning point in my life, like a boat bobbing up beside me on a stormy sea. Thankfully, Pop wanted to keep me as much as I wanted to be kept, and I only had to see my father once a month when he invited me to his business club.

I will never be him. It’s the vow that has guided my every step since I was old enough to understand the power of nurture over nature. A lesson Pop taught me when he took me in, coaxing me out from under my father’s bad habits with kind words and buckets of love.

“This room is magical,” Grace hums as she drifts to the window, staring down into the garden. It’s as wild as the feral little asshole I used to be, but Pop has never had the heart to tame it. “Do you sleep with the window open?”

“Sometimes, if it’s a sticky night. All the stone keeps it pretty cool in summer, though.” I place the port and glasses on the nightstand and join her near the window. She turns to me so easily, I can’t resist wrapping her in my arms. “Are you hot?”

I don’t think she’s used to alcohol, because there’s a slight glaze to her eyes. Or maybe she’s just as turned on as I am, because she gives me a soft, hooded look from under her lashes. “Not in the way you mean.”

I grin back, my own temperature kicking up a notch. “Can I kiss you, then?”

“Yes.” She stands on her tiptoes, pressing her chest to mine. “You can kiss me whenever you want, Max.”

A dangerous offer, since I’ve been staring at her mouth all evening. She has a way of playing with her bottom lip which makes me hard as rock. All the time she was staring at her Scrabble tiles, she’d skim a finger over that puffy pink lip. Back and forth. Round and round. It drove me nuts. And I’m pretty sure it was why I couldn’t muster a double-word score to save my life.

Lip. Kiss. Pant. No problem. Although, when I played that last one, Pop shot me a look that spoke volumes.

But now I dip my head and taste her. The sweet wine, the tang of cherries, and that special something that’s all Grace. I’ve never kissed a beta before, and my dates with women I can count on one hand. Male omegas are rare, and right from high school I was courted by entitled jocks who didn’t like to share. I figured I’d end up the pampered pet of some possessive alpha, and the cynical part of me – that grew up with parents who loathed each other – had been ready to settle for that. What was bonding, but a legal contract with a feathered nest attached?

I break the kiss, flushing at how fucking stupid that sounds in my head. Bonding isn’t clauses and concessions, just so some rich asshole can trot you out at their annual Christmas party. It’s having a girl stare up at you like the world just shifted under her feet.

“Do you want a nightgown?” I ask, my voice an octave lower than usual. “We keep some for overnight guests...”

But she just shakes her head and starts unbuttoning her blouse. “I’m sure they’re beautiful, based on your family’s taste, but I don’t need it.”

My pupils blow as she peels open her shirt, only to reveal another layer of silk against her skin. It’s probably what a stylist would call *bisque*, since they’ve concocted at least fifty

words for beige, and even without looking at the tag I know it's from the H.O.M.E. lingerie line. A chemise – or what I've heard some of the girls call a slip. More from Pop's era than mine, although I can't think why as I study the whispers of French lace against her sweet curves.

It takes me a moment to realize she's trying to wiggle out of her bra without stripping off her slip. "I can get it for you," I offer, turning her gently at the shoulders. "I'm a pro at the quick-change."

She giggles, and I lean forward and breathe in the scent of her hair as I unsnap her bra. I decided long ago I don't have a type when it comes to attraction. I like soft skin, thick hair, and interesting eyes, but I don't really care what package it comes in. But if I had a scent that keeps me up at night it would be this – fresh laundry, or vanilla ice cream, with that hint of feminine spice that makes my mouth water.

When we've both washed up, I throw on some sleep shorts and climb into bed. We take a pillow each, lying on our sides with a few inches between us. I can feel our combined warmth lapping under the covers, her perfume washing over me as she lifts a hand to stroke a finger along the headboard. "This bed is gorgeous."

"I bought it when I was in Milan. It was part of a photoshoot I was doing, and once I lay down on it, I never wanted to get up again."

Her eyes glow, twilight blue with tiny gold sparks. "I'd love to see the pictures."

I reach for my phone, logging into my cloud account and pulling up the main picture of the campaign. It wasn't the biggest of my career, but it caught the eye of the west coast pack, earning me an invitation to their house in LA. The beginning of a nightmare, but I shove the bad memories down deep, and try to look at myself objectively.

A tall, slim guy in his mid-twenties, sprawled across the thousand-thread count sheets I was meant to be advertising. But the public seemed more interested in my hair – longer then, and mussed in a bad case of just-got-fucked locks – and

my underwear, a pair of hot pink briefs one of the stylists had literally shredded on my body. They barely covered my junk, and the advertising standard's prude squad ended up banning it, for 'offensive and irresponsible marketing, objectifying omegas and their nests.' The campaign manager tried unsuccessfully to argue it was a bed, not a nest, but it sure sold a fuckton of briefs.

"Wow." Grace says, clearing her throat. "Hot pink suits you."

I smirk, because her cheeks almost match my briefs. "Pretty sure there's still a waitlist for that color."

She makes an agreeable sound, her smile growing as my screensaver kicks in. It's a picture of me and Pop at my first modeling gig. I was sixteen, so he insisted on coming to the Chinatown shoot with me. I was intimidated, but the stylists and models fell all over Pop in his vintage suit, insisting on including him in the campaign.

Maybe that's why I feel so in tune with Grace. Today, when the shoot was going sideways, she suddenly appeared and literally saved my skin.

"You're so lucky to have him," Grace says, biting that pretty pink lip as she studies the picture.

"I've been a dumbass about a lot of things, but never about Pop." I put my phone on the nightstand and roll back to face her, tucking a flyaway curl behind her ear. "My parents weren't great, but I thank them every day for leaving me with him." She smiles, but there's a world of hurt in her eyes, and I brush my knuckles over her cheek. "You don't have that, do you?"

"My dad died a long time ago, and my mom just after she remarried." She tries to smile through the shadows, but her lip is trembling. "To be honest, I can't even imagine what it must feel like having someone like Pop."

Like this, I want to tell her. He raised me, more than my own parents, and anything that's good in me came from my grandfather.

But I hold back, knowing it's too soon. She's been through too much, and she's got no reason to trust me yet.

But actions speak louder than words, and I've got all weekend to convince her I'm worth taking a chance on.



We sleep after a chaste goodnight kiss, but my libido mutinies at dawn, and I wake with a roaring case of morning wood. Grace has rolled in the night and is nestled back against my chest. One of my hands is firmly planted on the lacy cup of her slip, and a leg has wormed its way between her thighs, curling around her calf. Warm, soft flesh fills my palm, and her ass curves into my groin, those two points of contact enough to send me up in flames.

It takes me a moment to realize she's awake. "Jesus," I huff. "Sorry, GW."

But when I try to pull my hand back, she grabs it, holding me still. "The last thing I want you to do is move," she murmurs in a husky voice. "Or move *away*, I should say."

"Really?" I gently roll her onto her back, my fingers stroking the hard little bud under the lacy cup. "You don't mind?"

She bites her lip, but this time she's smiling up at me. "You had me at snuggle, Max."

I don't know if it's the almost shy admission, or the lust shining from under her lashes, but a wave of heat rolls through me like dark honey, melting my muscles and prickling my skin. What I don't expect is the flush of wetness along my ass. "Oh, shit. What the hell?"

Grace pops up on an elbow, looking at me in concern. "Is it a cramp?"

I want to laugh, except that she's now right under my nose, and her scent drags a tortured groan out of me. Something flutters in my stomach; wings sparking on live wires. Fuck. She smells so *good*...

I know I should get up – *clean* up – but I can't stop myself from cupping the back of her head, my lips diving in to devour her mouth.

She opens under me with a moan, her fingers digging into the clenched muscle of my shoulder. Her tongue is velvet, her breath all sweet little gasps. I drink down every sound, licking and sucking until the damp spot under us becomes too wet to ignore. I brush a hand over my ass, the palm gleaming in the morning light.

“It's slick.” I feel my face burn in a way it hasn't done since I first presented in high school history class.

Grace looks at my hand in fascination, her tongue wetting her lips. “I thought you needed an alpha to make slick.”

I grimace. “You kinda do. But I haven't been with anyone for a while.” Not since I fled the west coast, feeling like the gum on the bottom of an alpha's shoe. “Maybe I've just reached my containment limit.” I put on one of those nasal PSA voices. “Watch out. Flood waters ahead.”

Grace giggles, but I want to slap my head at the lame joke. Now she thinks I'm a leaky omega, when the truth is, most alphas have to work damn hard for my slick. It doesn't pour from me like a dump truck backed over a fire hydrant.

“Can I... touch it?”

Grace is up on an elbow, and I shiver at the glint in her eyes. Fuck me, I want her to do more than touch it. I want her to sniff it, and roll around in it... But my heart almost stops when she bends down and laps at my sticky palm. That pink tongue, those shining eyes, the sounds my slick drags from her as it slips down her throat...

And then, because I've been raised by a goddamn gentleman, I open my mouth. “We should... hit a pause.” She blinks at me, and I drag a painful breath through my tight lungs. “I told Pop we'd spend the day with him. If you still want to, I mean.”

Grace is searching my face, but then she relaxes back, nodding into my pillow. “More Scrabble?”

“More anything. I just want to hang out with you.”

She gives me a small smile. “As long as we can pick this up again later.” Her eyebrows waggle in a perfect Pop move. “And just for the record, I’m pretty good at navigating deep waters.”

It’s my turn to blush, but she’s already rolling out of bed and heading for the bathroom. I need to give my asshole a stern talking to, so I toss back the covers, staring down at the sheets. My scent, as potent as hothouse flowers, wafts up at me from the puddle of slick. Not quite a biblical event, but Noah should probably stay on high alert.

Fuck me.

I strip the bed in record time, and then scuttle off to the guest bathroom, clenching my traitorous ass cheeks the whole way.

After breakfast with Pop, he shows Grace his collection of vintage postcards. None of that ‘wish you were here’ stuff, but sepia drawings of crooked European alleyways and women in hippie gowns with flowers in their hair.

“These should be on display,” Grace says, sorting them into sets on the glass table in the front salon. She’s in the same clothes as yesterday, but barefoot, with her hair trapped in a silky knot tied around itself. “I recognize a couple of the artists. Sadly, this one died when she was twenty-two.”

They chat for a while about different artists, Pop sharing stories from his many trips to Europe in his youth. He eventually goes to the attic to collect some wooden frames, and they spend the rest of the afternoon mounting the postcards and debating where to hang them. If Pop was enamored before, he’s dealing with a full-on crush by the time we sit down to dinner.

He’s prepared a roast chicken with all the trimmings, and Grace snaps the wishbone with me. She gets the wish, and I watch as she closes her eyes, her tooth chewing up that sweet bottom lip. “Want to tell me what you wished for?”

I've taken her hand over the tablecloth, but her gaze is fixed on Pop. "Would it still come true if I said it aloud?"

The question is too adorable for words, but Pop just smiles at her kindly. "I can always roast another chicken next weekend."

But she keeps her wish to herself, and after dinner we settle in the games room. Instead of Scrabble, Pop puts on an arty French film, and they begin a long discussion of New Wave directors that would normally put me to sleep. But with Grace cuddled up to my side, there's no fear of that, and I'm almost jumping out of my skin when we finally head to bed.

We undress each other by moonlight, her hands slow and admiring as she traces my slick-coated thighs. I've washed up - twice - but Grace really has turned me into a leaky tap. "I've been thinking about this all day," she admits, giving a delicate shiver as she lifts her hand to her nose and breathes me in. "Pop's an amazing cook, but nothing can compete with the way you taste."

Her words make my back curve, that omega arch designed to lure hungry alphas my way. "I didn't mean it about containment limits." As her fingers touch the bumps of my spine, I skim my thumb along her bottom lip. "My slick, I mean. This isn't just about getting off for me."

She gives me a look through her lashes as her hands drift to the waistband of my boxer briefs. "But we can, right? Get off, I mean?"

"Fuck, yes," I breathe, and we laugh as we quickly strip the rest of the way.

We fall into a long, grinding kiss, our hands wandering until we're both gulping for air. The bed curls around us, almost nest-like with my fanciest sheets. We kiss and lick, down necks and along throats, the feel of her tongue on my scent gland sending a wave of bliss pulsing through me. My dick gives a violent throb, and for a moment, I think I'm going to embarrass myself. Again. That would take leaky to a new low, especially since I've trained myself not to come until I'm stuffed with a big, thick knot.

A little thrill runs through me, because there's no knot – or alpha – in sight. This isn't just biology, but pleasure. Giving and taking, in equal measure.

And Grace isn't shy about giving, dropping kisses down my belly, her fingers stroking my nipples as she heads south. I want to taste her first, bury myself between her sweet thighs until she's screaming my name. But I sink back into the bed as she licks down my shaft, her lips like velvet as they press against my throbbing head. My thighs quake, and she barely has me in her mouth before I'm arching again, my release erupting like a chaotic geyser.

I groan, too blissed out to be ashamed. Grace sinks deeper onto my cock, humming happily as she swallows me down. I finally stop coming, and she looks up at me through hooded lids. My dick is still in her mouth, and I groan as I drag her up my body, desperate to suck the hazy pleasure from her face.

We make out like teenagers, my hand on her clit until it's swollen and slippery. Grace is squirming and sighing, but when I try to duck towards her thighs to finish her off, her hand grabs my hair. She licks her battered lips, and slick trickles from my ass, Pavlov-style. "I want to come when you're inside me, Max."

Fuck me, *yes*. When I'm slicked up like this, my refractory period is practically nil, and my cock is throbbing with another imminent eruption.

She pulls me over her, and even though my body is built for bottoming, I love the way she melts into the bed under me. Her thighs drop open, her hands gripping my slick ass. I slide into her so easily, I have to bite my cheek to hold back my orgasm.

Grace groans, arching her back and hooking her legs around my hips. She writhes under me, her breasts flushed, and I attack them with my teeth and lips. Her scent is thickening, her sweet spice beading on her skin, and I lap it up as I thrust into her wet heat. I'm not being gentle, my hips rolling and snapping, but she grabs a handful of my hair and squeezes her thighs. "More, Max. More."

I nod, tilting her hips for a deeper angle. She's speared on my cock, but now I can torture her swollen nub as well. I rub it as we rock, and she pants out her pleasure, her eyes rolling up on a breathless moan. I fuck her harder, our skin slapping and sucking, and the bed judders against the wall with every thrust. I'm no alpha, but Grace has me slamming into her like I'm trying to plant a knot.

And then she comes with my name on her lips, and I strain over her, every muscle clenching as I break apart. Her pupils blow as I bury myself inside her, falling onto my hands so I can suck her cries from her lips. She tastes like vanilla, spice, and me...

Mine.

Which is nuts. We barely know each other, and insane chemistry aside, omegas and betas aren't built for the long haul. But as I roll onto my back and she comes with me, it doesn't feel that way. There's not an inch of skin between us, and we're a slippery, panting mess.

But we also *fit*. Like... two parts of a wishbone finding their way back together. Just like nature intended.



7. GRACE

I've read about insatiable lovers, but I always thought it was just fiction spun for unbonded omegas. But when we wake at dawn, Max is still inside me from the last time he came, our legs tangled up like overcooked spaghetti. I've lost count of my own orgasms – I seem to be floating on a sea of pleasure with no horizon in sight – and as we climb out of bed, groggy and trembling, I wonder if it matters. His pleasure is my pleasure, and even when he's not inside me, I can feel him in every atom of my body.

We shower together, holding each other up as if the spray might sweep us apart. He seems to like using my ass cheeks as an anchor, while I can barely keep my mouth off his scent gland. I know I should stop – we really need to get clean – but my brain went offline hours ago. Far easier to just nuzzle his throat and surrender to the wash of bliss humming under my skin.

“Is your heat like this?” I ask as Max shampoos my hair, his long, skilled fingers massaging my scalp until my eyes roll closed.

“Mm.” It's a non-committal sound and I squint through the soap in my eyes. “No. Most have been at clinics. Thank God I wasn't on cycle when I was on the west coast.”

I know that omegas have two heats a year, although a bonding often triggers a third. Unbonded omegas tend to check into clinics, where, according to the ads I've seen on TV, a bunch of smiling people in white coats and glasses tend them through their no fuss heats.

He nudges me under the spray and I purr as he rinses me clean, then lathers conditioner into my squeaky hair. It smells like honey and *Max*, and I know I'll be sniffing myself all day.

“I think if I saw you go into heat, it’d melt the skin off my bones.”

He turns me towards him, our hips sliding together. He’s hard, and I’m wet, and we don’t even talk about going again. He simply lifts me, and when I’ve wrapped my legs around his hips, sinks his cock to the root. His slick makes the glide almost too smooth, and I clench around him, greedy for every inch.

“Would you like that, GW?” He pants against my inflamed skin. “Do you want to tend me through my heat?”

We both groan as he backs me up to the wall, pressing my spine to the cool tile. “Yes. Yes!” I have to bite my lip hard to jolt my brain back to life. “But you’ll be with the Rose Pack by then. I mean, if the contract works out, and everything...”

“The Rose Pack and *you*.” He punctuates the word with a thrust I feel all the way to my curling toes. “The first is negotiable, but I’m pretty stuck on the second.”

Stuck on *me*. I’m pretty sure I’d shiver if our body heat – and the water pouring down on us – wasn’t cranked up to scorching. “I would... love that. But they might have a different view of sharing your heat.”

He shrugs, water cascading down his long, lean form as he grinds me into the wall. “Like I said. Not negotiable.”

We eventually make it out of the shower, and I try not to pout as I pull on my clothes for the third day in the row. Popping home to change is just not an option when you live with the Sawyer Pack, but nothing but admiration shines from Max’s eyes as he watches me dress. Before we leave the house, Pop kisses both our cheeks, his happiness like nectar on my tongue. I’m pretty sure he knows Max and I are more than just friends now, and the fact he looks so smug makes my heart flutter like a hummingbird. But my nerves come back in a rush as we’re ushered into an upmarket restaurant adjacent to Rose Tower.

Steady, Grace. As awkward as this is going to be, there’s too much at stake to mess it up for Max.

In theory, an omega holds most of the cards in a courting arrangement. If they're in high demand, they can play packs off against each other and demand better terms. In Jasmine's case, she was only able to negotiate a three-month courtship and to keep her room at the sorority house. It's a sliver of freedom, and she knows exactly how tenuous it is. Because when she actually becomes part of the Sawyer Pack, she won't be able to take a step outside that Kayden hasn't approved in advance. GPS monitoring will only be the tip of the iceberg.

But Max isn't Jasmine, and the Roses aren't my stepbrother. Something I tell myself as we're handed glasses of champagne by the maître d. Technically, the restaurant is open to the public, but the dining area is empty as he leads us across the floor. I take a quick sip of the sparkling drink. It's delicious, but the bubbles burn my tongue, reminding me that this is still a long way from a celebration.

"You didn't want to bring a lawyer?" I murmur as we reach the doors to the private dining room.

"No point," he snorts as the maître d steps back, offering a glimpse of an elegantly laid breakfast table. "From what I've heard, no one can out-argue Daniel Rose."

I blink, since the name Daniel didn't come up in any of my research into H.O.M.E. Is he a new addition? A relation, rather than a pack member? I know that Garth Rose is the CEO, and Joshua Rose is the head of marketing and development, but Richard is the only one I've met in the flesh.

Or, at least, that's my assumption until the room's occupants get to their feet. I come to such an abrupt stop, Max looks at me in concern. But all I can see is the alpha I was sent to after my failed attempt at an interview. Mr. Knuckledusters, complete with leather jacket, shaved head, and eyes the color of bruised violets.

"Max. Grace. I'm Daniel Rose, Head of Legal Affairs. Thanks so much for meeting us at this early hour." I blink as the lawyer extends his hand in greeting. His voice is smooth and inviting, but his cocky smile makes my hackles rise.

Max shakes first, and then I step forward in a daze. I'm prompted as much by ingrained manners as by the allure of my scent-matched alpha beside him. I fit my hand in Daniel's, trying to hide the shiver that passes through me at his touch. Although, I doubt there's much the lawyer misses, given the hawkish way he's watching me.

"You've both met Richard, our Head of Design and Innovation," Daniel goes on, gesturing to his companion. "Unfortunately, Garth and Joshua are in London on business, but they're itching to get home and meet you."

Unlike Richard, who barely meets my eyes as we settle into our chairs. He might be hellbent on ignoring me, but I can definitely smell *him*, and I slide my hand over Max's, earning an arched brow from the lawyer. "You met on Friday, right? Looks like you're pretty cozy already."

I stiffen at the implied criticism, but Max just gives the alpha a big smile. "We clicked. Instantly. And I suppose we have your pack to thank for that, since you brought us together for the interviews."

"Clever us," Daniel murmurs, but I don't like the glitter in his eyes. At best, he thinks I orchestrated our meeting. And at worst, that I heard how interested the Roses were in Max and decided to attach myself to him like a tick. Not that I care. He can think whatever nefarious thoughts he wants, so long as he doesn't try to get between us.

To calm my fraying nerves, I take a sip of water and study our surroundings. I know from my local history classes that the restaurant was once part of the original Rose Tower. It shares its ornate Gilded Age design, from the marble floors to the bronze and crystal chandeliers, and the flamboyantly carved ornamentation on the walls and pillars. All things that would dazzle my designer eye if I was experiencing it in different company.

I breathe a sigh of relief when the food starts to come in. It's small platters of exquisite breakfast samplers, including feta frittatas, gruyere omelets with heirloom tomatoes, smoked

salmon and soft-boiled eggs, and buttermilk pancakes drizzled with maple syrup.

“We weren’t sure how hungry you’d be, so we ordered a little of everything,” Daniel says as no less than five servers flutter around us. “There’s also coffee, tea, and fresh juices.”

We put in our drink orders, and once the servers have retreated, Daniel leans forward. “We have the contract here, but there are a few points we were hoping to clarify.”

Max smiles, all charm as he munches his way through a tower of pancakes. “Sure. We’ve got a few things to add, too.”

I’m not the only one who looks at him in surprise, and I suddenly wish we’d spent more time talking about his courtship and less time rolling in his heavenly sheets. No, scratch that. Nothing beats the fact I can still feel Max – both on my skin, and deep inside my core.

“Well, let’s start by saying we’ve spoken to the outfit holding your family home as collateral,” Daniel says, his thick fingers clasping a coffee cup that doesn’t match the delicate Rose place setting. “The debt has been transferred to our lending service, as per your first stipulation in the contract.”

There’s no mistaking Max’s relief. His entire body relaxes, and he reaches over to drop a kiss on my lips. “Thank you,” he tells the two alphas, radiating happiness. “I can’t wait to let Pop know.”

Daniel smiles, but his gaze lingers on my mouth. “Are we in agreement that the courting period will be for three months, with the option for either party to terminate after that time, or to extend for another three?” Max nods, and I can picture the alpha ticking off another box on his mental checklist. He might look like a gangster, but he seems to be taking this process seriously. “Richard said you understood the medical requirements, and you’re also happy with the deep background check we’ll be conducting.”

That makes Max smirk around his teacup. “Are you telling me you haven’t already run me through every database, going back to my preschool dental visits?”

Daniel gives him a slow, sinful smile. “I have my sources, but there are still a few things I’d like to personally check out.”

There’s no mistaking the invitation in his eyes and I put my coffee cup down hard enough to make the flatware jump. “Max will be doing the same, of course. And he’ll have full access to any of the pack’s medical issues or legal disputes, right?”

Daniel swings those heavy-lidded eyes my way. “Of course. It’s already written into the contract.” It’s pretty obvious I haven’t read it, but he just moves smoothly to the next point on his mental checklist. “We’ve doubled the living allowance you suggested, Max, and also taken care of your credit card debts. Are you still happy to move into the Rose Tower today?”

Today? I send Max a startled glance, but he’s already nodding. “Assuming everything else checks out. And you’ve added in the part about Grace, right?”

I’m now very firmly in the spotlight, and when Richard lifts his eyes to mine, I put my fork down before I choke.

“The companion clause,” Daniel says slowly.

“We don’t want to call it that,” Max declares, threading his fingers more tightly through mine. “It’s old-fashioned, and to be honest, kind of insulting.”

“Of course.” Daniel opens his jacket to retrieve a pen and a leatherbound notebook. It’s a deep navy moleskin that I dazedly recognize from their Alpha Abroad range. Daniel taps his pen over a snowy white page. “What shall we call it, then?”

“Well, she’s more than just a friend who’ll be living with me.” Max shoots me a hooded glance, his mouth quirking up as he says, “But I’m sure you can tell that from our scent.”

It takes me a moment to realize what he means. *Our* scent, because we spent all night rolling around in his slick-coated sheets.

“How about an Intimate Clause?” Daniel suggests, a slight quirk to his lips as he taps his pen against his notebook. “It’s a term we use when an existing couple is merging with a pack. It affords you both the same considerations, and also respects your prior relationship.”

I look at him in surprise, because it’s perfect. Or, at least, it appears to be on face value. I’ll need to read the full contract, but I give a tentative nod, and Max beams at me.

Daniel makes an entry in his notebook, but Richard, I notice, is back to staring blankly at his soft-boiled eggs. I wait for him to say something – to give even the slightest indication he’s part of this process – but when he remains silent, Daniel lifts his gaze and I get the full force of his violently blue eyes. “And you understand that if all goes well, we’ll be bonding Max. Bites, knots, the whole nine yards?”

I shuffle my feet, hating the heat burning in my cheeks. “I understand how a pack works, Mr. Rose.”

“Daniel,” he corrects me. “As a pack intimate, you can’t be calling us all Rose, or it’s going to get confusing fast.” The term – *intimate* – hangs in the air between us, but I just shrug. I doubt I’m projecting the indifference I’m striving for, especially when his smirk takes on a wicked edge. “We’ll need to talk to Garth and Joshua about this, but I think I know what they’ll say. If we’re merging packs, they’ll want to court you as well.”

I gape at him. “What?”

“Dates. Just to make sure you’re a good fit.” Those long black lashes lower over his glittering eyes. “Being a package deal, and all.”

Heat washes over me, so potent I have to swallow a whimper. What the hell? I’d understand my reaction if I was getting flirty looks from Richard – given his scent is enough to make my head spin, even when he’s doing everything to avoid me – but there’s nothing desirable about Daniel Rose. He’s just my stepbrother in a better wardrobe. Or, at least, that’s what I try to tell myself as I stare at his smirking mouth.

“I don’t know about dates,” I manage to get out, “but I’m willing to spend time with each of you, as needed.”

It’s not exactly an enthusiastic declaration, and Max jumps into the awkward silence. “We’re obviously going to need a schedule, working around everyone’s commitments. But I want to make sure one night a week it’s just me and Grace. Our own date night. Plus, she wants a job.” He turns to stare hard at Richard, his jaw flexing. “In fact, she *deserves* a job, and I’m sure you’ll agree since you’ve seen her portfolio.”

“I have,” Richard says quietly, a shiver running down my spine as he finally flicks a glance my way. “It’s very impressive.”

“Thanks.”

“But unfortunately, we’ve already filled the junior designer position you applied for.”

So fast? I bite my lip in dismay, but then a flush of anger coils in my belly. Why am I surprised? It was probably an easy hire, given the crop of clones they had to choose from. “With an alpha, I suppose?”

Richard tilts his head, and I wait for him to respond to the accusation in my voice. But he just gives lifts a shoulder in his salmon-hued linen jacket. “He was the best candidate. He’s completed a number of internships with our competitors, and came highly recommended by his last employer.”

“Then give Grace an internship,” Max says quickly, his scent sharpening as he sits straighter in his chair. “She deserves it, and if you won’t give her a foot in the door, how can she ever compete for a position? It’s not fair, and you know it.”

Daniel takes a neat bite of his frittata and raises his wicked black brows at me. “PR or Market Research?”

It’s a taunting reminder of our last meeting, when I told him I wouldn’t work for H.O.M.E. if he begged me. But I just give him a tight smile. If I’m honest, I’d probably accept any pathway into the company, but Daniel just waves a hand at his

packmate. “She’ll be in your department, Rich, so it’s up to you.”

Richard stares hard at where his fingers are resting on the linen tablecloth. His scent might be a mouth-watering allure, but his body language is textbook rejection. “Living with an employee will raise a lot of questions.”

“Then I won’t move into the Tower,” I reply, folding my arms. “I can commute from where I live now.”

Max stiffens beside me and Daniel slides a narrow-eyed look my way, clearly unimpressed with my current living arrangements. I squirm under the attention, but keep my chin up. Would I really abandon Max and move back in with Kayden? Hell, no. But I *need* a job. I need to believe I’m something more than my stepbrother’s possession – or Max’s live-in lover.

“We can put a confidentiality clause in the contract,” Daniel says slowly, his gaze still resting heavily on me. “No one in the office needs to know what we get up to at home.”

Richard frowns, but I feel a trickle of relief at the idea of keeping this to ourselves. I have no idea how long this arrangement will last, but I don’t plan on telling Kayden I’m an intimate of the Rose Pack. The very thought makes me choke on my coffee.

Max is watching me closely, and he gives the alphas a firm nod. “That would be great. It’s no one’s business but ours, right?”

No one’s business that the owners of House of Omega are courting an omega of their own? A cynical little voice in my head says that when you’re as high-profile as the Roses, a prospective packmate is front page material. The fact Max doesn’t mind keeping this private – when he’d be the envy of every omega in the country - just makes my heart melt even more.

“If we’re offering an internship, it will only be on a trial basis,” Richard murmurs, clearly stuck on the living-and-

working-together issue. “Two days a week for the first month of the contract.”

“Three days,” I counter, squeezing my hands between my knees. “And for half the contract. Anything else won’t give me time to learn the company’s systems and processes.”

He dips his head like he’s tired of the whole conversation, but then he shrugs and goes back to his breakfast. A little pang of hurt lodges in my heart at his cool dismissal. But screw him. I’ve got a foot in the door of the best luxury goods company in the world, and that’s not something many betas can ever claim.

Daniel just smirks and drops his napkin on the table. “If we’ve finished with the horse trading, how about we go show you your new home?”



My stomach is fluttering around our extravagant breakfast as we’re given a tour of Rose Tower. I try not to get distracted by the architectural features, but it’s hard when it’s a shrine to the Gilded Age. Garth Rose put a lot of money into it when he bought it a decade ago, and I don’t think I’ve seen a more devoted restoration with its parquet de Versailles floors, marble stairs, and intricate floral moldings.

There are four floors, with a rooftop terrace and swimming pool, and the bedroom suites on the level immediately below. They’ve set aside two separate suites for us, but Max quickly vetoes that by pulling me into his room and dragging me down onto the edge of the bed. It’s not as pretty as the one we spent the weekend in, but it’s huge, with a comforter that feels like silky butter under my legs.

The alphas leave us to get settled in, and as Max calls Pop, I drift out to the balcony. I can hear a few sniffles, but they’re the happy kind, so I leave them to their conversation. But there’s a lump in my throat as I pull out my phone. And it only grows larger when I find a two-word text waiting from my stepbrother’s number: **Call me.**

For a moment, I close my eyes, picturing his wrath. Two days of no contact? Kayden will be *livid*. But what's he going to do? Even if he's managed to track me to Fifth Avenue, he can't exactly storm the Rose Tower, can he?

With new confidence, I turn my phone off and head back inside, Max's arms coming around me in a rocking hug. He's almost vibrating with happiness, and I push all the dark thoughts aside as I soak in his scent. It's mouth-watering, and I make a mental note to start work on a Maximum Bliss fragrance as soon as I can get my hands on my oils, vials, and scent strips.

Max must be thinking along similar lines, because he twists my hair around his finger and says, "I'm going to head home and grab some of my things tomorrow. What about you? Want me to come and help you pack?"

I smile, but I'm well-practiced at side-stepping landmines as explosive as this one. "I've actually been staying with my friend Jasmine for the last few days. I'll just grab my stuff from her place." Max frowns, but doesn't push. I know he's thinking about Kayden, but like me, he probably doesn't want to burst our happy bubble. "I think I'll do it today, since it gets pretty hectic on campus mid-week."

Max tilts my chin up, trying to read my eyes. "And you're okay with this? It's not too much, too soon?"

I look around at the opulent room and shrug. "It's a lot," I admit. "But I guess we just take it one day at a time."

But Max isn't about to be brushed off, cupping my cheeks so I can't look away. "You have to tell me if this doesn't work for you, Grace. If something isn't right, we'll change it. Okay? You don't have to fight things on your own anymore."

Words that are still ringing in my ears an hour later as I walk to the public library on 67th Street. It's closed, being a Sunday during City budget cuts, but I'm not here to study. Instead, I take the alley to the basement stairwell and rap my knuckles on the steel security door.

“No classes today,” Billy says through the grill, then gets a look at my face. “What’s up, Grace?”

“Hey, Billy. I just need to grab something out of my locker. Is it okay if I do it now?”

“Sure. I was just getting a couple of the rooms ready for some new arrivals.” He opens the grill and I step into the shelter. Not many people know the Sanctuary Center exists. I only stumbled upon it because Kayden tracked me down at the library and I used the back stairs to slip away from him. Billy was working that day, and he read all he needed to know on my face.

The basement has been used for a lot of things over the years, from storing banned books, to hiding liquor during prohibition, and eventually, to sheltering omegas in need. Most are running from abusive alphas, although some are hooked on the various scent-related drugs that have flooded the city in the last decade. Whatever their reasons for coming here, Billy and his team of volunteers offer a safe place to get back on their feet. Plus free self-defense classes, which is why I’ve spent so many hours here over the last few years.

The residential dorms are through another security checkpoint, and as of yet, I haven’t had reason to stay there. But Billy always gently reminds me that there’s a bed waiting if I ever need it.

The lockers adjoin the rec room where various classes are held. The whole place is musty, smelling of damp and the burned sugar scent of stressed omegas. It’s not fancy, with a small gym, a space for dance and yoga sessions, and a battered pool table, but just crossing the room fills me with a sense of peace and calm. And as far as my stalker stepbrother is concerned, I’m just a platinum member of the library.

I grab my duffel bag from my locker and swap my heels for a pair of sneakers, then head back out to say goodbye to Billy. He raises his grizzly eyebrows when he sees the bag over my shoulder. “Going somewhere?”

Billy’s lips have thinned into a worried line, and I hurry to reassure him. “I’m not running. I’m just moving to a new

place.”

“Sawyer know about it?”

I bite my lip. Billy is an ex-boxer, and even though he’s in his late sixties, he always gets a combative light in his eyes when he talks about my stepbrother. “Not yet.”

“He causes you problems, you let me know. We have people who can help.”

I smile and lean forward to give him a hug. He’s an alpha, and dresses like a life member of a motorcycle club, but he’s a big softie on the inside. “Thanks, Billy, but I think I have some people, too.”

“Oh, really?” He looks me up and down with his faded blue eyes. “And are they why you smell even better than usual?”

I grin, even as I fight a blush. “Maybe. I’ll have to let you know how it goes.”

He opens the grille and checks the street. “You do that, Grace. And if they let you down in any way, don’t forget to invite them to Mickey’s for a drink.”

It’s code for a distress call, in case an omega needs Billy and his friends to chase off a persistent abuser. A lot of alphas think they won’t take no for an answer until they meet Billy in a dark alleyway outside Mickey’s Bar and Grill.

“I will. See you soon.”

I kiss his grizzled cheek and head back to the street, my sneakers slapping on the sidewalk. But I’ve only made it halfway down the block before a bulky shadow falls into step beside me.

“Fancy meeting you here,” Daniel Rose rumbles, sliding me a wolfish grin.



8. DANIEL

Am I stalking Grace Worth?

Not exactly, but when she left the tower to grab her things, I decided to stretch my legs. So I trailed her to 67th Street, curious why she'd be hanging around the library when it was closed. I caught a flash of silky brown hair as she ducked down the alley, and then saw her greeted by an older alpha through a security grille. The same guy she kissed on the cheek when she reappeared ten minutes later with sneakers on her feet and a duffel on her shoulder.

“Want me to carry that?” I ask, gesturing to the bag.

She stops and gapes up at me. “Are you following me?”

“Would you believe me if I said I was returning a library book?” She gives me a disgusted look and I have to bite back a grin. “Then shall we talk about the guy you just kissed goodbye?”

I expect her to fumble through a lie, but she grabs my wrist and strong-arms me into the nearest alley. It's the Upper East Side, so it's not exactly a sewer, but I don't like being pushed around. Still, I'm curious about the strength hidden under her silk blouse as she backs me up against the wall. “Leave them alone. They haven't done anything wrong, and they don't need you checking up on them.”

Now I'm really intrigued. Especially because I can see tiny flecks of gold in her blue eyes. They remind me of lapis lazuli, Richard's favorite stone, and I have to force the steel into my voice. “If you want to protect them, Grace, you'll need to give me more than that.”

“It's a refuge,” she says, letting my arm go and taking a step back. “For people in trouble. But it's privately run, and

they want to stay off the radar.”

Which means it’s a refuge from alphas. I open my mouth to ask how she found out about it when her stepbrother’s face pops to mind. I’ve studied that surveillance picture a lot over the last couple of days, and just thinking about it now – of Grace backed up against a grimy club wall with that thug’s mouth on her neck and his stupid fucking packmate leering down at her... Pure, protective rage ripples through me. “He’s hurt you?”

“What?”

“That prick Sawyer. Did you have to go to that shelter because of him?”

“No.” She sighs and hitches her bag higher. “Well, in a way. But I take self-defense classes there. I’ve been doing it for years.”

Admiration now coils through me, hot and thick. There’s steel under that pretty silk blouse, just like I thought. “Good. Knowing how to defend yourself is important. But if he gives you trouble you can’t handle, come straight to me. Don’t try to tackle him on your own.”

She arches her brows and backs off further, but it’s definitely not a retreat. Her chin is up, those cute nostrils flaring. “I don’t need some alpha coming to my rescue, Mr. Rose. I’ve been looking after myself for years.”

I ignore her pointed use of my surname. “I don’t doubt that. But we protect our own, just like it says in the fine print of the contract. All Rose Pack employees are protected, whether it’s a legal issue or anything else.”

She blinks up at me as if she can sense the lie in my words. She hasn’t read the contract – that was obvious at breakfast – but my declaration is more of an exaggeration than a lie. Our employees are looked after, but we don’t fight their battles for them. Our packmates, though, they’re exactly what I told her – ours to protect.

Instead of fighting me on it, she just shrugs and heads back to the street. It’s not a long walk home, but it feels like it goes

in the blink of an eye, and I realize I don't want to head straight up to my office. But I've got a Zoom meeting set up with Garth and Joshua, and they'll be pissed if I cancel. I can tell from their texts they're already intrigued by our proposed pack merger. And who can blame them? We went after Max because he's the most intriguing omega to cross our threshold in a long time, but the added bonus of a smart, feisty woman like Grace? I'm suddenly eager to see how things develop when all six of us are under the same roof.

As we get into the elevator in our lobby, I turn to study her. She's wearing a slim-fitting navy skirt, a silk blouse, and the cute sneakers she must have taken from her duffel. Her hair is down, and her skin is soft and dewy-looking under a light application of makeup. She should look a mess, since she's been wearing the same clothes since her interview on Friday, but she's too stylish for that. Comfortable in her own skin, maybe? Or just used to making do?

But the thing that really intrigues me is her relationship with Max. I assumed she targeted him after he caught Richard's eye, but I've looked at the timeline, and it seems they came to their interviews together. I don't know how they met, but there's no denying the sizzle in the air every time they touch. And I have to admit, I like her possessive streak, especially when one of us touches her omega. Doesn't matter she's facing a pack of powerful alphas, I can see the warning flashing in those lapis lazuli eyes. And damn if that doesn't light me up in all kinds of ways.

"I think we got off on the wrong foot," I tell her as we reach the floor where our offices are located. "I shouldn't have shown you that surveillance picture without getting your side of the story first."

She's placed her duffel at her feet and now she leans against the wall, her hands tucked behind her. "It was a shitty thing to do."

I smirk. Abrupt, but honest. Two traits I actually admire a lot. "It was. But it wasn't really about you. The man your stepbrother worked over is called Andy Curry, and he's a friend of Rich's. That's why I had the footage."

A small, broken sound slips out of her, and she slumps against the wall. “No! God. I’m so sorry...”

I’ve caged her in before I think about it, one arm on either side of her and my face inches from hers. “Not your fault.”

“But it is.” Instead of shrinking away from me, she tilts her head back, those blue-gold eyes swimming with pain. “He tried to help me outside the club, then again in the cloakroom. Kayden hates anyone getting in the way of his plans.”

The growl that vibrates in my chest has her eyes widening, but she couldn’t be more shocked than I am. Fucking hell. I’ve literally backed her into a corner and now I’m vocalizing like a rabid animal. But a lot of shit is flicking through my head right now. Because I know exactly what plans a guy like Sawyer would have for his stepsister in a club cloakroom...

But before I can say any of that, she peels her hands off the wall and squeezes my arm. “Is he okay? Will you tell him I’m sorry? And if he wants to press charges, I’ll back him up.”

I stare at her, trying to process what she just said. “You’d do that? You’d go up against Sawyer for a stranger?”

She nods, even though I can see her throat bob and smell the fear leaking from her pores. “Your friend was only trying to help me. He didn’t deserve to get caught up in my problems.”

Her problems, like she asked the universe to curse her with Kayden fucking Sawyer for a relation. I know plenty about the guy, and not just because we run in some of the same circles. Andy isn’t the first of our friends to get fucked over by him, and since he likes to target rich guys with bad habits, I doubt he’ll be the last.

“I’ll tell him,” I mutter as I leave the elevator. Not that I have any intention of putting her in her brother’s path. Especially now that she’s stepped into mine.

Do I feel some satisfaction at having Grace – who Sawyer clearly has an unhealthy obsession with – under my roof? Yes. But will I use it against him? Never. Because the blowback

from psychos like Sawyer often hits the people who least deserve it.

Which means I'll just have to be a little more subtle than usual...

I head into my office for my Zoom meeting, surprised to find Richard slumped in one of my club chairs. I drop a hand on his shoulder in passing, then go straight to fix us a drink. I wish it was a celebratory moment, but I can tell by his scent it's anything but. "News on Andy?" I ask, even though his doctor has me on speed dial.

"No. Nothing since this morning," he says in his distracted way, pushing his wild auburn curls off his face. I notice a faint fuzz on his jaw, which is unusual. Even on Sundays, Rich is immaculate about his appearance. "I need to talk to you about this companion thing."

"You mean the intimate clause." I give him a look as I set the whiskey in his hands. "You didn't seem all that thrilled at our meeting."

"I know," he murmurs and takes a sip, grimacing at the taste. It's a forty-year-old hand-filled bottle of Douglas Laing, but Richard isn't the type of guy to like something just because it's expected of him. Probably comes from growing up with the kind of parental abuse that makes other kids toss themselves off their ivory towers.

I arch a brow, my own drink biting the back of my throat. "You want to back out of it, I take it?"

"No." He takes another small sip before he sets his glass down. "Not yet."

"But you're having second thoughts. Why? You don't like her? Or are you still worried about the internship part? Because until we all sign the contract, we can still negotiate on that."

As a rule, we don't meddle in each other's departments. We work best when we focus on our own skillsets, and let Garth, as CEO, sort out the gray areas. But Richard was clearly disturbed by the suggestion of taking Grace under his

professional wing. Staff management isn't his strongest suit, but I'm not sure that's all that's going on here.

"I'm just saying we should proceed with caution," he says, fiddling with his tie. "We did our research on Max before we met him, and even though he's been *in* trouble, he's not trouble. There's a difference."

"True." I sit back and watch as he drums his fingers on his knee, his gaze skittering around the room. Richard's always twitchy – comes with having such a complex brain – but it's a while since I smelled such a sour edge to his scent. "But I'm not sure Grace is trouble, either."

That has his attention snapping my way. "How can you say that? After finding out who she really is, I thought you'd be the first to question her loyalty."

Something prickles inside me that feels a lot like anger. "Her stepbrother's an asshole, but that doesn't automatically make her one." Well aware of my hypocrisy, I tilt my head, watching Richard's pulse jump in his throat. If anyone knows we can't pick our families, it's the two of us. Opposite ends of the social spectrum, but we both grew up in shitty households. "But if you're looking for proof, she just offered to testify against him if Andy wants to go to the cops."

He looks shocked. "Really?"

"Yeah, so maybe cool it with the trouble stuff. Give her a chance." I reach over my desk and take the hand that's now drumming on my blotter. "Is something else going on with you, brother?"

"No," he says, standing up so abruptly the club chair squeals against the floorboards. "I'm going into the office. Say hello to the others for me."

He's gone before I can remind him it's Sunday. Not that it's ever stopped Richard from burying himself in work. Or me from scheduling Zoom calls, although this one is more about pleasure than business.

"Danny." Garth's purr echoes through the room, and I instantly relax. He's not just our CEO, but the most dominant

alpha in our pack, and I breathe easier knowing he'll soon be back here with us. "I miss your face."

"You saw me a couple days ago," I remind him. "That conference call with Peters & Daye."

He waves a hand. "That was business. I can't flirt with you when I'm being wooed by marketing firms."

I smirk, since we both know it doesn't really stop him. "So, are we going with P&D, or are we doing another round?" The purpose of the trip is two-fold: check on the London office; and decide on a marketing firm to work hand-in-hand with Joshua's division. Most of our competitors are based out of Europe, so it's important we have a strong local marketing presence.

But my mind quickly switches back to pack business. "Where *is* Joshua? Don't tell me he clocked out early?"

London is five hours ahead, which makes it almost dinnertime, but our pack doesn't rest during business trips. The objective is to always get the work done and head back home as soon as possible.

"P&D are good to go, so Josh took an early flight back. I'll stay another couple of days to tidy things up, but he was restless."

"Restless?" I echo with a smile. "I take it he liked that update I sent through?"

Garth chuckles, like liquid sex when accompanied by the dark gleam in his eyes. "Pretty sure he's already memorized it word-for-word. You know how much he wants an omega, and the added bonus of a beautiful beta had him doing cartwheels."

I smirk. Our youngest packmate is also our most exuberant, so it's pretty easy to picture his reaction to the detailed memo I sent last night. "What time is his flight?"

"He should arrive around midnight your time."

Another knot loosens in my spine. The world's always a little brighter when Joshua's around, but I still worry about him. He's the sweetest of us, and while I've made sure he's

street smart, there's always some asshole out there looking to take advantage. "Good," I rumble. "We need some pack time, now more than ever."

Garth nods and leans forward, pulling at his tie. "Tell me about them. In your own words."

I hesitate, thinking of the whirlwind forty-eight hours since the courting couple walked into our lives. "You got the update about the intimate clause?"

"I think that's what tipped Josh over the edge," he murmurs, resting a palm against his throat. It's a thick, tanned column of muscle and I feel the quiver under my skin at the memory of pressing my mouth against it. "A pack merger is a whole other thing."

"It is," I agree, holding his gaze. "But you have to see them together. It's..."

The moment lengthens, and his voice drops an octave. "Speechless, Danny?"

"Mm." I shrug off my jacket and pop the button on my jeans. A shiver works its way down my spine as I unsheathe myself in front of his dark gaze. I've been hard since brunch, but the feel of my alpha's eyes on me makes precum spill from my slit. I wrap a hand around my shaft, smearing the moisture with my thumb. Pride hums in my chest at the way his hand drops to the bulge in his trousers. Garth is all business when he's in the office, but I guess there's an exception to every rule. "You should get back here and experience it for yourself," I taunt him.

He huffs out a laugh, squeezing his own erection through his expensive suit pants. "Can you smell them now? I imagine their scent has already worked its way into the walls."

I groan and drop my head on the back of my chair. "Fuck, yes. It's everywhere."

"No wonder you're so hard," he says with a sympathetic smile. "You know, you don't have to wait for me to taste them."

And that's why I'd take a bullet for this man. Not many alphas as dominant as Garth would let an unbonded omega move into his house when he's not home, let alone invite a packmate to claim him first.

But he was the one who insisted we keep the consent clause in, meaning that sexual relations can commence – or end – at any time, as long as both parties are in agreement.

“Dates,” I manage to say as I work my hand over my aching cock. The head is already dark and dripping, my balls pulled up tight and ready for release. “I told Grace we'd all date her as part of the deal. But right now, she's pretty wrapped up in Max.”

Literally, if the scent filtering through the air conditioning system is anything to go by.

“My poor alpha,” Garth murmurs, with only a touch of mockery this time. “That perfect, dripping cock and no one to enjoy it but me?” It bucks in my hand and he loses his smile, his dark eyes narrowing. “You want me to purr for you, mate?”

I try to hold on to the last frayed edge of my sanity. “Only if you see something you like, Alpha.”

He growls, finally pulling his own cock from his trousers. I groan at the sight of him, bigger and thicker than any erection has any right to be. My mouth instantly waters, and I lick my lips, tugging almost ruthlessly on my cockhead as he wraps a big palm around that throbbing shaft. “Together, brother,” he purrs. “Let me see you come all over your desk.”

I'm almost panting, the visual complemented by the sound of his deep, rough purr. Powerful alphas can make you hard with their vibration only, and the rumble coming from Garth's throat hits me like an avalanche. One more fierce stroke and I'm shooting thick ropes of cum across my blotter, just like he ordered.

“Fuck me,” I pant, leaning forward to brace my elbows on my knees. “Your purr is damn dangerous.”

“Only when you’re so pent up,” he murmurs, already tucking his own spent cock back into his pants. The fact I missed him stroke himself to completion is a damn shame, but Garth is more about control than release. He’s not into other alphas as a rule, but he takes pleasure from our pleasure. In another world, he’d probably be more inclined to kill us than jerk off with us, but Garth is our pack alpha first and foremost. “I’m thinking we should book a double date as soon as I get home.”

I nod, hardening again as images flicker through my head. An unbonded omega is temptation incarnate for an alpha, but just as many of my fantasies now feature our guarded beta, those lapis lazuli eyes flashing as she backs me up against an alley wall.

“Although, if Joshua has his way, it’ll be a triple date,” Garth muses, smiling fondly at me through the screen.

I smile back, but I can’t help but think of Richard and the way he twitched like he was hooked up to an electrical outlet. Is it just nerves? Resistance to change? Or is his prickliness because of something deeper?

It’s something I should look into, but right now, I just want to enjoy my afterglow with my alpha’s eyes on me.

Everything else can wait.



9. GRACE

“He didn’t wait for her?”

The irritation in Max’s voice is the only sour note in the elegant dining room. His scent coats my skin, both heady and comforting, and I’m sitting in a little pool of morning sunlight, the French doors open to the terraced garden. We’ve just devoured a delicious breakfast of French toast and a berry parfait, and we’re lingering over our coffee - on the assumption that Richard will come by soon to collect me for work. But it’s now eight-thirty and Daniel is leaning on the door frame and staring at us with his dark, watchful eyes.

“It’s okay,” I murmur as I drain my coffee cup. “I know the way.”

“But it’s her first day,” Max protests, frowning up at Daniel. “Isn’t the polite thing to go in together so Richard can show her around?”

“I believe he popped his head in your room earlier, but you were busy.” There’s a wicked edge to his smirk as he walks over and takes a seat opposite us. Not sure why he needs to sit so close when the table has a dozen place settings, but I push down my irritation. He apologized for the surveillance picture, and even though he stalked me to the library yesterday, something seems to have softened in his face when he looks my way. Maybe it’s just wishful thinking, but Mr. Knuckledusters and I might actually be on civil terms. Although, I question that a moment later when he runs the pad of his thumb over his bottom lip and purrs, “You certainly smell like you woke up on the right side of the bed.”

“So do you,” I reply before I can stop myself, and his eyes widen over his coffee cup. “I just mean... you look well rested.”

If resting is a euphemism for whatever had his office smelling like a pheromone factory when I dropped by this morning.

Thankfully, Max still has a bee in his bonnet about Richard, and leans forward, capturing the alpha's attention. "If you guys aren't going to treat the internship seriously, we need to revisit the contract." He juts out his chin, looking exactly like a storybook prince facing down a dragon. Or, at least, one with a couple of hickeys blooming on his neck. "Are you taking this seriously, Daniel?"

The alpha frowns, no doubt smelling the stress in Max's scent. "I promise you, we are taking this *very* seriously." He looks between us, those intense eyes flashing. "In fact, Joshua just cut his business trip short so he could come back and meet you."

I perk up a little at this news, and Max gives my hand a squeeze. We've talked about the packmates, obviously, and Joshua Rose is known to be the most approachable of the alphas. As the head of the company's marketing department, he's often photographed out and about, and there are plenty of influencers who gush about how he's the nicest person they've ever met.

"He's sleeping off his jet-lag right now, but he'll be at tonight's pack dinner." Daniel drains his cup and cocks a brow at me. "Ready to get going, Grace?"

"Thanks, but Max is going to walk with me to work."

"Walk?" He looks like the concept is foreign to him, even though he happily stalked me through the streets yesterday. "I'd prefer you just came with me."

"I dropped the internship contract on your desk this morning. It said I'm to work normal office hours, which according to the employee portal are nine to five. It's only a fifteen-minute walk."

"I'm not worried about you being late," he grumbles, but I'm already on my feet and Max is a step behind me. But before we can leave the room, Daniel cuts me off and takes my

wrist. I try not to flinch at how close he is to touching Kayden's bite mark, but the scowl on his face deepens. "Look, Richard is a brilliant designer, and a committed packmate. But he doesn't have the best people skills. He has a couple of managers for that, and you'll probably spend the majority of your time with them. But if Rich is a little aloof or prickly... Fuck, if he gets your name wrong, don't take it personally, okay? He's just..."

"I get it," I cut him off. Richard has made it pretty obvious he doesn't want me working in his division. I'm not sure if it's personal or if he feels like I've coerced him into this internship. In a way, he's right, but I plan to prove that I deserve this chance. "I'm an intern, not one of his direct reports. I'm not going to make a fuss."

And to be honest, even though my little scent-matched soul is desperate for another hit of Richard Rose, avoiding my boss has become one of my new work priorities.

Max growls something rude under his breath, but I just give Daniel a tongue-in-cheek look. "Thanks for the pep talk, though."

He stares at me for a moment, then huffs out a laugh and rubs his knuckles over his scalp. "Fuck, I think it's my first, so don't hold it against me."

There's so much rumbly humor in his voice I can't help but smile back. "Practice makes perfect. Maybe you should do a stint in the HR division. Just to brush up on those people skills."

His laughter follows me down the hallway, but as we collect our things for the day, he doesn't try to get me to ride with him again.

I tell myself I'm happy about that as Max and I head out onto the street. It's late September, so the weather is perfect for a brisk morning walk. Although, I'd probably be happy promenading through Hell if I had Max Colt on my arm.

"Daniel's right," he murmurs in my ear as we pass a dog-walker with half-a-dozen well-fluffed charges in hand. "You

smell like someone worshiped your heavenly body from dusk to dawn.”

“I’m pretty sure you’re the sex god in this relationship,” I murmur back, having caught the dazed look in the dog-walker’s eye as he passed us. Instead of feeling jealous, it makes me smug, because *I’m* the one Max is nuzzling as we wait for the lights to change. “I thought I’d be wiped out this morning. But that thing you did with your tongue...” I widen my eyes at him. “It gave me just the boost I needed to put a spring in my step.”

He steps closer to me, which I thought was a physical impossibility given how we’re plastered together. But our arms rub from shoulder to fingertips, his heart beating against my ribs. And the heat coming off him? It’s like warm honey being drizzled over my skin. “Well, let me know if you want to meet for lunch,” he murmurs in my ear as he sucks the lobe into his mouth. I shiver, almost panting as I screw a hand into the front of his shirt. “Or I can always give you a quick top-up in the copier room.”

When he finally pulls away and we start across the intersection, his grin is pure wickedness, and I feel my panties dampen. Just as well I packed an extra pair in my bag. How’s that for being prepared for your first day?

“Definitely tomorrow,” I tell him when I find my stride again. “For lunch, I mean. Not the copier room.” Although the temptation is very, very real. “Today I should probably keep my head down, but if I get desperate, I’ll call you for some phone sex. I’m sure Richard has a spare office he won’t mind me hiding in.”

Instead of making him smile, his brows pull together and he swings me around until I’m caged in his arms. The move would make me breathless even if it wasn’t Max’s perfect face frowning down at me. “If anyone gives you a hard time, go to Daniel.”

I scoff. “I’m not siccing Mr. Knuckledusters on my new colleagues.”

“Mr. Knuckledusters?” His mouth tugs up in a reluctant smile, and he kisses me hard and fast. “I can’t wait to hear you scream that name as you come, GW.”

“What?”

I gape at him, but someone jostles my shoulder, and I realize we’re standing out the front of H.O.M.E., my new colleagues hurrying past us to start their day. If I don’t leave right now, I’ll be late, but it’s hard to tear my gaze away from Max’s smirking eyes.

First stop: bathroom for a panty change.

“Have a great day, gorgeous woman,” he purrs, finally backing away. It leaves me no option but to mount the imposing stairs, my hand slippery as I grip my tote bag. Despite the pep talk I’ve been giving myself, my stomach is full of nerves. I only manage a limp wave at his retreating back, and then I’m being sucked through the revolving doors, the same unimpressed doorman from Friday stepping into my path.

“I’m here for an internship,” I tell him before he can try to throw me back out again. “In the design department.”

“Mr. Spade is waiting for you on the sixth floor.” He hands me a visitor pass and points to the elevator. “Don’t dawdle. He’s a very busy man.”

I bite back a retort – something along the lines of preferring to loiter than dawdle – and follow the other workers heading to the elevators. There’s a bit of a crush being this close to nine o’clock, and I have to hang back to wait, finally squeezing in on my third try. It’s easily five-to-one male to female, and the only other beta I see is a delivery guy clutching a huge floral arrangement. We stop on every floor and the air is stifling with alpha pheromones and the perfume from the lush roses in the bouquet.

“I hope that’s for me,” an alpha says with a toss of her long red hair. I can see her reflection in the polished doors and she’s a stunning woman in her mid-thirties, rocking the kind of sleek power suit that makes me feel kind of obvious in my more

flamboyant outfit. “My pack owes me a bit of groveling after spending all weekend on the golf course,” she huffs, studying her nails.

“Only if your name is Grace,” the courier replies, and I jolt, biting my lip. He plucks the card out of the arrangement and reads, “*Good luck on your first day. You’re going to knock this internship out of the park.* Signed Garth.”

“Give me that card,” the redhead snaps, scanning it with widening eyes. “Since when do interns get flowers from the CEO?”

“It’s a prank,” another alpha says dismissively. He’s not the biggest guy in the elevator, but he’s leaning against the wall and taking up more than his share of the limited space. “Someone’s just trying to get into this girl’s panties. Maybe that cute little receptionist in the customer service team.”

“You’re disgusting, Nick,” the redhead replies, her lip curling. “And if it’s a prank, it’s a very expensive one.”

“It’s our premium arrangement,” the delivery guy confirms, puffing his chest out. “It includes a bottle of one of your perfumes.”

That gets Nick peeling away from the wall, the alpha digging through the display until he pulls out a curved golden bottle. “Holy shit. This is *Magnetism*. It’s meant to be under lock and key until the launch.” He scowls at the delivery guy. “How the fuck did you get this? Someone clearly stole it from the design department.”

“Or marketing,” the redhead says with an arched brow. “Sure you didn’t let a sample slip under your desk, Nick? You know, so you could gift it to a cute little receptionist called Grace?”

The doors finally open on the sixth floor and I leap forward, almost crashing into the alpha waiting there. I instantly recognize him as Simon Spade, the man who never got around to interviewing me. He’s lean, with a shiny bald head and thick dark eyebrows that are twisted in a frown. “Grace Worth?” he

demands, then glances at the others in the elevator. “Mike. Louise. What’s with the frowns?”

“You’re Grace?” The delivery guy asks, looking annoyed as he pushes the bouquet my way. “Why didn’t you say so, and save me the trip?”

“Screw the flowers,” Nick snarls, glaring in my direction. “We have to find out who stole the bottle of *Magnetism*. God knows how many others are floating around out there...”

“None.” Spade reaches out and scoops up the flower arrangement, dropping it into my startled arms. “Garth told me he was organizing this. Welcome to H.O.M.E., Grace.”

“It’s for her?” the redheaded alpha demands, her narrowed eyes sweeping me from head to toe. “Your *intern*?”

Spade turns on a shiny heel and walks off, leaving me facing an elevator full of suspicious faces. I shake my head, like it’s just some weird misunderstanding, then scurry after my boss.

My thumping heart starts to slow the longer he ignores me, and I look around. Unsurprisingly for a luxury goods company, the office furnishings are plush, although they lean to the more traditional. But being a design floor, there are also some more innovative touches, including the wide, ergonomic desks and cutting-edge tech hubs. Heads turn in our direction as we pass, but Spade strides straight for a back office. A blonde beta in a smart pantsuit is sitting at the assistant’s desk and gives me a curious look. When Spade flicks a finger at her, she grabs a notebook and follows us inside.

“Eliza, this is Grace. She’s the new intern. Eliza will set you up with your pass, desk, and phone.” I nod at the other woman, who gives me a practiced smile. “Your day-to-day work will be with Aaron, and your HR rep is Stacey. Richard said you’re here three days a week. Any preferences?”

“For days? I’m flexible. And I’m also happy to work more days if it helps.”

“We’ll stick with what you negotiated.” He scratches his chin and I try to read the expression in his eyes, but he’s a

closed book. “We haven’t had an intern in this department before, so there will be some curiosity about you. Richard said you have a confidentiality clause in your contract.” When I dart a glance at Eliza, he waves a hand. “Eliza knows more about this office than I do. But it’s important that we know how much we tell the rest of the team.”

I move uncomfortably from foot to foot, finally setting the flowers down on the edge of his desk. “Can’t you just say that Richard saw my portfolio and wanted to give me a chance?”

They exchange a loaded glance and Spade scratches his chin again. “Sure, we can try that. Now, how about Eliza shows you around and I check back in with you in an hour?”

He’s already picked up his phone, so I nod and follow Eliza to her desk. She grabbed the flowers on the way out and she now arranges them in a vase, handing me the card and the bottle of perfume. I ignore the curious glint in her eyes as I stuff them in my tote, and she opens a manila folder on her desk.

“There are a couple of forms for you to fill out for HR and payroll. You can do those tonight, if you like. I’ll show you around the floor and introduce you to a few people. We can then cover our normal routines and other expectations. You’re booked to have lunch with the other new starters at noon. It’s part of HR’s orientation program.”

So, no lunchtime nookie in the copier room. Bummer.

I murmur my thanks and Eliza leads me across the floor, showing me the breakroom, lounge area, bathrooms, working hubs, and running through the health and safety protocols. Along the way, she stops to introduce me to various people. I’m clearly a hot topic of conversation based on the way their eyes widen at the word ‘intern’, but I get through the meet and greet with polite smiles and a smattering of small talk, until we stop next to a huddle of three alphas.

“Aaron, can I interrupt for a moment?” Eliza taps the arm of a big alpha in a gray suit. I’m guessing he’s in his late thirties with wavy brown hair and a prominent chin. “This is Grace Worth, our new intern.”

“Grace...” Aaron looks me over, lingering on the tangerine silk blouse I’m wearing under my pleated robin-blue blazer. “You’re certainly going to brighten up the place.” Eliza gives a weak smile as he takes my hand, squeezing more than shaking. “Let me introduce you to Liam and Viktor. Liam’s one of our senior designers, and Viktor just got the new spot on the team.”

He means the position I never got to interview for, and I try to maintain a neutral expression as I study the younger alpha. But other than age, it’s actually quite hard to tell them apart. All three of the men share the tanned, square-jawed look of well-bred alphas. Viktor is shorter and stockier than the other two, but he has the same smug, entitled expression. A baby clone of his boss - or maybe that’s just my sour grapes getting the better of me.

“We’re kicking off with a team meeting in a few,” Aaron says, “so why don’t you hang with us, Grace? We can give you back to Eliza after we’re done.”

I glance at the assistant, who gives a tight nod, handing over the manila folder and a new phone. “I put in a couple of numbers that might be useful,” she tells me in a low voice. “I’ll get your laptop set up and then we’ll find you a desk.”

I give her a grateful smile and follow the three alphas to a meeting room. There are already two other guys seated at the long, sleek table, discussing the weekend’s sports results as they tap away on their laptops. They’re both older, and the energy in the room isn’t quite as intense as it is out on the floor. Although they look up in surprise as we enter the room.

“Patrick and Terry, this is Grace, our intern. You already met Viktor at drinks last night.” There are handshakes and backslaps all round, and a couple of polite nods in my direction. “Now, the whole team is here to get you up to speed and my door is always open... unless it’s not.” He laughs, and the other alphas chuckle along with him. “But you’ll work it out.”

They launch into a quick update on the projects they’re working on and their plans for the week. Aaron jots a few

things on a tablet, then says, “Great, but our focus is still on the Face Showcase on Friday.” He looks at me as he explains, “We’ve just signed a new Heart of the House for the year and there will be a cocktail party on Friday to welcome her. We’re also showcasing some of our core products.” He winks at me. “If you play your cards right, Grace, we might be able to slip you one of the swag bags we give to the attending omegas.”

I give him a polite smile, but inside I’m groaning. After the flower fiasco, I’m not looking for any more House of Omega freebies. But thankfully he moves on quickly, addressing the whole team. “Don’t forget, we have the monthly performance workshop with the marketing team this afternoon. You’re all expected to be there and *contribute*.” There are a few grumbles around the table, but he slides a smirk my way. “Collaboration is key, after all.”

The meeting breaks up shortly after, but Aaron asks me to stay back a moment, also gesturing for Viktor to remain seated. When we’re alone, he folds his arms, staring intently down at us. “So, my two newbies. This is a big opportunity for you both, but I don’t need to tell you that. I just want to make sure there are no hard feelings to get in the way of your work.”

I widen my eyes as I glance at Viktor, who’s studying his knuckles. “I don’t know what you mean.”

Aaron clicks his tongue. “Well, I vet all the early applications for this department, so I know you both applied for the junior designer position. Your portfolio was impressive, Grace, but Viktor was the standout candidate, and fully deserved the role. I just want to make that very clear.”

There’s a hint of warning in his voice and my heart sinks as I realize he’s pegged me as a troublemaker. But I tilt my head back, refusing to look anything but calm and professional. “I understand, and it’s not a problem.”

He studies me for a moment, not looking convinced. “Okay, but while I’ll be your day-to-day manager, I’ve asked Viktor to supervise your work. If that’s going to be an issue for you, you need to tell me now.”

I manage to keep the grimace off my face. “I look forward to working with him. I’m sure I’ll learn a lot.”

Aaron waits another beat, then smiles. “Great. Then welcome to the team.”

I leave the meeting room feeling like my tail is tucked between my legs, but I force myself to keep my head up. I’m clearly still the topic of conversation on the floor, but I ignore the whispers as I make my way back to Eliza. She has a new laptop bag on her desk and a shiny ID badge with my name and picture on it.

“Now you’re official,” she tells me with a kind smile and I feel the prickly tension fade a smidge. I’m not expecting to make friends with my colleagues, but if I have to keep my guard up for six weeks it’s going to be exhausting. “We have a hot desk policy for consultants and interns, but I’ve found you a spot over there.” She points to a desk that’s a long way from the action, but still in her line-of-sight. “Aaron will want you to check in regularly, but I’ll be here for anything else you need.”

I smile back at her now, smart enough to recognize a lifeline when I hear one. “Thanks, Eliza. I really appreciate all of this.”

“Just doing my job.” But there’s no resentment in her smile and I relax a bit more. “Here’s your email details. As soon as you log in, there’s an induction pack to go through that should take you up to lunch.”

I nod, and after collecting my things, head over to my new desk. It’s secluded, being close to the emergency exit, but I like having my back to the wall. I sweep the room with my gaze as I get set up, noting that the rest of my team is located together in a shared hub.

Fine. I’m not here to rock the boat.

I watch Aaron backslap Viktor, both laughing loudly, then log in to the online induction and focus on the screen. Despite the noise on the floor, I’m quickly swept up in the information about H.O.M.E.’s vision, mission, and history. Excitement

tingles back up my spine as I realize I'm now a part of this incredible company. I work through the modules that cover everything from workplace safety to the company's supply chain, then settle back in my chair as a video of the CEO starts playing.

Garth Rose is sitting in his office, wearing an immaculate dark suit that hugs his powerful frame. It's nighttime, and the city lights gleam through the window behind him as he smiles into the camera, welcoming us into the company his great-grandfather started out of a tiny apartment in Brooklyn. His voice is a tantalizing rumble, his body language warm and engaging, and I find myself smiling at the screen. I'm so caught up in the video, I jump when Viktor sets a coffee cup down loudly on my desk.

He cocks a brow at me, his lip curling a little as he takes in the sparkle in my eyes. "You coming to lunch? We have the new starters' thing."

I check the time, surprised to find it's only a few minutes off midday. "Wow, I got really caught up in the induction. Have you been through it?"

"On the weekend," he says shortly. "They had welcome drinks for me last night, and I wanted to put names to faces."

There's a niggling edge to his voice, but I ignore it as I slip into my jacket and grab my phone and ID badge. At the last moment, I tuck some money in my pocket in case we're leaving the building. But when we reach the elevators, we head upwards to the tenth floor. A receptionist I don't recognize is behind the large desk, but she just nods at us as we walk past. I assume we're meeting in one of the boardrooms until Viktor grabs my arm, pulling me over to a familiar alcove. It's outside Richard's office, where I waited before the interview that never happened. My heart sinks to think that I'm about to spend an uncomfortable lunch with my scent-match while my hostile new supervisor looks on.

But Viktor just backs me up against the wall, his alpha scent a bitter mist in my face. "I heard what you said at the interview. I was sitting right *there*." He jabs an angry finger at

a nearby chair. “How it wasn’t a fair or equitable process? Yeah, I know you threatened the company if they didn’t hire you. Well, fuck that. I got the job, and I didn’t have to blackmail anyone to get it.”

I open my mouth, refusing to be cowed, when Daniel Rose looms up behind Viktor, his violet eyes aflame. “Get your hands off her, you little fuck, or I’ll break your goddamn wrists.”



10. GRACE

Viktor makes a strangled sound, his hand flying from my arm like it's radioactive. But Daniel doesn't look satisfied with that, tearing Viktor's ID badge from his suit lapel and sneering in the younger alpha's face. "Did no one tell you that manhandling other employees is grounds for termination, Viktor?"

"I wasn't..." Viktor swallows the rest of his objection at the growl echoing in Daniel's chest. His face goes as pale as the marble floor, his throat bobbing in alarm. "I mean, I was just telling her she can't blackmail the company..."

"So, you were helping me out?" Viktor blinks, and Daniel flashes his canines. "You think I don't know how to protect my own company? Is that what you're trying to tell me?"

Viktor's legs shake, and he folds his arms around his torso like he's trying to keep himself upright. Or maybe he's trying to stop himself from puking all over Daniel's shoes. "No, Mr. Rose."

"What's your job?"

"Junior designer. I just... I just started."

Daniel grimaces, his snarl stretching across his face. "Then consider yourself on probation, Viktor. And not with Richard. With *me*. If I hear as much as a sniffle out of you, you're done. And I don't just mean in this company. You won't get a job designing paper cups once I'm done with you."

"Yes, sir." Daniel thrusts the ID badge back at him and Viktor is gone in a flash, running for the elevator. I blink and take his place against the wall, my own legs less than steady.

“You okay?” Daniel is crowding in against me now, but the violence is gone from his large frame. It takes me a moment to realize he’s blocking me from whoever else is on the floor. “Fuck, I should have dragged the little shit into a room instead of making you watch that.”

“It’s okay.” I take a deep breath and realize it’s mostly true. Viktor’s behavior disturbed me a lot more than Daniel’s reaction. “But that’s my new supervisor you just ran off. And I have no idea where I’m supposed to be for lunch.”

“Good. Because you’re coming with me.”

I blink at him. “I think it’s part of my induction...”

“I’ll induct you,” he says with an airy wave, and I snort a laugh.

“That’s really going to endear me to the other new starters.”

He studies me for a moment then glances over his shoulder. “Will, you know where the new starters lunch is?”

“The boardroom,” a bright voice responds, and an alpha in his early twenties peeks around Daniel’s shoulder. “Hi, I’m Will, Daniel’s assistant. Want me to show you the way?”

“*We’ll* show her the way,” Daniel rumbles, nodding down the hallway. Will looks surprised for a moment, then shoots me a friendly smile as he falls into step behind us. Daniel cracks his knuckles, then shoves his hands into his pockets. “So that’s the little punk Richard hired instead of you?”

I shrug, biting back a smile, because Viktor really is a punk. “He’s got experience I don’t have.”

Daniel mutters something rude under his breath and then Will is ducking in front of us to open the boardroom door. An omega in a blue wrap dress is at the front of the room, clicking through slides, while half a dozen new starters nibble on their packed lunches. They all look up in shock as Daniel strides into the room. “Hey, Stacey. Sorry for the interruption.”

The omega’s eyes go wide, and then she dimples prettily. “Mr. Rose. How are you?”

“Good. I was just showing Grace where to go for lunch.” He looks at the paper bags on the table and frowns. “It’s not catered?”

Crap. I didn’t think about that. “I’m not hungry,” I lie, but he’s already snapping his fingers at his assistant. “Will, call downstairs and get some sandwiches and sushi.” He looks at me. “Maybe some muffins and a cheese platter?”

I open my mouth to tell him it’s too much, but I catch a swift head shake from a girl sitting near me. “Ah, sure. That would be great.”

Will whips out his phone while Daniel directs me to a chair. He pulls it out, every eye on us as I get settled. “Have you covered the company’s legal policies and practices yet?” he asks Stacey.

The omega blinks at him. “I...um, I don’t think I have a slide on that...”

“No problem,” Daniel says, taking the seat beside me and leaning back until his leather jacket creaks. “I can cover it if you’d like.”

“Sure!” Stacey still looks a little shell-shocked, but she perches on the edge of a table and gives Daniel a bright smile. “Please. We’d love to hear all about your department, Mr. Rose.”

Daniel loses most of us less than a minute into his spiel, but from the looks on their faces, I don’t think anyone cares. There are five guys and a girl, all alphas, and they’re watching the lawyer with rapt expressions. When Will appears with a cart of lunch platters, the atmosphere in the room turns almost jubilant.

“You should come work with me,” Daniel says quietly while everyone eagerly fills their plates with the swanky lunch offerings. “You could be my intern.”

I grin around my sandwich, a little bubble of warmth igniting in my belly. “Sure, except I don’t know anything about the law.”

“You could be my design liaison,” he murmurs, passing me a napkin and watching as I blot my mouth. “Collaboration is key, don’t you know?”

I heard that repeatedly on the induction video, so I know it’s one of the company’s operating principles. “I appreciate the offer, but I want to try to make it work with the design team.”

Daniel’s violet eyes narrow. “Who does Richard have you reporting to?”

“Aaron Court.” Daniel doesn’t look impressed, and I hurry to distract him. “I got flowers from Garth this morning.”

The scowl melts from Daniel’s face, his lips hitching in a smirk. “Oh, yeah? I told you he wants to take you on a date.”

I blush, looking around to make sure no one is listening. Stacey is watching us from behind the sushi she’s nibbling, but everyone else is too absorbed in their lunch to be eavesdropping. “Can you thank him for me?”

It might’ve been an embarrassing way to start the day, but I still appreciate the gesture. And I’m dying to show Max the limited-edition bottle of perfume when I get home.

“You can thank him yourself,” Daniel tells me. “I asked Eliza to put all our private numbers in your phone.” I try to imagine ringing Garth Rose while he’s on an important business trip, and make a mental note to text him instead, but Daniel distracts me by placing a leather notebook in front of me. It’s similar to the one he had at the breakfast meeting, although this one is a deep plum that’s almost the exact shade of my lipstick. “I thought you might need this. It’s my favorite type of notebook.”

I bite back a smile to think of Mr. Knuckledusters stocking up on fashionable stationery. “From the Alpha Abroad range. Yes, I recognize it.”

A faint blush touches his high cheekbones. “Shit. I didn’t think about that. You probably want something a bit more...”

“Omega-ish?” I ask, poking my tongue into my cheek. “No, I really don’t. This is perfect. Thanks.”

He breathes out, rubbing a hand over his scalp, and we go back to our lunch. But I can tell he's stewing over something, and I'm not surprised when he sets down his sandwich and says, "You want me to talk to Richard about his team? I wasn't kidding when I said Viktor is done if he looks sideways at you again."

That happy little flame bursts to life again under my breastbone. "You really don't need to." He raises his eyebrows and I hold up a finger. "Firstly, you were really scary. Viktor would have to be crazy to mess with me again. And secondly... I don't think anyone sees me as a threat. If anything, I'm a token hire."

His brows scrunch down at that. "Three quarters of our staff got here because they went to the right schools, and go to the right clubs. You're probably the most deserving person in the building."

"What about you?" I ask, ignoring the way his compliment has fanned that little flame in my heart. "How did you join the company? I know that Garth's great-grandfather started it, and that Richard and Joshua worked their way up from entry-level positions, but I couldn't find anything about you."

He smirks, as if that's exactly how he likes it. "I'm a little different. This is actually my first job in a luxury goods company. Before that, I worked as a criminal defense lawyer for the Quinn Pack out of Boston."

He says the name with an emphasis that makes me curious. "I don't know them..."

"Good. They're bad news. But I grew up in their neighborhood, and it was safer working with them than against them." I nod, understanding the subtext. Daniel doesn't just dress like a top-tier thug; he grew up amongst them, and probably still associates with them. But then he leans over, his hand coming to rest over mine, which are currently pinching the filling out of my sandwich. "But I'm not like your stepbrother, Grace. I got away from that life, and I don't regret it for a second."

I nod, the tension going out of my shoulders, and I give him a small smile. “Okay. That’s good. And I’m happy for you.”

He grins, sitting back with a pleased rumble, then points his sandwich crust at me. “But I’ll still put that little prick’s head through the wall if he tries to bully you again.”



After that enlightening lunch, I’m smiling as I take the elevator back to the design floor. Viktor, Eliza tells me, had a family emergency and had to go home early, so she walks me to the conference room where the workshop with the marketing team is just getting underway. Richard is at the front of the room, with Aaron and Simon Spade both seated nearby. There’s a bunch of other faces I don’t recognize, so I quickly slide into a chair and take out the notebook Daniel gave me. I think I can smell his scent clinging to it; or at least, that’s what I tell myself as I force my gaze up to meet Richard’s.

My heart stutters at the sight of him in his element. He’s wearing a teal vest over a plum shirt, the same color as my new notebook, with tailored sand trousers and a matching tie. Next to the conservative navy suits in the room, he looks bold and fresh, and I find myself smiling fondly as our eyes meet.

Azure eyes against tanned cheekbones and a tumble of auburn curls... He’s as pretty as his outfit, but my smile stutters as he rakes his gaze over me and then looks away

Cool. Resigned. *Dismissive.*

The meeting swirls around me while I try to swallow the ashes of rejection.

I don’t know a lot about scent-matched mates, but if the memes and jokes are anything to go by, this is *not* how he’s supposed to respond. Just walking into the same room should have made him weak at the knees. Instead of staring at the whiteboard behind him with the full force of his attention, that devotion should be directed *my* way. He should be drinking me in, eating me up with his eyes, every other person in this building irrelevant next to the fascination of our blossoming bond...

I bite my cheek hard enough to taste blood.

It takes me a moment to realize the focus of the room has swung my way. My nails skitter over the front of my notebook, my voice catching in my throat. “I’m sorry. What?”

Aaron’s eyes bore into mine, clearly annoyed that I’ve drifted off, but it’s Simon Spade who says, “The feedback from the marketing team is that interest in the new Omega Free range is lukewarm. Particularly for the new line of neck scarves.” I nod, licking my lips and he cocks a brow at me. “We were thinking you might have some insights, given you have fresh eyes.”

For a moment I feel the full pressure of two dozen mostly alpha males staring at me. They’re barely even judging me; I can tell from their amused and slightly bored expressions that they’re just waiting for me to wilt or stutter my way through a less than impressive response. But fuck it. This is the first time I’ve been asked a professional question in an environment like this, and if I had twenty-four pairs of handcuffs at my disposal, I’d have enough feedback to hold them here for a week.

“Firstly, the name is misleading.” I lick my lips, but my voice is clear and steady, and it gives me the confidence to continue. “I know the Omega Free range is supposed to portray the essence of a carefree and modern omega, but then your signature piece is a classic neck scarf.” I reach into my tote and pull out an example, since Kayden has always had a thing for me in silk collars. I lay it flat in front of me, the gold palette of the design house mingled with swirls of soft peach, lavender, and baby blue. “There’s nothing wrong with the design or the fabric, but it screams tradition.” I hold it up against the bold palette of my outfit, so they can see the contrast, and then drape it around my neck. “It’s also the classic design of a twenty-four-inch square, best suited for neckerchiefs. This restricts both the knot and the drape.” I demonstrate by rolling it from crease to corner into a tube, and tying it in a simple knot. Then I follow it with a basic bow. “It’s too short for a bandana bib or a loop tie.”

“So, you’re saying it’s a design problem,” Aaron says flatly, earning a couple of smirks from the marketing guys.

“Not just the design,” I correct him, watching their smiles melt away. “In every ad for the product I’ve seen, it’s displayed in a tight knot against the neck. This doesn’t just disguise the design they’ve paid a lot of money for, it also hides their bonding bites.”

A couple of the guys shift restlessly in their seats. “You’re saying omegas don’t like this?” A guy on the marketing side of the table juts his chin at me. “That’s not what our research tells us.”

I take a careful breath, highly aware I’m lecturing a bunch of semi-hostile alphas on designation dynamics. “Traditionally, omegas covered up their bites. If they were venturing outside the pack home, a tightly knotted scarf was often worn to hide them as a sign of respect for their alphas.” There are a few grudging nods. “But these days, omegas like to flaunt them. And I’m pretty sure their alphas enjoy seeing their marks on display...”

“I think we get the idea,” Richard cuts me off. “But I don’t believe the design is the issue. It’s traditional, and has always been a strong seller.”

I bite back the flash of hurt at his cool tone. “I’m just saying that if you look at the top fashion bloggers, a lot of them are wearing their scarves in non-traditional ways.” I hold up my phone so they can see one of my favorite influencers displaying a homemade scarf. “She’s using it as a belt, as bag swag, as a turban, and even as a strapless top.” I flick through a couple of images until I find the one I’m looking for. “And here’s the actress Gloria Raheim wearing an Allure scarf as a dress to the Omega Foundation Awards last month.”

The alpha next to me leans in closer, angling the screen his way. “Damn, she looks hot.”

I’d roll my eyes at him if he wasn’t helping me make my point. I lift my gaze to Richard’s, trying to keep the flutter in my pulse out of my voice. “I think the design is beautiful, but a variety of shapes and sizes displayed in fresher ways might supplement those traditional sales. And also live up to the Omega Free ideal.”

Simon Spade steps in with a smooth smile. “Thank you, Grace. You’ve definitely made a statement.”

I blush, but I refuse to apologize for giving them a detailed response. If they really wanted fresh eyes, then I more than met the brief.

The conversation turns to the Alpha Abroad range and I sit back and listen to the latest customer feedback, jotting notes in my new book. I know I’ll never be asked to work on the alpha-centric line of products, but I’ve always admired them, especially since Kayden once dismissed them as too pretentious for his tastes.

When we break for coffee, the alpha next to me taps my arm. I’m still busy writing notes, and I sit back with a start. “You obviously like the alpha range more than the omega one.” It takes me a moment to realize he’s talking about Daniel’s notebook. “Is that because you’re a beta?”

I do my best to ignore the slight sneer in his voice. “Not at all. I love all the company’s products. But I was specifically asked about the scarves.”

He nods, but I can tell he’s not going to drop it. “But the scarf was stuffed in your bag. You weren’t wearing it.”

“This was a gift,” I tell him, placing my hands almost protectively over the notebook. “That’s why I’m using it.”

Another alpha drops into the empty seat next to me and when I look up, I realize Richard and his managers have drifted to the far end of the room and are deep in conversation. A few of the guys are at the coffee station, picking through the pastries, but a small huddle has formed around me.

“I heard it’s not the only gift you got today.” It takes me a moment to realize why he looks familiar. It’s Mike, the angry alpha from the elevator who was sparring with the redhead. “So, how do you know our CEO?”

I lick my lips, trying to think of a reply that will satisfy the dark curiosity in his eyes. “I’ve never met him. But I’m friends with someone he knows.”

That draws a sneer from most of them. “Right. Guess that explains a few things.”

Another alpha leans towards me. “Yeah, because if you haven’t guessed by now, Richard hates interns.”

That’s a little too cutting for comfort and I can feel my blush burning up to the tips of my ears. I try to push back my chair, but someone is standing right behind it, caging me against the desk. “I bet you have all sorts of ideas for the omega range,” Mike says in a sneering tone. “Is that because you’ve dreamed of being an omega for so long? Now you get to play out your little fantasies?”

I glare at him. “I have no issue with my designation.” I tilt my head, knowing I’m challenging him. “Do *you* have a problem with my designation, Mike?”

He shows me his teeth, but another alpha just gives a long-suffering sigh. “I thought interns were just here to fetch us coffee and rub our feet.”

There’s a teasing note in his voice, and I glance at him. Same cookie-cutter looks, but there’s something a little less hostile in his eyes. “I’m happy to do whatever the department needs me to do,” I say quietly.

“Really?” This is from an alpha who’s sidled up to Mike like he’s his bodyguard. I know the type. Waits until the biggest guy in the room acts out and then echoes him, like a whiny little asshole. “Could have fooled us. A stuck-up beta like you is lucky to even have a foot in the door of our company.”

“I believe she’s more than adequately answered your questions,” a metallic voice says, startling me.

But it’s nothing on the reaction from the alphas around me. They spring back like naughty boys, eyeing the speakerphone in horror. “Fuck,” Mike murmurs. “Is that still on?”

“It’s on,” the voice goes on, cold and slightly threatening. “And I expect to see each of you gentlemen in my office first thing in the morning.”

“Y-yes, sir...” the whiny little asshole stutters.

There's a loud click and I look up. "Who was that?"

But the alphas are already in retreat, and I realize it's after five and the meeting has broken up. Richard has stepped away from his managers and is on his phone, his shoulders taut and his hand on his hip as he listens to whoever is on the other end. His musky scent has a sour edge that makes my stomach churn, and I quickly gather my things. I'm pretty sure he catches sight of me out of the corner of his eye, but then he's screwing them shut so tight, I hope it was just my imagination.



11. GRACE

“That’s not a happy face,” Max says ominously as I step through the office’s revolving door and find him waiting at the bottom of the stairs. He’s wearing jeans and another faded band tee – the Velvet Underground, this time – and he looks good enough to eat. I keep that observation to myself as I almost fall into his arms. But as he doses me in his perfect scent, I can’t stop myself from arching into his kiss.

And he doesn’t let me down. It’s like the eight hours we’ve spent apart have made us both a little feral, and if it wasn’t for the doorman’s disapproving gaze on my back, I’d probably make good on my first instinct: to gobble Max Colt down like the soothing snack he is.

I settle for an extra swipe of my tongue across his lips, shivering with pleasure at the groan vibrating from his mouth to mine. When he pulls back, he makes no effort to disguise the way he adjusts the bulge in his jeans, his gaze scorching as it rakes over me. “I was going to suggest we go out for a celebratory drink, but now I’m thinking we should go straight home.”

A kaleidoscope of images – many of them now my favorite memories - flutter behind my eyes, making my stomach flip. But the thought of tonight’s pack dinner is like a bucket of cold water over my head. Today has been trying on a number of levels, and having to sit through a lavish meal while my scent-mate ignores me makes me physically nauseous.

Procrastination is key, I think with a self-deprecating smirk.

“A drink sounds good,” I murmur, tucking my hand through his arm and pulling him tight. “Where would you like to go?”

Max looks pleased at how readily I put myself in his hands, and as we start down the block, I have to wonder about his past relationships. Not the trash of a pack on the west coast, but the people he dated before them. There's a lot of speculation about male omegas and how they operate in packs. Some stories make them out to be submissive playthings, while a lot of social media portray them as bossy brats who like to make their alpha mates dance to their every whim.

I don't know Max all that well, but I can't see him playing those kinds of games with the Rose Pack. He's too... *authentic* to be anything but himself, and like me, life has knocked him around enough to make him sensitive to other people. In my opinion, the Roses are beyond lucky to be able to court him.

Which quickly circles me back to Richard Rose and the night ahead, both of which I tuck into a murky corner of my mind. First, a drink with Max, where I can think about nothing but how much I've missed him. And how giddy I feel as he wraps an arm around my waist, leaning down to breathe in my scent like he can't get enough of me.

We walk for a while, our steps slow but in sync. Max leads me down another block, then turns into a side street, stopping outside a building with faded burgundy wall tiles and a large, stained-glass window. There are a couple of bright flower boxes near the door, and when Max pulls it open, a wave of old leather, stale cigarettes, and furniture polish greets us. The bar is only half full, and we get a few curious glances as we walk inside, but nothing too intrusive.

I look around as Max leads me across the room to a booth. There's a long timber bar with oak wood paneling, a library corner with leather club chairs, and a fireplace that's big enough to probably heat the entire city block. A screen door separates us from a room with a pool table and a rowdy darts game. It's warm and welcoming, and it reminds me of the sort of pubs you see in English travel vlogs.

"Most bars around here are wall-to-wall alphas," Max murmurs, "but this place isn't really flashy enough for their tastes."

“I like it.” I tell him as we settle into a booth with high carved backs like you’d see on church pews. The table top is worn but clean, and there are hand-stitched cushions to soften the wooden seats. Scattered across the wall above us are framed pictures of country village scenes, lit by traditional decorative sconces. *Wallchieres*, my designer brain informs me.

A young beta waitress with blue hair and an eyebrow piercing appears, and when I comment on how cozy the place is, she gives me a proud smile. “Thanks. It belongs to my pack.” There’s a slight lilt to her voice that I think is Irish. “We’re from all over, but Aiden’s granddad bought this place years ago.” She points to a burly alpha sitting on a stool at the bar. He notices the gesture, but other than a nod in our direction, his gaze doesn’t linger. “We’re not as posh as the other places around here, but the fish and chips are the best in the city.”

Since we have dinner later, we just order drinks and a basket of their famous fries to share. The waitress gives us a friendly smile and I relax a bit, some of the day’s tension bleeding out of me.

Max is clearly tuned into my moods, because he leans across the table, clutching my hands in his. “So how bad was it?”

I bite my lip, thinking back on the crazy day. From the CEO’s surprise flower arrangement, to Daniel rescuing me from Viktor, to the ambush and cold shoulder in the marketing workshop, I feel drained down to my bones. I decide to focus on one of the highlights. “I had lunch with Daniel. HR put it on for all the new starters, but it was nice he took the time.”

Max cocks a silky brow at me. It’s clearly not what he was expecting, but he looks pleased. “I’m glad. He seems really protective of you.”

I shake my head, still unsure of the gruff alpha’s motives. “I think we got off on the wrong foot, and now he’s trying to make amends.” I drop my voice, even though there’s no way

anyone in the next booth can hear us. “The curse of my stepbrother, you know?”

A dark light floods Max’s eyes. “Have you heard from him?”

I dig in my tote, holding up my phone to display the blank screen. “I haven’t turned it back on. But he’ll be looking for me. Kayden isn’t just going to let me walk away.”

Max reaches over and takes the device. “You got a work phone, right?” When I nod, he slides the device into his pocket. “Then he’s got no way to track you anymore.”

I grimace, but don’t argue. Past experience has proven that turning my phone off – or tossing it in a dumpster, which I did when I was a desperate sixteen-year-old - doesn’t stop my stepbrother. I need to contact Jasmine and make sure he’s not harassing her, but I also need a better strategy than just avoidance. It might be a few days before Kayden tracks me down, but it’ll take more than the threat of a lawsuit to stop him from snatching me off the street and locking me back up in his townhouse.

“And what did *you* do all day?” I ask Max as the waitress brings us our drinks. “Did you go see Pop?”

His face softens into love lines. “Yeah. We had afternoon tea together, and he let me pretend I was helping him with the crossword.” He snorts, then rubs at his brow. “He’s worried about us, though. Wants to make sure we’re doing this for the right reasons.”

“Us?” I ask, sipping on my wine. It’s not the best Chardonnay I’ve ever had, but the ambience more than makes up for it. “You mean about your courtship?”

“I mean *our* courtship. We’re a package deal, right?”

My heart flutters at that and when he reaches past his beer to squeeze my hand, I let myself sink into the moment. He threads our fingers together, stroking them, tangling them, in that cute way I’ve seen couples do but never experienced for myself. Like he can’t resist the urge to touch me, even though

we're only a couple of feet apart. I really need to pinch myself, but if this is all a fantasy, I don't want to shatter it just yet.

But I also have to hold on to a shred of sanity, too. This is all happening really fast, and if today showed me anything, it's that we have an uphill battle ahead of us. It's an unpleasant reminder, but there's a reason people call it a whirlwind romance. The way I'm falling for Max, I need to make sure I survive the landing.

"Oh, hey. I was going to show you this." I pull away from his soft touches and dig the bottle of perfume from my tote, holding it up in reverent hands. "It's from Garth. A welcome to the company gift."

Max's scent spikes with excitement. "Oh, wow! It's their new Magnetism perfume. I heard some of the girls at the Face auditions talking about it. Supposedly, it accentuates the bond scent. Unbonded can wear it and it just smells like a delicious perfume, but if a bonded pair wears it, it takes on characteristics of both natural scents."

I stare at the elegant bottle in shock. This sounds a lot more advanced to scent layering, which is the traditional way of developing a fragrance accord. I've experimented a lot with perfume, but I've never been able to impact anyone's biology. "Then you should have it." I push the gift across the table at Max. "My scent is barely noticeable. It would be a waste pairing it with me."

Max gives me an outraged look. "Barely noticeable?" He stretches his legs under the table, hooking them around mine. "Then how come every time the wind blows past you, my head spins? It's like breathing in fresh laundry on a crisp fall morning with the Von Trapp family singing in the background."

I smirk at the exaggerated compliment. "I'm pretty sure that's just transference from *your* skin."

But he doesn't laugh it off. "Omega scents are overpowering. I'll take your breath-of-fresh-air perfume any day."

I nod, accepting the fact that my barely there scent is probably easy on his omega nose. But that doesn't mean it appeals to alphas, or would add much to a scent bond. "Either way, this is a pretty amazing gift," I tell him, sliding the bottle back into my tote.

Max is clearly in agreement about that, his mouth twisting into a sly smile. "Something tells me Garth Rose is going to be worth the wait."

I bite my lip, a little intimidated about meeting the CEO. Any intern would feel the same, but I'll be meeting him in the guise of an *intimate companion* as well. I have no idea how he's feeling about the developments in his pack in his absence. Does he feel manipulated and uncomfortable, like Richard does? Or will he make the best of things, like Daniel is clearly trying to do?

"What about Joshua?" I ask as the waitress delivers our basket of fries. "Is he over his jetlag?"

"Yep." Max laces his fingers behind his head and stretches, his band tee working up his torso until I can see a strip of perfect pale skin. The fries could possibly be the best in the city, but they might as well be cardboard in my mouth as I drool over the vision of Max's sculpted abs. "We went for a swim together in the rooftop pool."

There's no mistaking the wisp of omega arousal in the air and I clench my thighs tight under the table. "And...?"

His cheeks go a delicious pink. "Well, we kissed." He's watching me closely. "I hope that's okay. I wanted to wait until you got home, but..."

I put my wine down and give him a stern look. "Max. You have three months to get to know your alphas. Don't apologize for anything that happens between any of you."

He blows out a breath. "Okay. I just don't want you to feel left out. And remember what Daniel said. This is a pack merger, not just a courtship. The alphas have to win you over, too."

I give him a soft smile, because I love his protective instincts. The omegas Jasmine lives with at the sorority house are competitive to the point of ferocious, and I know that if they were in Max's place, they'd scratch my eyes out before they'd let me in the same room as the Rose Pack. *Which reminds me...* "I need to call Jasmine. Can you give me a minute?"

Max tells me he'll grab another round, so I take my new phone towards the restrooms. There's a little alcove behind another sliding screen door and I step inside, dredging Jasmine's number up from memory. I'm sinking onto the edge of a faded tartan club chair when the phone is snatched out of my hand and icy dread surges through my limbs.

Kayden is glaring down at me, his jaw white and throbbing under his scruff. "You didn't come home, little mouse."

I flinch back against the chair, my heart in my throat. He's wearing all black – his signature color – and my stomach clenches at his familiar scent. It's like iron and blood and the musk of a hungry predator. "I got a job," I blurt out. "I've just finished work."

He tilts his head, those black wolf eyes drifting down and settling on my chest. My heart gives another desperate thump, but then I realize he's staring at my ID badge, which is still clipped to the lapel of my jacket.

"What the fuck?" He snatches it off me, scrubbing a thumb over my picture. "Since when are you a fucking intern for House of Omega?"

"Since t-t-today." I hate the stutter in my voice, but I can never get my brain and mouth in sync when Kayden's this close. "I had the interview on Friday, and they called me over the weekend."

With a sneer of his lip, he pockets the badge, reaching down and grasping my chin in his iron fingers. He forces my head back until my neck spasms and tears burn. Something that looks a lot like murder flickers in his gaze. "You fucking one of those Rose pricks, little mouse?"

“No!” I gulp in a shuddering breath, my jaw throbbing in his grip. I’m not surprised Kayden knows who owns House of Omega; the Roses are exactly the kind of respected, high-flying pack he’s always envied. And I can’t deny the petty part of me that revels in the fact he’ll never reach their level, even if he blackmails the whole damn city. But I keep those thoughts to myself as his grip tightens, his fury swirling around me in a choking mist. “It’s just a job, Kayden,” I murmur, hoping to placate him. “And it’s only for a couple of months.”

He studies me for a long moment, no doubt trying to catch the lie in my scent. Not for the first time in his presence, I’m glad my barely there perfume gives so little away. “And where are you staying?” He’s caging me in with his thighs, and when he leans more heavily against me, I can smell his arousal burning through his dark jeans. “You shacking up with that pretty boy out there? You two looked real cozy eye-fucking each other across the table.”

If I thought my heart was in danger before, it’s close to collapse knowing Kayden has Max in his sights. I try to shake my head, but his fingers dig cruelly into my chin, squeezing so hard I know they’ll leave bruises. “You smell like omega, sweet sister. Either you’re fucking that boy...”

“I’m working at House of Omega!” I burst out, my voice high and frantic. “They’re everywhere, and I’m testing products for them, so what do you expect?”

“*You’re* testing omega products?” He gives me a mocking smirk, but his fingers are relaxing. His other hand even reaches out to tweak my nose. “Still messing around with oils and shit, little mouse? All those hours in your bedroom, trying to make yourself smell like an omega....”

I swallow the denial that wants to burst from my lips. It should be easy, since I’ve heard it so many times before. When my friends at school were presenting around me, he’d sneak into my bedroom at night, crooning that I was faulty goods, that my genetics were second rate, and that I’d never be anything but an afterthought to the alpha heartthrobs pinned on my walls. I’d cried into my pillow as he ground against my

childish curves, whispering in my ear that I was never going to be pretty enough, interesting enough... that I'd never be worthy of anyone's attention but his.

I can't hold back a shudder as he drags his thumb over my lips and pulls it away, studying the lipstick smear on his skin. Instead of wiping it off, he stuffs it in his mouth and sucks it clean. When he pulls it free, it makes an obscene pop, and I have to dig my nails into my palm to keep the grimace off my face.

"I thought you knew by now that you don't need to be an omega to be owned by me." There's a possessive purr in his voice as he presses his wet thumb back against my lips. "You're mine, Gray, and your bland little scent has fuck all to do with it."

The arrogance would take my breath away if I hadn't heard some version of this a hundred times before. I drop my head, exhausted and overwhelmed. I have no idea what I did to earn his fucked-up fixation. But then he's wrapping a hand around my wrist, his fingers playing with his mark under the sleeve. For a moment he looks like he's about to inspect it up close, but he pulls me to my feet instead, his mouth brushing over my temple. It might look like a kiss, but I know what it is – another stamp of ownership. "Go back and grab your bag, little mouse. You're coming home with me."

"Everything all right in here?"

My breath catches as I look past Kayden to see the burly alpha from the bar leaning in the doorway. He's one of the owners, I recall, as my brain goes into overdrive. This is my chance to escape, and I strain towards it like an animal caught in a trap. "There you are! It's good to see you again."

When Kayden looks over his shoulder, his brow furrowed with suspicion, I twist my arm, rotating my wrist towards his thumb and breaking his grip. It's a basic self-defense move, but one I've never used on my stepbrother, and he gives a warning growl as I pull away. But I fix my gaze on the other alpha, letting some of my desperation seep into my eyes. "Our waitress said you own this place," I babble as he steps back,

gesturing for me to pass him. “We don’t want to cause any trouble.”

Based on the rumble coming out of my stepbrother’s chest, I’m lying through my ass. Kayden *lives* for trouble, and I know he won’t think twice about dragging me out of here by my hair. But I use the distraction to duck out of the alcove, shooting the owner an apologetic look as I scuttle back towards the booth.

My heart is pounding so hard, I feel sick. It’s the most openly defiant I’ve been towards Kayden in *years*, and now I’m driven by a single instinct: to grab Max and flee. But as I reach our table, I find a stranger sitting in my seat.

No, not a stranger.

It’s Joshua Rose, the youngest and most carefree of the Rose Pack. My frantic gaze takes in his tanned face, gleaming chestnut hair, and caramel eyes. He’s the kind of boy-next-door handsome that draws every gaze, but right now he’s smiling up at me like he has no idea of the shitstorm on my heels.

I don’t have time to shoot him more than a harried glance, grabbing my tote and tugging on Max’s arm. “Can we go, please? Right now?” His focus snaps past me, his brow furrowing, and I flip my wrist over, so that my sleeve pulls back an inch. “Family crisis.”

Max’s attention drops to the sliver of inflamed skin and he’s on his feet in a flash. “Come on, Josh. We need to make a speedy exit.”

The alpha looks at me in concern, but whatever he reads on my face has him giving a quick nod. “Got it. Let’s move.”

I almost collapse in relief, but they’re now in motion, hustling me to the front of the pub. It’s only blind luck that I pause to peer out the stained-glass window, ducking back before Porter can see me. He’s leaning up against the exterior wall, his arms folded across his thick chest. *Of course* Kayden’s pack dog is waiting, ready to block our escape. “Wait! We have to find another way.”

“Follow me,” a sharp voice says behind us and I turn to find our waitress heading through another door, dirty dishes in hand. We hurry to catch up, nodding gratefully at the couple of kitchen staff who stand back to let us pass. Our escort dumps the plates and jerks her chin towards the back door. “You got a way out once you hit the alley?”

“My driver is waiting,” Joshua tells her, tapping a message on his phone. When he’s done, he grabs a couple of crisp bills from his wallet, but the waitress waves him off.

“No need.” Knowing eyes settle on me. “I’ve been there, and I’m happy to pass it on. Just take care, okay?”

I nod, my throat tight, but Max has pulled me under his arm and I burrow into him, my eyes burning behind lowered lashes. Joshua is a blur in a camel-colored coat as he steps through the door. I take a breath and push back enough to check our path. I owe it to Max to keep my shit together until he’s out of the line of fire.

But the alleyway is empty, the car waiting only a few feet from the door.

“You’re okay,” Max murmurs into my hair as he buckles me in, his lips brushing over my trembling mouth. “And that asshole’s not your family, GW. Just in case we need to clear it up.”



12. JOSHUA

Max is right. Grace Worth smells like fresh linen and spring sunshine. Although, as he wraps his arms around her like he expects the seat belt to fail, I can't miss the sharp edge to their combined perfume. To my alpha nose, it smells faintly of the crackle of ozone before a monster storm. Metallic, with a touch of singed sweetness I associate with pissed-off omega. Maybe it's the adrenaline swirling around us, but it sets my teeth on edge.

My protective instincts don't get much of a workout in our pack, since Daniel's our unofficial enforcer, and Garth is as dominant as they come. But I can't stop myself from reaching past Max and gently squeezing Grace's shoulder. She twitches, like she wasn't expecting the touch, but then she relaxes, even turning her head so her cheek brushes my knuckles. It's a show of trust, maybe even a hint of affection, and the mostly dormant beast inside me sits up and takes notice.

I didn't think I could get more blissed out than the moment I met Max this morning. When I finally pulled myself out of my jetlag fug, he'd been swimming laps in the rooftop pool, and I felt a jolt of pure lust slam into me when our eyes met. It helped that he was dripping wet and wearing a tiny pair of trunks, every line of his perfect, lean body on display. I'd abandoned my coffee in a less than subtle move, stripping down to my boxer briefs to join him in the pool. We'd played around until things heated up, but it never got further than a searing kiss. When he pulled away, Max said he wanted to check in with Grace before things went any further, and I'd felt deflated... but also hopeful.

Because if they're the kind of couple who put each other before a mind-blowing make-out session, then my pack would be lucky to call them ours.

“Is she okay?” I murmur in Max’s ear. The pink shell is peeking at me from a curtain of silky hair, but all thoughts of taking the delicate curve between my teeth are pushed aside as I catch the strained look on his face. There’s a fascinating mix of anger and worry in his eyes, and I can’t resist leaning into him, absorbing his iron-tinged scent. “Can I do anything to help?”

Max gives a barely discernible shake of his head, his arms tightening around Grace. “We’re good. But do you think we can push the pack dinner to another night?”

I think of the phone call I made to Daniel earlier and breathe a silent sigh of relief. I wasn’t looking forward to telling our courting couple that our first official pack dinner was postponed, since Richard insisted he had some urgent business to take care of, and Daniel was busy kicking his stubborn ass. “Not a problem. We can go low-key and get Rory to whip us up some pizzas.”

Max bites his lip as he brushes a hand over Grace’s silky bangs. She’s still burrowed into his chest, her face mostly hidden by the protective arch of his arm, but I watch, mesmerized, as he drops a soft kiss on her forehead. “You want pizza, GW?”

Hearing him refer to her by her initials is so adorable, I can’t keep the smile from my face. “There’s a wood-fired oven on the terrace.” I try to make my voice as tempting as possible. “We can kick back by the pool, stuff our faces, and look at the stars. No pressure.”

“Sounds nice.” Grace’s response is muffled by Max’s shirt, but her jewel-bright eyes suddenly peek up at me. “I’m sorry about the hasty exit, Joshua.”

I want to wave off her apology, but her safety is too important to just brush aside. “Did you run into someone from your old pack?”

Max stiffens beside me, but Grace pushes herself up until she’s resting her head on his shoulder. Her eyes are brimming with a dozen tangled thoughts, but her face is a careful mask. This is clearly someone who spends a lot of time guarding her

emotions. “My stepbrother’s Kayden Sawyer. Until a few days ago, I lived with him and his packmates, Porter Krill and Derek Morgan. But they were never my pack.” I nod my understanding, but her lashes flutter, hiding the world of hurt reflected in her eyes. “Porter was waiting outside, but Kayden came up to me while I was trying to make a phone call. I’ve been avoiding him... so I guess he tracked me down.”

“Where did he touch you?” Max demands, his growl at odds with the way his fingers flutter over her cheeks. “I can smell him on you, Grace.”

She pulls a face, but gives a firm shake of her head. “Nothing bad, I promise. He just likes to think I belong to him.”

Max grinds his teeth, then shoots me a furious look. “We need to do something, Joshua. He can’t just *stalk* her like this.”

“No, he can’t,” I agree, placing a reassuring hand on his knee. But my gaze is on Grace as I say, “Daniel and Garth have discussed the situation, and they’re going to take care of it. But in the meantime, you should probably stay close to the house or office. No solo trips anywhere.” Twin spots of color burn in her cheeks and I give her a sympathetic smile. “It’s annoying, but you get used to it. All our drivers are also trained bodyguards, and there’s security at both buildings, though you’ll rarely see them. I’m afraid it’s just part of being our packmates.”

I don’t add that Daniel has beefed up our security detail at both the office and the tower, and is in the process of upgrading our home surveillance system. Given our public profiles, we’ve always had bodyguards, but expanding our pack means we need to take extra precautions. And when that expansion includes the stepsister of one of the nastiest gangsters in the city, you can bet Daniel’s protective instincts have gone into hyper-drive.

Max nods, but we’re pulling into the parking garage under our building, and we don’t speak again until we’re in the elevator. We stop to let Grace off to change out of her work clothes, but when Max tries to join her, she waves him away.

“Go have a drink and relax with Joshua,” she tells him, trying for a reassuring smile. “I’ll only be a few minutes.”

He leans back against the wall, reluctance in every line of his body as he watches her walk away. When the doors shut and he catches me staring, he shoots me a rueful grin. “I *do* want to have a drink with you. And pizza on the terrace is a great idea. Thanks for suggesting it.”

I step into his space, bracing my hands on either side of him. “And what about a kiss in the elevator? Is that a good idea, too?”

Instead of answering, he grabs the front of my shirt and pulls me against his chest. I’m an inch or two taller, and with him slumped against the wall, I can almost completely cover him with my body. It’s a sensation I’m not used to in our pack, and that newly awakened beast makes a hungry sound that vibrates up my throat. Max grins, his eyes hooded as they study my mouth. “A pre-dinner appetizer, you mean?”

“My mouth’s watering,” I tell him, then reach over to punch the stop button on the control panel. As the elevator jerks to a halt, Max’s eyes go wide. But his pupils dilate all the way when I drop to my knees in front of him. I tilt my head back, gripping his hips, waiting until his startled gaze settles back on my smirking mouth. “And I was thinking more of a pre-dinner drink.”

“Fuck.” He pants as I lower a hand over the outline of his erection. He’s in jeans softened with age instead of design, and as I rub the faded denim, I can see the blooming flare of his head under the fabric. Omega arousal fills the air, his hips tilting towards me, but he’s still blinking down at me in surprise. “You want to blow me? Here?”

“Why not? This is the safest place in the city.” I flick his t-shirt up and nuzzle the silky hair above his waistband. “And I’ve been aching to get my mouth on you since our kiss in the pool.”

He groans, reaching down to grip my hair as I get busy with his zipper. I’m clumsy in my haste, the pinch of pain on my scalp fucking up my natural coordination. But I slow down as

I pull his cock from his boxers, wanting to savor the moment. He really *is* mouth-watering, with a long, pretty shaft and a plump, pink head that strains in my direction. “How do you like it?” I ask, looking up at him through my lashes. “Hard and fast, or slow and teasing?”

“Both. Either way,” he huffs, gripping my hair tighter. But then he blinks, like he’s just remembering where we are. “Hard and fast. Grace is waiting.”

I wait for the flash of annoyance that even now – with me on my knees, and his dick an inch from my mouth – he’s only thinking of his pretty little beta, but instead, a purr rattles from my chest. “Maybe we should wait so she can join in.”

Max narrows his eyes at me, like he’s wondering if it’s a test. “You want that?”

I just raise my brows at him. He said it himself – they’re a package deal – and I can’t think of anything more delicious than inserting myself into their hot-as-hell dynamic. “I want you both; any way you’ll let me.” I grasp the base of his silky shaft, leaning forward to press my lips to the shiny tip. His slick tastes like honeyed sunlight, and every inch of my body clenches in need. “In a perfect world, I’d be kissing her with your cum on my tongue.”

“Fuck,” he growls, digging his nails into my scalp. “Suck me off, Alpha, before your dirty mouth makes me explode.”

I obey him happily, my dick straining against the front of my pants. But this isn’t about me getting off. I want to drink him down – literally - until that iron edge fades from his scent, and he’s a lump of putty in my hands. Besides, as the least dominant alpha in the house, I get plenty of dick, but I don’t always get to edge myself.

His hips thrust as I swirl my tongue, playing with the grooves and veins that line his beautiful shaft. He might look like a marble statue, but his body is radiating enough heat to send a trickle of sweat through the grooves of his six-pack. Slick is also leaking from him, and as I lap up that bead of sweat, my head spins so hard, I’m glad I’m already on my knees. I try to go hard and fast like he asked me to, but I can’t

help savoring him a little. The desperate way he's clutching my hair is just as tantalizing as the smooth glide of his cock against the back of my throat. I swallow, forcing my gag reflex down, and he curves above me, his stomach muscles jumping under my knuckles. "Jesus, Joshua! You're too good at this!" And then a strangled groan later, "I'm gonna come, Alpha!"

I grunt, sucking harder, and he fills my mouth with a powerful jet of his creamy release. The grip on my hair becomes almost painful as he thrashes above me, my hands clamping his thighs as he sends another burst of cum to the back of my throat. I take two more, and a strangled curse that's almost a whine, before he presses a hand to my forehead, easing me back. I resist for a moment, chasing the last of his slick-laden cum. *More, more, more*, my beast chants, but then he gives an adorable giggle-snort, clearly overstimulated by my greedy tongue.

"Fuck me," he says when I sit back on my heels. "You're one thirsty alpha."

I lick my lips, shivering as much as the sight of him wrecked against the wall, as the taste of him on the back of my tongue. "You're going to turn me into an addict."

He smirks and pulls up his jeans, then reaches down to draw me to my feet. I let him pull my heavier weight off the floor, then rest it against his trembling body, his arm hooking around my back. He sighs, the aroma of contented omega swirling around me, and my heart gives a joyous thump. The fact I reduced him to this hazy mess with just a blowjob makes me insanely curious to see what he looks like when I've got him on my knot.

But I push my spiraling lust down, releasing the hard stop so the elevator can take us to the terrace. When the doors open, Grace is standing in front of us in a short silk kaftan and bare feet. "I took the stairs," she says with a smile, her eyes meeting mine before they rake over Max. "But the elevator looks like it was way more fun."

I grin, but Max lurches past me, his hands out like he plans to snatch her off her feet. But she spins faster than a

quarterback, tearing off her kaftan a moment before she plunges into the pool. Max pauses only long enough to strip down to his boxers before he cannonballs in after her.

I shrug out of my coat while they horse around, splashing and laughing as Max tries to get her onto his shoulders, and Grace twists around him like a manic porpoise. I sit back in one of the chairs around the firepit, content just to watch their antics and let my hard-on go down. Not that it does much with the pair of them grabbing each other and snatching kisses with every other breath.

This is why I told my pack we needed an omega. This sweetness, with a strong side of playfulness. I love my alphas with every fiber of my being, but sometimes I need a little honey to go with my oatmeal.

Not that I expected the couple in front of me when I pictured our perfect omega. Knowing Garth's preferences, I always saw a shadowy female with a soft voice and gentle hands. Someone like a Heart of the House, without the employer-employee entanglements.

But then Max's application crossed my desk, and I couldn't resist. I asked Daniel to see if he thought he'd be a possible match, and I only grew more intrigued when I learned about his past. Not just the nightmare on the west coast, but growing up with distant parents, and then going to live with Pop when they finally abandoned him. My childhood was Midwest-conservative, but the other guys have enough scars to appreciate an omega who's also a survivor.

Grace, though, is an enigma. To my shame, I've never dated a beta, not even back in high-school. I *was* the quarterback, but I also worked on my parent's farm, so the few hours I got to date were portioned out between the girls who'd already presented as omega.

I was an entitled dick; no other way to look at it. But Grace is the exact opposite, according to the intel Daniel's been willing to share. He sent us her background report, but I'm pretty sure he's kept a few details to himself. Back in London, I thought he was just keeping his guard up, sounding out the

stranger in our midst, but after talking face-to-face, I think he's protecting her. From us.

Instead of pissing me off, it warms me through to my bones. Daniel has little reason to protect anyone outside of our tight-knit pack, especially if they're embroiled in the kind of gang life he fought so hard to escape. But Grace, clearly, has earned his trust.

I watch them for a moment longer, wondering if they realize how obvious their connection is. They might have only known each other for a few days, but their glances, their touches, and the way they lean into each other, seem as natural and familiar as a decade-long bonded pair. It also stirs a pang of longing in my chest.

I can't help myself. When Rory, our chef, produces a couple of perfectly cooked pizzas from our outdoor oven, I grab a towel and walk over to the edge of the pool, sticking my hand out. Max is closer, but I'm looking at Grace, who's squeezing the water out of her long brown hair. She raises her brows, since it's not exactly a long swim to the stairs, but then bobs over and grabs my hand. I smile into her watchful eyes, then pull her up out of the water, my other hand sliding around her back to take the strain off her arm. Water pours off her and she makes a squeak of protest, but I just wrap her in the towel and pull her against me.

She sinks into my arms, even as her eyes go wide with dismay. "I'm ruining your shirt! Oh my God, and they're herringbone trousers. You can't get them wet."

I want to chuckle at her fashion-conscious concerns, but the beast is rising inside me again. "One kiss and I'll forgive the damage."

She stiffens, and I think I've overplayed my hand, but then she stops squirming, her eyes falling to my lips. "I was going to give you the name of my dry-cleaner, but if you insist..."

I don't try to hide my delight at her teasing, swooping in to claim my compensation.

It starts as a shared grin, both of us laughing at our silly banter. But then I *taste* her, the tip of her tongue grazing mine, and our kiss suddenly deepens. I lick past her lips, exploring the heat of her mouth, and she makes a hungry sound I can feel on my tongue. I cup her cheeks, tilting her head to taste more of her vanilla sweetness. I'm like a kid who just discovered ice cream during a heatwave, a growl climbing my throat as our tongues twine together. I'm vaguely aware of the towel hitting the deck as she grips my ruined shirt, my hands drifting down her spine to settle on the full globes of her ass in her damp swimsuit. She mirrors the action, no longer giving a fuck about my wool pants as we grind together.

"Um," Max's voice says behind me, "not to interrupt the hottest damn floorshow I've ever seen, but your pizza is getting cold."

I pull back slowly, the smile back on my lips as Grace blinks up at me like a baby owl that just fell out of its nest. I'm tempted to dive back in for another kiss, but she's already stepping around me, hands on hips. "Why are you picking the pepperoni off? You're acting like it's pineapple, or something."

Max gives a cackling laugh. "I'm weaning myself off sausage this week." That gets an eyebrow raise from me, but Max just gives me a shit-eating grin and pushes a chair towards me with his foot. "Still hungry, Alpha?"

I smirk at him, taking a seat at the table and scooping up a slice of pizza. Rory has outdone himself, and we all fall into a blissful silence as we munch away. When I burn my tongue on a piece of cheese, I slow down and glance at Grace. "What did you think of Magnetism?"

She's relaxing back in her chair, her knee brushing mine as she tangles her feet under the table with Max's. But she sits up straight at the question, her eyes bright. "Does it really alter scent chemistry?"

"Yep. It's Richard's baby, from concept through to the actual formula, so he can describe it best." My grin grows at

her obvious surprise. “He was a chemist before he got into product development.”

Her lashes flutter on her pink cheeks and I have to wonder if she has a crush on my packmate. Richard isn’t easy to know, but under his aloof exterior, he has a brilliant mind and a heart of pure gold.

But instead of asking more questions about the perfume’s design, Grace puts her slice on her plate and shakes her head. “I can’t believe you’ve kept it a secret. Unless I’ve missed something in the trade news.”

“No, it’s still mostly under wraps. We’re planning to launch it at Friday’s event, then go worldwide with our new marketing partner in Europe. That’s one of the reasons Garth is still in London. Putting the finishing touches on the contract, but also making sure nothing leaks ahead of the launch.”

“We really want to meet him,” Max says with a cheeky glance in my direction. “Is he as hot in person as he looks on the screen?”

I laugh, but Grace reaches across the table to poke him. “Stop it.”

I glance between them, missing the joke, and Grace rolls her eyes. She has another slice of pizza in her hands and she waves it in front of her face like a fan. “He’s just teasing me about the staff induction video. I told him it should come with a NSFW warning.”

I almost choke on my pizza crust, but Max drops forward onto his knees, his gaze flaring hot as he crawls towards Grace. She immediately nudges her chair back from the table, watching him in lip-biting fascination. When he bridges the small distance between them, he leans into the open V of her thighs, a wicked gleam in his eyes. “You thinking naughty thoughts about your CEO, GW?”

We all watch his fingers trail down her silky arms, the fine hairs lifting like static in their wake. “I definitely wouldn’t say no if he sent me to the copier room,” she replies, and from the

way Max's pupils dilate, it's clearly code for something other than collecting office supplies.

"Mm," he murmurs, the sound a throaty growl. "I bet he'd have you in there every day. Then he'd take you up to his office, show you that big desk of his."

She cards her fingers through Max's silky hair, her gaze fixed on his pouty mouth. "Do you think it'd be big enough for both of us?"

Fuck. I adjust my cock in my damp boxers, wishing I had my phone with me right now. If not to video the electric lust sparking between them, then to put Garth on speakerphone so he can hear how riled up he's made our courting couple. And all because of the induction video he grumbled about making in the first place.

"He's going to love you," I tell them, tearing their attention away from each other. They're both flushed and breathing hard, and the urge to reach out and touch them is almost overpowering. Instead, I grab my glass, chugging down the icy water until my canines stop throbbing. "And you'll be good for him. Bring him even further into the pack."

They tilt their heads, a mirror of curiosity, but it's Max who asks, "What do you mean?"

"Well, he's our pack alpha, so we're super close, but there's still an intimacy barrier." I look between them, but there's no dawning understanding. I frown, some of my excitement dimming. "The guys haven't told you about our dynamic?"

The crackling tension between them has faded back to its muted hum, but they still wrap their arms around each other as they study me. "To be honest, it hasn't really come up." Max shrugs, clutching Grace tighter. "And we've kind of been... busy with each other, you know?"

I nod, because their bond seems deeper and more intense than some bonded couples I know. "Well, we have an understanding. We're packmates and best friends, and for the most part, our sexual needs are met by each other. We don't date outside the pack. Except for Garth."

They both stiffen, but it's Grace who gives a tight nod. "Because he's the most dominant, right? He gets a free pass."

I pause, bothered by her easy assumption that Garth demands special treatment. But now is not the time to probe what I assume is a wound from living with the Sawyer Pack. The important thing is they understand how things work in *our* pack – and what it means to their place in it. "No, because alphas don't do it for him. Sexually, I mean. He lends a hand when we ask for it, and he likes to watch us together, but he has a service he uses to meet his physical needs. Discreet, professional, and never the same person twice."

"Omega escorts?" Max asks, rising to his feet. Even if I couldn't sense the anger souring his scent, I can read it plainly on his tight lips. "I have friends who do that. To pay their way through college. It's not... easy work."

"No," I hurry to correct him, since I can just imagine what wealthy, unscrupulous alphas ask of their omega escorts. "Betas only." My gaze flicks to Grace, who's watching us quietly. "He says it's to avoid emotional entanglements."

"Because betas are harder to bond with," she says, her face an impassive mask. "No chance of ending up with an unwanted mate."

I pause again, feeling like I've wandered out into a minefield. "I don't want to put words in Garth's mouth," I say carefully, "but it's more of a transaction to him than anything. He gets everything else from the pack, and he only uses them every couple of weeks."

They're both silent, their gazes locked as they absorb my words. All hint of their playful flirting is gone, and I shiver in my damp clothes.

Shit. Maybe this wasn't the best time to talk about pack dynamics, after all. But I don't want to get any deeper into this relationship without being transparent about how we work. Plus, I was kind of hoping it would clarify how important the addition of an omega and a beta is to our pack. Of course, it would be easier if my other mates were here as well, instead of hiding at the office, or whatever the hell it is they're doing.

“And he’s not using the service anymore,” I hurry to add when the silence thickens. “As soon as you signed the contract, he terminated his arrangement with them.”

“He better fucking have,” Max growls, and Grace reaches out to grab his fingers. They’re digging into his hips tight enough to bruise, but she tugs his hand towards her mouth, kissing his knuckles, and he relaxes at the soothing gesture. “I’m glad you told us,” he tells me with a huff, “but there can’t be any sharing outside the pack. That’s a hard no for us.”

I nod, feeling my own beast rise to the surface. The thought of these two messing around with another alpha is enough to make my hackles rise. And I didn’t even know I *had* hackles. “We all really want this to work.”

Doubt flickers over Grace’s expressive face, raising another red flag in my mind, but Max just grunts. “Good,” he says abruptly, pulling her to her feet and nuzzling her forehead. “As long as we’re clear on how important this is to us.”

Grace melts into his side, and I get a jolt again. Not just envy, but longing. They move so seamlessly together, like two halves slotting back into a perfect whole.

Biology says it shouldn’t work that way. Alphas and omegas are nature’s ideal coupling, with betas there to round out the pack. Omegas are the prize; the soft and tempting center of the group dynamic. Alphas are built to take, to own, to push their way into the less-dominant designations like an invading force...

But I don’t feel any of that instinct when I look at Grace and Max. Instead, I want them to *invite* me in. To expand their tight little pairing until there’s enough room for me, too.

And maybe Grace reads some of that longing on my face, because she extends a hand in my direction. “Nightcap?”



13. MAX

By unspoken agreement, we head downstairs together to our suite. I'm not exactly sure why Grace asked Joshua to join us for a drink, but I trust her instincts more than my own. And after his revelations about his pack's dynamics, I need her calming scent to flush the sour taste out of my mouth. My logical side knows it's a good thing he told us about Garth, but I'm still pissed. Omegas are just as territorial as alphas, and the thought of the most dominant Rose using an escort service makes my stomach churn, and my molars ache. The saving grace, if I can call it that and not wince, is that Garth's transactions were with betas, not omegas. Of course, that just makes me want to rage out at the insult to Grace, instead.

Fuck me. Why does pack life have to be so complicated?

It's something I ponder as I stride into our suite and straight over to the sideboard that also serves as a bar. There's a mini fridge, where I know a bottle of expensive champagne is chilling, but I'm not in the mood for bubbles. Instead, I grab the decanter of whiskey and three glasses from a silver tray and stomp over to the table next to the balcony doors. It gets a lovely puddle of sunlight in the morning, but I'm not feeling very cheerful right now. Instead, I pour us each a drink, then flop into a chair, pulling Grace down onto my lap. I know it's not cool to keep manhandling her like this, but I can't seem to stop myself. I *need* her body pressed up tight to mine, her clean scent invading my every sense. Anything else makes me feel like I'm clawing at the edge of a cliff.

"I don't want separate dates," I spit out, my chin resting on Grace's shoulder. I hook a finger around one of her damp curls, and rub the silky strand across my pouting lips. "We're together, so we should be treated that way. Not that the other

guys seem all that eager to take *either* of us out,” I add in a stinging undertone.

Joshua has settled into a chair at the table, but he pauses with his glass halfway to his lips. The look that passes over his boy-next-door face is a mixture of frustration and apology. “I’m sorry about that. We all want this, but work’s really busy right now...”

“Then joint dates will make things easier.” I interrupt him, draining my glass. I’m in the mood to slam back another drink, but I don’t reach for the decanter. I’m a lightweight with booze, and the two beers I had at the pub are still snaking through my veins. “Half as many nights you need to drag yourself out of the office, right?”

Joshua blinks his thick lashes at the bitchy note in my voice. No doubt I’m a caricature of the petulant omega right now, but I can’t find it in myself to tone it down. I’m *pissed*. And feeling like this whole courting thing could be a massive mistake.

Because I’ve been here before. I’ve been seduced by the glitter and gloss of a pack, only to be used in the worst possible way. I wasn’t kidding when I told Grace I don’t trust my instincts anymore. But my Pop always says that action speaks louder than words. And right now, the Rose Pack is a long way from getting their Italian leather boots under my bed.

As I nudge the neckline of Grace’s cover-up aside to run my lips over her shoulder, I wonder if maybe I’m just better suited as a couple. The last few days with her have been perfection, and I haven’t given an alpha knot or a bonding bite more than a passing thought. It’s hard not to envy her biology, where attraction is based solely on the person. If I’m honest, I’m sick of pheromones rewiring my brain, tricking me into thinking I can’t survive without an alpha. Not to mention how they make me leak slick like an ice cube on a hot plate...

“So, does this count as my first date with you both?”

My head snaps up at Joshua’s question, my gaze narrowing on his dancing brown eyes. This is the charming Rose, I remind myself. With the quarterback shoulders and caramel

scent, like you're living in an Abercrombie ad. But I have to wonder if that's just the face he shows the world. He's a marketing guru, after all, and beneath the easy dimples and the effortless charm, the guy is still one of the most powerful alphas in the city.

"If it is, it's nearly over," I tell him, rubbing my chin against Grace's shoulder. "We've had pizza, a swim, and a nightcap, so you should probably think about heading off."

Grace stiffens on my lap, but I just clutch her tighter. Yes, I'm being a bratty bitch right now, but if this is the Rose Pack's definition of courting, they need to drastically step up their game.

So why does my heart give a sad little squeeze when Joshua drains his drink and gets to his feet? There's a curve to his shoulders that tells me it's not a happy retreat, his gaze downcast as he heads to the door. But instead of feeling victorious, I have to bite the inside of my cheek to stop from calling him back.

I'm not *trying* to pick a fight with him, but damn it, anyone can see this courtship is heading in the wrong direction. I was blown away when Richard Rose approached me after the photo shoot, and not just because he seemed like the answer to all my financial woes. I'd been flattered, and maybe even a little smug after the nightmare on the west coast. One of the hottest, most sought-after packs in the country wanted *me*, and their generous contract terms proved it... So why the hell does it now feel like nothing more than empty words on a piece of paper?

My jaw tightens, anger and hurt feelings spiraling inside me. I'm actually picturing myself calling it quits when Grace suddenly climbs off my lap. She smooths down her silky robe, running her fingers through her tangled curls, but her gaze is glued to Joshua's retreating back. "If this is a date, shouldn't we end it with a goodnight kiss?"

I blink in surprise, but it's nothing on Joshua's reaction. He freezes a step from the door, then swings back with his mouth hanging open. "Really?"

Grace shrugs a shoulder, her cover-up sliding down until she hitches it back. “Well, if the one on the terrace is anything to go by, I’d be missing out if I didn’t ask.”

A smile like a Fijian sunrise blooms on the alpha’s face, making his whole golden aura spark to life. “I’d like that a lot,” he says, his voice husky as he takes an eager step towards her. I don’t blame him; Grace looks like a debauched angel with her damp hair and bare feet, the whiskey dabbling spots of color in her pale cheeks. And when he takes another step, still hesitant, she meets him halfway. Her hand comes to rest on his forearm, and when I catch the edge of her profile, it’s that same wide-eyed look she gave him after their kiss on the pool deck. “Thanks for tonight, Joshua. It was exactly what I was in the mood for.”

That makes me feel like an ungrateful asshole, but I keep my grumbles to myself as she stands on tiptoes and tilts her face up to his. Joshua has a way of making himself look less physically imposing than he really is, but I get a flashback to the elevator as he leans down over her. The reality is he’s all alpha under those fancy woolen pants, and when his hand comes down on her waist, pulling her towards him, goosebumps break out all over my body.

I open my mouth to protest, but Grace melts against his chest, her lips parting in sublime invitation. I watch them kiss – just a subtle sweep of mingled breath – and those goosebumps pebbling my skin turn into a prickly, heated rash. Because her tongue has flicked out to taste him, a needy little moan catching in her throat as he grinds their mouths together.

Fuck me. As their kiss deepens, their bodies sway together, Grace clutching at his arms while Joshua’s hand slides down to cup her ass. It seems to be his signature move, although I feel less waspish than I did a minute ago. His muscular thigh is wedged between her legs, pulling her cover-up taut as they cling to each other. It gives me a perfect view of her sweet shape under the thin cotton and my cock goes rigid, the scent of my own slick filling my nose.

“Max?” It takes me a moment to realize they’ve stopped kissing. But they haven’t moved apart yet, Grace’s back to

Joshua's chest, his arm draped across her middle. I take in the corded length of muscle and golden skin, but I only have eyes for Grace. Because if she looked like a fallen angel before the kiss, she looks like lust incarnate as she beckons me towards them. "Why don't you come and kiss our alpha goodnight?"

I look at her sharply, because there's no way calling him *ours* was a slip of the tongue.

"You want me to kiss him?" I ask her, even though her blown pupils are staring hungrily into mine. I push off my chair and stroll over to them, never taking my attention off her flushed face. I can see her chest lifting, her body inching towards mine, and I don't hide the satisfaction in my smile. "I think I'd prefer to kiss *you*, GW."

"Can't you kiss us both?" Joshua asks with a cocky twist of his mouth that sends fire dancing through my veins. Grace must have *gnawed* on him to get his lips so red and puffy. "Isn't that what you said? We might as well double up and save time?"

There's more than a hint of challenge in his gaze and I immediately think of the elevator, and the way he fell to his knees in front of me. I couldn't exactly return the favor since we were pressed for time, but I find myself warming to the idea again.

But instead of acting on it, I reach out and run the tip of my finger over Grace's bottom lip. The way she shudders goes straight to my cock – and doesn't hurt my ego one bit. "I want to see him give you a real kiss, GW. On his knees." I tilt my chin and drill Joshua with a hard look. "You want us? Then prove to me you're worthy of her."

Grace makes a startled sound, but Joshua's grin is blinding. He drops to his knees with all the elegance of a powerful alpha, and when Grace twists to face him, his hands come up to grip the edges of her cover-up. I take up position behind her, my mouth settling on the thrumming pulse in the side of her neck. There's no denying she's turned on, her subtle scent taking on a spicy edge that makes me groan low in my throat.

Joshua's gaze flicks my way, but there's no challenge there now, just excitement and more than a touch of longing. I give him a short nod and he focuses back on Grace, his hands gently gripping her thighs. "Can I taste you, sweetheart?"

I'm close enough to feel the shudder work its way through her. "Please."

I smile against her neck, reaching down to hitch the cover-up to waist level. She's still in her bikini, the cotton damp from both her swim and her rising arousal. As Joshua leans forward to press a kiss against her heated V, I hook my finger under the elastic, working it between her folds. She gasps, her heart hammering against my chest, and I swirl it in her juices before I pull it back out. "Consider this an olive branch, Alpha."

Joshua's eyes flick to my face, but then he's dipping his head and sucking my finger between those puffy lips. The sound that comes out of him makes Grace whimper, which I guess is good enough for me.

I start to work her bikini bottoms down her thighs and Joshua is only too happy to help, scooping them up and stuffing them in his pant's pocket. I smirk, but he's now rising up to press a kiss to Grace's belly, one big palm cupping her mound. "Do you want to lie down, sweetheart, or can you put a leg over my shoulder?"

My cock twitches hard at the growl in his question, and Grace practically melts in my arms. She twists to look up at me, and I drop a kiss on her parted lips. "I'll hold you, GW. Why don't you keep that alpha on his knees a little longer?"

There's no mistaking the challenge in my voice, but Joshua just grasps her ankle and lifts it over his arm. He studies her swollen folds with ravenous eyes, but when he leans forward, he laps gently at her seam. He doesn't go any further for a while, sucking her dampness off her curls and sliding his tongue over every inch of her flesh. Grace's pants eventually become moans, her hips rocking forward, and a hand descending to clutch his curls. He licks further into her heat, lifting her ankle to his shoulder and tilting her pelvis back

against mine. He flicks a knowing glance at me, teasing her channel until she's grinding back against my hard-on. When he inserts a finger into her, sucking on her clit in a way that has her writhing, the last thread of my animosity unravels. This is a *good* alpha, even if his packmates still have a lot to prove.

My cock is now drilling a hole in my damp boxers and I reach down to grip his curls. "Hold up," I murmur, shucking my briefs down my thighs. "I want to sit down."

Grace's ankle slips from his shoulder and we shuffle backwards until I'm perched on the edge of our bed. Instead of settling her on my knees, I grab my dick and hold it straight, rubbing the throbbing head against her wet lips. She doesn't hesitate, gripping Joshua's shoulder as she sinks on to my length. We both groan and I lean back on my arms, just basking in the feel of her hot, tight warmth.

But this isn't about me getting off – or, that's just a side benefit right now – and I lean forward, wrapping my arms around her and peeling her folds open. Joshua is still on his knees, his cock almost punching out of his trousers as he watches us. But he doesn't wait for an invitation, diving back between her thighs and latching back on her clit. It doesn't take more than a few greedy sucks and Grace is crying out, her head thrown back as she comes. Her velvet walls pulse against me, but as soon as she's done, Joshua is rising up, his hands on her hips as he lifts and grinds her on me.

Grace is putty in his hands, letting him use her tender channel to milk my dick. I'm so far gone I'm panting into the back of her neck, but it doesn't stop me from leaning forward to share in their sloppy kiss. Grace's head is turned, so I only get the edge of her lips, but Joshua feeds us both his tongue, and I shiver as I suck on it. It's Grace's flavor, with an alpha muskiness that goes straight to my hindbrain. And then Joshua pulls back and gives me a filthy wink. "Guess it must be a perfect world, since I'm kissing you with her cum on my tongue."

And even though this isn't about me, I go off like a rocket, pumping so violently into Grace, Joshua has to wrap his arms

around us to hold us together.



I wake up in a tangle of limbs, my body soft and heavy under the covers. Grace is sprawled across me, one hand cupping my ribs and her hair a silky tangle on my chest. Pre-dawn light is just teasing the edge of the drapes, but when I glance at the far side of the bed, there's nothing but a dent in Joshua's pillow.

We all collapsed in a sweaty pile last night, the whiskey and mind-blowing orgasm sucking all resistance out of me. Grace tried to return the favor once Joshua got down to his briefs, but he just climbed in between us, curling his arms around us like we were a matching pair of cuddle pillows. I was too tired to complain, dropping an arm across the alpha's waist so I could clutch Grace's hip.

But now I frown, my sleepy contentment dissolving like mist. It's too early for Joshua to be getting ready for work, so where the hell has he gone? If he's slunk off to his own bed, I'll hunt him down and kick his ass. After what we shared last night, he needs to be right here when Grace wakes, still wearing her juices like a fine cologne. Anything else is just fucking bad manners.

Sliding out from under Grace is a painful process, her fingers clutching at my arm before they curl up beside her cheek. I can't resist kissing her as I roll off the bed, checking to make sure her toes are under the covers before I go looking for my boxers. They must be tangled up in the bedding, so I grab Grace's cover-up instead. It's too short, too tight, and makes my morning wood stand out like a banister post, but who cares? I just plan on dragging Joshua back to my bed, so if I need to flash a bit of dick, all the better.

But when I make it to the hallway, I hear the low rumble of voices and I frown. It's coming from three doors away, which I'm pretty sure is Daniel's room. Fine. If Joshua blew off our early-morning cuddle for his packmate, then I can confront them together: Joshua for slinking out like a seedy one-night-

stand; and Daniel for never making it into our bed in the first place.

But when I reach the doorway, my righteous anger is flushed away by pure, sizzling lust. Because Daniel is flat on his back in the middle of the bed, Joshua's hands clutching his packmate's thick thighs as he rides him. The stretch puts Joshua's tightly muscled chest on perfect display, while the angle means I can see *everything* as he slams himself onto Daniel's cock.

And by *slams*, I mean rams that thick length inside his tight ass like it's a goddamn punishment. My own hole gives a needy pulse as I watch, too enthralled to do the right thing and walk away. I should. I *know* I should back off and give them some privacy, but my hand is around my straining dick before I can stop myself. Slick is going everywhere, but the sound of my wet fingers is drowned out by the grunts and gasps coming from the bed. They're speeding up, their hips thrusting and their hands pinching and groping, the scent of alpha arousal so thick it makes my throat burn.

But right as my other hand wraps around the door frame, ready to step into the room and throw myself into the mix, Joshua goes rigid and gives a strangled cry. He starts shooting ropes of cum all over Daniel's chest, the other alpha rearing up and following him over the edge with a ravaging kiss. Even as my own orgasm starts burning up my spine, I'm transfixed by the way they wring the pleasure out of each other, hands grabbing and thighs flexing as they grind their mouths together.

When they finally collapse in a sweaty heap, I force my grip down to the base of my cock, holding my release back with a silent curse. As much as I want to come, I need to confront them first.

But before I can push my way into the room, Daniel gives a lusty sigh. "Feeling better, sweetheart?"

The big alpha is still flat on his back, Joshua draped across his cum-streaked chest, and I'm stuck by how cozy they look. Daniel is playing with Joshua's hair, while he, in turn, runs his

fingers back and forth over his packmate's jaw. It's not like I haven't seen alphas getting intimate before, but the easy affection between them makes me curious... and tugs at my greedy little omega heart.

"Yes... and no." Joshua gives an aggrieved sigh that has no place in a bedroom drenched in alpha cum. Rolling onto his side, his arm drops over his eyes, while his other hand gropes for Daniel's fingers. He twines them together and gives them an almost aggressive tug. "What the fuck are we going to do about Richard, Dan?"

I freeze, since it's a question I very much want to hear the answer to.

"I have no fucking clue," Daniel replies with the kind of frustrated growl that settles deep into my loins. Even in my current mood, irritated alpha looks damn good on him. "I tried everything to get him to talk to me, but he was completely shut down. Said there was no problem, other than the fact he has an intern he doesn't want, and a team of pissed-off designers who think we're playing favorites."

"Favorites!" Joshua spits, sitting up and tugging on his sweat-dampened hair. "We should fire their asses for talking to Grace like that in our fucking building!"

I stiffen, my hand falling from my dick as the blood rushes to my head. What the hell are they talking about?

"You won't get any arguments from me," Daniel says, running a soothing hand over Joshua's thigh. "But Richard's taking the blind, deaf, and dumb approach. He thinks he can just put Grace on paperwork, and keep his team intact while they all wait her out."

"You mean until she quits, or her contract runs out." Joshua makes a disgusted sound and starts rooting under the covers for his underwear. "Well, I've already told Mike and Trey to find another job. I'll deal with HR today, but after that bullshit they pulled, they're not stepping foot back in my department. And if they ask for a reference, I'll tell every shop on the block they're a pair of beta-hating bullies."

I feel a flush of satisfaction at the way he's defending Grace, but there's still the issue of *why* she needs defending in the first place. My blood is now boiling for an entirely different reason, and I shove the door open, storming inside. "What the hell's going on?"

They both stare at me wide-eyed, although neither makes a move to cover their well-used dicks as I glare down at them.

"You mean...?" Daniel waves a hand between their sweat-streaked bodies, while Joshua bites his lip and looks like a puppy waiting to get his nose smacked.

I roll my eyes at them. "No, I caught the grand finale from the hallway, so you don't need to explain the hot-as-fuck sex." They both grin and I plant my hands on my hips, my foot tapping in irritation. "But I *do* want to know what happened to Grace at work yesterday. Who insulted her, and what did those jackasses say?"

They exchange a grim look and Daniel waves me to the edge of the bed. When I ignore him, he sighs and leans back on his hands, stretching his neck until I can hear the audible crack. "It's hazing, I suppose. Some of the guys don't like working with a beta, and when they heard about Garth sending a welcome basket to an intern..."

"They got their tiny dicks tangled into pissy knots," I finish for him. When they both nod, I approach the bed, making no effort to cover myself with Grace's robe. In fact, I let the silky material slide over my heated body, knowing full well they can see the sheen of slick coating my cock and thighs. It's like tossing a match on the cum-soaked sheets, and I watch their muscles ripple as they fight the urge to pull me down between them.

Instead, I press a careful knee on the end of the bed, trailing my fingers over my plumping cock. I might be pissed about what happened to Grace, but there's no escaping the pheromone fug they're pumping into the air. And I'm not above using what I have to drive a point home. "I thought you were the kind of pack who takes care of their own," I murmur, looking at them from under my lashes.

Matching expressions of dismay wipe the lust from their faces. “We are!” Daniel growls. “No one fucking messes with our mates.”

It’s Joshua’s turn to put a soothing hand on the other alpha. “We won’t let anyone hurt you or Grace,” he tells me, his voice ringing with sincerity. “You’re safe here. I promise.”

I snort and arch a disbelieving brow at the pair of them. “But you just said she got bullied at work. In *your* building. By *your* employees. And her boss – not to mention her courting alpha – refuses to do anything about it.”

Their faces fall at that, but I tug the robe closed over my straining cock and give a dismissive sniff. “I thought if you messed with the Rose Pack, you got a thorn up the ass. But maybe you should change your name to the Pansy Pack.”

Daniel’s growl is now full of warning, but I just flick the edge of Grace’s robe at them. “Whatever the hell’s going on, you boys better start acting like courting alphas, or Grace and I are gone.”



14. GRACE

The next day starts a whole lot better than the one before. Daniel brings us a breakfast tray in bed, and even though Max and Joshua have both clearly been up for some time, they're tucked under the covers when I blink myself awake. Their bodies are warm and sweet-smelling, and I really have to concentrate on the scrambled eggs Daniel sets in front of me. I keep imagining the pair of them sneaking off to shower while I was asleep, and I can't stop the smile tugging at my lips. It seems my brilliant plan to get us all one step closer to an intimate pack is working. And I can't say I mind the way Daniel's eyes rake over my bare shoulders as I nibble on my breakfast.

I know I should be a well-sated beta after our steamy version of a goodnight kiss, but there's still a hungry little throb between my legs. I blame it on the fact that watching Max melt into a satisfied puddle turns me on in every way. Biology says that betas can't get addicted to omegas the way alphas can, but when it comes to Max, I want more. More smiles, more kisses, and more mutual orgasms that scramble my brain and send my soul soaring. And from the way Max has been acting, his skin almost permanently touching mine, I have to believe it goes both ways. It might not be a bond in the usual sense of the word, but it feels just as good to my hungry little heart.

Today's assignment: channel the tension prickling between the four of us into something more productive for a newly-forming pack. Another sheet-soaking orgasm, anyone?

But first, I need to get into the office and sort out whatever is going on with Richard. It seems getting loved up by two enthusiastic men has cured me of my hurt feelings, and I can think a little more clearly about our situation. If Richard is

pissed because I've wrangled my way into his home and business, then I'll apologize. And if we really can't live and work together, I'm prepared to compromise. Maybe I could take up Daniel's offer to intern in his department, or try a working from home arrangement, so there's less friction with the design team. The scent-mate rejection still stings, but I can accept that no one likes to feel they're being taken advantage of, especially when it's by a prospective packmate.

After breakfast, I dress in an outfit inspired by the teal vest and plum shirt Richard wore yesterday. My pencil skirt is a tartan print in similar shades, and I tie a House of Omega scarf around my high ponytail. I add my tangerine heels to the ensemble and decide I look both classic and chic. After all, that's the direction I'm hoping House of Omega is headed; a traditional company of unparalleled elegance, that also recognizes their customer's individual flair... Even if she's a beta intern.

I'm in high spirits as we take the elevator to the parking garage under their building. Max has decided to ride to the office with us, and Daniel and Joshua are discussing different places we can all catch up for lunch. While they debate the pros and cons of the local restaurants, I thread my fingers through Max's and smile at our reflection in the mirrored doors. He's wearing a faded denim shirt over black jeans; the perfect medium between Joshua's stylish gray suit and Daniel's edgy leather jacket.

"You look happy," he murmurs in my ear.

"I am," I reply, even though I'm slightly nervous about catching up with Richard. "I've decided to face my challenges head on."

A slight frown touches his brow. "Any challenge in particular?"

As we climb into the back of the car, I bite my lip, a little ashamed that I haven't talked to Max about the scent-match issue yet. But with Kayden lurking in the background, I haven't wanted to stir up additional drama. Max and I are just getting to know each other, and those hurt feelings I've been

carting around aren't exactly easy to share. No one wants to admit that a guy they're biologically fated to be with has rejected them... It's the definition of ripping off Max's rose-colored glasses and showing him exactly how little Richard thinks I'm worth. But I make a commitment to talk to him about it once I've hashed it out with my prickly boss.

"Oh, you know," I say lightly, "getting to grips with a new job. It's not all copier room shenanigans, unfortunately."

Max squeezes my hand tighter, but my thoughts have strayed to Viktor. The last thing I want to do is kiss and make up with him – as far as I'm concerned, he's a bully and an elitist, and House of Omega made a mistake hiring him – but I'm also determined to focus on the positives. Like soaking up as much as I can about luxury design, while also finding a way to add some value to the company.

I'm a little surprised when all three of the guys get out of the car at the other end. "Why do I feel like I'm under escort?" I ask as Daniel steers us into the executive elevator and swipes his ID badge. "Don't you legal types usually frog-march people *out* of the building?"

A forced smile twists his lips. "You still holding our first meeting against me?"

I dig a gentle elbow into his ribs. "You mean the one where I thought you have knuckledusters in your desk drawer?"

He looks aghast. "Jesus. I guess I really need to work on my first impressions."

I smirk at him. "Does it help that I thought you were a really hot asshole?"

Joshua gives an amused snort, breaking us out of our little banter bubble. "He really is. But today, *I'm* your escort." He links his arm through mine. "I was hoping you'd give me some more insights into the feedback on the Omega Free range."

I feel my cheeks grow warm, not just at the thought of spending some time with Joshua, but at the reminder he was on the speakerphone during yesterday's meeting. He didn't

just hear my critique of their classic scarf, he also heard how the other alphas grilled me about my connection to his pack.

“I’d love that,” I tell him truthfully, “but I need to swing past my desk first.”

I don’t miss the look that passes between the two alphas, but Max just squeezes my hand. “Sounds good, GW. Maybe you can show me that induction video you’re such a fan of.”

Joshua makes a choking sound, but I just grin at Max. “We should probably get a copy we can watch at home. You know, just in case my panties go up in flames, and I have to spend the rest of the day going commando.”

It’s a silly remark, meant to break some of the lingering tension between the guys – and definitely not something I’d say outside the privacy of the executive elevator – but Max is the only one smiling. The alphas exchange another pointed look and then they’re swinging my way, their larger frames crowding over me as I’m jostled back against the wall.

Daniel’s hand comes up to grip my ponytail, his head dipping down to sniff either my hair or the House of Omega scarf I have tied around it. “What the hell is this video she’s talking about?”

I open my mouth, but nothing comes out, because Joshua’s hand is suddenly gripping my hip, his head angled towards my neck. I lift my eyes to find Max smirking at the slightly panicked look on my face. “It’s part of the new starter induction.”

“It’s Garth,” Joshua cuts in, his nose brushing my cheek. I’m pretty sure he’s breathing me in just as intently as the alpha on my other side, and for a moment I wobble on my heels. “It’s the welcome speech he filmed up in his office.”

“Oh, yeah,” Daniel says in a heated rumble. “Pinstripes and suspenders?”

I look at him in surprise, since he doesn’t exactly strike me as a fashion follower. But he just tugs on my ponytail and gives me a knowing look. “Hot as fuck, right? Just wait until he puts you over his knee for the first time. There’s nothing

like getting spanked by the CEO when he's in a three-piece suit."

"What?" I squeak. "I wasn't asking for that!"

The alphas both laugh, the kind of deep, dirty chuckle that sets my pulse beating between my thighs. "You won't be asking, sweetheart," Daniel says with another tug on my hair. "You'll be *begging*. And we'll all be watching him give you exactly what you need."

I shiver, caught between the swirl of alpha arousal flooding my senses and the feverish images flicking through my head. Forget my panties going up in flames; I'm in more danger of them disintegrating into a sodden wreck.

But before I can push the guys away – or wrap myself in them like an alpha-scented blanket - Max steps in and presses a soft kiss to my trembling lips. "Sorry, GW," he murmurs when he pulls back, his fingers brushing over my burning cheeks. "Too much?"

"Um..." The breathy whisper has his gaze dropping to my lips. "Maybe right now. But we could... pick this up again later?"

His smirk is as dirty as it gets. "There's always the elevator at home..."

He leaves the suggestion hanging, and given what he and Joshua got up to in there last night, I'm not surprised when the alpha leans down and snares his lips. I watch them kiss for a moment, tongues sliding together hungrily, before Daniel puts a finger under my chin and tilts my head back. His scent – that alluring mix of musk and leather – fills my nose, but I'm drowning in the intensity of his violet eyes. "Is a kiss too much to ask?"

I shake my head, even though the other guys have stopped and are watching us. "It can be for good luck," I tell him. "For my second first day."

"You don't need luck," he mutters, but if he was planning a pep talk, it's lost in the moment his lips brush against mine. For some reason I expected his kiss to crash over me,

scorching its way down to my soul, but instead it's feather-light. I can feel his scruff, thicker and coarser than Joshua's, but his lips are almost as pillowy as Max's. He brushes them back and forth, more a caress than a claiming, and my head spins so hard I have to grab his arm. My whole mouth is tingling when we break apart, and our tongues didn't even touch.

"That was really... romantic," Max says, sounding impressed.

"He has his moments," Joshua smirks, but there's no missing the fond way he's looking at the other alpha. "Doesn't mean his tongue ring isn't pretty awesome, too."

"Tongue ring...?" I ask faintly, but the elevator is opening on my floor and Daniel puts his hand on the small of my back. "Lead the way, Grace."

I stumble a bit. "You're coming?"

"I just want to see where they've got you sitting," he says, Max falling into step on my other side. "You better have a good view."

I glance back at Joshua, who 's still in the elevator, and I remember this is his first day back in the office after his London trip. He probably has an insanely busy day ahead of him, and I should be grateful we've even had this much time together. "I have to pop over to HR," he tells me, "but Dan will take good care of you, and I'll see you at lunch."

I just offer a numb nod, because I don't want any of them to think I can't do this on my own. Still, it's kind of nice to have my escorts with me as we cross the floor. The bubbles of conversation die around us as my colleagues stop and stare, and my heart starts to race as Simon Spade steps out of his office and heads our way. I'm almost at my desk by the time he intercepts us. He looks curiously at Max, but his gaze rests uneasily on Daniel's face. When I slant a glance up at him, I understand why. His violet gaze looks like it could sever a limb, and not in a surgical way.

“Daniel.” Simon extends a hand, a pulse beating in his jaw. “Good to see you on this floor.”

“Is it?” Daniel looks around the open plan office, heads ducking behind desks all over the place. “Most people assume a visit from me means they’ve fucked up in some catastrophic way.”

I blink at the growl behind his harsh language, but Max just gives a satisfied little hum. “We’re here to see where you’ve put Grace,” he tells Simon. “Daniel’s hoping she’s got a nice view.”

“Ah. Well, it’s a hot desk situation, given our policy on interns...”

“It’s right here,” I interrupt my boss, which isn’t something I’d normally do, but I’m more than ready for the interrogation to end. I lead them over to my desk, Daniel’s gaze softening a bit when he sees the huge flower arrangement from Garth. “I like having my back to the wall,” I tell him quietly. “Please don’t make a fuss.”

He just grunts and looks at Simon. “What do you have her working on?”

“Ah,” Simon says again, this time a faint blush touching his ruddy cheeks. “Richard wants her to go over the scent catalog.” His dark eyes swing my way. “You said on your CV that you have some experience with perfumery.”

“Yes. I’ve been making my own fragrances for a while.”

“Good. Well, we have a room set aside for you to work in.” Simon gives Daniel a tight smile. “I assure you, Grace is in good hands.”

But Daniel just arches a brow. “I hope you mean that figuratively.”

When my boss blanches, I give Daniel a discreet nudge in the ribs. “I’m ready to get started, Simon. Which room am I in?”

“Ah, it’s in the basement.” The flush is back, this time accompanied by a wince. “A clean room is required for scent

analysis...”

“Of course.” I ignore the pinch behind my breastbone and march back across the floor to the elevator. I have a sneaky suspicion I’m being banished, but it doesn’t really hit me until we’re in the bowels of the building, standing in a room that would make a padded cell look inviting. There’s a desk and a computer, but the rest of the space is stark white and about the size of a broom closet.

“You’re fucking joking,” Daniel growls, his anger filling the small space like a storm cloud. “It’s a fucking morgue.”

“It’s a clean booth,” Simon says evenly. “For scent analysis.”

“It’s where job satisfaction comes to die,” Max mutters, his arms folding over his chest.

“It’s fine.” The complete lack of color wounds my designer heart, but I loop my bag over the back of the chair and give Simon a professional smile. “What do you need me to do?”

“Richard would like you to go through the catalog and check the scents are all correctly filed in the database.” His flush is now so deep, his ears are pink, and his bald head is starting to glow. It’s a spot of color in the bland room, but it doesn’t do much to lift my spirits. “The scent cards are in the drawer, and the database is the only thing on the computer. No Wi-Fi down here, I’m afraid.”

Daniel makes a disgusted sound and my heart sinks a little more. Not just banished, but banished to do some busy work in a pre-digital dungeon. But I lift my chin, refusing to look defeated. *Positive vibes only today.*

Simon makes his escape, and it’s only when he’s almost at the door I remember to ask, “Um, Simon? Could you please see if Richard has five minutes to meet with me today?”

Daniel stiffens at my side, and my boss glances nervously in his direction. “Ah, yes. I’ll see if he’s free.”

I nod, because this torture has gone on long enough. When Simon leaves, Daniel’s anger ripples through the tiny room, those storm clouds whipping up into a hurricane. “This is

fucking ridiculous! I don't know what the hell Rich is thinking, but you're not staying down here shuffling scent cards all day."

I just give him a little nudge towards the door. "I'll be fine. And if you two aren't here to distract me, I can fly through it and then ask for something new to do."

Daniel doesn't look convinced, but I'm relieved he doesn't try to argue with me. Instead, he squeezes my shoulder and says, "If Richard doesn't give you that meeting, let me know. I'll sort it."

Max mutters something under his breath, but I cut off his grumblings with a quick kiss. "Don't worry about me. I'll have this done in no time. And we're still meeting for lunch, right?"

"Definitely." His arms tighten around me for a moment, and he rests his forehead against mine. "Fancy restaurant or food truck?"

I'll definitely want a bit of spice after a few hours in this tomb. "Tacos?"

"Done. Get that cute nose to work, GW."

I'm still smiling when the door closes behind them, sealing me into my clean room. I shake my head at the irony of my scent-mate sending me down here, but my natural ambition quickly rises to the surface. I've never gone half-assed on a job in my life, and I'm not about to start now.

Although, my spirits flag a little when I open the drawer and see the sheer number of scent cards stacked in their neat rows. But I whip off my jacket and boot up the computer, quickly navigating to the database. It's pretty basic, with the card number, scent name, fragrance family, and description, including whether it's synthetic or a nature identical. I'm a bit disappointed it doesn't cross-reference it with other complementary scents, or list the House of Omega fragrances where the scent is currently used. But when I think of the number of cards in the drawer, I rein in my enthusiasm. Simple, in this instance, is a good thing.

I pull out the first card, and closing my eyes, take a whiff. Definitely minty, and when I look at the description, I'm pleased to see it's marked as spearmint. I search for the corresponding number in the database and read each column, marking the checkbox at the end to say the information is correct. I then return the card to its slot in the drawer and start on the next one.

After a few hours of diligent work, my head is swimming with a sea of scents: peppercorn, nutmeg, green tea, amber, ylang-ylang, and papaya, to name just a fraction. The excitement at correctly guessing each scent faded long ago, and I cast a despairing glance at the drawer. I'm less than a tenth of the way through the cards, which means I'll be spending at least a couple of days down here at this rate. With a sigh, I log out of the database, and grabbing my bag, head out for my lunch break. I don't even stop for a pee or to swipe some lipstick on; if I don't get out into the fresh air soon, I'm going to lose my scent-loving shit.

When I make it to the foyer, my heart gives a little jump to find Max waiting for me. He's standing in front of the company's product display, studying the huge headshot of the current Heart of the House, Ivy Weaver. Her replacement will be unveiled at the gala on Friday night, and it's a good reminder that Max didn't exactly get his dream job either. I cast the apple-cheeked blonde a narrow-eyed glare as I hook my arm through his. "You're so much hotter than she is."

He squeezes my arm, his green eyes dancing as he drops a kiss on the tip of my nose. "Are you all sniffed out?"

"Not when I'm this close to you," I murmur, leaning towards his neck and breathing him in. I might have scowled at the cards for honey, amber, and rose oil, but on Max they smell like a dream. "But I could do with some fresh air. Are the other guys still coming?"

Max nods as he leads me towards the door. "They went ahead to grab the tacos and scope out a bench to eat them on." He nods at a pair of muscle-bound alphas loitering nearby. "These guys are here to show us the way."

I bite my lip, taking in their stern expressions and impressive muscles. “Bodyguards?”

“Yep. Joshua wasn’t kidding when he said we won’t be going anywhere alone.”

I shrug, following him through the revolving door and out into the sunshine. Our bodyguards fall into step – one in front, one behind – but I just close my eyes and breathe in deeply. “If it makes the guys relax, I’m okay with it,” I murmur as we slot our arms back together. “And I just want to enjoy the fresh air with you.”

“If you can call city sewers and smog *fresh*,” he teases, but we fall into easy conversation as we cross the road and head towards the park. The bodyguard at the front clearly knows where he’s going, and it’s nice to be able to navigate the busy city streets without getting caught in the crush. Everyone takes one look at his massive shoulders and unflinching stare, and the crowd parts like the Red Sea.

Max is telling me about his morning – spent with Joshua, going through the program for Friday’s gala. It’s not just the reveal of the new Heart of the House, but also the official launch of Magnetism, and it explains why the guys are all so busy getting ready for the event. “I thought we’d go shopping for it tomorrow. You’re still scheduled to be off, right?”

I blink, realizing I’m not expected to be at work for the next two days. I bite my lip, even more frustrated by my current assignment, but then I catch the hopeful look on Max’s face and smile. It’s not like spending time with Max is a hardship. “Yep. Not back in the office until Friday. You thinking about a suit for the gala, or a new band tee?”

He smirks at my teasing. “I’m happy to go in my birthday suit if it means you’re on my arm.”

I give a mock-growl. “You’re lucky I don’t make you wear a sleeping bag.”

“Pretty sure I could make that look sexy, too,” he grins, biting the edge of his tongue, and I have to concede the point. Max in a sleeping bag is suddenly going to be the centerpiece

of my next camping fantasy. Not that I'm turned on by bug spray and inflatable mattresses, but I'm pretty sure Joshua could help me rig something together on the terrace...

When our little party suddenly comes to an abrupt halt, I'm tempted to roll my eyes. The *bench* the guys have been warming for us is actually one of the park's coveted gazebos, complete with a linen-draped table and four dining chairs. I climb the steps, laughter bubbling up as I take in the guys' smug smiles. "This is a bit fancier than a food truck."

"Tacos from Las Palmas," Daniel says, getting up to come around and settle me into my seat. I smile at the gentlemanly gesture, but then he leans down to murmur in my ear, "Pretty sure they'll have nothing on the taste of your mouth, though."

The blush burns in my cheeks, and I find it hard to look away from his smirking lips as he resumes his seat. Max, who's sitting on my left, gives me a knowing look and I blow out a breath as I reach for the sparkling water in front of me. "So, tell me about your mornings. Everything on track for Friday?"

Max has already caught me up on the preparations for the gala, but I listen intently as Joshua recounts his version, since the event is really his baby. There will be drinks and canapes in the main foyer of H.O.M.E. and then a showcase in the ballroom that I didn't even know existed. It sounds like it's going to be an incredible event, and I feel a prickle of excitement. The guys will be busy in their professional roles, but Max and I will go together, and we'll have front row seats for the actual Magnetism launch.

Talk of the innovative new perfume brings up my current assignment in the basement-slash-morgue, and Joshua scowls over his taco. "I can't believe Richard has you working on that crap. You must be going stir-crazy down there."

I shrug. "I've only been at it for a few hours. And while it's not exactly stimulating, I want to do a good job."

The guys exchange a glance, but Max nudges me with his elbow. "What about your taco? How does that rate?"

“It’s delicious.”

Max smirks over his fish taco. “Better than a food truck?”

I shrug. “I haven’t eaten a lot of Mexican food.”

I don’t want to admit that Kayden has me on a pretty strict diet, despite the fact he and his packmates eat like barbarians every night. Pretty soon after my mom died, my stepfather took control of all my meals, including a bunch of vitamins and other supplements that were meant to bring out the omega in me. Of course, it never worked, but my stepbrother still insists I take them, and I’ve given up fighting him on it. The restrictive diet doesn’t seem to be doing me any harm, and it’s not like he’s ever found my secret stash of chocolate.

When I realize the guys are all watching me, I take a big bite of my shredded chicken taco. It’s liberally covered in garlic, onion, and cilantro, and it’s probably a good thing I’ll be spending the afternoon in my empty little office. I smile when I swallow, grabbing a bottle of sparkling water and pointing it at Max. “Mine’s fantastic. What about yours?”

He crooks a finger at me, and I shiver at the heat in his eyes. “Kiss me and find out for yourself.”

I arch a brow at him, because not even a messy mouth can stop me from kissing him, and my lips are tingling by the time we break apart. “Mmm. You’re really spicy.”

He winks at me. “Pretty sure that’s you, GW.”

I smirk at him, taking another big bite, but Joshua leans across the table, his brown eyes full of caramel mischief. “What about us? Don’t you want to rate our tacos, too?”

I flick an uncertain glance between him and Daniel. “You mean...”

Daniel’s hooded gaze is on my tingling lips. “How can you decide if you really like tacos, unless you try a variety of flavors?”

I look pointedly at the heaped platter in front of us, since the guys must have ordered the entire menu. But I can’t resist the challenging twinkle in his eyes and I glance around. The

bodyguards are facing the park, and even though we're up on a raised platform in the gazebo, no one seems to be watching us. "Okay. Let's see what you've got."

I smile at the way their eyes widen as I round the table towards Joshua. He's just reaching for another taco, but he drops it back on his plate as I slide onto his lap. My interest in Mexican food evaporates as his warm, musky scent surrounds me, his thighs a hard perch under me. I run a hand along his arm, admiring the windowpane check of his jacket. Richard's sense of style might be closer to mine, but Joshua fills out his suit in a way that makes my hindbrain hum.

"You really like his jacket, huh?" Daniel asks, breaking the trance, and I laugh.

"I have a thing for handsome men in classic suits."

"Well, you should check if he tastes as good as he looks."

I already have first-hand proof of that, but I happily melt into his kiss. I have no idea what kind of taco I'm tasting, because I'm drowning in the essence of alpha. Joshua is sweet and musky at the same time, and he doesn't hold anything back, licking and nipping at my mouth until I'm squirming on his lap.

When I finally pull back, his pupils are blown, his hand clutching my thigh. "Verdict?"

"Delicious."

I'm all but purring, and the other guys chuckle as I fan my face. But when my gaze snares on Daniel, I kiss Joshua's cheek and move over to the other alpha. He's stripped off his jacket, draping it over his thighs, and I give him a questioning look. "I'm not exactly a comfortable place to sit right now."

It takes me a moment to realize he means the hard ridge of his erection, pushing up from his jeans. I have a crazy urge to peel back his leather jacket and stroke it, but I just settle on his lap instead. "I also have a thing for hot assholes in denim," I murmur into his ear.

He grunts, but it's a happy sound, and he breaks off a piece of the soft taco on his plate. "This one might be a bit spicy," he

tells me, holding it up to my lips.

My mouth waters and I lean forward, swallowing both the food and the tips of his fingers. When he starts to pull away, I grab his wrist, sucking the salsa off his thumb. “Fuck,” he mutters, his arousal swirling around us. “I don’t see how a kiss can beat that.”

“We should still test it out, though, right?”

He smirks at the teasing light in my eyes, but leans forward to press his mouth to mine. Same pillow lips and whisper of scruff, but this time his kiss is a little rougher. Still romantic, but in a tongue-sizzling way, especially when I feel his piercing. It’s hard and warm, and I get a wicked little thrill at touching this secret part of him. The more I play with it, the harder his erection grows under his leather jacket, until he winds his hand around my ponytail, angling my head so he can plunder every inch of my mouth. I don’t know if it’s the piercing or the chili making my tongue tingle, but I’m now definitely a fan of lunchtime kisses. Tacos aren’t bad, either.

I’m smiling when we come up for air, but then I feel a prickle on the back of my neck and look out at the park. The bodyguards are still there, eyes locked on the milling crowds, but that uneasy feeling only builds, and I slowly scan them for myself. Mostly tourists, with a sprinkle of locals like us on their lunch break. But when my gaze clashes with a furious pair of dark eyes, I go rigid, a strangled sound falling from my lips.

And suddenly, the delicious kisses I gobbled down so greedily taste like ashes on my tongue.



15. GRACE

“What is it?” Max demands, half out of his seat. His head whips around, searching for danger. Daniel and Joshua are also on high alert, growls vibrating in their throats, and I have to swallow repeatedly before I can get the words past my frozen lips. “I just saw Porter. Kayden’s packmate. He was watching us from beside the fountain.”

One of the bodyguards is already starting across the park, and I try to leap to my feet, but Daniel holds me still. “He can’t hurt you, sweetheart,” he says in a reassuring rumble. “Not if you stay close to us.”

I let myself sag against him for a moment, but the danger isn’t Porter, who I’m certain will have already left the park. “You don’t get it. I told Kayden I was just working for your company. I never said anything about the contract.” I don’t add that when he asked me if I was fucking one of them, I lied through my teeth. An icy shiver now runs down my spine. Porter looked furious, but my stepbrother will be homicidal. “This is *really* bad. When Kayden finds out...”

“It doesn’t matter.” Daniel is on his feet, but his arm is still around me. He nods at Joshua, who grabs Max’s arm and hustles us between their bulk. “Come on. The safest place right now is the office.”

As they bundle us out of the gazebo, I reach for Max. His jaw clenches as he looks down at me. “If this doesn’t fucking stop, we’re going to the cops, okay?”

I can’t help but think of what my stepbrother does to people who involve the police in his business. Bile rises in the back of my throat and I stumble on the grass. When Max’s arm tightens protectively around me, I can’t stop a shudder of foresight. *This* is what Porter and Kayden and their packmates

will try to destroy. Not the Rose Pack, whose lawyers and bodyguards and sterling reputation will protect them, but the unwavering devotion I can see reflected in Max's eyes.

Neither of us object when the alphas insist on driving the short distance back to the office. Although when I try to head back to my basement dungeon, Daniel gives me a stern look and tucks me close to his side. "We're calling Garth," he says as we take the elevator up to the executive floor. "We put a stop to this bullshit right now."

The anger rippling off him thickens the air, and I shoot Max a grimace in the mirrored doors. So much for not causing any more drama. But I know better than to try to talk a riled-up alpha out of his chosen course of action, keeping my mouth shut until we're all sitting around a boardroom table. Joshua is on his phone rearranging a meeting, while Max pours glasses of water for everyone, and I fiddle restlessly with the strap of my handbag. Daniel is busy punching numbers into a console on the desk, but we all turn at the squeak of the door.

The most delicious aroma precedes him, and my scent-starved heart gives a pitiful thump as Richard looks around the room. But his gaze skips right past me before landing on Daniel. "What is it?" he asks shortly, his hand still clutching the doorframe. "I've got a hundred things to do..."

"Nothing as important as this," Daniel snaps, pointing a finger at an empty chair. "We're calling Garth, and you need to be here."

Richard's mouth narrows into a thin line, but he clearly shares my policy of not arguing with pissed-off alphas. The fact he ignores the chair Daniel pointed to – taking the one furthest away from me – isn't something I miss, either.

But my hurt feelings are pushed aside as the screen on the wall flares to life. A mountain of a man is suddenly beamed into the room with us and it takes me a moment to realize this is our pinstripes-and-suspenders CEO. Because he's wearing nothing but a pair of silky workout shorts and a towel around his thick, tanned neck. He's in a dimly lit hotel room and has clearly just come back from the gym, because his heavily

muscled chest is covered in a sheen of sweat, a frosted water bottle clutched in his hand. He's in the process of taking a long, thorough drink, and I stare, entranced, at the way his glistening throat works to drain the bottle dry. Max makes a low humming sound beside me and I feel my cheeks burn in agreement.

Holy shit, Garth Rose is a sexy beast.

"You said it was urgent," he tells Daniel as he swipes the towel over his face and tosses it aside. "Want me to call back in five when I'm dressed?"

Nope. No need. *Happy to sit here and watch you stuff that big body into a three-piece suit...*

"You're good," Daniel says, parking his ass on the edge of the desk. But then he glances over at Max and me and his brow furrows. "Although, I guess this is your first official meeting, so maybe we should call back..."

"We're fine," Max says quickly, and I nod along, just in case there's any doubt. The alpha's dark gaze flicks between us, and Max gives him a pretty smirk. "Nice to officially meet you, Mr. Rose."

"Just Garth," he says, but there's amusement in his eyes as he grabs a warm-up jacket from somewhere and pulls it on. "I wish I was there in person, but I hope to be back in a couple of days."

My skin tingles at the thought of being in the same room as this man, but Richard clears his throat and sits forward, breaking the spell. "I've got a two o'clock meeting I can't afford to miss..."

"Hello to you too, Rich," Garth says, and the affection in his voice surprises me. Richard Rose might be my scent-mate, but in the few interactions I've witnessed, he's always more thorns than flowers.

"Sorry," he says abruptly, although there's no evidence of an apology on his smooth, handsome face. "I'm just spread a little thin with some of the changes in our departments."

It's clear from his tone that there's a coded message here, but Daniel just gives him a hard look. "We're not here to talk about that." His attention swings back to the screen and he clenches his hands on his thighs. "We were just having lunch in the park when Grace spotted one of Kayden Sawyer's packmates watching us. We need to make it clear to them that Grace and Max are off limits."

"Lunch in the park?" Richard cocks a curious brow at the other alphas. "Since when do you two eat out of food trucks?"

But Joshua ignores the question. "This is serious, Garth. Sawyer and Porter, the guy from the park, also tracked them to a bar last night. We're concerned this isn't just a surveillance mission."

He means they mean to snatch me off the street, and probably make sure I can never run again. A threat I've lived with almost constantly since I was fifteen, but the thought that Max might be hurt in the process sends a visceral shudder through my body.

When I look up, Garth is staring at me, all signs of the welcoming alpha gone. In its place is a granite-hard expression that makes my stomach tighten into a panicked knot. He's leaning forward, his elbows on his knees, and there's a hint of eyeshine glimmering in the dark that's only too familiar. I study him for a moment, my breath quickening, until I blurt out, "You're an uber alpha."

Damn. I didn't mean to say that aloud. But while the other alphas stiffen, Garth just dips his head at me. "I am. How did you pick it? Your stepbrother?"

"No. He's just a run-of-the-mill bully." I bite back the venomous words dancing on my tongue. Too many memories are crowding in, each darker than the one before, and my mouth feels like it's coated in acid. "My stepfather."

Garth tilts his head, and now I know what he is – that one percent of alphas who are so dominant, they have a designation all of their own – I can see the beast under his skin. The packed muscle, the glowing sweat, the eyeshine like

a cat caught in the beam of a flashlight – they’re all traits of an uber alpha.

“Barker Sawyer,” Daniel says in a soft, grim tone. “You lived with him for how many years?”

“Six.” I have to wet my tongue to get the words out. “I was fifteen when he married my mom, and he died two years ago.”

There’s a heavy silence as they no doubt picture what it was like for my teenage self to be under the guardianship of an uber alpha like my stepfather. Especially when he was raising a teenage jackal in the bedroom next to mine.

“There wasn’t anywhere else you could have gone?” Joshua asks, and my muscles unclench a little at the worry in his eyes.

“My dad’s pack tried to get me to go live with them after my mom died, but my stepfather refused.” I don’t mention the reign of terror he unleashed on them for even suggesting it. My dad had been dead for more than a decade by that time, and I couldn’t blame his old packmates for withdrawing their offer. By the time Barker died, they’d moved far away, and I was over twenty-one. I guess they figured I’d learned to live with the worst of it.

Not that my coming-of-age meant I was granted anything remotely like independence. Instead, my stepbrother became even more obsessed with controlling my every movement. That’s also when he brought up the pack companion idea, and if Jasmine hadn’t told him she wanted to be bonded into the pack first, I’m certain he would have bitten me and been done with it.

While these chaotic thoughts swirl through my brain, Daniel is rubbing his chin, his eyes narrowed in thought. “Did they ever find out who killed Sawyer?”

I shake my head, then shrug. “Kayden might know. But it was never discussed around me.” I don’t add that it didn’t make much difference to my life, because one day my stepfather was alive and controlling my every breath, and the next he was gone and his son had taken up the mantle. And now here I am, being courted - albeit remotely – by another

uber alpha. I turn my attention back to the screen on the wall. “I take it your designation isn’t public knowledge?”

“It’s still... frowned on in some circles.” Garth sighs and looks at his hands. As soon as his dark eyes break contact with mine, that moment of gut-clenching intensity fades. The designation is known for their ability to dominate others with their vocal commands, but a lot of an uber’s power is also in the way he looks at you. “Working in this industry, building an empire that reveres the softest of designations... In some people’s minds, it would be a bit like putting the fox in charge of the henhouse.”

Max makes a soft sound beside me, and I watch a shiver work its way down his body. I recognize it for what it is; the reflex to protect yourself, mixed with the lure of the ultimate predator. *More like the saber-tooth lion being put in charge of the baby chicks.*

But then I remember that H.O.M.E. is Garth’s family business; he was raised in this world and no doubt groomed from a young age to take it over. What was that like for him once he presented as an uber alpha? Most of his designation ends up in the military or the criminal underworld, like my stepfather. Being the head of a luxury goods empire is about as far from that as you can get, and I have to admire his ability to hide who he really is.

“You’re really an *uber*?” Max asks quietly, and I can hear the shock in his voice. “As in a permanent knot, wild ruts, and a voice command that turns omegas into puddles?” He lifts blown pupils to stare at the other men in the room. “Don’t you think you should have mentioned this before now?”

Daniel opens his mouth, but Garth waves him back. “I should have told you myself. And yes, we should have been explicit about it in the contract.” He leans forward again, his eyes now shining with sincerity. “But you never have anything to fear from me, Max. I have lived with this condition since I was thirteen, and I’m now the wrong side of forty. I’ve never unleashed it on anyone...” Something flickers in his eyes, and if it’s not his beast, it’s something that comes close. “Well, not on anyone who didn’t ask for it.”

Max's gaze snags mine and clings. I know he's thinking exactly what I am – about Daniel telling us there's nothing like getting spanked by our CEO. It had intrigued me at the time, but as an uber alpha, a little sexy discipline is probably just the tip of the iceberg. It's the murky waters underneath I'm worried about.

“I know this is a lot to take in, but there *is* a silver lining.” Max and I both raise a brow in unison and Garth spreads his hands wide. “No one fucks with my pack and gets away with it.”

Max gives a strangled laugh, but I drop my eyes to the table. It's not the first time I've heard an alpha make a statement like that, after all.

“I think we need to waive the confidentiality clause,” Joshua says into the sudden silence. “The best way to protect Max and Grace is to go public. The Sawyer Pack wouldn't dare approach them if they knew we were courting them.”

I'm not so certain, and I don't miss the skeptical glance that Daniel shoots Garth. I'm pretty sure they know exactly the kinds of lines my stepbrother is willing to cross, but it's Richard who speaks up. “It could help things in the workplace. There's a lot of confusion in my team about Grace's position, and a public statement might smooth things over with them.”

All eyes swing my way and I do my best to keep my expression unaffected. I'd been hoping to repair some bridges today with my colleagues, but if we go public, I'll have no chance of ever meeting them on equal footing. I'll always be the intern who got the job because she was screwing the Roses.

But what choice do we have? Not only does Max need protecting, but it's also not fair to make him hide the courtship. This should be a time when he's openly pampered by his alphas - and envied by every omega who thought they were in the running with the Rose Pack.

“I'm not afraid of gossip,” I say slowly, keeping my gaze on Richard. It hurts to have him stare back at me with his blank expression, but if there's any bridge I need to fix, it's

this one. “I appreciate the job more than you know, and the last thing I want to do is upset anyone. If it will make things easier for you, you can tell the staff about the contract.”

“The *courtship*,” Max says with a warning look around the table. “This isn’t just a business arrangement.”

“And this isn’t just about stroking a few bruised egos, either,” Daniel says in a biting tone, his eyes drilling into Richard’s averted face. “Just saying we claim them won’t stop the bullies. We have to *prove* how important they are to us.”

“Like giving Grace something real to work on,” Joshua pipes up. “The scent catalog, Rich? Really?”

Richard’s brow furrows in confusion. “What? It’s important work.”

“It’s grunt work!” Joshua snaps. “Admit it. You just gave it to her to keep her out of the way.”

My cheeks sting at hearing the truth spoken aloud, but Richard looks like he’s been slapped. His horrified gaze swings my way, his fingers tugging on his perfect Windsor knot. “That’s not... You don’t think that, do you?”

I drop my gaze. “If you say it’s important...”

“It is.” He gets to his feet, shoving his chair in. “If we want to take Magnetism to the next level, we need to know how scents interact. This database is the foundation for that.”

I want to point out that the database is just a list at this stage. It has potential – like knowing that ginger and cedarwood go well together, but mixing peppermint and lemon is a big no-no – but it isn’t captured in the raw data. And from what I’ve heard about Magnetism, Richard is taking the chemistry to a whole different level. *That’s* important work, and while I’m only an intern, I know I could offer some value to a project like that.

“It might be important,” Max says with a scowl, “but working in that basement closet is depressing. Can’t she work from home? The equipment can’t be that hard to relocate, can it?”

“Get it done,” Garth says in a commanding tone and Richard gives a curt nod. He’s gripping the back of his chair like he wants to sprint out of the room, and my stomach sinks. Trying to bring up the issue of our scent match now would be a disaster... but if we’re really going public, then we have to clear the air.

But before I can open my mouth, Garth says, “I’ll be home for the gala. And I think that would be the perfect opportunity to announce our courtship.” His dark eyes swing my way. “Grace, I’d like to personally review your work assignments next week, as well as getting some insights from you on the Sawyers. And I think the three of us should sit down and talk more about my designation. I’m sure you have some questions.”

Max makes a little scoffing noise, but I feel him relax at the offer. “Oh, yeah. We’re just dying of curiosity over here.”

Garth smirks as he logs out of the call, but Richard is already at the door, muttering about getting the scent catalog packed up for transport. Daniel and Joshua are talking quietly about a public statement for the gala, and when Max tugs me towards him, I don’t resist. In my high heels, I slot perfectly under his chin, and I rest my face against his neck, breathing him in. The fact he shivers at the drag of my nose along his throat chases away some of the shadows and makes happiness bloom in my belly.

“You okay with all this, GW?”

“The going public part,” I ask, dropping a kiss on his jaw, “or the finding out our CEO is an uber part?”

Max gives a grunt of acknowledgement, but his eyes are serious as he looks down at me. “If either of those things is a showstopper for you...”

I press a hand to his chest, right over the warmth of his heart. “Max, I’m all in with you. Kayden, my colleagues, even this contract... none of it comes close to changing my mind about *you*.”

I can feel the shudder that passes through him as he presses his forehead against mine. “Same. I’m all in.”

I glance past him to see the alphas watching us, and I wonder if they heard me dismiss the courtship contract. But the soft look in their eyes makes me smile. At least I know that Joshua and Daniel want this to work between us.

“Sorry we didn’t tell you about Garth,” Daniel says slowly, watching us closely. “He’d planned to be here to tell you himself.”

“And like he said,” Joshua adds, “he has it under control. His life has been under a microscope for years, and no one has ever guessed.”

“Until Grace came along,” Max says with a kind of possessive pride. I could point out that I only know the signs to look for because of my stepfather, but I’m tired of talking about the Sawyers. So I just lean into Max’s warmth as his arms tighten around me. “Just don’t bullshit us, guys. We can handle stuff if we’re told in advance. Plus, we deserve your trust, right?”

“You do,” Daniel concedes in a gravelly murmur. “And we’ll be upfront from now on. It’s a promise.”

I nod as we head to the door, the guys dropping kisses on our cheeks by way of apology. It’s decided that we’ll head home with Daniel while Joshua catches up on a couple of things for the gala. As we get into the elevator, Max starts peppering Daniel with questions about uber alphas and I try to hide my own feelings. The truth is, I’m more than a little disappointed by Garth’s revelation. Ever since I saw him in the induction video I’ve been wondering what it would be like to have all that virile dominance pointed in my direction. But if he’s an uber alpha, he’s definitely off the table for me. And not just because my stepfather was the worst example of their designation.

There’s one reality we can’t escape.

Ubers have permanent knots.

As in thick, swollen bands of muscle around the base of their penises that inflate during sex. As a rule, alphas only develop a knot when they're with omegas, so as a beta, it's never been something I've had to worry about. But with an uber, a knot doesn't care about designation. It doesn't even care about sex. It's there, all the time, a visual clue to the off-the-charts dominance flowing through their veins.

And my body – not to mention my heart – isn't built to survive that kind of claiming.



16. DANIEL

As soon as I get Max and Grace safely tucked away in their bedroom suite, I call our Head of Security into my office. Patrick is a six-foot-six alpha with a wild bush of copper hair and a melodic lilt straight from the Ring of Kerry. He's a graduate of the infamous alpha farm in southern Ireland, where abandoned kids are taken in and trained to become feral dogs for the Quinn Pack. I saw some of myself in him as he worked his way up the ranks, scrapping and stomping on anything that looked sideways at him, and when I left Quinn's employee to join Garth, I made Patrick part of the deal.

It never would have worked if Garth wasn't the most dominant alpha either of us has ever met. Patrick was tortured into a borderline psychotic state as a kid, and I'm pretty sure Quinn only let us go because he thought one or other of us would snap and tear our new alpha to pieces. But instead, when Patrick inevitably challenged Garth with a hunting knife and a bellyful of rage, he ended up on his face with an uber alpha kneeling on his back. A few whispered words from Garth, and Patrick was sobbing into the dirt, his neck arched in submission.

The truth is, Garth could grind guys like Quinn and Sawyer into mincemeat if he ever let go of his iron control.

"What's your threat assessment?" I ask Patrick as he stands at attention on the other side of my desk. I've told him plenty of times that sitting in one of the guest chairs isn't a sign of disrespect, but habits die hard in a kid who grew up kneeling on glass and drinking out of horse troughs.

"The probability that they'll try something is high. Sawyer isn't known for backing down, and Porter is his blindly obedient attack dog." His lips quirk, acknowledging the

parallels to his own past, but I don't smile back. With a minute shrug, he goes in, "The people I've spoken with confirmed my earlier statement: the Sawyer Pack believe they own Grace Worth. The only thing stopping them from a forced bonding is that their omega – Jasmine Crenshaw - negotiated it as part of her mating contract."

A low growl vibrates in my throat, and Patrick gives me a coy look. "You okay for me to go on, boss?"

I wave away his eyelash flutter and he blinks back to professional mode. "Sawyer – and his old man before him – have controlled every aspect of Grace's life since she was a teenager. She has no financial history, no online presence beyond the academic courses she's completed, and it's not unusual for her to go days, if not weeks, without leaving the pack's brownstone."

I grind my throbbing molars. Most alphas daydream about having someone like Grace submit to them, but we don't fucking act on it. "And the severity of an attack? What's your assessment?"

"It'll be a kidnapping, at the very least. Sawyer has clubs and warehouses all over the city where he could stash her for any length of time. But when I spoke to Kerr, the family doctor, he implied that the Sawyer men come from the school of 'if I can't have her, no one can.' There's evidence Sawyer Senior may have offed Grace's mother when she talked about going on an extended visit to her sister's pack." He gives me a careful look and I realize I'm gripping the arms of my chair so hard the leather is starting to crack. "Is that something you want me to look into further?"

I consider it, since the lawyer in me sees the value of compiling evidence against my enemies, then burying them under it. But the cynical street rat forces me to shake my head. "We know the son is as violent and corrupt as the father. More importantly, *Grace* knows it. She didn't flinch when she picked Garth as an uber, which means she's lived with it long enough to become acclimated to it."

I don't really like to think about those teenage years she glossed over, when an uber alpha like Barker Sawyer had her at his mercy. But I've never been interested in hiding from hard truths, and I make a mental note to talk to Grace about it at some stage. At the very least, it's another reason to hunt the Sawyer Pack down and skin them alive. But right now, I try to focus on the positives. "She's been taking secret self-defense classes for years, so she's clearly anticipating an attack of some kind."

I don't try to hide my admiration, and Patrick rubs his brow in confusion. The guy has seen me eviscerate a man with the leg of a dining chair, so he's probably not adequately prepared for my softer side. "I was gonna ask you if she was really worth all the fuss. But from that sappy look on your face, I'm thinking you might stab me with that poncy pen in your pocket."

"She's worth it," I reply, smirking at the play on her name. Grace is the furthest thing from a Sawyer, and after only a few days in her company, everything in me is coiled and ready to make her a Rose. "And we're going public on Friday. That'll put both her and Max square in the spotlight."

Patrick blows out a breath. "It'll definitely rattle Sawyer's cage."

I shrug, taking out my poncy pen and clicking the end. It's almost as satisfying as the sound of racking the slide on my Glock. "Garth will be back by then. If Sawyer decides to make a move..."

Patrick whistles, his grin borderline feral. When I roll my eyes at him, he shrugs. "What can I say? Getting to see an uber come off his leash would be epic."

It would be something, that's for sure.

"Let's go over the new security measures one more time," I tell him, grabbing my notebook and flipping it open. "Because as *epic* as it would be to see Sawyer carcasses littering the streets, I want that threat level back to zero."



We strategize for another hour, then head down to the gym to work out some of my aggression. Unleashing has a nice ring to it, and after a session that sees us both grinning through bloody teeth, I send him off and hit the showers. The hot water helps me unwind, but I learned a long time ago that my beast isn't ever really under control. Unlike Garth, who can take a knife to the ribs and not even see a spike in his blood pressure, I live with a steadily simmering rage that threatens to boil over at least once a month.

Which is why I think our courting couple has already sunk their hooks so deep into me. I like looking at them – and I know I'm going to love fucking them – but simply being in the same room while I breathe in their honey and vanilla scent brings me more peace than a dozen brutal boxing sessions.

“You're going to have to find one that's harder than that,” Grace's voice teases as I reach the door to their suite. I quickly notice that the computer from the basement office is set up on their breakfast table and the drawer of scent cards is on the floor. But instead of tapping away on the keyboard, Grace is sitting on the chair in a blindfold, while Max kneels between her parted thighs. The elegant pencil skirt that's been driving me nuts all day is pulled tight, one of Max's hands stroking the pale flesh above her knee. His other hand is waving one of the scent cards back and forth under her nose.

“It's definitely from the citrus family,” she murmurs, her lips hitching up in a smile, “so I'm guessing it's grapefruit. And – in case you're handing out bonus points - grapefruit pairs best with lavender, green basil, or cedarwood.”

Max leans forward and flicks his tongue over her smirking mouth. “Correct, again, GW.”

“You're just going to have to give me a bit more of a challenge,” she says in a teasing tone, then touches the tip of her tongue against his. I can see the shudder run through his body as she lures him into her mouth, their tongues dancing together. Now that I know exactly how she tastes, my cock starts to swell against the front of my sweats. Max groans, clearly addicted, and all that tension I worked out in the gym comes rushing back.

Only this time, it's fueled by pure lust. There's nothing I'd like more than to let my alpha scent unfurl in the room, but when Max catches me lurking in the doorway, I wave him to silence. Gesturing at Grace, I make my intentions more than clear, and his eyes light up with glee. Stepping as lightly as I can across the carpet, I stop in front of them and look down at Grace. With her eyes covered, her lips are the focal point of her face, and I have to bite back a groan. Max has a perfect model pout, but Grace's are soft and full, the edge dented where she's always gnawing at it.

I give in to the urge to touch. Just a feather-light sweep of my thumb across that bruised bottom lip, but she goes rigid, her hands clenching her knees. I think I've fucked up until she leans forward and wraps her mouth around my thumb. Soft, wet heat surrounds the digit and those pheromones I was trying to hold back rise off my skin in a heady mist.

"Musk," Grace murmurs when she releases my thumb with a soft pop. "But even if I couldn't taste you, I'd know it was you, Daniel. No one else has that mix of woodsmoke, leather, and copper notes." She pulls down the blindfold and looks up at me with her lapis lazuli eyes. "Have you been working the demons out of your system, Alpha?"

I smirk down at her, running my fingers along her jaw. "Beating them into submission, maybe." I glance at the drawer of scent cards, then linger on the way Max is stroking her silky thigh. "This doesn't look nearly as tedious a job as I thought it was."

"She's been working very hard," Max says with a dark twinkle in his eyes. "And now she needs to kick off her heels and relax."

Grace makes a small sound of protest, her eyes on the stack of cards. "We've still got a long way to go."

"And you've got two days home with me," Max says smugly. "If you ask nicely, I can keep the blindfold handy." Heat flares in her eyes, but when she starts nibbling on her lip again, Max leans in and murmurs, "All work and no play makes Max a very horny omega."

The sound that comes out of my chest makes both of them startle, and I feel like an idiot. I might not have Garth's control, but I know better than to growl at the people who make my dick hard. I scramble for a distraction, then remember why I came to their room in the first place. "Sorry...I was just thinking, maybe we should talk about what happened in the park today. Would it make you feel better or worse if I told you about the security measures we're taking?"

The hazy arousal in Grace's face fades, and I can see that familiar steel in her eyes. "Better," she says promptly. "And if there's anything I can tell you about the Sawyer Pack that might keep them at bay, I'm happy to help."

I nod, pleased, and pull out a chair at the table. Plenty of people would be cowering in the corner after being stalked by the Sawyers – and finding out their pack alpha is really an uber – but they both look hungry for information. "Right now, there's nowhere safer in the city than this place," I begin. "There's a security presence onsite at all times, plus a surveillance system that covers every room, including the personal spaces." I give them a cautious look. "You get what that means?"

"Someone is watching at all times." Grace grimaces, which pretty much confirms the Sawyers have had her under surveillance most of her life. I reach across and touch her wrist. "The bedroom and bathroom footage are off-limits to anyone but my pack. We take turns monitoring it, but only if a sensor is triggered. Plus, I've set up an override mechanism, so you can turn the footage off in any room at your discretion." I get up and walk to the main light switch and point at the dimmer button. "Instead of turning this, just press it. The feed to the room will be cut until you press it again."

They both look impressed by the privacy feature, and I'm glad I haven't creped them out with my hyper-vigilance. The truth is, there's no mile I'm not prepared to travel to keep them safe. "The office is harder to monitor given the sheer number of people who come and go every day, but I've increased our security checks and onsite patrols. For functions like the gala on Friday, we'll be going all out."

I resume my seat, my gaze heavy as I study them. “You’re most vulnerable when you’re between home and the office. All our drivers are trained to defend you, but I’m putting two of my best men on your personal detail. They’re the guys who escorted you to the park today.” They nod, but I pin Grace with a warning look. “No walking around alone. No quick dashing out for coffee, or unescorted visits to the library. Agreed?”

She bites her lip again, but this time there’s a touch of rebellion in her eyes. “I need to be able to defend myself, Daniel.”

I’m well aware she’s talking about the lessons she takes at the refuge center under the library, but there’s no way she’s going there unescorted. “We’ll train you here. We’ve got a great gym, and we all know what we’re doing.”

She still looks skeptical, so I reach out, trying to comfort her. But when my fingers encircle her wrist, she flinches. I look at the red skin peeking out from the cuff of her blouse, but it takes me a moment to make sense of it. And then the sound that roars out of my chest is close to a wolf’s howl. “Who the fuck *bit* you, Grace?”

She jumps so hard, I feel a surge of regret. But the play of emotions over her face just feeds my fury. There’s guilt and shame and a bone-deep sadness that barrels straight into the center of my chest. I don’t realize I’m moving until I’m sweeping her up into my arms. Max gives a startled cry and I flinch, but there’s no stopping my forward motion. In three strides I’m at the door to their bathroom, and in another couple I have her propped on the vanity. Max has hurtled in behind us, and I motion for him to hold her while I start rummaging in the cabinet. I pull out a medical kit, but Grace tucks her wrist to her chest when I grab the ointment.

“It’s fine, Daniel. It doesn’t need treatment.”

The growl bubbles out before I can stop it. “It’s a fucking bite mark, sweetheart. Do you have any idea what kind of shit gets into an unprotected wound?”

She stares at me with her big, soft eyes. “It’s not new, Daniel. If it was going to get infected, it would have happened a long time ago.”

I grip the edge of the vanity so hard my knuckles throb. “What do you mean? How long has it been there?” Grace shoots Max a loaded glance, but I step between them, wanting her attention on me. “Was it Sawyer?”

She gives a jerky nod, and I peel her arm away from her chest. The cuff of her blouse has fallen back over the wound, and I scowl as I roll it up. Her wrist is a mess, and it takes me a moment to work out what I’m looking at. There’s a bruise the size of a plum, but the actual wound is multi-layered, because it’s not a single bite but multiple. The edges are jagged, like she’s been gnawed on by a feral animal. *Over and over and over...*

“Any one of these could have been a claiming bite,” I snarl, slathering the abused skin in ointment. “Do you realize that a fraction deeper, and he’d have you leashed like a *dog*?”

“Alpha!” Max snaps, shoving my shoulder. “Ease up, for fuck’s sake. She gets it, okay?”

I draw a ragged breath, catching sight of my reflection in the mirror. I look insane, my pupils blown and my teeth bared in my feverish face. But it’s the way I’m crowding Grace into the vanity that makes me take a step back.

“Wrist bites are outlawed for a reason,” I manage to spit out. “There’s no bond if you’re bitten that way, just a claiming. That’s why I compared it to a leash. You’d be stuck with that asshole in your head, but it would only go one way. No comfort. No connection. Just static and compulsion.” I don’t add that I’ve seen it first hand in the Quinn Pack. All their mates are bound by claiming bites, and most of them don’t survive beyond a handful of years. “People lose their minds that way, sweetheart.”

She swallows, but she doesn’t look shocked by my grim words. “I know about claiming bites. My mom... That’s how my stepfather marked her. He hated the fact she still wore my dad’s bond mark, so he said it was her wrist, or he’d kick us

out onto the streets.” She takes a shaky breath, her lashes fluttering to hold back the tears welling in her eyes. “He had a leather wrist cuff made that only he could remove. If she was disobedient, he’d rub bleach or chili powder into the wound, and she’d have to wear it all day...”

Her voice breaks off and I catch the edge of Max’s devastated face. I don’t need to look to know it’s a mirror of my own. My heart roars for a woman I never met, abused and covered by a sadistic fuck, but my beast has no interest in my softer emotions. He’s latched onto the threat gnawed into Grace’s flesh, and he won’t rest until the whole Sawyer Pack is shredded into a bloody mist.

“The tub,” I murmur, forcing down my rage with effort. “We’re going to soak it, then wrap it. We’ll see my doctor tomorrow, and then we can decide on a longer-term treatment plan.”

I’m surprised I sound lucid enough to make myself understood, but Max springs into action, getting the water running and rummaging through a basket of bath bombs. But I shake my head. “We need healing oils.” I look at Grace. “Lavender oil, right?”

A soft smile chases away the glimmer of tears. “You know your essential oils?”

“I know wounds,” I grunt, then wish I’d swallowed my fucking tongue.

But she just climbs off the vanity and peers into the basket. “These are good, but I have something better in my handbag.”

Max is gone in a flash, returning with her oversized bag. I get a complex whiff of scents as she opens it, but I nod approvingly when she pulls out a small bottle that smells like lavender. “This has an apricot and olive base, plus sandalwood, jojoba, geranium rose for a sweet scent, and of course, lavender. It’s safe for the bath.”

She waits for my nod before pouring some in, the oily aroma filling the air. I dip a finger in to test the temperature, but when Max starts to unbutton his jeans, I suddenly feel

surplus to requirements. It's a big tub, but there's not enough room for all three of us. *This is wound care*, I remind myself as Max kicks off his jeans and moves over to unzip Grace's skirt. "I'm just going to leave you to it..."

"Stay," Grace says before I can take a step. When I turn to look at her, her legs are bare and Max is unbuttoning her blouse. He's watching me closely, but there's no judgment in his eyes, and I let my gaze settle on Grace's pale face. She's back to nibbling on that tempting lip. "Could you just... sit on the edge or something?"

I nod, pushing up the sleeves of my Henley and moving to the far end of the bathroom. There's an alcove with a bunch of candles in it and I grab my Zippo from my pocket and light them. I don't smoke anymore, since Richard can only tolerate the scent of Garth's cigars, but I'm a compulsive clicker. Pens, triggers, lighters – or, if I don't fuck things up – nipples, clits, and G-spots; I just need to keep my fingers busy. Especially when I can hear the siren's call of silk sliding over skin behind me.

I keep my focus on the tub until the water starts to ripple, and then prop my ass on the edge, like instructed. But there's no force on the planet that could stop me from looking their way once they're settled.

Max is leaning against the curved end of the tub, a fluffy white towel propped under his messy blond head. Grace is sitting between the V of his thighs, the tips of her hair floating in the oil-slick water. Max has an arm wrapped across her breasts, hiding her nipples from sight, but plumping out the globes nicely. She makes a soft sound, and even if I couldn't tell from her glassy eyes and parted lips, the ripples on the water clue me into the finger-fucking he's giving her.

My gaze drills the glossy surface, but all I can see are the candle flames dancing on the water. "This is supposed to be a therapeutic soak," I tell Max in a mock-growl. "You're supposed to be softening up her wound."

He gives me a cocky smirk, the tendons in his forearm working faster. "I figure it's just easier to give her the head-to-

toe treatment.”

Grace makes another soft sound and I stare at her flushed face. She looks like she’s caught in a feverish dream, her head rubbing on Max’s chest as she arches under his busy fingers. I lick my lips, the potent scent of oils and arousal making my mouth water. “What can I do to help?”

The timbre of my voice is so deep it scrapes my throat, but Max just gives me a hooded smile. “Well, like I said, head to toe.” He hooks a foot around her left leg and lifts it above the water. “Suck her cute little digits. She loves it.”

I look at him in surprise, but it’s the shudder that runs through Grace that has me reaching for her foot. It’s the exact opposite of the hairy meat slabs I’m used to seeing around the house, her toes soft and small and flushed a pretty pink. I grunt as I run a finger over the bright polish on her nails. “Orange?”

“Tangerine,” she murmurs, her foot trembling in my grip. “Do you like it?”

“I like everything about you, sweetheart,” I admit, then prove it by licking across the pad of her big toe.

Max gives me a wicked look through his lashes. “Well done, Alpha. I just felt her clit give a happy little buzz.”

Fuck me. Why didn’t someone tell me toe sucking was such a turn on?

I have no clue what I’m doing, but she doesn’t seem to mind my amateur moves, her head rolling back and forth on Max’s chest. Although maybe it’s the way his hips are circling and thrusting, his dick no doubt at full mast...

“You’re making me so slick,” he whispers in her ear. “Can you feel me sliding against your pretty ass, GW?”

They’re both writhing around so much, water sloshes over the edge of the tub, drenching my sweats. I catch a glimpse of my straining cock out of the corner of my eye, and it looks as monstrous as it feels against the wet fabric.

“That’s it, baby, dance on my fingers.”

Grace gives a strangled cry and jerks, her toes curling in my mouth. It's like I can feel her clit vibrating on my tongue and I stroke the silky length of her thigh. Her eyes are squeezed shut, her neck arched, and I can't stop watching her drown in her pleasure. Not to mention the sight of her vulnerable throat, begging for a bonding bite.

I groan, shoving the heel of my hand against my throbbing erection. Her eyelashes flutter, but Max is staring at me, a knowing smirk on his face. Dropping a kiss on Grace's temple, he stands in a rush of scented water, pulling her limp body against his. Candlelight dances over their flushed, oily skin and I'm tempted to pinch myself. Because black-hearted devils like me don't get to play with pretty little angels like them.

Although, Max kind of evens the stakes when he pushes Grace at me, his green eyes now locked on my monster hard-on. "Looks like it's our turn to do some soothing, GW."



17. GRACE

I stumble towards Daniel, my legs still quivering with the aftershocks of my orgasm. I can already feel another one building, as if being sucked and fingered to bone-shaking completion has flicked some kind of insatiable switch inside me.

Thankfully, Daniel doesn't miss a beat, sweeping me up into his muscular arms. His Henley is plastered to his chest, his sweats soaked through, and I expect him to reach for a towel. But he just holds me tighter and stalks back towards the bedroom.

Heat pinwheels through my belly as we approach the bed. He doesn't seem to care we're an oily, dripping mess, placing me on the silk comforter and stepping back to stare at my trembling body. "You want this, sweetheart?"

My gaze skitters over him, my breath catching at the view. He's tugged off his Henley, and he's a clenched mass of muscle, the arousal in his eyes hot enough to make me pant. I part my legs, giving into the neediness that Max always seems to draw out of me. "I want you inside me, Alpha."

I don't usually refer to designations out loud. Having my own thrust in my face for so many years, I never learned how to say it without cringing. But with Daniel, I want to lure out that primal part of him.

And it seems to be working, Daniel's hands clenching on his hips. But when he doesn't move towards me, Max drops to his knees beside him, tugging down his sweats. The alpha is wearing a pair of black briefs that mold to his body like a dream, and Max sits back on his heels, whistling under his breath. "Fuck me, alpha! That's one meaty man part you've got there. Sure you're not part-horse?"

Daniel's eyes widen, and I can tell he doesn't know what to do with Max's cheeky side. But then his eyes narrow and he grips Max's hair, not hard enough to hurt, but clearly holding him in place. "You offering to ride me, Omega?"

Max makes a humming sound in his throat, clearly enjoying being manhandled. He leans forward, and Daniel gives him enough leeway to place a nuzzling kiss on his straining cock. "I thought I could suck you for a bit, and then our girl could finish you off." His lashes flutter as he looks my way. "She owes you for taking such good care of her in the bath, after all."

I'd roll my eyes at him if Daniel wasn't reaching out and cupping my jaw. "You want that, sweetheart?"

I shiver, but nod enthusiastically enough to have him join me on the bed. Instead of turning to get his promised blowjob, he grabs Max's wrist and pulls him down on his other side. He then rolls onto his back, his hands coming up to cup our faces. "You want to soothe me, I'm up for it. But we start with kisses."

"Ever the romantic," Max says with a smirk, but he doesn't complain as Daniel grabs his hair and pulls him down to his mouth. They kiss long and slow, their tongues sliding and tangling in a way that makes my heart flutter. Daniel's arm is wrapped around my back, his fingers stroking my spine, while Max's fingers creep back in my pussy. He strokes my clit, and my head lolls back, because he's already a master at keeping me right on the edge.

Instead of waiting for their kiss to end, I lean down and press my lips to Daniel's nipple. It's a stiff little bud on the broad ridge of his chest, and I can't help thinking of that piercing on his tongue. It makes my mouth water, and as I give it a gentle suck, the arm around my back instantly clenches tighter. Encouraged, I suck harder, and roll his other nipple between my fingers.

When he groans, I ease off and start peppering open-mouthed kisses down his torso. It makes Max squirm when I do this, and I smile as I feel Daniel's eight-pack tighten under

my lips. Max's fingers have slipped out of me as I've moved down the bed, and I groan as he presses them between Daniel's lips, no doubt teasing his tongue ring in the process.

"Fuck, sweetheart," Daniel growls when he's licked them clean. "You smell like heaven, and taste like sweet sin."

He's one to talk. His musk and leather scent is doing crazy things to my head, and I tug impatiently at the waistband of his boxers. He lifts his hips so I can peel them down to his thighs, and Max gives me a bright-eyes smile as I regard my prize. "That's supposed to be my job, GW."

I cock a brow at him. "Want to come help me?"

Max hums in agreement, scooting down the bed while Daniel props himself up on his elbows. "Are you two trying to kill me?"

That gets a laugh from Max, his thumb sweeping over my bottom lip. "I don't think the big scary alpha can handle us, GW."

But I'm too busy licking my way up Daniel's shaft, chasing every drop of precum. I don't know if it's because he's feeding off Max's scent, or if he always tastes so potent. *Guess I'll just have to keep checking back in to know for sure.*

Max's hand slides to the back of my neck as I try to take Daniel's head into my mouth. It's engorged with blood, bucking under my hand as it tries to sink into my warmth. I lick and suck the swollen tip, purring at the pressure Max applies as I try to swallow it down. But even though Daniel sounds like he's at heaven's door, I know when to admit defeat.

As I ease back, Daniel groans and nudges Max. "Time to put your big mouth to use, Omega."

Max rolls his eyes, but he's up for the challenge, and I watch in fascination as he takes Daniel down the back of his throat. With his pillowy lips and soft curtain of hair, it's one of the most erotic things I've ever seen. Plus, there's the bonus of watching Daniel's entire body ripple in pleasure, his hands gripping the comforter like he's about to levitate off the bed.

When I wrap my fingers around Max's throat, I can feel the thick shaft pressing against the skin, and I can't help giving it a little squeeze. The moan that rips out of both of them is enough to make me swirl my own fingers against my clit.

But Daniel pulls Max off with a huff. "Keep that up, and I'll blow too soon."

"Not before you get inside our girl," Max says in a husky voice.

He puts a steadying hand on my back as I sling a leg over Daniel's thighs. His muscles clench under my hands as I wriggle forward into position, and Max points that thick mushroom head at me. We're all high on omega slick and alpha pheromones, but as I sink down onto Daniel's cock, I don't get very far before I have to stop.

God. *Daniel the Impaler.*

"You okay, sweetheart?" I open slitted lids to find him gripping my hips and watching me with concern.

The truth is, the stretch is making my breath catch, and Max quickly leans in to suck a pain-tinged moan from my lips. "Too big, GW? How about I help you along?"

I stare at him in hazy confusion, but Max just grins and drops down to run his tongue over our swollen joining. He laps at the shaft, coating it in saliva, then finds my throbbing clit with the point of his tongue. He works his magic, sending a bolt of pleasure from my neck to my knees, and I cry out as I slide down another inch. "That's good," I pant. "More of that."

He happily obliges, and Daniel works me down with his hands, his thumbs rubbing the sensitive skin of my belly. When he starts to rock, I realize I've taken him to the root, and I laugh at the smug look on Max's face. "Max's tongue comes to the rescue."

"Here to serve at your pleasure," he quips, diving back in to help us along.

It doesn't take long for the burn to turn to bliss, and I drop my head back. Daniel shuttles in and out of me, those big hands doing most of the work, and I love the feeling of being

used for his pleasure. Used *and* rewarded, because every time I sink down, Max gives my clit a quick little suck.

“You’re so beautiful, GW,” he whispers as I taste myself on his kiss. “Look at you ride that big cock. Is it good? Do you like the stretch?”

I’m beyond words, but I nod my head, and Max purrs. “You’re so perfect for us, GW. You’re everything we need. And soon, our alphas are gonna bite you and claim you. Gonna make this sweet pussy part of the pack. You want that, my gorgeous woman?”

I give an inarticulate gargle, but Daniel’s hands slow my writhing, his fingers digging into my hips.

“I’m gonna knot soon, sweetheart.” He shoots Max a narrow look. “All that claiming talk has me ready to bust.”

There’s a hint of apology in his voice, and I realize it’s because he thinks I’ll feel left out. But how can I blame him for going full alpha when Max’s seductive slick is coating the air?

“I want to see it,” I tell him, rolling my hips to brush Max’s smirking mouth. He’s already running his tongue over the ridge of swelling muscle, like the temptation is too much to resist. I watch a little more guardedly, but Daniel wraps his big fingers around the bulge. “Does it hurt? When you can’t push it in?”

Max rolls his eyes up at me. “According to every horny alpha I’ve ever met, it’s up there with blue balls, and waiting for the Yankees to win their next World Series.”

Daniel grunts. “No. It doesn’t hurt, sweetheart. And being inside you is all the distraction I need.”

I nod, but I’m not convinced, and for a moment I’m tempted to push his hand away. But while we’re all high on omega slick, riding an alpha knot is still just a fantasy for me. My body simply isn’t made to take it, and I’ve heard the horror stories of betas getting torn up when they try to ignore their limits.

But that doesn't mean I'm not dripping with curiosity. "What does it feel like, Max?" I flick Daniel a hooded glance. "Having a knot this delicious buried inside you?"

The alpha throws his head back and groans, while Max starts circling my clit with a lazy finger. "As good as it looks," he purrs, then rubs me harder. Stretching up on an elbow, he flicks his tongue over my nipple, looking at me through his well-fucked hair. "But you can find out for yourself when I go into heat. The slick I'm gonna feed you will open you up nice and wide, and if they play their cards right, there should be more than a couple juicy knots to ride."

Daniel's cock kicks deep inside me. "Oh, fuck! I'm coming, sweetheart!"

My pussy clenches at his strangled roar, and I feel Daniel's cum explode against my vibrating walls. It's hot and thick, and when his violet eyes lock onto mine, I fly right over the edge after him. And of course Max is right there, still smirking and sucking, until I'm nothing more than a slick-drenched puddle in their greedy hands.



I wake to a happy ache between my thighs and a big, warm body pressed against my back. It takes me a moment to understand how Max can be in front of me, his nose inches from mine, when there's a rock-hard cock nestled against my ass.

Until I breathe in the scent of musk, leather, and... lavender oil.

Daniel the Impaler.

I smirk at the delicious memories, and Max leans over to nuzzle my lips. When he licks his way inside, he tastes like honey vanilla and alpha musk, most likely from lending such an enthusiastic hand – or tongue – last night. I squirm, and he drops his mouth to my ear and whispers, "You look almost as good in his arms as you did on his cock, GW."

And Daniel said *I* was sweet sin?

“Don’t wake him,” I whisper back, giving his nipple a pinch. “He was moving around all night like he couldn’t get comfortable.”

Max chuckles and props his head on an arm. “I don’t think he’s sleeping, babe. I can smell his morning wood from here.”

To my surprise, Daniel tightens his arms around me, rubbing his groin against my ass. “I might be a hard guy, but I’m not actually made of cement.”

“No,” Max teases, “you’re made of frogs and snails and puppy-dog’s tails, like all the naughty little boys.”

“Don’t forget meaty horse’s cock,” I quip, stretching my sore muscles.

Max laughs, while Daniel rises up behind me, flipping me over onto my back. *More polished marble than cement.* I hum at the sight of his thick slabs of muscle, especially because I can feel that monster erection pressing against my thigh. I love Max’s pale leanness, but there’s something about Daniel looming over me that makes my hindbrain dizzy with want. “Good morning, sweetheart.”

He doesn’t wait for my reply, dipping his head and claiming my mouth. It’s the opposite of Max’s sweet peck, his tongue thrusting between my lips without a care for my morning breath. Instead of feeling shy, I thrust my shoulders up, my nipples throbbing as I groan into the warm cavern of his mouth. His piercing rubs along my tongue, and by the time he pulls back, I’m panting for more.

“Too bad Grace’s got a dress fitting in an hour. If we had more time, she might be able to do something to soften you up, Alpha.”

I barely hear Max, who’s popped out of bed and is pulling on his jeans. But when he rummages in the dresser for another band tee, my head clears a little and I cock a brow at him. “No shower?”

“I’m still nicely oiled up from the bath,” he says with a smirk. “Besides, I wasn’t the one sleeping in the wet spot.”

I flush, since I can still feel Daniel's cum inside me, despite the careful way he wiped me down last night. "Fine. I'll shower while you get breakfast." When I roll off the bed, Daniel is right on my heels and I give another happy hum. "You're coming?"

"You couldn't keep me away with a blowtorch." I ignore the obvious pun, and he follows me into the bathroom, reaching down and palming my ass as I fiddle with the shower. "In fact, I plan on sticking close to you all day."

I glance over my shoulder with a smile, but his gaze is all violet heat and I push back against his groping hand. Where Max's touch is sometimes teasing, sometimes reverent, Daniel is plain hungry, his fingers kneading my flesh like he can't get enough of me. "No work today?" I manage to ask.

"You might need help with your zippers or something," he murmurs, stepping into the warm spray and pulling me against him. I reach for the body wash, but he's backing me up against the wall, crowding us into the corner. I hiss as my ass brushes the cold tile, and he growls low in his throat. "I need to taste you, sweetheart."

He drops to a knee, graceful for such a big guy, and hooks my leg over his shoulder. "Hard and fast, and then I'm dumping another load in you."

I shudder at his crude words, but it's exactly what I want. For him to fill me up and then mark me with his scent, so everyone knows I belong to this big, ferocious man.

Hungry doesn't begin to describe the way he dives between my legs. I steady myself on his shoulders, but when I feel his piercing flick against my clit, my knees almost buckle. A few quick sucks, his piercing rolling back and forth over my throbbing core, and I'm coming with a near scream.

Before I've even caught my breath, he pulls me out of the shower and nudges me over to the vanity. "I don't want this washing away," he grunts, pressing a hand to my back and notching his cock against my sensitive opening. "I want you dripping with my cum all day."

I open my mouth to remind him I have a dress fitting in an hour, but when he pushes inside me, the words spin away. I widen my stance and push back as he thrusts forward. There's no way I'm stopping him now... And besides, he can handle any lawsuit for any damage I do to the dresses.

"You're opening up for me beautifully," he mutters, pressing forward. It's part invasion, part sweet relief, my body desperate to take him in. "You like this, sweetheart? You like making me feral for your pussy?"

My head bobs, too overwhelmed for words, and as he drags back, a needy whine escapes me. He's still being careful, since he really is pushing me to my limit, but the steady drag of his cock along my walls is pure bliss. Pressing a hand against the mirror to anchor myself, I stare at our reflection through the steam. He's grunting and huffing, the sight of his massive body thrusting into me taking me right up to the edge. I'm a master at self-loving, but that's always a slow, tingling climb to release. Whereas this is like being shoved towards a cliff by a hurricane.

I'm panting after a dozen thrusts, and as his fingers swirl over my clit, I give another needy cry. Daniel leans forward and runs his teeth along my straining throat. It's a primal move, and I buck back against him, arching my neck in invitation. I know he won't actually bite me, but for a moment his gaze catches mine in the mirror and I see the pure *want* burning in his eyes.

To claim me. To *own* me....

Something sharp pinches my opening and I hiss, even though I'm still shaking with pleasure. I grip the edge of the counter, feeling dizzy as he rams into me again, that prick of pain blooming like a dark flower. "Fuck, you're stretching me, Alpha. I'm right on the edge."

I *really* don't want him to stop – in fact, I'll sob like a baby if he does – so I grip the counter tighter, tilting my hips and willing my body to open a little more. But Daniel has gone still, his mouth jerking away from my throat. His pupils are blown, his brow furrowed, but then he runs a soothing hand

down my spine. “Sorry, sweetheart. I got a little carried away. Nearly knotted you without thinking.”

The confession melts something inside me and I push back against him, now reveling in that pinch of pain. “Don’t apologize. It feels amazing. I want to take your knot more than anything.”

But he’s already pulling out of me, that aching stretch drawing another hiss as he leaves my body. I make a broken sound, trying to turn towards him, but he wraps his arms around me, his fingers finding their way back between my thighs. “Right now, I’m gonna watch you fall apart.” I want to protest that he can do that just as well when he’s drilling into me, but he bites gently on my shoulder. “All you, sweetheart. Give it to me now.”

I moan, because he’s curling three fat fingers inside me and rubbing my walls. The stretch might be different, but like Max, he now knows exactly how to play me. “That’s it, sweetheart. Milk my fingers.”

I come with a strangled cry, and Daniel licks down my neck as I shudder through my release. When my heart finally slows, he licks his fingers and nudges me back towards the shower. “Promise I’ll just wash you this time.”

I nod, but even though my body is too sensitive for another mind-blowing orgasm, I feel strangely unsatisfied when he does just that.



We’re in the car heading to the dress fitting when Daniel reminds me of our unfinished business from last night. “We’re stopping at the doctor’s first. I want a plan on how to get that fucker’s mark off your wrist.”

I frown, touching the strip of gauze he insisted on applying. “It doesn’t hurt...”

“It hurts *us*,” Max says quietly, threading his fingers through mine. “Can we just see what the doctor says?”

I pause, trying to imagine if our roles were reversed and the west coast pack had left some nasty claiming bite on Max. I'm pretty sure it would make my blood boil every time I caught sight of it. "Okay," I murmur, squeezing his fingers. "Just as long as we're not late for our fitting."

Daniel smiles, settling back into his chair. "Let me worry about that."

I shrug, enjoying the warmth of the two guys on either side of me. I dressed casually in plum corduroys and a soft denim shirt, given we'll be climbing in and out of clothes all morning, but now I wish I'd worn one of my strapless dresses. Soaking up their honey and musk heat is sublime, but it would be even better if I could rub my bare skin against the source.

The interior of the car doesn't do much to quench the heat between my thighs. It's another limousine and I stare at the bench seat opposite us, imagining the guys stretching me out and opening me up. I'm not really sure where my wanton daydreaming is coming from, but I bite my lip as we pull up outside the private clinic. Last thing I want is to shock the doctor by panting my neediness in his face.

To my relief, Daniel's doctor turns out to be a female beta in her fifties. She's bright and elegant, with just a hint of messiness that puts me at ease. She spends a couple of minutes searching for her glasses before she finds them in her coat pocket, and Daniel watches her with an indulgent twinkle in his eye as she settles me on the edge of the examination table. He only loses his smile when she peels back the gauze on my wrist, revealing the messy wound. It actually looks a little less raw than usual, but her brow furrows all the same.

"I can treat the injury," she says slowly, "but I have to ask, are you still in contact with the alphas who did this?"

I sink a little, but there's no missing the look the guys share. "*Alphas?*" Daniel thunders, his voice echoing in the small room. "You're talking more than one?"

The doctor instantly stretches to her full height, her body angled in front of mine like she's trying to protect me from his

anger. “If you’re going to bark at me, Danny, you can do it from the corridor. Do I need to send you outside?”

“No,” the alpha says with a sour look, then rubs a hand across his face. I don’t miss the fact Max has put a calming hand on Daniel’s arm – or the tinge of pity in his eyes as he stares at me. “I’m sorry, Nora,” Daniel murmurs. “You just took me by surprise.”

The doctor gives a curt nod. “I’m sure I did. Near-claimings like this aren’t easy to talk about.” She turns her back on the guys and gives me a sympathetic smile, her voice dipping low. “Would you like me to ask them to leave?”

I swallow, still tasting Daniel’s anger in the air, but shake my head. “No. They know most of it, just not all the gory details.”

I wince at the soft growl that comes from Daniel, but the doctor shoots him another warning glance. “Well,” she says when she turns back to me, “my original question stands. Are you still in contact with these men?”

“No.” I lift my chin so they can all see the resolve in my eyes. “And I plan on doing everything I can to never be around them again.”

That seems to settle the guys a little, and the doctor pats my hand. “Good. Then we have two areas to treat. There’s the wound itself, which is fairly superficial. The bruise will fade, and I can prescribe an ointment to work on the scarring, although Danny knows almost as much as I do about that.” That note of affection is back in her voice, and I wonder how they know each other. The way she bosses him about makes me smile, and I feel the tension in the air easing even more. I’ve never liked doctors – the alpha my stepfather had on call always gave me the creeps – but Nora reminds me of a kind, clever aunt. “If it doesn’t heal to your satisfaction,” she tells me, “we can look into cosmetic surgery, but you’re young and healthy. I doubt it will come to that.”

I nod, sitting quietly while she applies some cream and covers it in a fresh dressing. When she’s finished, she takes off

her gloves and studies me. “Is there anything else you want to talk to me about today?”

I pause, wondering if I could ask her about the mechanics of taking an alpha knot, but it’s not something I want to bring up in front of the guys. When I shake my head, she slips a business card into my hand. “Here’s my direct number. I make house calls, but only for my favorite patients. And only if you’re close enough for me to bike there.”

I smile at the idea of this elegant but slightly eccentric doctor pedaling through uptown traffic to visit her patients, but Daniel comes over to help me off the table. “She’s living with our pack, Nora. Both her and Max.”

Our omega appears on the other side of me, and the doctor gives Max a quick, thoughtful look. “You’re courting them, Danny?”

The alpha smiles, looking almost bashful. “Mm. I’m doing my best.”

I squeeze his hand while the doctor reaches up to pat his cheek. “Then I’m very happy for you. But that house visit is now non-negotiable. I need to give you all check-ups and talk to you about your heat and rut plans.” There’s a steely edge to her voice as the guys both twitch and study the floor. When she catches my eye, we share the amused smirk of betas who are above such things.

But Daniel’s next words knock the smugness right out of me. “Better book it now then, doc. My rut’s only a week away.”



18. GRACE

The guys are restless as we leave the clinic. I don't know if it's the news of Daniel's impending rut, or because they still want to talk about the claiming bite on my wrist, but I don't feel up to discussing either. Instead, I prattle on about mindless things to distract them. Max plays along, but when we pull up outside the boutique, Daniel gets a text on his phone, his mouth turning down in a scowl. "Shit. I need to head to the office to deal with a patent issue." He sighs and scrubs his head. "Joshua is on the way. I'll walk you to the door, but do you promise to stay inside until he gets here?"

Max and I exchange a quick glance. The frustration pouring off Daniel is enough to keep the sass to a minimum. "Of course," I tell him, and he pulls us tight, licking into my mouth before giving Max the same treatment. We're all panting slightly by the time we get out onto the pavement, and Daniel points a threatening finger at our bodyguards. "You stick to them like fucking glue, yeah?"

I wrinkle my nose at that, but after the park yesterday, I'm not going to argue. The last thing I want is to give Kayden a chance to ruin this good thing I can feel building between us.

Daniel's gaze drifts back to my wrist as he gets into the car, but I just give him a cheery wave and follow our guards inside. The building is bright and modern, with soaring ceilings and polished concrete floors. It's more like a loft than a boutique, and my gaze snaps past the reception desk to a room that's as big as a cathedral. Dresses sway on metal racks, and people buzz around with scissors, scraps of fabric, and measuring tapes in hand. "Is this...?"

"House of Omega's fashion hub," one of the bodyguards says. "But I can't tell you much more than that, I'm afraid."

“That’s okay.” I know exactly where we are now. This is the powerhouse behind the fashion stores, where prototypes are developed, and vintage and pre-loved items are curated for resale. “Oh my god,” I murmur, squeezing Max’s hand, “I never thought I’d get a chance to peek behind this curtain.”

Max just gives me one of his perfect grins. As a model, he’s probably seen the inner workings of all the big fashion houses, but until now, all my experiences have been online. I’ve taken virtual tours of some of the smaller maisons de couture, but never one as high profile as H.O.M.E. I give a giddy little laugh as I look around, but it cuts off as an alpha in a sleek black suit steps towards us, his hand extended towards Max. “Monsieur Colt,” he purrs, dark eyes bright behind thick black frames. “I am Barlow Green, operations manager of the fashion hub, and it’s an honor to dress you today.”

“Us,” Max says pointedly, pulling me tighter under his arm. “Ms. Worth is my date. Or I’m hers, since she’s the one who works for H.O.M.E.”

“Of course,” Barlow says, giving me a professional once-over that stops at my collarbone before his eyes snap back to Max. “We’ll start with your tuxedo fitting. Would you please accompany me to the salon?”

Max pulls a face, dropping his lips to my ear. “Sure we can’t just go to Macy’s and grab something off the rack?”

I swallow down a burble of laughter. “I didn’t come all this way to miss seeing you strut around in your underwear.”

He pinches my side, but gives a sigh and follows Barlow towards one of the dressing rooms. The bodyguards go first, but when I try to follow, the operations manager steps in front of me. “It is gentlemen only in the salon, Ms. Worth. Would you like to sit in the waiting room and Max can collect you when he’s done?”

I’m tempted to snap and tell him it’s *Mr. Colt*, but I refuse to let his pettiness rub off on me. Instead, I turn on my heel and head across the warehouse floor. I might be disappointed to miss seeing Max get fitted for his tux, but at least I’ll be the one peeling it off him after the gala. And it’s not like there

aren't plenty of interesting things for me to look at while I wait.

There are a few people moving around the floor, some discussing the designs hanging on the metal racks, while others are busy at workstations, assembling different creations. I keep out of their way, trying to ignore their curious glances, but eventually my skin starts to prickle and I duck past a heavily graffitied half-wall. It's too clean to be anything but a design feature, and I study the workspace behind it with interest. When a young beta working at a desk looks up at me with a smile, I decide to try my luck. "Excuse me, can you tell me what this area is about?"

"We're the upcycling collaboration," she says, pointing to an edgy logo on the wall. "Basically, we showcase products made from H.O.M.E. deadstock materials. They call it repurposing, but I like to think of it as product evolution."

I smile at her, intrigued. "You said 'they'. Does that mean you don't work for H.O.M.E.?"

"I'm what you call a creative partner," She uses air quotes, and stops just short of an eye-roll. "I have my own label – Sally Vass designs - but I'm just starting out." She gives me a wink. "Think of me as a tiny tick feeding off the global H.O.M.E. carcass."

I splutter a laugh, then point to the leather cutouts on the desk in front of her. "Mind if I ask what you're doing with those?"

"Not at all. This is some leftover material from the Alpha Abroad range. I'm using it as features on my ballgowns." She nods at a rack of designs behind her. "Urban glamor meets Homecoming queen."

"Moleskin," I murmur, then pull the notebook Daniel gave me out of my bag. It's a close match. "That's so cool."

She gives the notebook a fond look. "I love working with the stuff. I swear, the Rose Pack must infuse some of their pheromones into the leather. Smell this."

She waves one of the cutouts at me, and I take a deep sniff. While it smells delicious, it doesn't quite live up to a naked, sweat-streaked Daniel. "Mouth-watering. What else are you working on?"

"Well, I'm hoping I can eventually get my hands on recycled stock. A lot of it ends up getting tossed because it's too ratty to meet the company's quality standards." She uses air quotes again. "But old and worn doesn't necessarily mean ugly or useless."

I nod. The fashion world talks a lot about sustainability, but there's still a worrying trend toward overproduction and waste. "Plus, it would have a positive impact on the environmental footprint, right?"

She nods enthusiastically, her eyes bright as she points at the rack of designs again. "That's why I call this line Evolve. Alphas like to think they're the top of the pyramid, but I think the world's more like a spiral. A bunch of continuous curves, each one building on the ones that have gone before."

I admire her philosophy, but I'm more intrigued by her designs. I walk over and examine them, a bubble of excitement building in my belly at what I find. Cutting edge is hard to define in fashion since trends change so fast, but these gowns definitely qualify. The silhouette is a relaxed sheath with a tiny flare at the ankles, and the fabric is a rose silk chiffon, embroidered with hand-sewn crystal beads. "Is this an omega bonding gown?"

She gives me a sad smile. "Yeah. That one actually belonged to a friend. Her pack backed out of the bonding contract at the last minute, so she wanted to toss it out. I convinced her to let me evolve it into something new."

"You've definitely done that," I murmur, running my hands over the leather straps that crisscross the gown, from the bodice right down to the hem. It gives the sheath a much more structured, edgy silhouette, not to mention it's sexy as hell. "Would you consider selling it?"

She looks at me in surprise. "Sorry, but these are prototypes. I'm showcasing them in a month, and if the lords

and masters like them, I might get a contract to make more.”

I hold up a finger, too excited to settle for whatever gown – or sackcloth - Mr. Green has planned for me. “Can you give me a minute? I’ll be right back.”

She just shrugs and I rush off, but I haven’t gone more than a dozen steps when I run into Richard Rose. I suppose I shouldn’t be surprised to see him here, but I stop short, my gaze drinking him in like a cold drink on a scorching day. He’s wearing a turquoise blazer, a mint tie, and burgundy pants, and I don’t know if I’m more dazzled by that, or the expression in his eyes. Because, while he looks just as surprised to see me, I catch something that looks almost like longing... before he shuts it with a hasty blink.

“Hi. Richard. Do you know if Joshua is here yet?”

He pulls his phone from his pocket, but doesn’t check it. In fact, he seems to be using it mostly as a prop to fiddle with. “No. I didn’t know any of you were stopping by.”

“We’re picking out our gala outfits.” When he sweeps a curious look over my casual ensemble, I huff. “Well, Max is getting fitted for his tux. I’m kind of window-shopping.”

He looks past me, probably wondering what mischief I’m up to. “Do you think... Could you maybe have a look and see if I could borrow something for the gala?”

It strikes me it’s the first time I’ve asked him for anything... And I have no idea how he’s going to respond. Neither does he, I’m guessing, because he seems to be caught between faking a call on his phone, and stalking off without a word. But then he gives a tentative nod and gestures for me to lead the way.

Not exactly falling over his feet to spend time with me, but I push that flicker of hurt down deep.

“Sally Vass,” I say in a bright voice as we reach her workstation. “I’m sure you know Richard Rose? He was just passing by, and I was hoping he could have a look at the dress.”

Her mouth drops open a little, but then her professional instincts kick in. “Um... Sure. Hello, Mr. Rose. It’s right this way.” She leads us over to the rack and holds up the dress. “I’m hoping it’s going to be in the showcase next month, if Jana can find a slot for me.”

I have no idea who Jana is, but I can see Sally’s spirits flagging the longer Richard stares silently at the dress. His face is hard to read at the best of times, and I hope like hell I haven’t made a mistake. From the comments he made in the marketing workshop, he’s pretty traditional about fashion – despite the fact he’s dressed like a candy dispenser. “Maybe I could try it on?” I suggest, because I figure it’s too late to back out now. “Just so you can get the whole picture?”

Sally’s now gnawing on her thumbnail, and I point to a silk screen behind me. “I’m just going to duck back there and change.”

I don’t wait for either of their blessing, using the limited privacy to strip down to my underwear and then step into the dress. As I expected, I need help with the straps, and I wave a hand over the top of the screen. What I’m *not* expecting is for Richard to appear next to me, his eyes averted until he’s certain I’m covered.

Doesn’t stop the exposed skin of my arms and shoulders from prickling with reaction. And then my heart speeds up, my throat growing tight, while my tongue presses against my teeth. All because Richard Rose looks like candy, and smells like sex on silk sheets.

“Sorry to railroad you,” I murmur, shuffling around to give him my back. “If you could just help with the zipper, and make sure those straps are straight...”

The soles of his shoes scratch on the concrete floor, and I know he’s moved closer, because I can feel his warm breath on my nape. A shudder slides down my spine at his nearness, my neck aching to arch in invitation. I wore my hair in a messy bun to avoid accidents with zippers, but I never dreamed I’d need to protect myself from a dose of Richard Rose.

“You smell like alpha,” he murmurs, the tips of his fingers brushing the flyaway hairs at my nape.

“I... um... I think it’s the leather straps. They’re recycled. From moleskin notebooks.”

There’s a long pause as he edges the zipper up my spine, my hands clenched so tightly in front of me, I’m leaving dents on my palms.

He huffs something that sounds like a half-chuckle. “Daniel’s favorite.”

Not going to lie, I’m really fond of them too, especially because Richard’s fingers are now sliding under the straps. He arranges each with precision, his thumbs stroking them into place. Every time he touches the edge of my skin, I feel my heartbeat flutter between my legs. It’s like every atom in my body is trying to telegraph him a mental map: *Touch me here!*

But then he’s stepping back, job done. I turn slowly, expecting him to have vanished, but he’s down on a knee, gazing up the long line of the dress. “For the whole picture,” he murmurs, and I realize he’s holding out a shoe. Not a diamond ring on a heart-shaped pillow, but I’m absurdly happy as I slide my feet into a pair of slingbacks covered in stylized graffiti and diamantes.

“What do you think? Could it work for the gala?” I hold my breath as he stands and traces his eyes over the straps. They’re tight, especially around my ribs and hips, and I’m guessing it was designed with a more waifish figure in mind.

But he doesn’t look like he has any complaints as his eyes finally lift to mine. “I think it’s exactly how this dress is meant to be worn.”

“And that’s a good thing?”

His eyes flicker; ocean blue, with pockets of impenetrable darkness. “My packmates won’t know whether to kiss your hand or grovel at your feet.”

He has a point; the dress is a striking blend of omega innocence and alpha dominance. But it’s also like a dagger to

my heart, because it's pretty clear he doesn't include himself in that prediction.

Sally suddenly pops her head around the screen, Joshua on her heels. The designer's cheeks are bright pink, no doubt at having two Roses now descending on her workspace. But Joshua gives Richard a curious smile, swooping in to kiss my cheek. For some reason, I feel almost shy as he looks me over. "Do you like it?"

"I think we're going to need more bodyguards," he murmurs, his hands stroking my exposed back. There's a lot more heat in his touch than when Richard helped with my zipper, and I shiver as his lips feather up to my ear. "And I can't wait to be the one who peels you out of it."

I bite my lip, hyper-aware of our audience only a couple of feet away. Sally is staring at me with stars in her eyes, but Richard's gaze is locked on my neck. It takes me a moment to realize he's staring at Joshua's thumb, drawing slow circles on the side of my throat.

"What about you, Richard?" he asks in a purr. "You think you'll lend a hand again after the gala?"

The sub-text is clear. Joshua is inviting his packmate to help me get naked on Friday night. I hold my breath as Richard's eyes snap to my face, and I'm not sure what I'm hoping for. A smile? A nod? Some sign he wants me even a fraction as much as I want him?

But he just swivels and looks at Sally. "We have a small slot in the showcase on Friday that I haven't filled. Do you have enough pieces to be ready by then?"

Sally gulps, too speechless to do anything but nod, and Richard takes a business card from his pocket. "My assistant will be in touch this afternoon."

Rejection tastes bitter on my tongue as he walks away without another word, but thankfully, Max is already strutting towards us. He has one hand in the pocket of his form-fitting tux, and the other pushing back his long, blond locks. He looks every inch the glamorous model, and I'm not surprised

Richard slows down to watch him pass. But Max only has eyes for me, heat flaring in his green irises as they rake me from head to toe.

Turning on a perfectly polished shoe, Max snaps his fingers at the red-faced operations manager in his wake. “I hope like hell you have this tux in leather, Green.”



I’m still smirking at the snooty alpha’s stammered denial a half hour later. We’re back in the limo, two H.O.M.E. garment bags stored in the trunk. Max is pouting a little about not getting his leather tuxedo, but he perks up when I tell him I’ll need his help with all my straps on Friday night. Because there’s no way Richard will be volunteering to dress me a second time.

“Lunch at Billini’s?” Joshua asks, his hand stroking my knee. It’s enough to drag me out of my funk, especially because the popular lunch spot isn’t far from Jasmine’s school. Since Kayden confiscated my phone, I haven’t been in touch with her, and I feel a stab of guilt. We’ve always downplayed our friendship to my stepbrother, but we rarely go more than a couple of days without at least exchanging a text.

“Sounds great. Can I borrow your phone, though?”

Joshua nods and slides it my way, falling into easy discussion with Max about the gala arrangements. I tune them out as I quickly text Jasmine, inviting her to lunch. A reply comes through immediately, promising to drop by, and I feel my stomach unclench a little. I can only imagine how monstrous Kayden has been since I slipped through his fingers, and I’m praying with everything in me that he’s not taking it out on my friend.

Bellini’s is a family-run trattoria that doesn’t take itself too seriously, but we’re ushered to a private booth at the back, the owner chatting to Joshua like they’re old friends. When we’re settled with drinks, I slip out of the booth, and under the watchful gaze of the bodyguards, head to the bathroom. I quickly do my business and freshen up my lipstick, not

surprised when Jasmine slips through the door a moment later. We crash together in a messy, clinging hug, and I feel her slender body let out a deep breath.

“How horrible has he been?” I ask when we pull apart. She shrugs, but the strain around her eyes says enough. “I’m really sorry, Jas.”

She takes my hands and squeezes them, flicking her long blonde curls over her shoulder as the steel comes back into her spine. “Don’t be, Grace. The only question I have is, *are you happy?* And since I think I saw your beaus in the booth outside, I’m guessing the answer is a resounding *yes.*”

I smirk, well aware my cheeks have gone pink. “I’m very happy. Max and I are... as close to bonded as I guess a beta and an omega can get. And things are going well with the other guys.”

“The Rose Pack,” she murmurs, appreciation sparkling in her vibrant eyes. “They’re top-shelf, Grace. Which you more than deserve, of course, and I’m sure they’ve already realized what a treasure they have in you.”

I nod, although as I think of Richard and my failed attempt to win him over, my smile falls flat. Jasmine knows me too well to miss the change in my mood, and pats my hand. “It’s not all a bed of roses?”

I grunt out a laugh. “We’re still getting to know each other, I guess.”

“Well, these things take time. Established packs have their own dynamics. But from everything I’ve heard on the omega hotline, the Roses are definitely worth the effort.” She pokes me in the ribs when I roll my eyes. “And don’t think I can’t smell that tall, blond, and blindingly attractive omega on you, too.”

I smirk, because in the hotness stakes, Jasmine almost gives Max a run for his money. “Max is pretty perfect. I mean, I thought I was just going to be his plus-one, but it’s not like that. We’re in everything, equally. And sometimes I can’t tell where he ends, and I start.”

“Soulmates,” Jasmine murmurs, her eyes going soft. “Sounds like that’s what you’re talking about, Grace.”

Is it? I rock back on my heels, my head almost dizzy as I turn the word over in my mind. *Soulmates*... Is that what we are? It’s the stuff of fairytales and Hallmark movies, but it’s how my mom used to talk about my dad, so I’ve always wanted to believe it’s real. But I’ve never heard of it happening between a beta and an omega.

“I hope so,” I whisper. “I mean, I think it is. My heart definitely wants it to be.”

“I love that for you, Grace,” Jasmine sighs and pulls me in for another hug. “You look radiant, you know? Like all the shadows have been stripped away, and you’re finally showing the world the real you.”

I blush, but I know what she means. Living under the Sawyer thumb for so long, I got good at hiding. Not just in the townhouse, where a wrong turn could drop me in Kayden’s lap, but in every interaction I had with the world. It was just safer to stay small and uninteresting, like a black-and-white version of myself.

“Will you come and have lunch with us?” I ask her, wanting to bask in the glowing way she’s looking at me. “I’d really like you to meet the guys.”

Her smile falls, and she quickly glances at her watch. “I wish, but I can’t be off campus for too long...” She doesn’t need to say more. We both know Kayden is out there, tracking her every movement. “But before I go...” She sighs and takes a phone from her pocket. “I didn’t want to give you this, but I shudder to think how Kayden will get the message to you if I don’t.”

I jerk back from the phone, already shaking my head. “I’m not going to let him stalk me again, Jas.”

“It’s not that,” she says, looking awkward. “He’s left a voicemail for you.”

I gulp, bile spiking the back of my tongue as I reluctantly take the phone. “Will you wait while I listen to it?”

She glances at her watch again, but gives a quick nod. “I have to go straight after, though.”

I grimace, and quickly navigate to the phone’s message bank. I wish I could feel nothing, but I can’t stop a small jolt of fear when Kayden’s icy voice spills out of the tiny speakers.

“Little mouse, little mouse... There are so many fucking things I could say to you right now, but I’ll save them for when you’re home. But before you come crawling back, you’re gonna do something for me. Since you’ve got your nose shoved right up in the Rose Pack’s business, you must have access to their offices. You’re gonna find me their Ferro Club card. It’s black, looks like a credit card, and is worth more than money, so you’ll need to look hard.”

There’s a pause while he huffs out his nose, his molars grinding. *“And if you’re thinking about ignoring this message, or taking it to one of those Roses, let me lay out what will happen. The pretty boy omega you’re fucking will disappear. I can grab him any day, maybe get his old pop in the process, too. And then I’ll maybe use him up, or pimp him out, maybe even pop a couple pieces of his sweet ass in your nightstand at home. You like holding his hand? Maybe I’ll leave you a couple fingers as a keepsake. And when I’m done with him, I will burn that fucking tower you’re hiding in to the ground.”*

His voice drops low, the malice slicing into me like a knife. *“As for you, little mouse, there’s nowhere you can run where I won’t find you. And when we bite you into our pack, you’ll be worse than ruined. There will be more holes in you than a lump of fucking cheese. No one – not even a blind man - will ever want to touch you again, and then you’ll come crawling on your belly to me. So don’t fucking push me on this, little mouse...”*

I drop the phone, gripping my elbows as it skitters under the door of the closest stall.

“Fucking asshole,” Jasmine curses, pulling me in for another hug. She turns me to the counter and, grabbing a washcloth, runs it under the faucet. The press of the damp cloth against my nape makes me flinch, but she just croons

under her breath, “He’s not here, lovely. Don’t let him back inside your head.”

I gulp, taking the cloth and pressing it to my mouth. “I know. It’s just more of his same shit.” But then I lean hard on the counter, feeling sick. “He really means it, Jas. I have to get him that card, or he’s going to come after us.”

She bites her lip, and I feel tears prickle my eyes. God, how does she feel knowing that he’s her future *mate*? The father of her children, who’s twisted claim she’ll have to live with every day. Jasmine has nerves of titanium, but bonding with the Sawyer Pack is a slow form of suicide. “You have to get away from him, Jas.”

Her face freezes, and then she pushes open the stall door, retrieving the phone and dropping it into her purse. “I looked into the Ferro Club. Do you know anything about them?”

I shake my head – both at her question and her change of topic - and she washes her hands in the basin, studying her reflection in the mirror. “It’s one of the oldest, most exclusive alpha clubs in the country. Invitation only and like he said, better than money, because the members share everything.”

“Everything? What does that mean?”

“I don’t know the specifics. But if you get in the door, you own the city.” She pulls a face. “The rumor is it was started by a small group of uber alphas. They wanted a place where they could do whatever the hell they wanted, so they formed a club. It expanded over the years to include other elite alphas, but I shudder to think what that much dominance gets up to behind closed doors.”

Jasmine is well aware of my stepfather’s uber nature, and she despises the designation as only a steel-willed omega can.

“Okay,” I say slowly. “So I get him the card. I mean, it won’t hurt anyone, will it? If the other members are elitist assholes, Kayden will be right at home with them.”

I flinch as I play the words back in my head. Not so much about the club, which I have zero interest in, but the way Kayden can taint even the most innocent of words.

For the first time since my dad died, *home* is becoming a place I can trust. But hearing Kayden talk about my inevitable return makes my skin crawl with panic. What will I do to protect Max? What will I risk to keep my stepbrother's wrath from the Roses' door?

Just about anything, I realize, even if it breaks my heart in the process.



19. GRACE

I barely see the guys for the next couple of days, since they're living out of the office while they prepare for the gala. Daniel is still dealing with his patent issue, and while Joshua sends regular messages to the group chat, it feels strange to be rattling around the tower without them.

One upside is that I have a chance to search the home offices for the Ferro Club card. I don't know if the pack has a safe on the premises – and I can't think up a plausible excuse why I'd ask – so I limit my search to their desks and filing cabinets. I hate the fact I'm invading their privacy, so I make a point not to snoop. Even though I use the dimmer switch to turn off the surveillance in each office, my heart still hammers and my hands shake, certain that at any moment Daniel's security forces will come rushing through the door. All I get for my stress is the certainty that I have no future as a criminal, and the sinking realization that the card is probably somewhere on the H.O.M.E. executive floor.

The other, far more pleasurable, way I spend my time is by falling deeper and deeper into Max. By some miracle, he doesn't seem to grow tired of my company, so we spend every waking hour together, even if it's just curled up on the loveseat in the library while we both read. He likes juicy thrillers, while I catch up on my monster romances, reading him juicy snippets about tentacles and demon tails until he nudges me off the loveseat and fucks me into the library floor.

At night, when we've dragged ourselves out of the tub - and he's applied some ointment to my carpet burns – we snuggle under the blankets and talk about our lives. We hold nothing back, and for someone who has banished a lot of memories to the deepest recesses of my mind, it's like falling off a building - only to find you can fly. Nothing I tell Max changes the look

in his eyes, and when he opens up about the west coast pack's betrayal, we cling together, kissing promises into our mouths that those lives are behind us for good.

It brings us closer than I thought was possible. And it also confirms what I already know: I have to get that Ferro Club card to Kayden as soon as possible.

Because I will do anything – without limit - to keep Max safe.

On Thursday night, my nerves wake me from a restless sleep, and I slip out of bed to go downstairs for a snack. Rory, the in-house chef, makes a honey and pistachio yogurt I've quickly become addicted to, and I convince myself I can't wait until breakfast to sample his latest batch. But while I'm rooting around in the refrigerator, a hard body presses up behind me, hands sliding over the thin silk of my tank. I'm still covered in Max's scent from the slow, cuddly sex we had just before we drifted off, and at first I think Daniel or Joshua have hunted me down for a taste. The guys told us they would spend the night at the office – or crash in their own rooms if they made it home for a couple of hours – and as the scent of alpha arousal swirls around me, my mouth waters for a different midnight snack.

But as warm lips touch the nape of my neck, licking across it in slow, delicious swirls, my heart gives a desperate little leap. Because the scent bond – that rejected, neglected pinch in my chest - is humming in a way that can only mean one thing.

Large hands slide across my middle, and when they turn me away from the open door of the refrigerator, I stare stupidly up into Richard's face. He's sleep-mussed; messy spots of color on his sculpted cheekbones, and his perfect auburn curls sticking up in every direction. It looks like someone has twisted their fingers through them and *tugged*, and my eyes narrow with jealousy. If anyone is going to make him look freshly fucked, it should be *me*.

But before my green-eyed monster can pounce, he presses his mouth to the pulse hammering in my neck. "You smell so

good,” he says in a strained voice. “Like vanilla, jasmine, and gardenia; white florals touched by spring rain.”

I blink at him. Richard is usually mute around me, and now he’s showering me with flowery compliments?

I push back against his shoulder, his lips coming away from my neck in a glossy pout. God, he looks like a sleepy incubus come to suck my soul out of my body. Bare-chested, with just a pair of thin cotton shorts hanging from his hips. I don’t know what’s more distracting – the feel of his warm, tanned flesh, or the look in his azure blue eyes. They’re unfocused, almost glassy. But there’s also a hunger shining there, like he’s just woken from a dream that’s still slipping through his fingers.

But I force myself to edge back against the refrigerator. I glance over my shoulder, barely seeing the contents on the shelves. “Did you want a snack? Rory’s made another batch of his famous yogurt...”

But Richard just waves off the offer with a frustrated growl. “I need to taste you,” he mutters, his thumbs swooping across my collarbones. “I need to drown in your sweet pussy.”

I gape at him, because... forget the yogurt. But then I give myself a mental kick. Would I really have sex with a guy who barely looks at me in the light of day? My pride gives an angry boo, but my body lights up like it’s high noon. It takes everything in me not to melt against his chest.

“We need to talk.” It’s a weak protest, because my hands are already settling on his hips. His skin is velvet soft over hard bones, and I sway towards him, fingers digging in to anchor me. This isn’t just attraction – it’s my rejected heart drumming against my ribs, desperate for its mate. “We can’t just jump straight into bed, Richard. We have to decide how this is going to work.”

But he just grips me tighter. “Let me smell you, mate.”

It takes a moment for the word to settle, and then my heart thumps, a strangled cry falling from my lips. “So, I’m not going crazy? We really are a scent-match?” He pauses, and I wait for him to deny it, but he tugs me around until my back is

against the kitchen island. If anything, he's moving faster, a determined gleam in his eyes. With barely a ripple of his muscles, he lifts me up, my thighs sliding over the cold marble. "Richard," I whisper, running my fingers over the taut muscle of his shoulders, because I can't help myself. "Why now? I'm not complaining, but you've been avoiding me..."

He doesn't reply, except for a hungry grunt as he runs his hands down my legs, greedily massaging my thighs. My muscles twitch, then melt; my body recognizing him as my mate. I've heard the stories of scent-drunk alphas tearing their way across the room in search of the scent made just from them – but it's always a perfuming omega at the end of the hunt. And, until this moment, just the sight of me has Richard running in the opposite direction...

But he's not running now. He's nudging his nose along the seam of my tiny sleep shorts, his hair tickling my thighs. I wind my trembling fingers through his messy curls, almost whimpering at their silky softness. He answers with a muffled grunt, his mouth kissing and licking its way across the damp fabric of my shorts. When he hooks his fingers into the waistband, I wriggle my hips to help, but he just forms two fists and tears them down the middle. I stare, dumbstruck, as the fabric flutters to the tile at our feet. Of all the things fogging my head, the strangest might be watching Richard Rose tear a pair of Omega @ Home sleep shorts off my body.

But now that I'm bare, our mingled scent curls around me, potent and demanding. It calls to my body, lighting up every atom, and I have no way to hold myself back. This is my scent-mate, and whatever barrier there was between us has been stripped away. Literally. I tug on his curls, trying to pull him up for a kiss, but he jerks forward and buries his face between my thighs. He noses me open, almost impatiently, and then his tongue is sliding along my swollen clit.

"Richard!"

I come almost immediately, my orgasm rolling through me in a pulsing rush. The whine that leaves my lips would embarrass me, if Richard wasn't growling in satisfaction at my

release. So I give myself up to it, leaning back on my hand as he licks and sucks me through the aftershocks.

When I finally start to come down, I expect him to pull back, to rip off his own sleep shorts and bury himself inside me. But instead, he grabs an ankle, bending my knee, and props my heel on the edge of the counter. I'm wide open, shockingly so, but he just gives another rumble of satisfaction. And then he's diving back in, his nose nudging at my folds as his tongue licks against my sensitive core. I twitch, pushing at his head, but then his eyes slide back to meet mine, and I catch my breath. Oh, God. He's looking at me like a starving man looks at a feast. Like he didn't just rip a monster orgasm out of me less than a minute ago...

"Let me," he says softly, those blue eyes holding mine. "I need to pleasure you, mate."

I whimper, my molten muscles giving up the fight. But just as I ease him back between my thighs, the elevator doors open and a weary-looking Joshua steps out. He's in one of his sharp gray suits, and he's massaging his brow until he realizes he's not alone. "Oh, shit," he murmurs, his eyes going dark as he takes us in. "This is a nice surprise..."

But he stops dead when Richard's head snaps his way, a low growl vibrating from his chest. I stare between the two alphas, confused, because as far as I know, scent-matches love to share their mates with their pack. It never occurred to me that Richard was keeping away because he wanted to keep me for himself...

But as soon as the thought settles, Joshua is placing his satchel on the floor and moving towards us, sympathy blooming in his eyes. His hands are raised, like he's trying to calm a startled animal, and it takes me a moment to realize he's trying to soothe *me*. "Sweetheart, I think he's sleepwalking."

Sleepwalking?

"He hasn't done this for years," Joshua goes on, his mouth twisting with frustration. "It must be the stress at work..."

I stare at him, trying to make sense of what he's saying. Richard, who's in the process of turning me into a steaming puddle of need, is actually *asleep*...? "That's crazy!"

"I'm sorry, Grace. He just doesn't know what he's doing right now."

The apology echoes through my body like a punch and every muscle clenches. *What the hell?* There's no way Richard could possibly be asleep right now... A denial is ready to burst from my lips, but then I look down at the man crouched between my thighs, his face wet with my juices. His eyes are glazed, his fingers holding me almost possessively tight. Is this why I thought he looked like a sleepy incubus?

He's definitely done a sterling job of sucking my soul out of my body...

It's the worst kind of joke, and a bolt of pain pierces my heart so sharply, I shove him away. Richard's reflexes are so slow, he spills back on the floor, his glassy eyes blinking up at me.

"Whoa," Joshua is advancing again, hands still up. "Did he hurt you?"

The concern in his voice floods my cheeks with embarrassment, but I straighten my spine. "No."

But I'm lying. Because Richard is still staring at me in that soft, glassy way that I'd convinced myself was some kind of scent-mate awakening...

"I want to fuck her," he murmurs, his sightless eyes glued to my parted thighs. "I need to be deep inside her sweet pussy."

I can't stop the visceral thrill that runs through me at his hungry words, but I snap my thighs shut, furious at him, myself, even Joshua for coming in and stopping us... God, this is so messed up. It's bad enough having my scent-mate avoid me, but knowing Richard only wants to fuck me because he's basically unconscious and looking for a convenient release – damn, I think he just shattered my heart to pieces.

“You need to put him back to bed,” I tell Joshua, sliding off the counter.

Richard makes a swipe for my ankle, but the other alpha holds him back. “Are you okay, sweetheart?”

Joshua’s back on his feet now, moving towards me like he wants to pull me into a comforting hug. But I dart aside, wrapping my arms firmly around my body. “I don’t want to talk about it, Joshua. I’m going to bed.”

I don’t look at either of them as I run for the stairs. I’m heading back to our suite on auto-pilot, but as I approach the door, I catch a whiff of myself. I’m covered in Richard’s scent, so thick and potent it’s probably soaked into my bones by now. The thought makes tears well in my eyes and I bypass my bedroom door, running for the stairs to the terrace.

The cold night air swirls around me and I drag in a painful breath, walking numbly towards the pool. There are night lights flicking amongst the potted roses, but a wide swath of moonlight is painted across the surface, like it’s inviting me in. I don’t even bother pulling off my tank, trudging down the stairs, and dropping into the warm water.

Oh, God. That first cleansing rush rips the tears from my eyes, and I clench my lips tight so I don’t drown in my misery.

But a sob forces me back to the surface and I cover my face in my hands, trying to hold back my meltdown. I’ve heard of people getting sick from a broken bond, but I always thought it was exaggerated. I mean, rejection sucks, but I’ve built enough guards around my heart that one screwed-up mistake isn’t going to kill me... Right?

I tear off my tank and plunge into a long, shallow dive. The only exercise Kayden ever let me get was swimming at one of the gyms he owns. Everyone had to be cleared out of the pool beforehand, of course, and he’d sit on the edge of the pool and watch me like a stalker, but I learned to tune him out, losing myself in the rhythmic pull and push of water. If I swam enough laps, he might even get distracted by one of his packmates, and I could sink into a place where even his gaze couldn’t touch me. When I finally dragged myself out of the

pool, my arms would be like noodles and he'd complain about the smell of chlorine in my hair, but sometimes I could hold on to that free, floating feeling for hours...

"Baby, enough." Daniel scoops me out of the pool, his big arms pulling me tight as he backs away from the edge. I blink, probably looking exactly like a startled fish, but I'm too tired to fight him. And he doesn't seem to care that my limp body is splashing water all over his leather jacket. "You're exhausted, Grace. Let me take you to bed."

But the suggestion jerks a shudder from my numb limbs and I try to twist out of his arms. "No. I can't."

"Just here, then," he murmurs, and the next thing I know, he's pulling me down on a lounger, a fluffy blanket floating over us like a cloud. His hands rub my arms, which are prickled with cold despite the warm water, and I burrow into his chest. He smells like musk and night air and that delicious leather aroma I could pick out of a crowded room with my eyes closed. The nightmare of the kitchen hovers behind my eyes, but with Daniel all around me, I can push it into one of those dark alcoves in my mind, and fall into an exhausted sleep.



"Grace? Sweetheart, I'm heading into the office, and I just wanted to check on you before I left."

I jerk awake, my body throbbing with the deep ache I get from pushing it too far. I'm not surprised to open my eyes to the damp swimming deck or the sunlight sparkling off the water... But I have to blink at the sight of Joshua crouched at the side of the lounger. He's dressed for work, while I'm sprawled across a sleeping Daniel, the fluffy blanket pooled at my waist. If it wasn't for the red-hot alpha under me, the early morning breeze would've probably woken me long ago. "Hey, Joshua."

"Morning, sweetheart." His thumb brushes across the delicate skin under my eye. "You look so tired. I shouldn't have woken you."

“No, it’s okay.” I push myself up between the V of Daniel’s jean-clad thighs, looking around for my tank. I expect to find it floating at the bottom of the pool, but it’s drying on a nearby lounge. Still too damp to wear, but Joshua is holding a silk robe. I murmur my thanks as he helps me slip my arms through the sleeves, but when his hands brush the back of my tangled hair, I flinch. It takes me a moment to remember there’s no Kayden around to complain about the chlorine smell, or the fact I fell asleep without combing out the knots...

“Sweetheart, I’m so sorry about last night.” Joshua is resting back on his heels, a familiar sympathetic light in his eyes. “Richard hasn’t woken up yet, but he’ll be mortified when he finds out.”

“I really don’t want to talk about it, Joshua.” I climb carefully off Daniel and pull the robe tight. “Did you say you’re going into the office? I’d like to come.”

He blinks up at me, then slowly rises to his full height. “Yes. But you don’t need to hurry. It’s early, and I’ve had some food brought up.”

He gestures to a packed breakfast tray on a nearby table, and my stomach gives a pained clench. The idea of eating right now makes my throat close over. “I’ll just take the coffee,” I tell him, “and then I can be showered and dressed in ten.”

“What about Daniel?”

“Let him sleep. We’ve got a long day ahead of us, right?”

I don’t wait for him to agree, sweeping a coffee off the tray and heading towards the suite that was originally mine. I’ve moved most of my stuff into Max’s room, but there’s still a purse hanging on the back of a chair and I swipe it up as I head to the bathroom. Sipping on my coffee, I dig out a hair comb and untie my robe. There’s a faint buzzing in the back of my mind as I climb into the shower, but I ignore it as I quickly shampoo my hair. I don’t have time for a deep conditioner, so I just comb some smoothing product through it and wrap it up in a tight bun. When I look at myself in the mirror, a severe, deeply shadowed face stares back. I should probably soften it

with some makeup, but I pull a lipstick out of my purse and check the label. *Rose Dominance*. The perfect shade for the day ahead of me.

I have to get an outfit from my closet, but Max is sound asleep in our big bed and I tip-toe past on silent feet. When I'm dressed in a black pantsuit that perfectly matches my mood, I pause beside the nightstand to jot down a quick note. But before I'm finished, Max rolls over and blinks at me sleepily. The smile that sweeps across his face is like a blast of sunlight on a cold winter's day.

"Grace? You up already?"

"I'm going into the office with Joshua. I want to help with any last-minute stuff."

He yawns and scratches the light fluff on his cheek, looking adorable. "Wait for me and I'll come..."

"It's fine. Sleep in and catch a ride with Daniel."

He reaches out and snags my arm, laying a soft kiss on my bandaged wrist. "You sure? I can just roll into my clothes and I'm ready."

He's not kidding. Like all models of his stature, what Max wears is far less important than *how* he wears it, but I shake my head. "Get your beauty sleep. You're the belle of the ball tonight, remember?"

He makes a rude sound and flops on his back, stretching out his long limbs. "Only reason I'm going is so I can play with your sexy bondage straps all night."

Some of the ice melts in my belly, and I lean down to kiss him. Like always, it fills me with heat and happiness, and for a moment I consider crawling under the covers and just lazing the day away. But I need to get into the office, and I really don't want to be in the house when Richard comes looking for me. Just imagining the stilted apology on his lips makes me sick to the stomach.

"Have to go," I murmur, pulling back and hardening my heart against Max's pout. "Sweet dreams."

He mutters something sulky under his breath, but it's more teasing than anything, and I hurry out of the suite towards the elevator. If I had my way, I'd walk some of my nervous energy off on the way to work, but I clench my fists and slide into the seat opposite Joshua. He's on his phone, but he quickly puts it away, searching my face. Before he can start apologizing again, I say, "You can tell Richard I understand what happened, and there are no hard feelings. If he wants to talk it out, we can wait until after the gala. I know how important tonight is to you all..."

My clipped words drift off as Joshua slides to his knees. There's not a lot of room between the bench seats, and he's a big guy, but I'm not complaining when he wraps me in a hug. "It's just work, Grace. It means nothing if you're hurting."

I take a shaky breath, breathing him in. After Daniel holding me all night, and then the sweet kiss with Max, feeling Joshua's arms around me goes a long way to easing the ache in my soul. But I don't let myself thaw all the way. I need to get through tonight like a professional... Plus, deal with Kayden's ultimatum, so I can get him out of my life once and for all.



20. JOSHUA

I take Grace straight up to the executive floor, telling my assistant Lily to hold all calls while we settle in. I'm running on coffee fumes, and being back in my office again just stokes my frustration. It doesn't help that I'm two managers down since I fired Mike and Trey. They had to go, or I might have put their heads through the nearest hard surface, but the timing is a nightmare. Tonight is the biggest gala of the year, and with my workload tripled, I've been scrambling to catch up. There's still a bunch of high-priority emails waiting for me when I log in, but I can't even think about tackling them until I do something to dispel the shadows from Grace's eyes.

"Sally Vass is coming in this morning to set up for the showcase," I tell her when she's settled into the chair opposite my desk. "Would you mind being her liaison while I grind through my emails? She'll need a friendly face to help her get her bearings."

To my relief, Grace gives me the first real smile I've seen today. "I'd love to."

"Lily has sent her an information pack, but first-time showcases can be nerve-wracking. Anything you can do to put her at ease will go a long way."

"I'm on it. Anything else you need?"

A hug springs to mind – as much for my rattled nerves as her pale face - but I shove the urge down deep. I succumbed in the car, but it's pretty obvious she doesn't want to be touched right now. In fact, I don't think I've ever seen her look so fragile, despite the severe suit she's wrapped herself in.

A memory from last night flickers back to life, unbidden. Grace spread out on our kitchen island, a big hand massaging

her breast through a silk tank while a masculine body crammed between her thighs. The light from the open refrigerator cast them in a surreal blue glow, and as I stepped closer, I could see the straining muscles in her thighs, liberally coated from the hungry mouth grinding into her pussy. Her head was back, his tongue going to war on her clit, while he groaned and slurped like a man possessed. It was borderline brutal, and I honestly thought I was dreaming at first. That one of my darker fantasies was playing out in my kitchen at midnight, like a decadent feast for my overworked mind.

But then Richard turned his head and *growled* at me. And not in an inviting way, like he was trying to tempt me to join in. Out of the four of us, Richard is by far the most repressed. He's a product of a really shitty childhood, his omega mother unleashing her alpha-hating tendencies every chance she got. And while he's affectionate with us, he seems to prefer blowjobs in the shower or quick hookups in his room to snuggles in our pack bed. He definitely never feasted on any of us in the kitchen, or growled like a feral alpha at the threat of being interrupted.

It was so out of character, in fact, sleepwalking was the first thing that sprang to mind. He hasn't done it in years – not since his mom died when he was twenty-one – and the rest of us thought it meant his trauma at her hands was finally fading.

But now he's sleepwalking his way between Grace's thighs? It's not lost on me that she's the first woman he's lived with since his witch of a mother. Was he working out his anger towards her by throwing himself into some violent pleasure with the nearest pussy? Or was it something deeper than that? There's no denying the tension between them when their clothes are *on*, but what if there's something broken between them at the biological level? It would be a really disturbing development for our pack – not to mention the emotional toll it's taking on Grace – and I itch to call Garth for advice.

But I blink away the memory and focus on the here and now. “Yes, actually. Can you pop into Garth's office next door and see if you can find his cufflinks? He didn't have them in London, and he won't have time to grab them before the gala.”

A strange look flitters over her face and I wonder if she's nervous about meeting our pack alpha. Finding out he's an uber must have come as a massive shock, especially since her fucked-up stepfather shared the designation. Just another thing we need to talk out when she stops looking like a sharp word will shred her down the middle.

"Of course," she says quietly, getting to her feet.

But I can't bear to watch her leave the room with that haunted look on her face. "Grace, you know Garth is going to love you, right? He's a dominant alpha, but he's a good person. Loyalty comes first with him, and he's so happy you and Max are joining our pack. He will do everything in his power to make you feel welcome."

She bites her lip, but to my relief, some of the tension seems to leave her eyes. "I'm glad to hear it, Joshua. I'm looking forward to meeting him tonight."

We exchange a careful smile, and she disappears into Garth's office. I try to put the whole mess out of my head while I start going through my emails. When she doesn't reappear, I buzz Lily, who tells me she escorted Grace down to the ballroom to meet Sally Vass. My assistant's cheeks are flushed, and she gives me a saucy wink, flicking her fingers. "*Ooh-la-la*, Josh. I like Grace a *lot*."

"I can tell," I smirk, leaning back in my chair and studying the flush-faced alpha. She has a pack of her own, so there's no need to be territorial, but I still kind of like the feeling. "Better watch those fluttering lashes, or Sarah might get jealous."

She gives me the same sappy look she always does when we talk about her omega. "She reminds me of Sarah, actually. Something about her smile, and the way she holds herself. Or maybe it's because she smells way more tempting than any other beta I've met."

I pause, surprised Lily picked up on this so fast. Grace does smell amazing, but then, I haven't been around a lot of betas I'm attracted to. "She's a really talented perfumer, too," I reply, side-stepping the comment. "In fact, I'm thinking about getting her to work with us on the Magnetism campaign. She

has a fresh eye for what works in some of our under-represented markets.”

Lily arches a slender brow at me. “Won’t Richard be upset if you poach her?”

That’s a loaded question, and I just give Lily one of my bland smiles. “He’s a big boy. I’m sure he can learn to share.”

“Collaboration is key,” she replies with a saucy wink, chuckling as she returns to her desk.

I give her a moment to get settled, then grab my phone and dial Garth. He’s mid-flight, but since he’s on our company jet, I know he’ll take the call. And when he does, something inside me melts at the rumble of our pack alpha in my ear.

“Josh. Everything okay?”

It’s on the tip of my tongue to tell him we’re fine, but he needs to know what he’ll be walking into when he lands. “Not exactly. I got back to the house late last night to find Richard and Grace together. They were in the kitchen, and he was feasting on her, to put it mildly. Only thing is, when he saw me, he growled. And he wasn’t just acting like a possessive animal... he was sleepwalking.”

“Shit.” There’s a pause while something rattles at his end, and then he says, “Can we do this on video? I want to see your face right now.”

“Sure. I’ll call you back.”

I’m not surprised he wants to switch to video, since Garth has always been a master at reading body language. And like all highly instinctual alphas, he doesn’t feel like he’s really checked in unless he can see us face-to-face.

“You look tired, Josh,” is the first thing he says, his eyes crinkled with disapproval. “You’re pushing yourself too hard.”

“You can talk,” I snort, giving him a fond smile. “Did you have to pay extra for that baggage you’re carrying under your eyes?”

“Cheeky shit,” he mutters, rubbing at his face. Of course, Garth always looks good. He’s built on the hard, masculine

lines of a dominant alpha, so a few sleepless nights just add to his allure. But it's fun teasing him all the same. "So, first things first. Is Grace okay? Rich's sleepwalking must have been a shock."

My chest warms at his concern. "Yeah, but she's not ready to talk about it. She wanted to come into the office, but she seems a bit brittle today."

"You'll keep an eye on her?"

"Of course."

"And what about Richard?" A mix of sorrow and anger swirls in Garth's eyes. "I thought he was past that trauma."

I nod, my own mood darkening. "I did too. But he was in deep. When I took him back to his bed, he kept saying he could smell her under his skin. It was a bit too much like how he was after his mom died."

Garth makes a troubled sound, and I know we're both remembering those first months after Richard came to live with us. His mother's demons took a couple of years to claim her, and Richard nursed her until her eventual death. It wasn't pretty, and for a long time, he was obsessive about washing, often scrubbing his skin until it was raw. We eventually got the truth out of him – he was trying to wash away his mother's stench.

"I should've come home earlier," Garth sighs. "Introducing new pack members could've sparked something in him."

"Maybe, but if the trauma's still there, it's probably better that we know about it. Richard's never been very open about his feelings. At least this way we might be able to get him to talk to us."

Garth gives a frustrated rumble, and I know he's chiding himself for neglecting Richard's needs. It's guilt he doesn't deserve, but as an uber alpha, Garth always carries the weight of the world on his ample shoulders.

"What about Max?" he asks with a cautious smile. "Has he settled in? Any tension between him and Rich?"

“He’s happy if Grace is happy,” I reply, and shrug. They really are perfect together, and in no world can I imagine inviting only one of them into our pack. “As for how things are going with Richard, it’s hard to tell. He’s been avoiding all of us. And if you think I’m working long hours, last night was the first time he’s slept in his bed all week.”

Garth sighs, drumming his fingers on the arm of his chair. “Okay. Well, we have to make this work somehow. I’ve talked to Danny, and I don’t think I’ve ever seen him so smitten.”

I smirk, remembering the way I found them cuddled up on a lounge on the terrace. He saw her doing laps on the surveillance feed and stomped up there like a worried papa bear fishing his baby cub out of the river. “Agreed. I wouldn’t be surprised if he doesn’t tell us he wants to bond them in the next week or so.”

Garth’s brows shoot up. “That soon?”

I pause, thinking of the change I’ve seen in our newest packmate. “I think he needs them, Garth. Richard might be more obvious about his trauma, but Daniel’s still trying to convince himself he’s not one of Quinn’s thugs anymore.”

A possessive growl rattles from Garth’s throat, the tendons straining against his thick neck. “He’s *ours*. And if anyone needs reminding of that – Danny included - I’ll be happy to provide the update.”

I cough, discreetly shifting my rousing cock under the desk. Daniel might make a sexy papa bear, but no one does dominant daddy like Garth. “And you know I’ll buy tickets to watch.”

We both smirk, the tension deliciously hot for a moment. But then I lean forward, worry sinking its hooks back into me. “But I guess I’m also asking, if Richard can’t live *with* them, and Daniel can’t live *without* them, what the hell does that mean for the rest of us?”



21. GRACE

In my wildest dreams, I never thought I'd be attending the Heart of the House gala on the arm of the most beautiful omega in the world. I might be biased, since there are flocks of stunning omegas swirling around us in the foyer of H.O.M.E., but I'm not the only one who can't keep my eyes off Max. He wears his tuxedo like it's just another band tee, but it clings to his lean body like a second skin. And while the pack stylists have pampered and coiffed me to within an inch of my life, Max's ruffled blond mane somehow makes his formal attire look even more striking. For someone who's used to keeping in the background of things, it's quite refreshing to be caught in his spotlight.

"Do you have any idea how badly I'm drooling right now?" Max murmurs in my ear as we make our way towards the ballroom.

The hungry note in his voice sends a shiver through me, but somehow I manage a coy smile as we stroll through the elegant guests. "Even though you tackled that server to get the last appetizer off his tray?"

He narrows his eyes, his lips quirking into a sultry smirk. "What can I say? You make me ravenous, GW, and a couple of mini wieners isn't going to cut it."

I snort a laugh, clutching his arm tighter in mine. Of course, I get a few patronizing looks from passing alphas, but I lift my chin, determined to ignore them. Tonight is our night, and I'm not going to let any negative energy ruin it for us.

You're doing that all on your own, Grace.

I try to ignore the sardonic little voice in my head, but it's not wrong. Because as much as I want to buy into the fantasy

of tonight, I can't forget that the Ferro Club card I stole from Garth's desk is burning a hole in the bottom of my cute clutch. A part of me still can't believe I found it, but it had been right *there*, in the same drawer as his diamond-studded cufflinks. So easy, I wasn't sure if it was fate, or if I was being set up. As I stood in Garth's office, breathing in his heavenly scent, paranoia burrowed into me like a poisoned worm. Maybe someone overheard Kayden's ultimatum, and the pack was testing me with the perfect trap. At any moment, our furious CEO could stalk up to me and rip me from Max's arms, and would I really have any right to stop him?

The card itself is nothing special to look at – matte black, the size of my ID badge, with FERRO written across the front in gold script. But I know the betrayal isn't really about a piece of plastic. I'm certain Garth could tell the club owners that he lost his card, and they'd still let him in. This is about allegiance, and the fact I'd steal for the Sawyer Pack when the Roses have invited me into their home... and maybe even a couple of their hearts.

I spent most of the day fighting off waves of nausea, oscillating between coming clean, and running and hiding at the bottom of the nearest swimming pool. But a sense of calm descended over me as soon as I saw Max in his tux. Not just because he looks so beautiful, but because the faint lines of worry have finally faded from his eyes. All that shit he went through with the west coast pack left its mark, and I know how hard he's struggled to trust himself again. To feel safe and respected; two things Kayden would strip from him in a vicious heartbeat. I know I'm gambling with my future by giving into my stepbrother's demands – and that more than just my internship at House of Omega is at stake – but if my betrayal keeps Max out of Kayden's hands, then losing everything else will be worth it.

So I swallow back the whimper that's building in my chest and act as if I'm having the night of my life. And in a lot of ways, I am. Not only do I have Max on my arm, but both Joshua and Daniel have been in close attendance since we arrived, their eyes lighting up every time they catch mine. They're on host duty, so they can only stop by for a moment,

but every brush of their fingers across my back sends decadent sparks down my spine.

Their attentiveness is drawing curious glances from every direction, but I can't bear to pull away. In a perfect world, the pack will announce our courting arrangement tonight, and I can claim them in front of the entire ballroom. But then Joshua's lips dip to my ear and he murmurs, "Garth's on his way. I'll come get you when he arrives, so we can have a private meeting."

I gulp, the reality of what I've done making my skin crawl. But I manage to give him a small nod as Max leads us over to our front row seats. A runway has been set up with a circular stage at the end, the H.O.M.E. emblem a gold flourish on the dark wood. There's a program on my seat, and I pick it up and flick through it, even though I went over the details with Joshua earlier. He'll be announcing the Heart of the House first, and then they will officially launch Magnetism, with samples of the innovative perfume provided in the event's swag bags. Then the showcases will kick off, the guests encouraged to wander through the installations and talk to the various designers and product managers. As I settle into my seat, I catch Sally Vass watching me from her display and she gives me an excited wave, shooting a thumbs up at my dress.

"I really need to talk to her about designing a men's line," Max murmurs, hooking his fingers under the strap on my shoulder. I've noticed the guys can barely restrain themselves from stroking the leather, and I'm not sure if it's because it's infused with the scent of alpha musk, or if it's because the resemblance to bondage is giving them ideas. "All my years of fashion shows, and this is the first time I've wanted to fuck in the front row."

When he leans down to nuzzle my neck, I have to bite back a whimper of need. It doesn't help that Daniel folds himself into the seat next to me, his hand going instantly to my upper thigh. He's wearing a tux, like Max, except his lapels *are* leather and I watch Max pout in envy. "Where did you get that?"

“You like it?” Daniel asks, knowing full well he looks scorching hot in his ensemble. When Max’s eyes narrow in warning, Daniel gives a teasing smirk. “I had my fairy godmother whip it up when I heard what our girl was wearing to the ball.”

Max snorts, but I can’t keep the grin off my face. Daniel didn’t even attempt to keep his voice down, and I hear a few startled titters from the row behind us. Even as I melt under the weight of his hooded stare, it strikes me that after tonight, our relationship will be public knowledge. If the pack doesn’t get around to announcing it, the rumor mill definitely will.

He’s just leaning in for a kiss when Joshua appears on the stage, the music and applause ramping up as he gives a quick bow. He looks amazing in his slim-fit navy tux, the lights dancing on his chestnut curls and giving his tanned skin a delicious glow. His gaze instantly finds us in the front row, his brow quirking at the way Daniel is gripping my thigh. Not to be outdone, Max leans over and runs a finger along the leather straps across my bodice. Even though Joshua’s the one in the spotlight, for a moment *I’m* the one on the display, and I don’t hate that feeling. At all.

A delicious flush stains Joshua’s cheeks as he launches into the night’s program, welcoming everyone to the annual Heart of the House gala. He begins by thanking the current face of the company, Ivy Weaver, the petite blonde joining him on stage to polite applause. I’m certain half of the audience wants to scratch her eyes out, especially since she looks like a fairytale princess in her tiara and full-length gown. She’s dripping with jewels, and she definitely embodies the essence of House of Omega, even if the frou-frou sleeves and fishtail train aren’t exactly to my taste.

Her blinding smile only dips when Joshua announces her replacement, Linda Lavelle, who unsurprisingly is another gorgeous blonde in a flowing gown. She sweeps onto the stage like she’s about to pluck the tiara from Ivy’s head, but Joshua has her own set of H.O.M.E. jewels waiting. Ivy helps him drape them over the beaming newcomer, and I can feel Max laughing under his breath as we watch the two omegas try to

upstage each other. But the amusement dies from his face when Linda suddenly stands on tiptoe and presses a kiss to Joshua's lips.

It happens so quickly, I can only blink. But the evidence of the kiss is there on Joshua's mouth in glossy pink lipstick. Worse still, I'm certain I saw a whisper of tongue as the omega pressed herself against him. I try to tell myself she didn't just *lick my alpha*, but the buzzing in my hindbrain suggests otherwise. And then Max squeezes my hand so hard, I gasp. He quickly lets up on the pressure, flashing me a dark-edged wince. "Sorry, but I'm about to throw my swag bag at the bitch."

I gulp, nodding, because the tightness in my chest is demanding the same. And then Daniel leans against me, his eyes swirling with dark light. "You're growling, Grace. Want me to lure her out the back so you can wipe that smug smile off her face?"

I almost choke on my next breath, because he's right. There's a possessive rattle coming from my chest, and my fingers are curled into claws. It doesn't help that the pink stain of the omega's lipstick is still clinging to Joshua's mouth. Before I can stop myself, I leap to my feet, Joshua's head snapping my way as I stride along the length of the stage. I'm not sure what he sees in my eyes, but he turns back to the crowd and murmurs, "I'll let our new Heart of the House tell you all about herself. Linda, a few words for our guests?"

"I'd love to, Joshua," the omega gushes back, but I'm already moving behind the thick theater curtains at the back of the stage. The adjoining room is a flurry of activity with all the models and stylists working the showcases, but I ignore them, hands on hips, as I wait for Joshua to dismount the stage.

"Sweetheart..." he begins, but I just grab his hand and stride towards the nearest bathroom. There's a pretty male omega zipping up at the urinal, but he takes one look at my face and slides past us, biting his lip.

Pushing Joshua against the counter, I grab a folded washcloth and run it under the faucet. He raises his eyebrows

at me, but I ignore him, rubbing the wet cloth over his mouth. Even though I'm expecting it, my eyes narrow at the pink lipstick that stains the white fabric. "She *kissed* you," I growl, knowing I'm overreacting, but not sure how to curb the jealousy clawing at my chest. "She marked you up, for everyone to see."

"Shit," he breathes out, taking the cloth and rubbing ruthlessly at his lips. "You know I didn't want her to-."

"I know," I cut him off, wrapping my arms around my body. I'm not just growling, I'm vibrating with jealousy. "But the fact she thought she *could* - that's what pisses me off."

He nods, his brow furrowing as he tosses the washcloth aside. But when he takes a step towards me, I hold up a hand. "You smell like her," I mutter, unable to keep the grimace off my face. "Take off your jacket."

He doesn't hesitate, thumbing the button and slipping it from his broad shoulders. His dress shirt is a very pale blue, the scent of expensive cotton and alpha male flooding my senses. But the omega's perfume still clings to him and I reach for another washcloth, desperate to cleanse him of her cloying perfume. But when I bring the dripping cloth towards him, I hesitate. I can't ruin his beautiful tux over a meaningless kiss.

"I'm sorry," I murmur, feeling like the world's biggest fool. "I overreacted..."

But Joshua has tossed the washcloth aside and opened his arms. There's a soft light in his caramel eyes that eases some of the sting from those jealous claws. "You could just hug me, sweetheart."

I take a step towards him, then stop. Because as much as I want to melt into him, that omega's scent taunts me – lily, peach, and a sugary scent that reminds me of marshmallow. *Goddamn my sensitive nose.* "It won't work. My scent isn't strong enough to cover hers."

Joshua's frown deepens, but then he grabs his collar, working the knot out of his bowtie. He strips it off and drops it on the counter, heat sparking in his eyes. "Then mark me."

“What?” I’m distracted by the way his long, nimble fingers are sliding down his shirt, plucking his pearl buttons free. “You mean my lipstick?”

“No. I want you to bite me, Grace.”

Warmth floods through me in a heady rush. *Yes*. I want to bond him. Not just my bite on his neck, but his on mine, so the whole world will know he’s my alpha... “Joshua, we can’t. The courting contract states all parties have to agree before any bites can be exchanged.”

“Fine, then suck on my neck,” he says, tearing at the pearl buttons on his dress shirt. “Put your mark on me, sweetheart. So that when I go back on stage, every person in that ballroom knows I’m taken.”

That’s music to my ears, and I’m moving before the last word is out of his mouth, clawing my way up his body so I can reach his neck. My heels help, but it’s the fact he slumps against the counter, lowering himself under me, that makes me light up with satisfaction. Joshua is the epitome of the charming, sophisticated alpha, but right now he’s submitting to my need on a damp bathroom counter. His shirt is hanging off his arms, his neck tilted back as he lays himself bare for my hungry touch. I don’t hold back, grabbing his curls in my hands and devouring his mouth.

That sweet omega scent fades under the flood of alpha musk. Joshua returns every sweep and thrust of my tongue, his hands roaming and squeezing until I’m putty in his hands. But that territorial bitch under my skin won’t let me rest yet, and I pepper kisses down his neck until I reach the thudding pulse in his throat. My teeth latch on without warning, his body going rigid under me as I suck my claim into his skin. I moan at the taste of his flesh - a little salty, a little sweet, but unmistakably alpha – and I wish with everything in me that he’d reverse our positions, and lay claim to me, too.

But I manage to pull away, a dark satisfaction curling through me at the blossoming bruise on his neck. His eyes are blown, his breath reedy, and my need for his bite now throbs between my legs. “I want you inside me,” I whine, rubbing

hard against the bulge in his pants. “I want you to mark me with your cum, Alpha.”

God, I sound feral. But Joshua doesn’t seem to mind, growling as he takes my lips in another scorching kiss. “Me too,” he pants, covering my hand with his and squeezing his hot shaft. “I want it more than anything. But not in here... and not in that dress.”

I whine in disappointment, because as much as I love Sally’s creation, it’s not built for a bathroom quickie.

Which is probably a good thing when there’s a tap at the door. I stiffen, but Joshua wraps his arms protectively around me, and a moment later Max peeks his head inside, his eyes wide as he stares at us. “Okay. Levi said you were in a state, but I didn’t think we were talking wild bathroom sex territory.”

I assume Levi is the omega my green-eyed monster chased out of here. “Not sex,” I tell him, my voice still raspy with frustration. “I just had to get the lipstick off. And the perfume...”

“And the tuxedo?” Max smirks, grabbing Joshua’s jacket from the floor. “Whoa. That’s one hell of a hickey you have there, Alpha.”

“Grace marked me,” Joshua says, sounding absurdly proud as he turns to the mirror to study it.

“And that’s hot as fuck,” Max replies, amusement dancing in his eyes, “but unless you want to see a Heart of the House catfight, I think you need to come back out and kick them off the stage.”

“Shit.” Joshua starts buttoning his shirt, his angry scowl so out of character I giggle. Maybe I’m drunk on his pheromones, but I’m absurdly happy to see him so annoyed. He flings his bowtie around his neck like it’s a noose, barely bothering to tie it. When he’s done, he runs his fingers over my bite – which is a glaring red against the pale collar of his shirt – and gives me a wink. “You can do the other side when we get home tonight, if you like.”

There's no way I'm turning down an offer like that, my toes curling as he kisses me hard and leaves the bathroom. I turn back to the mirror, and not even the sight of my crazy hair and smeared makeup can dampen my smile. *Joshua Rose is mine.*

"Jesus, he didn't even remember his jacket," Max says with a gleeful laugh, flinging it across his arm. "Pretty sure you scrambled his brain with that monster hickey, GW."

"That's my version of a mating bite," I tell him, grabbing a fresh washcloth and pressing it to my tingling lips. "Fair warning, because alphas aren't the only ones with teeth."

"Fuck, that sounds good to me," Max murmurs, coming up behind me and nuzzling on my neck. "I've already picked out where I want you to do it, too."

I blink at him in the mirror, warmth flooding my chest. Alphas bite their omegas to cement their pack bonds, but it's rare for betas to be able to forge a similar connection. "You really want me to bite you?"

"Absolutely." There isn't a shadow of doubt in his eyes, and he arches his neck, exposing a tender spot on his throat. "Right here. Over my scent gland."

I stare at him, caught between shock and a surge of pure, possessive joy. "But that's..."

"For soulmates. You think I feel this way about anyone else?" He rests his chin on my shoulder, smiling at my speechless reflection. "I told you. It's you and me all the way, gorgeous woman." He drops a kiss on the side of my neck, nuzzling the skin with just the edge of his teeth. I hold myself still, barely breathing, until he gives a reluctant sigh and hooks Joshua's jacket over his shoulder. "You coming with me to redress your man?"

I like the sound of that a *lot*, but I grab my clutch, fumbling for my lipstick. As much as I want to find Joshua and admire my handiwork, I need a moment to catch my breath. "I think I better freshen up first."

Max palms my ass and heads out with a knowing smirk. Now would be a good time for my backup panties, but I spend

a full minute just leaning on the counter and staring blankly at my reflection. *I just gave Joshua a claiming bite, and Max told me I'm his soulmate.* Both reasons to dance for joy, but I can't stop thinking about the card in my clutch.

I need to find Daniel and confess everything. I shudder at the thought, but my spine stiffens with resolve. He will probably hate me for it, but he's the only one who might hear me out before he condemns me. Plus, I know I can trust him to put Max's safety above all else.

My soulmate.

The word is still playing through my mind as I leave the bathroom. I can hear Joshua's voice over the microphone, so I assume the omega catfight has been diverted, but I can't force myself to return to my seat just yet. Pulling my phone out, I'm busy dialing Daniel's number when a hard arm snakes around my waist, fingers digging cruelly into my side. I'd flinch away, but I recognize my stepbrother's touch only too well. And before I can utter a word, Kayden's steering me past the models and stylists, his strides so quick I'm stumbling in my heels. He's wearing a tux, so no one gives him a second glance, but the shock of seeing him here is like finding a snake curled in my bed. "How did you get in?"

He flicks a glance at me, my stomach clenching at the rage dancing in his eyes. "A disgruntled employee gave me his ticket," he replies as he nudges me around a partition. We're entering the area set out for the showcases, and I realize he's going to march me right out of the ballroom. "Said he got kicked out of his job because a mouthy little beta was sucking the boss' cock." His hand encircles the back of my neck, squeezing hard. "Imagine my surprise when he described my little mouse down to the last detail?"

I don't know which employee he's talking about, but it doesn't matter. The point is he's *here*. The one place I thought I'd never have to face him. "I have the Ferro card. I was going to mail it to you..."

"You can give it to me when we get home," he mutters, steering me across the room. Showcases flash by in a blur until

I catch sight of Sally, her worried eyes on me. I stumble, and when Kayden growls down at me, I flash her a pleading look. Her mouth drops open in shock, and I think she's got my S.O.S., but Kayden is moving too fast to tell.

Not that it matters. I can't wait around for someone to get me out of this nightmare.

I suddenly picture Sally dashing off to tell Max, and my over-protective omega, hurling himself in the path of my stepbrother. The thought is enough to make me stagger to a halt. Kayden jerks my arm, but I dig my heels in and drive an elbow up into his ribs. It punches a grunt out of him and I take a step back, raising my hands. "I'm not going with you, Kayden. And if you try to make me, I'll scream. Security will be on us before you can make it to the street."

"You've grown some teeth, little mouse?" He sneers down at me, ducking past my palm-heel strike and muscling me into the wall. He uses his body to herd me back until I can feel the silk wallpaper brush my hands. I can see a security camera over his shoulder, and I pray it's angled our way as he drags his nose down my cheek and bites the edge of my lip. There's no way anyone can think *this* is consensual. "Just remember," he growls, grinding down on the delicate flesh, "my teeth are bigger, and I bite a lot fucking harder."

I can't bring my knee up in the tight confines of my dress, but I can stomp on his foot, my heel driving hard into the leather. He rears back at the brutal contact, hissing through his teeth, and I let him read the resolve in my eyes. "I'm not bluffing, Kayden. I've been taking self-defense classes, and I won't hold back if you try to force me out of here."

A feral kind of glee lights up his eyes, even as his huge fingers curl into fists. "You gonna Krav Maga my ass, little mouse?" He leers at me. "You think I didn't know about that shitty little shelter under the library? I know every place you've ever been, every step you've ever taken. And a bunch of washed-up alphas can't ever take care of you the way I can."

Before I can respond to his twisted taunt, he lunges forward, slapping his hand over my mouth. His weight crashes into me and my spine slams into the wall, my groan stuttering into his palm. Everything throbs, and he grinds his groin against me, because of course the sick fuck is getting off on this.

“Had enough of playing rough?” he taunts, his smoke and steel scent choking me. “Because I can promise you, little sister, if you raise a hand against me again, I will put you in a fucking collar and let my pack loose on your ass.”

I shudder, a sob working up my throat. I can picture the scene only too well, and the beaten, helpless part of me flinches away... But fuck this! No matter what I do or say, I’ll never be able to get Kayden to back off. He *wants* to hurt me. Because that’s all I am to him; a weak little mouse to taunt, collar, and abuse.

“Just try it,” I hiss, then bite down hard, my teeth digging deep into the fleshy part of his palm. It’s more instinct than a tactical move, because I’m going to puke if I have to taste his skin one second longer.

He curses, and as soon as he pulls away, I spit his blood onto the floor. It’s immensely satisfying to see it splatter on the pale marble, and I grin at him, feeling as wild as he looks. “I have an alpha here, Kayden. A Rose, in fact. I just dragged him into that bathroom back there and tore the clothes off his body.”

My stepbrother goes white. “Don’t fucking say it, Gray...”

His bloody hand swipes at my face, but I knock him aside with a choppy block. I don’t know where I’m getting my strength from, but my muscles sing, like the sight of his blood is turning me feral. “I bit him, too. But I wanted to taste him so bad, I tore his throat up. I *marked* him, so everyone would know he’s mine. And I would’ve fucked him right there if I could get this goddamn dress off...”

He lunges for me again, but this time something other than my arm blocks him. It’s the size of a wall, and for a moment I have to wonder if Sally shoved one of the installations in

Kayden's way. But then my raised fists press into thick slabs of alpha muscle, and Garth Rose growls, "Who the fuck let this piece of trash into *my* house?"



22. GRACE

Tension throbs through me like a dark wind. At first, I think it's the blood in my ears, until I realize Garth is growling, a pulsing rumble that vibrates against my palms. All I can see of him is his huge back, wrapped in a sleek black tux, and the edge of his hard profile. He's bigger even than Daniel in build, but his features are more refined. Eyes as black as coal are framed by inky lashes, his dark hair slicked back, exposing sharp cheekbones and a slim, patrician nose. His mouth is lush for a man, but right now it's twisted into a sneer, and the dominance radiating off him almost burns my palms.

It takes me a moment to realize Kayden is growling too, but it's a low, muted sound compared to what's rattling out of Garth's chest. Because as cruel and controlling as my stepbrother can be, he's not an uber alpha. He doesn't have the same depths of dominance to draw from when he tries to bend someone to his will.

Which, I think now, is maybe why he's always treated me like a caged mouse. A real man, a real alpha, doesn't need to abuse a person to get what they want.

"You need to fucking step aside and give her to me!"

My stepbrother's scent fills the air like a toxic mist, but I don't know why he's still arguing with Garth; he must know there's no way he can win. If this is a competition, my stepbrother lost the day he presented as plain old alpha.

And I can't resist stepping out from behind Garth and sneering into his face. "Didn't Daddy teach you anything, Kayden? Uber trumps asshole every time."

It's petty and stupid, since my stepbrother could still level me with a hard sneeze, but the wild look in his eyes sends a

thrill through me. For all his sneering brutality, he's still only a shadow of his father, and Kayden knows it. "Watch your fucking mouth, Gray..."

He leans forward, like he's about to lunge for me, but when a large hand wraps around my arm, it's Garth, not my stepbrother. His touch instantly settles me, and his scent – a mix of musk and bottled lightning – makes my bones go liquid. I don't even pretend to resist when he pulls me against his side, and I smile at the way Kayden grinds his teeth. He looks unhinged, like another taunt will push him over the edge, and as much as I'd like to be the one to send him plummeting, the slight pressure of Garth's hand keeps my mouth shut.

"Let me make myself very clear, Sawyer," Garth says in a voice honed in a high-powered boardroom. "Your stepsister is not your property. She's an employee of my company, and a guest of my home. You can either respect that, or I'll throw the full force of my pack at you. And when we're done, there won't be enough left to shovel into a shoebox."

A dark thrill goes through me at the pure uber menace in his voice. Not that long ago, it would have me cringing in the corner, fearing for my mom's safety and my own sanity. But I know without a shadow of a doubt that this isn't just some cruel and twisted power play. Garth makes the rules, and if someone is stupid enough to break them, the apex animal living under his exquisite suit comes out to remind them who's boss.

"Want us to toss him out, Mr. Rose?" I startle at the unfamiliar voice until I realize a couple of the security guys are flanking us. They're both in black – tactical rather than formalwear – and holding handguns, the barrels leveled on my stepbrother.

"No," Garth replies. "Just keep him here while I take Ms. Worth home."

I blink up at him, but he's already leading me to a side door. I want to warn him that Porter - and maybe even Derek – might be lurking nearby, but as soon as we step outside, I

know it doesn't matter. Because there's a huge black SUV waiting for us, a phalanx of security lining the alleyway. The back door is open, and one of the guards extends a hand to help me into the car, but Garth brushes him back. "Deal with Sawyer. As soon as we're home, I want him dumped at his closest club. And make sure you curb any interest in returning."

The guard gives a grim nod, but Garth's hand is on my lower back, his head bent towards mine as he studies the confines of my dress. It seems he can switch from issuing orders to gentlemanly concern in the flick of his silky lashes. "Want me to pick you up and put you inside?"

I flush at the image, but shake my head, hiking my butt onto the seat and swiveling my legs past the door. I edge along the seat, pausing only when I see Richard sitting up front next to the driver. But then Garth is folding his massive body in beside me and I scoot over further. The door closes with a dull thud and the driver takes off, Richard's gaze fixed straight ahead. I grip my clutch and turn to Garth. "I'm so sorry that happened. I didn't know he was going to be there."

"It's not your job to keep tabs on your stepbrother," Garth replies, turning his massive shoulders so he's angled towards me, his black eyes searching mine. "Are you alright?"

"I'm fine." I give my standard response to that question, but when I think about it, I realize it's true. My heart is racing, and I'm bruised from where Kayden pushed me around, but I'm riding some kind of adrenaline high. Confrontations with a Sawyer usually make me want to curl into a ball and rock, but my blood is still singing and I keep remembering the wild look in Kayen's eyes when I threw his designation in his face. *Don't dish it, if you can't take it, dirtbag.*

"What was he doing there?" Richard asks in a clipped voice from the front seat. He's still not looking at us, but I can see his jaw ticking, and the sour edge to his scent is wafting through the car. "And how the hell did he get past our security? I thought Daniel had things locked down."

I avoid the first question, but can't let Daniel shoulder the blame for the second. "Kayden said he got the ticket from an ex-employee. Someone with an axe to grind, I think." I don't add the bit about sucking the boss' cock, given the company I'm in. "How did you know he was there? Did Sally find you?"

"We had him on security the moment he entered the building," Garth says, those dark eyes still burning into the side of my face. "I only arrived when he'd already made contact, but you were never in any real danger. And there was no way he was getting you out of the building."

"You were expecting him," I say, trying to keep the hurt from reflecting on my face. "I was bait?"

"We knew he would try something. Better in my territory than his."

My stomach squeezes, that surge of adrenaline fading and leaving a bitter taste on the back of my tongue. "He wasn't just there for me," I say, my voice echoing strangely in my ears. As if on auto-pilot, I open my clutch and pull out the Ferro Club card. "He told me to find this and give it to him."

Garth takes the card between two thick fingers and flips it over. There's not even a hint of surprise on his face. "The cards all have tracing chips in them. I was alerted as soon as you took it from my desk."

Shame burns in my cheeks, and I have to bite back a groan. All that anxiety about betraying him, and he already knew. Is that why Kayden wanted me to steal it? Did he know the chip would activate, proving I wasn't to be trusted? I feel like an idiot, and my embarrassment deepens as Richard turns to look at me. "You stole from us?"

I open my mouth, but I can't deny it. I drag my gaze away from his accusing stare and watch as Garth tucks the card in his breast pocket. The alpha smooths down his lapel, then rubs a thoughtful hand over the cleft in his chin. "I imagine Sawyer didn't give you much choice."

“He didn’t.” I force myself to look into Garth’s dark eyes. I could tell him about the threat of a claiming bond on Max, the promise to burn their house down, but I know it’s too little, too late. “I should have told someone right away. I’m sorry.”

“You should have.” He pulls his phone from his pocket and scrolls to his call log. “But perhaps we haven’t done the best job of convincing you to trust us.”

Richard stiffens, but Garth is starting a video call and Daniel’s furious face suddenly appears on the screen. His gaze flashes my way, and some of the panic bleeds out of his eyes. “Did he hurt you, Grace? The blood...”

I remember the violent splatter on the ballroom floor. “His. I bit his hand.”

A visceral thrill surges through me at the approval shining in his eyes. “Good girl. But make sure you wash your mouth out. That fucker must taste rank.”

“It was worth it,” I tell him, absently stroking my wrist. Sally fashioned me a cuff of tiny diamantes – since I couldn’t bear to wrap it in leather – and I smile at the feel of the tiny gems under my fingers. “He wasn’t expecting his little mouse to have some teeth.”

“Is he off the premises?” Garth interrupts my preening.

“He’s gone. We scooped up one of his packmates, but no sign of the other asshole.”

“Good. Then finish up as soon as you can and take the jet to Paris. Josh and Max can meet with the team prepping for Fashion Week and you can look into that patent issue first hand.”

Daniel frowns, his eyes flicking my way. “Seriously? I thought we were going to do the whole pack bonding thing.”

My stomach churns at the sticky silence, and I brace for one of them to tell him about my betrayal. But Garth just gives him a level look. “I need you to do this for me, Danny.”

He doesn’t look happy, searching my face again. “Josh isn’t going to like it. And Max is going to kick my ass.”

“I trust you to take care of it, Danny.” There’s a sliver of authority in Garth’s voice and I watch Daniel’s pupils dilate. It’s right on the edge of being an alpha command – something I’m only too familiar with from growing up in the Sawyer household – and my breath catches. But Garth eases back in his seat and gives his packmate a small nod. “Travel safe, and I’ll talk to you tomorrow.”

He ends the call before Daniel can reply, and the tension is suddenly so thick in the car it makes my throat burn. But it’s Richard who says in a low, angry voice, “We could’ve still done the Magnetism launch. Everything was ready to go.”

The smile drops from Garth’s lips. “I suggest you stop worrying about work and start thinking about your family, Alpha.” But the way Richard’s shoulders tense around his ears has Garth sighing and backing off. “Look, we’re all tired. Let’s get a good night’s sleep and we can sort things out tomorrow.”

Richard doesn’t say anything else and I turn to the window, staring out at the city traffic. Now the adrenaline has worn off, I can feel my panic rising again, and I try to keep my breathing calm. But it’s impossible. I know we’re not done talking about the card I stole, and there has to be a reason he’s sending the others off to Paris. Is he trying to keep me away from Max? It makes sense. I might have breached my contract – and probably a few laws – but Max and I are a package deal. It’ll be a lot easier to give me my marching orders when Max isn’t around to cause a fuss.

My gaze snags on a familiar building, and I grab the seat. It’s the public library on 67th Street... “I need to get out. I need to warn them.”

There’s no way they can’t smell my panic, and I squirm on my seat, caught between begging the driver to pull over, and lunging at the alpha beside me. No doubt he’d swat me off like a bug, but it’d be better than letting Kayden take out his twisted frustration on Billy and the shelter...

What I don’t expect is the hand that comes down on the back of my neck. It’s right where Kayden gripped me, but the

pressure is different, a thick thumb circling the top of my spine. “All you need to do is calm down.”

I know better than to try to pull away, but my heart starts pounding like it’s trying to break through my bondage dress. I look at the door, wondering if the driver will stop if I hurl it open...

“Rest now,” Garth purrs, his fingers giving the slightest squeeze. I don’t know if it’s his voice or his touch, but darkness rushes over me. The only thing that stops me from crying out is that it feels more like a thick blanket than a suffocating wave. But it drags me down all the same, and the last thing I hear is Garth murmuring, “You’ve got a lot of explaining to do, Richard.”



I wake in a nest. It’s round, with curved edges; a decadent wreath of silky cushions and snuggly blankets, big enough to house a pack. The pillow under my head smells like alpha musk and lightning, and I realize I’m in Garth’s room, or a nest he visits pretty frequently. I think of that escort service Joshua said he uses, and jealously surges inside me, but I push it down. Not just because I have no right to be upset about anything he does, but because I can’t pick up so much as a whiff of perfume in the bedding.

I’m still wearing Sally’s bondage dress, so I roll to the edge of the bed and clamber over the curved lip. When I’m standing on trembling legs, I look back at the nest and try to picture Max there. Of course, it’s easy to do. Max was made for beautiful things, even if he prefers his jeans and band tees to custom fit tuxedos.

Longing tightens my chest, and I look around the room, determined to find a phone. I circle the bed, checking both nightstands, then search the dresser and the tallboy. There’s a closet, the same dark wood of the walls, but laid out with the decadence of the bed. It isn’t just a place to store clothes and shoes, but a display worthy of a H.O.M.E. showcase, with floor-to-ceiling cabinetry, spotlight displays, and a crystal

chandelier. The clothing is mostly masculine, although there's a rack of female items, all still tagged. I finger the edge of a silk wrap dress and consider putting it on. But that would feel too much like laying a claim I haven't earned.

"Good morning," a voice says from the door, and I turn to find Richard watching me. He's wearing a pair of gray sweats, a chunky oatmeal sweater, and thick bed socks. It's the most casual I've ever seen him, and for some reason, it feels like *I'm* the one who's crept up on *him*. "Garth wants to see you in his office."

His gaze is locked on my collarbones, but I fold my arms until he finally meets my eyes. "Can I borrow your phone? I want to talk to Max."

He gestures to his casual attire. "I just got out of bed myself. But there's a phone in Garth's office."

Something I'm well aware of, since I searched the room when I was looking for the Ferro Club card.

I'm tempted to go to my own suite and get changed, but a part of me just wants to get this over with. And I'm guessing my hosts feel the same way, since I'm being summoned before I've even had breakfast.

"I'm sorry about the other night," Richard says when we're in the elevator, punching the button for the floor below us. "Josh told me what I did. I haven't sleepwalked in years, and I think all the stress of the gala just pushed me over the edge."

I stand frozen, not sure what to do with his apology. It's delivered in the same voice I'd use if we bumped into each other in the hallway, and not engaged in semi-conscious sex on the kitchen island. "It's fine. Joshua explained it to me, too."

He looks slightly uneasy at that. But then, when hasn't Richard been uncomfortable around me?

I'm the first out of the elevator, desperate to leave that sticky silence behind. When I reach Garth's office, I find him sitting behind an elegant mahogany pedestal desk that I'm pretty sure is an original Thomas Hope. He drops his pen on

the hand-tooled leather blotter and looks me over with his dark eyes. “Sleep well?”

Does he care, or is he just checking on the effectiveness of his compulsion technique? “Don’t do that again,” I tell him. “Putting me under like that. I don’t like it.”

He studies me thoughtfully. “But you needed it. You were on the verge of a panic attack.”

“Then try a Xanax next time.” I’m tempted to cross my arms, but I don’t want to draw attention to the goosebumps on my skin. “I don’t have a phone. Can I use yours to call Max?”

“I’d prefer it if the three of us had a chat first.”

Garth’s tone is mild, but I know an order when I hear one. So I sink into one of the two visitor chairs, while Richard takes the other. I can see his socked foot tapping on the floor out of the corner of my eye and force myself to sit still. It’s not easy with the tension pouring off my scent-mate, but Garth doesn’t torture me for long. “Were you intimate with your stepfather, Ms. Worth?”

I’d been expecting questions since I outed Barker as an uber, but not *this* one, and I can’t keep the revulsion off my face. “No! Never.”

“But you were with his son. Correct?”

I can see Richard twitch at my side, hard enough to knock the desk leg with a hard thunk. But I keep my chin up, refusing to be defined by what Kayden has done to me. “Yes. But only after my mom died. I was sixteen by then.”

Garth’s dark eyes don’t so much as flicker. “And his packmates? Were you intimate with them as well?”

I pull a face – I can’t help it – the thought of Porter and Derek always makes me nauseous. But the sound that comes out of Richard sounds like the snarl of a feral wolf. “Why the fuck are you asking her that, Garth? It’s none of your fucking business!”

“It’s fine,” I say quickly, even though I can taste bile in the back of my throat. “If you want the gory details, I’ll give them

to you. No, Kayden didn't let his friends fuck me. He told them they couldn't until after he'd claimed me, and I was officially their companion. But he started coming into my room as soon as we moved in. Mostly it was just bullying, or to keep my mom in line. After she died, he came by a couple of times a week. Less bullying and more sex, although the two things are one and the same in my stepbrother's head."

I feel a flush of shame, but also relief. I've never told anyone that, although Jasmine has probably guessed. But Garth isn't watching me. His focus is all on Richard, who's gripping the arms of his chair hard enough to make them creak.

"That's fucking *enough*, Garth," he says in a low, dangerous voice. When he gets to his feet, it's like watching a striking snake uncoil. "I'm not staying here for this. And if you keep it up, I'm calling Danny and Josh."

Garth just cocks an eyebrow at him. "While you're on your feet, go into your office and bring me a bottle of Magnetism."

Richard blinks at him, his jaw throbbing. "What?"

"You heard me." Garth looks away from his packmate, clearly dismissing him, then reaches in his desk drawer to pull out the Ferro Club card. He places it on the desk halfway between us, and Richard pivots with a growl, stomping to the door in his socks. It would be kind of cute if my head wasn't pounding in time with his angry steps. As soon as he's gone, Garth taps the card. "Why do you think he wanted you to take this?"

Take, not steal, but I squash the little bubble of hope. "Because it would break this. You, me, your pack. He knew you'd kick me out, and I'd be forced to go back to him."

"And is that what you'd do? If I kicked you out, I mean?"

My hands curl into fists on my thighs. "Never. I'd disappear. Go somewhere he can't ever find me, even if it means running for the rest of my life." I wait for him to ask how Max fits into this plan – since leaving him would

probably kill me – but Richard is striding back in the room with a bottle of the perfume in his white-knuckled hand.

He still smells like pissed-off alpha, but there's a thoughtful look on his face as he points at the card on the desk. "I called club management last night. They told me he's been trying to get a foot in the door of Ferro for years. Seems his dad was a member, but it was revoked for 'unscrupulous dealings'. After he died, Kayden tried to get admitted using the inheritance clause, but was turned down. My guess is he wanted to use your card to get in and..." He drifts off, as if he can't imagine what my nefarious stepbrother would do once he had free rein of an elite club.

"Burn the place to the ground," I murmur. "If he can't have it, no one can."

The irony isn't lost on me. In some twisted way, Kayden and I aren't so different. I've been trying to find a way into the Roses' world so I could add some value to their company, while my stepbrother wants to hijack their life so he can destroy it.

"Maybe," Garth says slowly. "Or perhaps he would try to prove his value to the club. Forge a place for himself, using his gambling connections."

I shrug, but it might work, since half the city's elite are caught in the Sawyer Pack's dirty web.

I'm still considering this when Garth takes the bottle of perfume and comes around to our side of the desk. "Wrists out, please."

I obey, simply out of habit, while Richard seems too confused to refuse. Garth gives us both a liberal squirt on our pulse points, then leans against the edge of the desk and takes a long, deep breath. I try to do the same, but the scent that floods my nose has me gripping the arms of my chair, every cell in my body clamoring to reach for the man beside me.

Mine. Mine. Mine.

"Yep. That explains it." Garth sounds almost relieved, until he turns to the other alpha and growls, "So why the fuck didn't

you tell me she's your scent-mate, Richard?"



23. GARTH

A blankness falls over Richard's face that can only be called a mask. I know it well from those early days after his mother died, and it hurts just as much now as it did then. Because the one thing the domineering beast under my skin wants above all else is the trust of our pack. He's like a faith demon, gobbling down their love and devotion to fill the needy places in my soul, and right now it feels like Richard just stabbed me in the chest with a rusty spoon.

“Did you really think I wouldn't find out? I'm a fucking *uber*, Richard. I could smell your connection the second she got into the car with us.”

Grace's eyes go wide, but for the moment, my attention is all on my packmate. Because he's standing in front of me like a blank-faced statue, and I'm fighting the overwhelming urge to knock him to the ground. “The guys told me you had something against her, but I thought it was just you being closed-off. I gave you the benefit of the doubt. And all the time you were deliberately avoiding her because she was your *scent-mate*. Are you going to deny it to her face, Richard?”

He lifts his head, but his eyes are so glazed, I'm not sure he's even seeing her. Or me. In fact, he looks like he's just woken up and found himself standing in rush hour traffic. “I didn't know.”

Now I really want to grab him and shake him, but Grace makes a disgusted sound. “Are you kidding me? I'm a beta, you asshole, and I knew the second I looked at you! It was like... nothing I'd ever smelled before.”

The hurt is impossible to miss under her anger, and my protective instincts come roaring to the fore. Not that they've retreated much since the run-in with her shit of a stepbrother.

But I pull her off her chair, walking her over to the sofa I use when I'm too tired to drag myself upstairs. She doesn't fight me, and I leave her there while I grab the decanter of Douglas Laing from the sideboard. Richard has never developed a taste for good whiskey, but I'm not about to offer him a glass, anyway. I pour one for Grace and myself and then return to the sofa, sitting close enough to draw her in under my arm. If she finds me overbearing, she doesn't say anything, just staring blankly at the whiskey in her hand.

At least Richard hasn't fled the room, which I'm sure he's been tempted to. Instead, he's drifted over towards us, but he wisely doesn't sit on the sofa. Instead, he grips the back of an armchair. "I can explain it, but you won't believe me unless it comes from someone else." He nods towards the video screen on my wall. "Can I call Andy?"

"Seriously?" I grunt, not trying to hide my scorn. "You really think *this* is the time to play the phone a friend card?"

Points of color now burn in his pale cheeks, but he swallows and nods. "I think I have to. Andy was there when it happened. And you know he's trustworthy, Garth."

Trust. The magic word to make my beast sit up and beg.

But Grace has put her drink down and is looking at him almost hopefully. "Do you mean Andy Curry? Is he okay? I never got a chance to apologize for what Kayden did to him at the club."

I grind my teeth, because that's just another incident I've yet to put to rights. Andy is the closest thing Richard has to a biological brother, and if he wasn't happily involved in his own pack, he would have joined us years ago. They grew up together, and Andy is that rare creature amongst alphas – a gentle person who can find the good in almost everyone. He's also someone I'd trust with my life.

"Call him," I mutter, and Richard lurches towards the phone console, running his fingers through his wild curls. It's a strange look on him, since he's usually tidy to a fault, but I refuse to let my heart soften. He made this goddamn mess, so he can clean it the fuck up.

As if he can feel my patience running thin, he quickly dials his friend's number, and Andy's bruised and battered face suddenly appears on the screen. "Hey, Rich. Garth. Afraid you've caught me still in my pajamas." Andy peers at Grace curiously from his unswollen eye. "Hello. I think I recognize you..."

"Yes, which I'm really, really sorry about." I can feel Grace curling with shame under my arm. "You helped me outside of a nightclub, and my stepbrother took offense..."

She seems to run out of steam, but Andy is already waving off her apology. "It's okay. It's Grace, right? Rich told me about Sawyer and why he went after me." His eyebrows crinkle with concern. "As long as you're safe now, that's all that matters."

She nods, but Richard steps in front of the screen, drawing his friend's attention. "I need you to tell them what happened at your place last year. The kitchen incident."

"Oh." A small smile pulls at the cut on Andy's lip and he presses it with a finger. "You mean the Great Fire of 2023?" Richard gives him a stilted nod and Andy's smile fades. "Well, Rich came over to cook for me, which he does from time to time. I had to take a work call in my office, and when I came out, the kitchen was on fire. Richard was right there, watching something on the news, and he didn't see it. We put it out, and it was mostly smoke damage, but we were confused."

"Because he didn't smell it," I say quietly. "You have anosmia, Richard?"

He nods again, but now he's avoiding my eyes. "It's been coming on for a few years. I didn't realize until food started to taste strange, and then I was having trouble identifying some of the notes in our perfumes. The fire was what sent me to the doctor. They've done all the tests. Complete loss of smell, most likely caused by an aggravated childhood injury."

My beast is now writhing under my skin, and I know Grace can feel it, but she doesn't pull away from me. Her entire focus is on her scent-mate. "I'm so sorry, Richard. I can't even imagine how you've coped with that."

Because smell, to an alpha, is everything. It colors the world around us and guides our every instinct. It tells us who is dominant, who is a threat, and ultimately, who we can trust.

I grind my molars to stop the tears pressing against the back of my eyes. “You should have told me,” I say in a low voice. “I could have helped.”

Richard scratches the back of his neck, his posture more submissive than I’ve seen it in years. Which immediately takes me back to memories of his mother – the fucking bitch who never once earned the title – and I realize that *this* is part of her toxic legacy. The childhood trauma that stripped him of his sense of smell was no doubt dished out by her violent and twisted hands.

“I only got the final results a few months ago,” he murmurs, still staring at the floorboards. “And I guess I didn’t want to rehash all that mess.” He straightens his shoulders, like the torture he suffered all those years could be called a *mess*. But when he lifts his chin, a flash of something that looks almost hopeful flickers in his eyes. “Doctor Nora got me a place on a clinical trial in a few weeks. I was going to tell you before it started.”

But then his scent-mate came into our lives, and his confused instincts went into freefall.

“Can you sense it at all?” Grace asks, her voice small and guarded. “Now you know what it is?”

Richard holds his hands out, like he’s groping at empty air. “I could always sense something. That’s why I was so... difficult. Every time I was around you, I felt light-headed. But if I avoided you, I couldn’t concentrate. I had to find you, had to see where you were, and what you were doing, but that kind of drove me nuts, too.”

He doesn’t elaborate, but it doesn’t take a perfumer’s nose to scent Grace’s arousal in the air. Good. So he hasn’t completely fucked up their bond if she can still perfume for him. “Don’t stop now,” I tell Richard mildly. “Time to get it off your chest and confess the rest of it, brother.”

Richard goes bright red and Andy clears his throat, no doubt taking pity on his friend. They end the call, and I pour us all a drink while the scent-mates stew in their sticky silence. I smirk when I press the whiskey into Richard's reluctant hand. "Is this going to be a waste?"

He shrugs and I can't help but laugh. It's been driving Daniel nuts why a guy like Richard – who clearly appreciates the finer things in life – never shows much interest in his beloved whiskey. "You still manage to eat us out of truffles and caviar when we get them in," I remind him.

"Food therapy," he says, taking a sip of his drink. "You try to stimulate the other senses."

We sit for a moment in silence, processing everything, and then Grace makes a little humming sound. "Is that why you put me on the scent catalog? I thought you were just trying to get me out of the way, but you said it was important work."

"It is," he says promptly. "It underpins everything else. I had to build Magnetism mainly from memory, and when I heard you had such an excellent nose, I thought I'd give it to someone I could trust."

The word settles in my chest, magically healing that rusty spoon wound. But Grace looks like he's just pulled the chair out from under her. "Me? You trust me?"

Richard has the sense to look embarrassed. "My instincts do. Doctor Nora said that other parts of me have been growing stronger, to compensate for my loss. Not just my hearing, but my ability to read people. To pick things up in their body language and the inflection in their voice. Just to be clear, I wasn't avoiding you because of a trust issue, Grace."

His eyes dance away and I give a low rumble of amusement. "You were avoiding her because she made you horny."

Richard flushes all the way to his pretty auburn curls, but his lips kick up in a smile. "Mm. Like every day was rut day."

Grace sits back, clearly lost for words, but Rich and I exchange a small smile. Suddenly, the whole world seems ripe

with opportunity.

“So what happens now?” Grace asked, maybe picking up on my train of thought. “Do we start over, or do we just pretend none of this has happened?”

Richard moves restlessly on his feet, and I eye the space between them, almost able to visualize the pheromones dancing on the air. “We decide whether we fix this, or go our separate ways.”

“Is that even possible? Can I just walk out of here?” Grace asks slowly, and if I couldn’t smell her stress, I’d think she was considering it. Of course, that means Richard looks like he’s about to bar the door, but Grace’s focus is on me. “We haven’t bonded, but I’ve heard stories of scent-mates getting sick if they aren’t together.”

I ignore the pleading look Richard is giving me and swirl my whiskey. “I think it would depend on your other bonds. Richard is mine, and that gives him some protection. But you might find things harder, Grace.”

I expect her to deny it, to stick that cute chin in the air and tell me she’ll just take a Xanax. But she shoots Richard a glance under her lashes. “I bit Joshua,” she murmurs, gnawing on her lip. “Just a love bite, but I was claiming him. Symbolically, I mean.”

Richard’s brilliant sea-blue eyes narrow to pin pricks. “Why?”

Grace has the sense to squirm. “The new Face of the Company kissed him on stage and left lipstick all over his mouth. Plus, she used *tongue*.”

She almost spits the word, and Richard’s lips give the faintest quirk. But Grace now slants her gaze my way. “And Max wants me to bite him on his scent gland. He said we’re soulmates.” She sits up straighter, and now that cute chin is as fierce as a battering ram. “So, it’s not like I don’t have bonds, too, right?”

The crackle of defiance in her eyes works like a hunting horn to my beast. She’s talking about splintering my pack,

after all, and probably stealing my omega out from under me. On a normal day, I'd be locking her in the basement, but since Richard looks like he's about to spin apart into a jealous fit, it's music to my ears. "Mm. Scent-mates are rare, but soulmates probably trump the bond."

Richard now hisses at me through his teeth, and I bite back my grin as I pull my phone from my pocket and hand it to her. "Call Max. Tell him he can come home."

She cocks a brow at me, although there's no missing the longing in her eyes. "Aren't they in Paris for Fashion Week?"

"They're at the Continental around the corner." I shrug at their mutual looks of disbelief. "I lied about sending them away. I figured we needed some space to work out what the hell was going on between you two."

"Slippery," Grace mutters, but I think she sounds impressed. She stares at the phone in her hand for a long moment, then drops it back into my pocket. "They can wait a day, I guess. It's not like my soulmate bond is going anywhere, and Max loves room service."

I grunt, hoping that comment doesn't get back to Rory and his well-earned Michelin stars, but I'm thrilled Grace came to that decision on her own. At best, I'd let the rest of the pack return in a day or two. Anything before that, and the dynamic will get in the way of *our* bonding.

As if she's reading my mind, Grace gets quickly to her feet. "Well, I need breakfast. And a change of clothes." She ignores Richard completely as she points to the Ferro Club card on my desk. "What do you want me to do about that?"

I stretch an arm along the back of the sofa. "I want you to trust me to handle it."

"No... punishment?" Her face goes red, her eyes darting around the room. "I mean, I tried to steal from you."

I study her body language, but I'm really drinking in the delicate perfume of her arousal. "You want me to punish you?"

She frowns, giving the question the consideration it definitely deserves. “No. But I don’t want to feel bad about it, either. If there’s some way I can make it better, I’ll do it.”

“Well, that’s easy.” I drain the last of my drink and click my fingers at Richard. “Sit on the floor, packmate, and keep your mouth shut.”

He obeys without a word, but I can feel the questions bubbling up in Grace as she watches him. I crook a finger, calling her over, and when she shuffles in front of me, I pull her onto my lap and wrap a gentle hand across her throat. “The first thing we’re going to do is work on those trust issues.”

Her eyes are as big as dinner plates as she stares at me. “How?”

“By showing you there’s a difference between dominant and abusive. Do you know what coercive control is, Grace?”

She licks her lips, her throat bobbing under my palm. But when she shakes her head, I click my fingers at Richard, who knows the answer only too well. “It’s a sustained pattern of controlling, threatening, or humiliating behavior. It includes isolation, gaslighting, and limiting your options. Abusers use it to make themselves omnipresent.”

I tilt my head. “Does that sound familiar?”

She licks her lips again, but this time there’s a spark of anger in her eyes. “Yeah, well, that’s pretty much the Sawyer playbook, so I guess I have some idea.”

Sarcasm is the refuge of the scared and lonely. Something Richard taught me when he was going through his rebellious, anti-authority phase.

“And that book is now closed. We don’t play with people here, Grace.” I let my hand drift from her throat to her shoulder. She’s still in the stunning gown from the gala, some chopped-up, rehashed, miracle of fashion that no doubt has a story behind it I need to hear, but for now I just rest my palm on her delicate bones. “As pack alpha, it’s my job to ensure everyone feels safe. That means honesty, respect, and trust are essential. Everyone contributes to the wellbeing of the pack,

but it's my job to correct the behaviors that threaten it. Do you understand what I'm saying?"

Something flickers through her night-star eyes, but then she gives a hesitant nod. "You want to spank me."

I'm a master at schooling my expression, but that almost puts a crack in my façade. "Do you think that's the best way to correct your behavior?"

She goes back to chewing on her lip, and I know she's thinking about brushing me off. If she backs out, I won't stop her. Punishment of this kind isn't for everyone, but it's a good way to move things along in our bonding.

"I s'pose. I mean, I know I screwed up. I should've talked to someone about the scent-match, instead of letting my hurt feelings get in the way. And I never should have taken your Ferro card." She looks at me, sincerity written all over her face. "My stepbrother knows exactly how to make me do what he wants. It's not an excuse, but if I really wanted to get away from him, I should've said no. I should've found another way."

"You should've found *me*," I say with deliberate emphasis. "Or one of your packmates. That's the root of the issue here, Grace. Trust. You don't feel it yet, but you will. If you let us in."

She flicks a glance at Richard, who's sitting crisscross applesauce only a few feet away. He's wearing the socks Joshua knitted him as a Christmas gag gift, and fuck but it makes my beast purr like a kitten.

"Okay," she says finally. "I want that. So what do I have to do?"

I nudge her off my lap and walk over to the armchair, removing my suit jacket as I go. It's early – and the weekend – but I'm still in my pinstripe suit and suspenders, since I figured things might go this way. Authority, especially for our bright-eyed beta, needs to be rewritten in her brain. And that means she needs to understand that when I'm dressed like this – which is always – she can trust me to take care of her.

I take a seat in the straight-backed chair and roll up my sleeves. When I'm done, I hold her gaze, and lifting my hand, pat my knee. "Time to let me in, Grace."



24. GRACE

Let him in...

A command, or an invitation?

I really can't tell. But maybe that's because my brain went offline when Richard revealed his condition. No, his *trauma*. Something so bad, he lost his sense of smell, and hid it from both his packmates and his colleagues.

Which must have been its own kind of torture. As the head of design, Richard oversees all the perfumery at House of Omega. How must that have felt, to be losing his sense of smell, when the company relied on him for his nose?

I shudder at the thought. I love fashion and all its accessories, but my heart is with fragrances. The perfumes, creams, and oils, that with a single sniff, can transport you to another time and place. If I lost that, I don't know what I'd do with myself.

But somehow, Richard managed to create Magnetism. A revolutionary fragrance that goes so far beyond scent layering, it actually alters the wearer's biology. And I have first-hand evidence that it works. Because as soon as Garth sprayed it on our pulse points, my olfactory receptors lit up like the Fourth of July.

Richard Rose is my scent-mate. And together, we smell like sunlight-wrapped sin. Musk, and vanilla, and something I don't recognize, even after labeling everything in the scent catalog.

It smells like us, a little voice whispers. Richard and Grace, with maybe a sprinkling of our pack alpha in the mix.

My skin prickles, from the fragrance on my wrist, all the way to my bare toes. I'm almost painfully aware of the silk rug under my feet, each fiber pressing against my tender soles. My nipples throb under my bondage bodice, my scalp tight when I run my fingers through my hair. Is this extra sensitivity a byproduct of the perfume? Or is it because Richard is watching me, those azure eyes locked on me like a falling star?

After days of avoiding me, his attention is almost overwhelming. How can such vibrant blue eyes feel so weighty, like a finger pressing against a bruise? I'm torn between walking over and climbing in his lap, to running for the terrace, and the safety of deep water. But those aren't options right now, and Garth's hand on his knee is reminding me of that fact.

I gulp down my nerves and shuffle over to the alpha's side. He's sitting in that armchair like it's a throne, straight-backed and self-assured. He's rolled his sleeves up, exposing the dark hair and hard veins of his massive arms. Thick wrists. Big hands... Shit. One swat and I'll probably be bruised for a week.

But before I can back out, his tapping hand starts to draw a slow circle on his thigh. I stare at the pinstripe fabric, admiring the cut, even as my brain sends up warning flares. "Is this going to hurt?"

The hand stops circling, lifting to balance my wrist on his open palm. He must have taken Sally's diamante cuff off me before bed, because my wound is on stark display. "Never like this," he says in a rumble that dances between soothing and terrifying. "I don't want your pain, Grace. In fact, I will do everything in my power to make sure you're never physically harmed again."

He sounds like he means it, but he's not getting up out of the spanking chair. "But you said you want to punish me."

"Did I?" His thumb sweeps the edge of my wound. "I want you to submit to me, is a better way of looking at it. I want you

to trust my instincts, and to take comfort in the fact I will always look out for your needs.”

It sounds so easy, but how is it different to what Kayden has been whispering in my ear for years? Of course, I want to trust Garth. I want to climb on his lap almost as much as I want to bury myself in my scent-mate. But my walls are thick, and paranoia is high. What would I even look like if I could give up the almost constant fear that lives under my skin? If I didn't have to keep looking over my shoulder, expecting the worst? For as long as I can remember, the first thing I've ever done in the presence of an alpha is look for a place to hide.

Deep water. *Is that what he's offering me?*

“Do I have to undress?”

Surprise flickers in his eyes, but then he gives me a small smile. “No. This isn't about that.”

Not about sex? Humiliation? Stripping me down so he can build me back up? I bite my lip, trying to remember his exact words. This is about trust. About letting him in by submitting to his will.

I place a careful hand on his thigh, lowering myself across his lap. His thigh muscles are like rocks against my belly, and his scent swirls around me, potent as a drug. I fix my gaze on the floor, on the delicate silk rug lying on the dark hardwood floor. I can't help but think that's me. A softness laid bare across an unyielding surface.

I take a breath and close my eyes. Max likes to sit me on his knee, to wrap me tight in his arms, murmuring spicy suggestions in my ear as he breathes in my hair. But this is different. I know that even as Garth's hand comes down on the small of my back. Not a spank; barely a touch. A big palm radiating warmth and... what?

“Do you like leather?” I can feel Garth tracing one of the straps on my dress. “Is it something you wear a lot?”

“No. Hardly ever.” I pause, then decide if there ever was a time for opening up, it's now. “Kayden chose my clothes – or

set the parameters, I guess, on what I could buy – and he liked me in classic designs. Linen, silk, and lace.”

Garth gives one of those soothing-frightening rumbles. “Leather suits you. And, if it needs to be said, in this house you can wear whatever you want.”

I nod, because if anything proves that point, it’s the dress I’m in right now. His finger finds another strap and traces it up over my spine. He’s barely touching me, but my back arches, my breasts pressing against the meat of his thighs. “You really think Max is your soulmate? Even though you’re a beta?”

I flinch a little, and the hand on my lower back presses down. I can’t tell if he’s trying to squeeze the truth out of me, or be reassuring. “I want to believe it,” I say slowly. “Max is the best person I know, and I feel something with him I’ve never felt before. But is it something mystical? Some lucky star I was born under, but didn’t start shining until now?” I shiver as Garth’s finger resumes its travels, skimming the skin of my upper back. “As you said, I’m not sure if things like that really happen to people like me.”

I wait for him to probe deeper, since I can hear the doubt in my voice. I sound wary. Worn down. Distrustful. The exact opposite of what he wants from his pack. But instead, he pulls on a different thread. “What do you remember most about your mother? Just words, not memories.”

“Fear. Pain. Love.” Those words spill out of me in a rush, but then I pause, feeling a tear trickle down my nose and hang off the point. Am I crying because I miss her, or because of the blood rushing to my head? All I know is that Garth is peeling back my layers as he traces the straps of my dress. Because I didn’t just love my mom. In fact, in some ways, I hated her. “Weakness.”

The word falls between us; heavy, accusing.

“Because she didn’t protect you?”

“She tried, but it wasn’t enough.” I cough, squirming a bit, but the feeling growing in my chest is like a hand squeezing my heart. And then more words are spilling out of me, that

tear dangling from the end of my nose, falling with a wet plop onto the floorboards. “We could have run before Barker claimed her. There was time. I told her I was scared of Kayden, right from the first night we moved in. He’d picked the lock on my door and come into my room while I was sleeping....”

I break off at the harsh inhalation from Richard. But I can’t look at him. Not with the words bubbling out of me like poison. “We could have left and gone to Dad’s pack. Or asked for help at a shelter. There are people who take in omegas like her. But she didn’t. She told me we were better off with them. She knew what they were, but it was better than living off the scraps of someone else’s charity...” I sniff, but the tears are dripping too fast to stop. “She actually said that. We were better off with the devil we knew.”

“Let go.” Richard’s voice is soft, but certain. “You don’t have to carry that anymore.”

I turn my head before I can stop myself, but I can barely make out his face through my watery eyes. “It’s not that easy. It’s all I’ve known.”

“I know.” The emphasis he points on the word makes my heart squeeze even tighter. But then he’s crawling towards us, his voice growing stronger, more determined. “Garth will protect you, Grace. Plus, the rest of us, we’ll always back you up. You can trust us. You can let go.”

I would – maybe – if I knew what that looked like to them. More tears? More confessions? Begging for a hard spanking?

I don’t *know*, but I pull myself up anyway, clawing along the thick muscle under Garth’s pinstripe pants. I wobble as I finally get upright, hampered by my tight skirt and the awkward position. But then I lean forward and wrap my arms around his girth. I can’t get all the way around, but I worm my fingers between his back and the seat. And then I hold on.

“You’re safe now.” His voice is a purr, too gentle for an uber. “No one will ever hurt you, sweet girl. We’ll protect you, no matter what...”

The words trickle down like tears. Soft, almost whispers.

And then their hands are on me; stroking, safe.

I turn so I can press my face into Richard's neck, breathing in that potent blend of our scents. It's perfection. Like a bouquet of every single sweet note, balanced by the perfect blend of wood, spice, and musk. My mouth waters, my nipples sharpening to aching points. And between my thighs my folds grow as wet as omega slick.

But that's not me. I'm a beta. And that's enough, because they're telling me I am.

"You said you could smell me," I tell Richard as I press against his neck. "While you were sleepwalking. You said over and over you wanted to drown in my scent. Vanilla, jasmine, gardenia. White florals touched by spring rain."

Richard makes a broken sound, his throat working against my lips. "I don't sleep. Not well. It was always the most dangerous time to trust her."

His mother. Because she haunted him, even when he was at his most vulnerable. "You can sleep now. I'll watch over you."

He doesn't look at me, doesn't reply, but his arms tighten around me until I can barely breathe him in.

"Is that what you want, Grace?" Garth's hands, I realize, are still rubbing soothing circles on my back. "To sleep together? Like a pack?"

"Yes." I don't even have to think about it. I want to be in that nest upstairs, to soak our scent in those heavenly sheets. And when Garth lifts me, I realize what he was offering for my submission. Not a spanking, or any kind of breaking me down, to build me back up again. But trust, kindness, and the warmth of my scent-mate's hand as it fits perfectly in mine.



I half-expect us to tumble into the bed, tearing at each other's clothes, but that's not how it happens. Richard goes into the bathroom to fill the tub, while Garth calls down for a

breakfast tray. I don't know if they've eaten already, but this is what I asked for – food, a shower... and to get out of my dress. Although, they don't seem to be in any great hurry to help me with that last one.

“Over the next week, we'll take a leave of absence from work,” Garth says as Richard comes to listen in the doorway. He's taken off his sweater, and the plain white tee clings to his body in a way that has my mouth watering. But I force myself to focus on Garth, as he taps at the laptop on his sideboard, clearly checking their schedule. “There'll be a couple of meetings we'll have to do from here, but the rest of the time we focus on Magnetism. I want a complete overhaul by the end of the week.”

I frown, affronted on Richard's behalf. “Why? It's perfect.”

Garth smirks, but Richard says quietly, “We need to go back to the beginning and check every aspect of my work. I know the science is right, but we should go over it again, anyway.” I still don't see the problem, and it must show on my face. “When news of my condition gets out, we'll need the support of the Fragrance Foundation, particularly if we want to weather any lawsuits. And they'll only give it if we've done our due diligence.”

“Lawsuits? Why?”

“Because it's an evolutionary step forward for the industry,” Garth says in his boardroom voice. “We have proof it works right in this room, but there will be plenty of competitors and critics who'll try to scuttle it.” I give a reluctant nod, and he smiles. “It'll be a full pack effort. Legal, design, and marketing. Not the best way to bond you and Max into the pack, but at least you'll get to work with us, first hand.”

Which is a dream come true, of course. Not just working with the owners of House of Omega, but learning everything there is to know about Magnetism - from the first sweet note, to the legal jargon that's sure to go right over my head.

But wait... *what did I miss?*

“You want to bond us *this week*?” I ask with a squeak that makes my cheeks flame. “What about the three-month contract?”

“Our pack has a scent-match, soulmates, and the most dominant uber in the city,” Garth says without a hint of humility in his voice. In fact, he starts to stalk towards me, every inch the apex animal as he drawls, “A piece of paper isn’t going to make a damn bit of difference to our hormones when we get the six of us into this bed.”

I gape at him, but he turns me gently by the shoulders, leaning down to rumble in my ear, “Now, Richard’s going to give you a bath. It’s his due, as your very stupid scent-mate. And while he’s doing that, I’m going to clear our calendars, and call the other guys. How does that sound to you?”

“Good. Just... are you going to tell them to come home now?” I gesture towards the luxurious nest. “Shouldn’t Max be here? As your omega?”

That gets a frown from Richard, and Garth turns me by the shoulders so he can stare down at me with his bottomless black eyes. “You’re not a companion, Grace, if that’s what you’re still thinking. The nest is for the Rose Pack, and you’re as much a part of that as any of us.”

I nod numbly, letting Richard lead me to the bathroom door. Garth is already on the phone, but it’s white noise. Because hearing those words fall from my pack alpha’s lips? If happiness had a sound, that would be it.



25. RICHARD

Garth is right. I *am* a very stupid scent-mate. And I can't blame my condition for that. PTSD from my childhood? Probably. But I've been a part of the Rose Pack long enough to know I'm responsible for my actions. And I broke a cardinal rule: I shut my packmates out. Which means that when I needed them most – like to help me interpret my connection with Grace – I was on my own. And that's something I'll have to make amends for with all of them.

Starting with Grace, herself, who's standing at the end of the tub and watching me with eyes that spear my soul. Lapis lazuli, Danny's been calling them, as if it didn't occur to me that they're exactly like my favorite stone.

"I'm sorry I screwed up, Grace. It was a chicken shit move to avoid you like that."

She blinks – maybe at my salty tongue, but then, it's not like I've said more than two words around her until now. She probably doesn't know I can curse in three languages.

"It was." She leans down and trails her fingers through the bath water. "But I'm not exactly good at facing things head on, either."

I nod, accepting her words, even if they're just to make me feel better. "Are you okay if I help you now?"

She shrugs, but I think she wants me to stay more than she wants me to go. Fuck. It would be easier if I could just smell her emotions, but then I guess I wouldn't be so tuned in to the other parts of her.

Like the fact she likes her coffee with a shot of cold water added to the froth. Or that she has a full-on love affair with the color tangerine. Or that she sits up straighter every time I enter

a room. Or that she makes a sound – almost a whimper – every time she comes down off the high of an orgasm.

And how do I know that? I don't just have a dirty mouth, I'm a goddamn peeping tom when it comes to her.

“I need to tell you something else.”

She's been studying the label of the bubble bath I used, but now she arches a brow at me. “More confessions?”

“Ah, yeah. I watch you sometimes on the surveillance feeds. Do you know about those?”

She tilts her head, eyes narrowing. “Daniel explained them. You take turns monitoring it if a sensor is triggered, right?”

I wince. “Usually. Except, I've sort of been hogging the ones with you in them. And not always when there's a trigger.”

Now she looks pissed. “So, when you're not here, being my scent-mate – or my boss, for that matter – you're watching me on a security screen?” Her eyes narrow almost to slits. “And when I use the dimmer switch? Are you spying on me then, as well?”

I wince, because I know what she means. Blocks of feed where it goes to static, not that I need my nose to guess why. She might whimper during her orgasms, but my packmates sound like dying wolves. “Nope. I have limits on how much of your privacy I invade.”

She snorts and shakes her head. “Very noble, Richard.”

Pleasure curls through me, thick and hot. It's not the first time she's said my name, but my sharpened hearing is picking up a trickle of something that might be affection.

“Are you going to unzip me?” She turns and lifts her hair, showing me the long line of her back. When I move towards her, not even attempting to hide my eagerness, she mutters, “You've probably seen it all before, anyway, right?”

“There's a difference between seeing and touching,” I reply, skimming a finger along one of those tempting leather straps. She probably doesn't realize it, but by wearing this dress to the

gala, she's shaken up my entire vision for the next spring/summer collection. "Your skin is like silk."

She shivers as I ease down the zipper, but pulls away as soon as she can remove the rest by herself. I watch her carefully step out of the gown, carrying it over to hook it on the back of the door. It leaves her in a matching set of rose-gold lingerie that's definitely not from the H.O.M.E. line.

"They're not mine."

"No." She gives me a small smile as she touches the tiny gold Allure Industries' emblem nestled in the valley of her breasts. "This was more my mood last night."

I step forward and press a finger against my competitor's logo. It's warm from her body heat, and every instinct screams at me to lean down and press my lips to her milky skin. "And now?"

She unhooks the little fastener behind it and shrugs out of the bra, leaving it dangling from my hands. "Touch it all you want. I'm having a bath."

I know she's got a playful streak, like Max. I've heard them giggling together and watched them pinch each other often enough to know she's not as serious as she comes across. But there's almost a challenge in her eyes as she walks to the tub, keeping her back to me as she pulls off her panties and climbs into the steaming water. I don't even pretend not to watch; she knows I can't help myself.

"Garth was really angry at you," she says when she's relaxed down into the bubbles. "Any chance he's going to spank you for lying to him?"

She sounds like she finds the idea intriguing, and I snort. "Oh, yeah. That's definitely in my future."

Her pupils dilate, but she drops her gaze as she stretches her toes to the end of the tub. "So, I got off lightly?"

I grab a loofah off the counter and dip it in the water. "Does it feel that way? Did you want him to be more... hands on?"

I can see her weighing it up for a moment, and then she shakes her head. “No. I mean, I like him touching me, but I’m not sure about getting punished. Doesn’t it hurt?”

I think of the complicated relationship I have with pain and authority. “Sometimes, it hurts worse if you hold things in. When I submit to my pack alpha, Garth takes the stuff that’s weighing me down. He’s telling me I don’t have to carry it alone. And it proves to Garth that I trust him to take care of me.”

My betrayal – not telling him about my condition, or the fact I was losing my mind over Grace – suddenly sinks in. Fuck. Garth is going to go all out on my ass, and I’ll deserve every moment of it.

“Maybe... I can see the sharing the load thing. I’ve never told anyone about Kayden before, except for my mom.” Grace is absently playing with the bubbles in front of her, but now her brow furrows. “She wasn’t a bad person.”

“Mine was.” I reach into the water and find her ankle, drawing her foot to the surface. I use the loofah to tease across her toes and she shivers, sinking lower. “There’s a lot we have to discover about each other. Things that happened to us, and stuff we’re still dealing with. But there’s no rush.”

She thinks about that for a moment, then says, “You’re really going to do that trial with Doctor Nora?”

“It starts in a couple of weeks. It’s a pharmaceutical trial to stimulate the olfactory bulb.” As a chemist, I understand the science, but I only realize now how much hope I’m pinning on it.

“I’d like to... come along, if I can. I’ve read a bit about scent retraining.”

I’ve ditched the loofah and I’m massaging her foot now, using my thumbs to dig into her arch. “Yeah, that would be great. And Doctor Nora will probably want to talk to you as well. As my scent-mate, you’ll be an important part of the treatment program.” She nods, rolling her head a little on the bath cushion, and I watch her breath hitch as I kiss the crown

of bubbles off her tiny pink toe. “Can you tell me what our scent-bond smells like?”

She doesn’t even have to think about it. “Rain. Pine. Vanilla Bean. Maybe a little cinnamon. It’s the perfect blend of wood, spice, and musk.” But then she shakes her head. “But in another way, it’s not like that at all.”

Every second, more than a billion biochemical reactions occur in every cell of our bodies. There’s probably a little room for some mating magic in there as well. “And can you smell me? My pheromones?”

That challenging glitter – with a little frustration thrown in – is back in her eyes. “Every time I take a breath.”

Good. I mean, I don’t want her pissed off or frustrated, but I like the idea of her thinking about me at least half as often as I’m obsessing about her.

I reluctantly let her foot sink back into the water. “Want me to go check on breakfast? I could bring you some of that yogurt you love.”

I’m really just making the offer so I don’t fuck things up by sliding into the bathwater with her, but her gaze dips instantly to the bulge in my pants. I’m wearing a pair of old sweats from my rowing days, and there’s no mistaking my train of thought. But I’m not quite sure why her breath has gone thin and reedy, unless she’s got a breakfast kink.

But before I can ask, Garth sticks his head around the door. “Josh just called. Daniel’s rut has come early.”

“Seriously? But he’s usually like clockwork.”

“Mm.” Garth’s gaze lingers on Grace, who’s all big eyes and soapy shoulders in her nest of bubbles. “Apparently not when there’s an omega going into heat in his hotel room.”

Grace sits up so violently, half the bubbles are washed out of the bath. “What? Max is in heat?”

“Looks like they might’ve triggered each other. They’re on their way back right now.”

I grab a towel off the rack and wrap it around Grace, helping her out of the tub. Half my mind is on the bubbles sliding down her body, and the other on the logistics to get our hormone-addled mates safely back to the tower. “Under full escort?”

“Josh said Danny sorted it before he went under.”

“He’s already in rut? Shit, that’s fast.”

Garth nods, and we head out into the bedroom. There are platters of food – a lot more than a simple breakfast tray – on the sideboard, but he waves Grace towards the closet. “Grab anything you want out of there. It’s all in your size.”

She’s too distracted to argue, and while I pour some coffee, she dips into the closet, coming out a minute later in a buttercup yellow cotton mini dress, with little cap sleeves and buttons all the way down the front. It’s probably my favorite out of all the clothes I chose for her, and I shoot Garth a tortured look. But he, of course, just grins at my pain. “What a perfect fit, sweetheart.”

“Thanks.” She gives him a self-conscious smile and swipes her damp bangs off her brow, then grabs a pen and notebook from her bag. “So, tell me what I need to do to help.”

Garth blinks as Grace perches on the edge of the nest, pen at the ready, but then rubs his chin. “Good idea. We should discuss how this is going to work before they get here. Firstly, Danny has good control of his ruts, but I haven’t ever seen him with an omega in heat. We should start off with Max in here to get his bearings for a while. Depending on how far along he is, he might be in nest-making mode. I’ll get the housekeepers to bring up some extra bedding.”

“Not the housekeepers,” Grace said quickly. “Leave that to me. I know what to get.”

Garth just nods. “I’ll take Danny straight down to the gym and let him work out some of his aggression.” I open my mouth to volunteer, but then recall the last time I watched Danny box when he was in a mood, and swallow my words. Garth’s the only one who can really restrain Daniel if anything

sets him off. And there's nothing more volatile than an unbonded omega in heat, especially to an alpha he's already been intimate with.

"If Max agrees to see him, we'll bring Danny up." Garth walks over and cups Grace's face, pushing back her damp curls. "You ready for that, sweetheart?"

"Knots, bites, and bonds?" She holds his stare, then nods. "If it's what Max wants, and I think it is, then I'm one hundred percent behind it."

"Okay. And the rest of us? If Max is able to consent before we start, are you going to be comfortable with us bringing him all the way into the pack?"

"Again, his choice. I will back him all the way."

I wonder if she realizes how much she sounds like a Rose when she talks that way.

"And you? Max's heat might not affect you as strongly as the rest of us, but Danny's rut will. Josh said he thought he'd want to bond you sooner rather than later, so if you're in the nest with Max, Danny's going to want to make that happen."

She hesitates a fraction of a second and my heart plummets. I spin on Garth. "It's too soon. Josh and I can take care of Danny's rut, and you can help Max with his heat. We don't have to push Grace to choose between her soulmate and the rest of us."

Garth looks stunned. Not only because he probably doesn't see it that way – it's obvious in his mind we're already one big, slightly dysfunctional pack – but also because I've never helped Danny, or any alpha, in that way. In fact, the guys often go to our cabin upstate when one of them goes into rut. Not because I don't love and trust them, but because my mom's warped view of alphas is something I still struggle to shake.

"Just to be clear, that's not what I was thinking about," Grace says slowly, the end of her pen digging into her bottom lip. "Max said if he feeds me his slick during his heat, I could take Daniel's knot, even though I'm a beta." Her eyes flick

between us, a flush rising in her cheeks. “I was just trying to think of a way to work that into the conversation.”

Holy fuck. That bulge in my sweats is now tunneling towards my waistband, and Garth doesn't look as serene as he did a moment ago, either. “Then you're consenting,” he asks, voice deep and slow, “to knots, bites, and bonds with the rest of us?”

“I'm all in.” My enhanced auditory perception says her voice is firm, clear, with maybe just a little wobble of excitement. Full consent, at least until she sees the reality of a dual rut-heat for herself. “But Max is the focus, okay? Whatever he wants goes. And I haven't talked to Daniel about the knot thing, so maybe let me work up to that before you mention it.”

Garth bites back a smile, while I glower at the side of his head. Because I don't care what Grace writes down in her little notebook, there's no way in hell she's taking Daniel's monster knot before she takes mine.

“I wanted to take this slow.” Garth clicks his tongue as he plays with her damp curls. Like most dominant alphas, the guys are all highly tactile, but I've often wondered if our pack alpha is a little touch-starved. “Romance you with some fancy dates.”

She rolls her eyes, but she's smiling. “You've already bought me flowers and perfume. Plus breakfast, a closet full of clothes, and you've even let me sleep in your bed.” She's ticking things off on her fingers, but she suddenly stands, tossing her notebook aside so she can step into his arms. He shoots me the briefest glance – waiting for my nod - and then wraps her up tight. Her voice comes out a little muffled, but I can still hear every word. “You gave me a safe place to stay, you let me cry on your shoulder, and you put yourself between Kayden and me. You don't need to romance me more than that, Garth. You've already made me feel like I'm pack.”



26. GRACE

Garth wasn't kidding when he said their hotel was right around the corner. I've barely had a chance to tell him I'm all in – that I consent to whatever happens with this pack, including bites, knots, and bonds – before he gets a text on his phone saying they've arrived. I'm itching to rush to the parking garage to meet them, but they convince me to let them check it out first. Garth will assess Daniel's rut, and Richard will help Joshua bring Max upstairs.

Which leaves me sitting on the edge of the nest with an empty notebook on my knee. Because who wrote the manual for this scenario? A scent-match, a pair of soulmates, an omega in heat, and an alpha in rut. Even if we had time to make a plan, it would probably unravel in the first hour.

Which is why I'm not completely surprised to have Max suddenly appear in the doorway – with not an alpha in sight. I leap to my feet right as he comes barreling towards me. No band tee this time; just his smooth, flushed chest, his jeans hanging low on the points of his hips. I whimper as he clutches me tight, his arms trembling as they wrap around me.

“God, you smell like heaven,” I murmur, burying my face in his neck. Max's usual honey, amber, and rose oil scent is now overlaid with a muskiness that makes my throat clench. “Are you okay? Does it hurt?”

“It's good. Dreamy, even.” He pulls back and I can see the hazy sheen in his eyes. His skin is glowing, his pupils dilated, and a soft smile hovers on lips that look puffy and tender. “But it's even better now I'm here with you.”

He drops a kiss on my mouth and I get to feel the full, pillowy effect of his lips. I shiver, especially when his tongue darts out and I taste the sweet tang of his slick.

Which must mean... “Where are the other guys?”

“I gave them the slip,” Max smirks, nuzzling into my hair. “They were fussing over me, trying to get me to listen to their plan, so I jumped in the elevator. No one keeps me away from my GW.”

I click my tongue at him, but I’m getting the impression Max is kind of incorrigible when he’s in heat.

“And look at you,” he says, arousal making his eyes glow like green flames. “Just like a dollop of buttercream in this cute little dress.”

I laugh, because I feel exactly like butter melting on a pan right now. It’s the heat rising off his body, faster than the air-conditioning can cool it, and I smooth his hair back while he plays with my buttons. He’s hot, but not overly clammy. Like his hormones are working overtime, but in a good way.

“You know I wanted to be with you, right?” There’s a flash of panic in his eyes as he tugs me over to the bed. “But Danny said Garth could tell his rut was coming on early, so he whisked you home from the gala. Believe me, I was pissed they dumped us in a hotel. Tried to walk back here by myself, but you’ve seen our security guys, right? Shit. I have to work out more. But they weren’t expecting my heat hormones to go haywire, were they?” He sounds quite gleeful about this fact. “The guys got all territorial, but I was pretty graphic about what damage I’d do if they tried to keep me away from you ...”

Reading between the lines of his rambling, I realize Garth must have cooked up the cover story of Daniel’s early rut as the reason we were kept apart. No mention of Kayden crashing the gala, which is probably a good thing given where Max’s head is at. I doubt it will hold up once he’s thinking clearly, but I’m glad he doesn’t have to deal with my stepbrother’s threats on top of everything else.

“I’m sorry we weren’t together,” I tell him as he settles me on his lap. His bare chest is warm, and his erection is nudging hard between my thighs, but for now he seems happy just to nuzzle my neck. I’m not sure if this is still the build-up, or a

dip, or if he'll be like this the whole way through his heat. My omega tending knowledge, I realize, is sadly lacking. "Can you tell me what to do to help, though? I don't really know that much about the process."

Max's eyes grow as luminous as jade moons. "You just stay close to me, skin to skin. I'm going to be a bit of a touch monster, and I'll want to smother you in slick, but I'll *try* to control myself. And the guys will be here," he says almost as an afterthought. "Plus, Danny's my mate now, so he's gonna try to horn his way in to everything."

I blink at him, my mouth falling open as he swipes back his tangled hair and I see a huge bite mark on his throat. Not over his scent gland, but big enough that I don't know how I missed it in the first place. "You bonded with Daniel?"

He gnaws his lip, that panic back in his eyes. "Sorry, GW. I mean, I'm not sorry we did it, but I should have waited." He looks almost guilty. "I was s'pose to talk to you about moving up the contract timeline, not jump straight on an alpha knot."

I giggle at the image, reaching up to stroke the raw bite mark with reverent fingers. The way he shivers under my touch sends a bolt of heat straight between my thighs. "It's fine. Don't apologize. I'm glad you were there for each other."

"Really?"

"Absolutely. And I just told Garth and Richard I'm all in as long as you are. You still come first. But if you want this pack, I'm up for it."

"Thank fuck," he whispers, pressing his forehead to mine. "Because I really, *really* want to see you jump on some knots, too."

I laugh, but it's more of a moan this time, and he bends me back on his arm, those puffy lips ravaging my mouth. I open for everything he wants to give me, lost in a haze of pleasure as he sucks on my tongue. His hands are roaming, getting to work on my buttons, and his cock is throbbing through his jeans. When he sticks a thumb in my mouth, my head spins,

and I realize he's worked his zipper open and is feeding me his slick.

"I think you should start with Josh," he whispers, pressing down on my eager tongue. "Then you can work your way up to Danny. Garth's gonna be a bit of a challenge from what the guys have said, but he's an uber, so his knot is around 24/7." He gives me an eyebrow waggle. "Convenience is key."

I moan as he pulls his thumb out and swipes it along my bottom lip. "Pretty sure it's collaboration."

He gives me his fingers now, glistening with slick. "Oh, don't worry, GW. We plan to collaborate your brains out."

I suck him clean, groaning at the taste, then lick my way down his palm to catch every drop. His hooded stare makes my thighs clench, and I realize we're about five seconds away from some pretty intense collaboration of our own.

"Um. That's a great plan. But I should probably tell you something about Richard first." His wicked grin fades as he studies my face. "Nothing bad. Just that I noticed something strange when I first met him. I didn't mention it and it became a whole thing. I got hurt feelings, but Garth forced us to talk, and now we realize we're scent-mates."

It comes out as rambling as his own retelling, but Max narrows his eyes at me. "You're his scent-mate, and he didn't say anything? This whole time?"

"Well, he didn't really know." I tell him about Richard's anosmia, leaving out the extra stuff about his childhood trauma.

"And you're one hundred percent sure?"

I nod. "We even tested it with Magnetism."

That gets Max sniffing my wrist, his tongue rasping along the skin like a hungry cat. "So *that's* why you smell like cinnamon pancakes," he murmurs. His gaze crawls over my thighs, up my half-opened dress, to the flushed skin of my chest and neck. "This heat is gonna be hot as hell."

I'm not sure if that's a warning or a promise, because Max is now working twice as fast on my buttons. He's just opening the last one when the guys appear in the doorway; Garth first, with Richard and Joshua close behind. Daniel growls from out in the hallway, and Max's pupils blow as big as dimes.

"Happy for us to come in?" Garth asks, still holding his pack back at the door.

Max wraps his arms around me, playing with the soft skin of my stomach. "Sure, but we start slow. Some of us are still getting a feel for each other."

I'm not sure if this is a dig at Richard and our scent-bond, but Garth just turns to say something to Daniel. I still can't see him properly, but there's a familiar rumble, and then his packmates part to let him through. Daniel's barefoot and shirtless, like Max, his violet eyes almost black with lust as he approaches the bed. But Max sticks out a foot and nudges his mate in the ribs. "Remember what I said. No one touches Grace until she's dripping in my slick."

Holy hell. I know Max is obsessed with opening me up for their knots, but there's a possessive light in his eyes as Daniel sinks onto the nest. The alpha's feet are still on the floor, but the scent of his arousal wafts over me, and I have to bite my cheek to fight back a moan. I don't quite have my mouth muffled against Max's neck when I admit, "He smells pretty good, though."

Daniel gives a dark chuckle, and the other guys come closer. The swirling mist of aroused alpha has me melting in Max's arms. My skin feels tight, and my head is too heavy for my neck, so it takes me a moment to realize Max is laying down the law. "Now, my heat usually lasts three days, but it could go longer or shorter, especially with Danny's rut. So, before I lose it and go under, I want you to promise you won't rush things. Your knots are no joke. And no amount of slick takes the sting out of your bites." He's stroking my face as he lectures them, and I watch through hooded eyes as Garth's hand comes down on his shoulder. I think it's meant to be a reassuring touch, but Max tips his face back, almost glaring up

at the big alpha. “I love her more than anything, okay? So don’t fucking hurt her, or I’ll beat your ass.”

I’m not sure about threatening an uber alpha in his own nest, but my heart flutters at Max’s words. “You love me?”

“Oh, GW. I’m so fucking gone on you, you have no idea.”

“I have a bit of a one,” I tell him, biting my lip. “Because I’ve felt that way since you tried to win Scrabble with C-U-M.”

He sniggers, but swoops in for a kiss, and he doesn’t break it off even as he nudges us to the middle of the bed. *Nest*, I correct myself, and then remember the only task I was assigned when we were planning his heat. “I forgot to get extra pillows and blankets for your nest!” I whine, dismayed.

“But that’s what your clothes are for,” he tells me, his wicked grin back as he peels me out of my dress. He buries his face in it, breathing it in, then leans over and tucks it under the ridge of artfully arranged cushions. I slipped on a fresh lingerie set I found in the closet, and I don’t miss the way Richard’s nostrils flare when he sees the Rose emblem perched between my breasts. “Fuck, I’m going to devour you,” Max mutters, peeling me out of the sleek lace and adding it to his nest. He barely looks at the arrangement, leaning down to capture the tip of my breast in his mouth.

I’m wildly conscious of the alphas surrounding us until I catch Garth’s eye and he gives me a small nod. If he wants a show of trust, this has to be pretty convincing. So I let myself sink back into the soft bedding, closing my eyes so I focus everything on Max. He really meant it when he said he wanted to devour me, torturing both breasts with his lips and teeth, and then kissing his way down to my navel. He nips at all my ticklish spots, then parts my thighs, getting his broad shoulders between them. I can’t miss this sight, and I watch him through slitted lids as he drops a kiss on my mound. “Gonna make you come, then open you up on my cock. Get you nice and slick before you take your scent-mate’s knot.”

My eyes go wide, flying to Richard’s face, but he’s already stripping out of his clothes. He piles them neatly on the edge

of the nest, Max snaking out a hand to grab them. I try to follow his logic as he threads them through the blankets, since I know next-to-nothing about nest-building, either. But then he slips his tongue between my folds, and I figure he can teach me another time.

Max might have been preaching slow and gentle to the alphas, but that rule doesn't seem to apply to him. He knows exactly how to bring me to the edge, lashing my clit and fingering my walls until I'm coming with a breathless wail. Pleasure ripples through me, spiking every time he feeds me his slick coated fingers.

"You okay?" He's kissing my face again, working across my cheeks and along my hairline. Everything tingles and quivers, but my body tightens as his cock nudges my opening. "Will you let me in, Grace?"

I look at Garth, remembering how he asked me the same thing. He wasn't talking about my body then, and Max isn't really, either. Because when I grip his hips and pull him inside me, I can feel him in every molten corner of my mind. Not a mental bonding – we need an alpha for that connection – but something that comes pretty close.

"My soulmate," I whisper, as he rocks inside me, and Max's hazy eyes lock on mine. Our fingers thread together, and I feel all the words bubbling up that I never thought I'd get a chance to say. "I love you, Max. Everything about you. I wish you could stay inside me like this forever."

"Then bite me, Grace," he whispers, tilting his head so I'm looking at his scent gland. "That's yours. So we're always together."

I don't know how to do it – I don't have the alpha instinct to bite him – but I know I want to see my mark on his neck more than anything. So I take the delicate skin in my mouth and taste it. Pure Max, so enticing it makes my teeth ache. Still, something holds me back, until I feel Daniel's hand on my cheek.

"You won't hurt him, Grace. And I can feel how much he wants you to claim him."

My fingers flutter over Daniel's bite – still raw to the touch – and Max shudders at the sensation. He's pumping into me, deep as he's ever been, and as I feel his back arch, I bite down. A flash of copper, a swirl of honey, and Max is straining above me, shooting his cum inside me as I spiral apart.

“Tend him, Grace.” When I come back to myself, Daniel has peeled Max off me and is holding him against his chest. I crawl between their legs, sprawling across Max so I can lap at the tiny dots of blood on his throat. I barely broke the surface of the skin, but Max threads his fingers through my hair and holds me tight. I nuzzle and lick until he's purring under me, and then I feel him start to squirm. Heat rises off him in a potent wave, and I feel his stomach muscles clench, like he's in pain.

“Can I tend him too, mate?” It takes me a moment to realize Daniel's talking to me and I watch, heart pounding, as the alpha licks his way across my bite mark. His tongue is bigger and rougher than mine, and he's wringing shudders of pleasure from our omega. But Max is also whimpering now, grinding himself back against his mate.

“He needs your knot,” I tell Daniel. “Don't make him wait.”

The alpha runs soothing hands down Max's writhing torso. “Yes, but I need you, too,” he tells me in a guttural tone. “You're mine after him.”

It's a reminder that Daniel isn't just newly mated, but also deep in a rut. There's enough command in his voice to make Richard growl, but Joshua nudges his packmate's shoulder and they both drop a knee onto the nest. This is *their* pack bed, but it feels like they're asking for an invitation to crawl in, and I scoot back a bit, making room.

Joshua crawls straight over to me, his caramel eyes gleaming. “I've missed you, sweetheart. Garth said there was trouble at the gala...”

“Not now,” I murmur, gesturing to Max and Daniel. “This is about them. And it doesn't matter, anyway.”

Joshua holds my gaze for a moment, then touches a bruise on his throat. The hickey I gave him isn't nearly as big or dark as I'd hoped it would be, but he looks smug. "I think *this* is what tipped Daniel into his rut. Seeing how ready you were to claim us." He glances at Richard, a prickle of doubt in his eyes. "Garth said you guys had to work through a misunderstanding..."

I catch my scent-mate's gaze, and huff out a breath. "Another conversation for later."

"But you still want to be pack?"

I answer him by stretching out between them. They're both so handsome – Joshua with his sunshine smile, and Richard with his piercing eyes – and for a moment, I wonder how I got here. How did mousy little Gray Sawyer end up in a nest with the Rose Pack?

"You're shivering, sweetheart," Joshua murmurs, cupping my cheek. "Is this too much?"

I look back and forth between them. "This is pretty perfect, actually."

"Then let us take care of you."

He nods at Richard, who moves in to kiss me. His mouth presses down, our lips fitting together, and I wait for our bond to sizzle through my blood. But it's just a kiss – sweet and a bit awkward – until his tongue flicks out and curls along mine. And then I suddenly *taste my scent-mate*, and a hundred delicious flavors explode on my tongue. Richard grunts, and for a frantic second, I think I've bitten him. But he's just finally tasting what he couldn't smell. And it's enough to make him grab my cheeks and grind me down into the mattress with his mouth.

"Richard!" Garth's voice snaps through the haze, pulling us apart. Richard gulps, his mouth wet and swollen, but we both turn to peer at our pack alpha. "Slow it down," Garth rumbles. "Remember the rules."

I gape at him, like some kind of sexy referee at the end of our bed. But Richard nods. "Sorry, Grace. I got carried away."

But I shake my head. “It’s what I want. I need to be out of my head. I want to drown in you, mate...”

It’s the right thing to say, because he starts kissing me again, slow and languid, but filled with desire. It strokes that needy little part of me he’s neglected, and as he fits his body over mine, I wrap my legs around his waist.

But he pulls back, peering down into my eyes. “We don’t have to rush,” he murmurs, brushing my hair back from my face. “We can just do the bonds. Wait for a while for the knots...”

God, why does everyone keep telling me to go slow? My heart is hammering, my skin prickled with heat. I’m rocking under him, trying to drive my core up to the heavy cock pressing into my belly. Does a woman ever get more ready than this? “If you don’t fuck me and knot me and sink your teeth in me, Richard, I’m going to lose my mind!”

His eyes blow wide, but he tilts his hips, grabbing his shaft and thrusting inside me. I’m so wet from Max’s slick, there’s barely a pinch. He rocks forward, kissing my breasts, little grunts of pleasure sparking off my skin. I clutch him tight, my ankles hooked behind him, wishing I could get *closer, closer, closer...*

“She’s on the edge. Just a little more, Alpha.”

I blink up at Max as he swipes his fingers over my lips and chases it with his tongue. I taste slick and musk and *him...* My soulmate. “I want his knot, Max.”

“And you’re gonna get it.” Max nudges Richard’s back, pushing him deeper inside me. There’s a devilish light in his eyes as he licks the edge of his ear. “Don’t hold back, Alpha. Plug her tight and feed her your cum.”

Richard groans, every muscle clenching, and I cry out as his knot stretches me wide. But Max is there with more of his slick, his tongue licking away the pain. And then Richard grinds down on my nub, his cock jerking. Pleasure rolls through me, making my eyes roll back. “Quick, Alpha. While she’s flying high.”

I feel Richard's thumb on my throat, circling my pulse, and then his mouth touches my scent gland. Barely formed - beta not omega - but he finds it anyway, and sucks it into his mouth. I feel pressure, and a sharp sting, but he's coming inside me. And then the world folds around me like a fragrant blanket, every thread a different, perfect scent. I sink into it, holding him close.

"My mate," he whispers, kissing my hair, my neck, my lips. "If you smell as good as you taste, I'm the luckiest man alive."

I smirk, because the bond has settled, and I'm a little less crazy now he's inside me. "I took your knot."

"Mmm." His azure eyes sparkle with happiness. "You're still taking it. But Josh is patiently waiting." He grunts as Daniel suddenly rises up beside him, his eyes black with his rut. "And... Danny seems to be skipping the queue."

"I'm not a Ferris wheel," I grumble, but I hold out a hand, and Daniel nuzzles the palm. His pheromones are the strongest in the room, and when he wraps my fingers around his cock, I give a needy little moan. But Joshua hasn't given up an inch, either, and when I turn my head, our noses bump. "I want you to give me a bruise like the one on your neck," I whisper, watching his eyes darken to treacle. "But I want it to last."

"I can do that," he replies, his voice dropping to a husky octave. "But I'll wait to knot you another day." I raise my brows at him and he strokes a hand down my thigh. "You're doing so well. But I can share you with Danny." He glances at the alpha hovering over me, his smile wry. "I think he's getting impatient to claim you."

I shiver, lifting my hand to stroke Daniel's cock again. His rut seems to have stolen most of his words from him, but there's no mistaking the look in his eyes. Or the need I can feel throbbing under his skin. "Do you want to mate me, Daniel?"

He nudges his way up between my thighs and falls forward on his hands. He brackets my head, his mouth lowering to lick at the seam of my lips. His voice rolls out of him, thick and guttural. "I've wanted you since you shoved me into that alleyway near the library." He must feel me tense, my worry

over Billy and everyone at the shelter making him growl under his breath. “They’re safe, love. I made friends with your old alphas. No one will harm anyone you care about.”

It’s an impossible promise, but I melt under him, gratitude stinging my eyes. And when he presses inside me, I will my body to take him. He’s thicker than the other guys, but he goes slowly, nudging forward, inch by inch. The high from Max’s heat keeps me from getting too sensitive, but when his knot starts to swell, I have to take a moment to breathe.

“Careful.” Garth’s voice comes again from the end of the bed. “Gentle with her, mates.”

I squirm, and Max feeds me more slick, while the other guys pet and kiss me. I want to pull them closer, take *more, more, more* - but I can feel the stretch of Daniel’s knot starting to burn. This is a lot of sex, even for an omega, and I pull Joshua’s lips to my neck. “Can you bite me together? Is that okay?”

“It’s perfect, sweetheart.” He licks my pulse, blowing warm air on my tender skin. “You’re taking him so well. You’re so good for your mates.”

I moan, and Daniel cups my face, but I turn my neck. “Please do it. Please make me yours.”

He makes a rasping sound deep in his chest, and I feel him come as he bites down on my neck. It’s painful, but there’s dark pleasure under it. I cling to it, riding an orgasm that spools through me like dark honey. Joshua is still stroking and kissing me, and when he bites me, it’s barely more than a nip. Enough to settle another bond inside me, but I know we’ll be doing this again in the next few days. I need him to burrow inside me as deep as he can go. So that anyone who sees me knows I’m his, and he’s mine. That I’m Rose Pack, and now they have me, they’ll never let me go.



27. GARTH

They drift on the haze of their mating bonds until late afternoon. Grace is in and out of sleep as her body slowly recovers. When Max's heat finally dips, we fall on the forgotten breakfast buffet like locusts. Plates are filled and lukewarm coffee chugged, while I work my way through a bowl of oatmeal. I haven't done anything more than observe, but there's a hollow feeling in my belly that might be hunger. I snort into my cereal. More likely frustrated desire eating its way through my stomach lining.

"So, what's the difference between a crepe and a pancake?" Max asks from where he's perched on Danny's lap. His rut has retreated in line with Max's heat, and Danny gives me an almost sheepish look as he nuzzles his mating mark. Max licks his syrupy fingers and shoots me a very different kind of glance. "Is it just a size thing?"

"I think it's the raising agent..." Richard murmurs, but Max is already off Danny's lap and advancing my way. He scoops a sleepy Grace up from where she's being doted on by her new mates, and brings her over, too. She's nibbling on a strawberry, but she swallows it with a gulp when Max perches her on my left knee, then takes up residence on my right. I grunt as they settle their weight, and Max looks at me through his lashes. "Can't leave the biggest guy in the room out, can we?"

Grace brought her bowl of strawberries with her, and for a while Max amuses himself by popping them in my mouth. But when he moves to open my zipper, I cover my groin with my hands. He pulls back like I've snatched his candy away, his mouth turning down in a pout. "I don't get it. Are you shy... or you're not attracted to us?"

Both concepts – but especially the second one - are so outrageous, I laugh. “Of course I’m attracted to you. You’re all my fantasies come to life.”

“But you don’t want us to touch your cock?” Max sounds like he’s speaking a foreign language, but Grace, I note, has gone very still. “Then why are you at my heat? And more importantly, why did you court us? Were you just going along with it for the other guys?”

Max is getting himself wound up. Mostly it’s his heat hormones reacting to the most dominant alpha in the room, but there’s also a hint of rejection in his burned sugar scent. I know his history. I know how the pack on the west coast screwed with his sense of self. But this isn’t the same thing. Or that’s what I tell myself as I take their hands, squeezing their stiff fingers. “I want you in our pack more than you can know. Have you ever heard the saying *un branco senza omega è come una lanterna senza lume?*”

Max gives a delicious kind of shiver, his pout softening a little. “No, but feel free to whisper that in my ear any time you like.”

I smile. “It’s Italian. It broadly means a pack without an omega is like a lantern without the light. We need you, the way ships need a lighthouse. And for ubers, that’s even more important. Our world can be a murky place. Our impulses aren’t always civilized, and an omega reminds us that there are more important things than power and control.”

Max stews on this for a moment, but Grace seems to sense a deeper story. “You’re Italian?”

“My grandmother’s side. She was an omega mated to two ubers, so I think she knew what she was talking about.” That gets another flicker of reaction from her, and I thread our fingers together. “But she was also mated to a beta. He’s the one I think of as my grandfather. Leo. My Nonno. I remember first hearing his packmates use the word, and I got so angry, I kicked them in the shins. I thought they were saying he wasn’t good enough, because they were always telling him no.”

A ghost of a smile touches her lips. “No. No.”

“Mm. My grandmother took me aside and told me, firstly, don’t kick an uber, even ones who pinch my cheeks and play hide and seek with me. But also, she told me Leo was special, and that while she was the light in the pack, he was their shelter. Her other mates weren’t easy men to live with – they’d actually been business rivals before they started courting her – but Leo was the one who really kept the peace. There was something about him that calmed all of their most extreme impulses.”

Soothed the savage beast, but that’s not something I want to say aloud, not even in lyrical Italian. The only thing worse than making them feel unwanted, is letting them believe they only exist to serve men like me.

But Grace’s careful gaze is still locked on my face. “Is that how I make you feel? Calm?”

I bite back a grimace, because I don’t want her to think I went into the courting arrangement to get myself a mood stabilizer. “You make my heart race, my palms sweat, and my knot throb. But yes, the longer I’m around you, the more peaceful I feel.”

By contrast, Max has crossed his arms, and I can feel his frustration like an approaching storm. “So, you’re attracted to us. We make you feel good. We’re the light and the shelter.” He tries to keep the sarcasm out of his voice, but mostly fails. “So why, exactly, don’t you want to fuck us?”

Grace is frowning now as well, my packmates exchanging worried glances, and I sit back. Shit. Now is definitely not the time for this conversation. “This is probably something we should talk about after your heat.”

Max’s eyes narrow to slits, and it’s clear he plans to spring off my lap and never return. But Grace is watching my face. And her hand snares Max’s wrist, holding him still. “No,” she says quietly, head tilted like she’s chasing a thought. “You use an escort service. So, it’s not that you don’t like sex. It’s something else.”

Fuck. I forgot that Joshua shared that with them. I can feel the guilt in his grimace from across the room, but I give him a

soft smile. My beautiful packmate is the fantasy of my troubled teenage years. Maybe not sexually, but as the best friend my uber side made it so difficult to have. “I’ve used them in the past. But that’s finished. I couldn’t even look at someone in that way who isn’t you.”

“Yeah, well that makes zero sense,” Max scoffs, although he looks slightly less frosty. “But it’s not good enough. Tell us what’s going on with you.” When I don’t reply, he rolls his eyes. “We’re literally *naked* in front of you, Alpha. It’s only fair you open up to us, too.”

Which is true. They’ve given us everything in no time at all. Trust, in its purest form.

“Let us in.” Grace drives the point home by arching a silky brow. “Isn’t that how it goes in this pack?”

I can’t help but smile at the challenge in her eyes. “You’re right. It is. And this isn’t something I planned to keep from you. It’s just a... complication during a heat. Because I won’t hurt you trying to make something happen that’s unnecessary.” I wrap my arms around their bodies, both still warm from the haze, but far less pliant than I’d like. “I don’t need to knot you to mate you.” Or to love them. They both make that very easy.

I can see the moment Grace puts it together. “Your knot is too big.”

Max snorts, then his eyes go wide. With surprise, but also more than a little curiosity. “Seriously? How big? And does that mean... Wait up. You *have* knotted someone before, right?”

“A professional. Once. She specialized in difficult knots. Ubers mostly. But it wasn’t pleasurable for either of us, so I never repeated it.”

There’s a shuffling sound from the nest, the low murmur of voices, and then Danny shakes his head at me. “Jesus. You never told us, Garth.”

I blow out a breath, feeling the weight of their gazes. “I’m a hypocrite, I know. But this isn’t trauma. And it’s not something I can work through. It’s just... biology.”

“Biology?” That gets a roll of the eyes from Grace this time, and she climbs off my knee before I can stop her. All eyes are now watching her as she stands over me, her hands on the perfect curve of her hips. “Do you know how many times I’ve heard that excuse? That biology made me the way I am, and that means I’m not good enough?” I open my mouth to protest, but she gives me a look that makes my beast long to roll over and show its belly. “This isn’t about one part of you, Garth. It’s not about slick, or knots, or even our bodies, really. We just want you to make us feel good, and we want to do the same for you. That’s what being a pack is about, isn’t it?”

I nod, because when she looks like that – pale skin, soft curves, snapping eyes - and tells me she wants to make me feel good, what else can I do? Especially when she holds out a hand and says, “Then trust us to make this good for all of us.”



They lead me over to the nest, one on either side of me, their hands clasped in mine. I make a quick study of my packmates. They’ve moved up the bed a little, and I’m relieved to see they’re just giving us room and not putting distance between us. Shame heats my cheeks for a moment, but I meet each of their eyes. Why haven’t I talked to them about this before? I trust them with my life, and I’ve always shared the rest of myself with them, openly and honestly. Is it just knot stigma, like Doctor Nora once suggested? Or is it because they’ve always looked at me like I can conquer anything?

When I’m sitting on the edge of the nest, Max drops gracefully to his knees to work on my shoes, while Grace starts with my shirt. Or my cufflinks, to be precise, smiling at the little rose design stamped into the gold. When she’s set them aside for safekeeping, she works on my tie, making a soft sound of pleasure at the silk in her hands. “Have you ever thought about recycling these?” she asks, surprising me. “Sally Vass, who designed my gala dress, is looking at ways to evolve H.O.M.E. products. Think of all the alpha ties out there that could be given a second life.”

To demonstrate, she winds my tie around her throat and lets it dangle between her breasts. I'm not sure it qualifies as clothing, but I've got a closet full of ties I'll gladly donate to the cause.

"We're going to offer Sally backing for her label," Richard says from behind me. "Danny will have to work out the legal side, but it will be good for her. Let her try new things, and on a much bigger scale. Plus, it'll give our older products a chance to shine again."

Grace smiles at him over my head and the sight of her dimples popping to life makes my breath catch. Grace seems to have three smiles: a cautious one, an amused one, and then this one, which lights up her face and draws every eye in the room. The fact Richard is the one to bring it out in her makes my beast sit up and beg. But then again, *I'm* the one she's unwrapping like a limited edition H.O.M.E. handbag.

Although, her hands slow when she gets to my suspenders. She studies them, and I tilt my head back. "Richard drummed it into me that there are three rules for wearing suspenders. Want to hear them?"

She nods and I snare her pointer finger, running it down the vertical leather strap over my chest. "Don't wear your suspenders with a belt. That's overkill."

"And his hand is plenty effective, anyway," Richard notes from the bed, no doubt thinking of how I'll be pinking up his ass once Max's heat is over.

"Don't put your suspenders on after your pants. Instead, fasten them to the back first. That way it will line up with your center seam." Richard gives me a proud little nod, exactly like the peacock he is, and I flick one of the braces. "And lastly, they have to match your shoes. No canvas suspenders with leather oxfords."

Max snorts from between my feet where he's working off my socks. "Can't really see you in a pair of canvas boat shoes, Alpha."

I grin down at him. “But then you haven’t seen my boat yet, have you, Omega?”

Max gives me flirty eyes. “I’m guessing it’s a great, big vessel?”

“Has its own berth at the club,” Joshua remarks, playing along. “I always thought it was compensating for something, but now I’m not so sure...”

That gets a few groans and snorts from the others, but their laughter dies away as Grace slides her fingers into the waistband of my pants. They’re the classic type of suspenders, with buttons instead of clips, and her knuckles graze my abs as she works them loose. If I was hard before, my knot is now threatening the structural integrity of my trousers.

But once she has them undone, Max joins her, and they quickly strip me of my shirt. Their hands roam over my chest and shoulders, their scents sparking with arousal as they explore. I can’t even pretend this isn’t foreplay, groaning at the sensation of their fingers taking greedy swipes of my skin. Another theory of Doctor Nora’s is that I’m touch-starved. She told me to practice some exposure exercises, even if it meant using my escort service. The ideal touching speed, apparently, is about three centimeters per second if you want a good dose of oxytocin. But it seems technique matters very little when it comes to fingers trailing down my happy trail.

“Stand,” Max mutters, and the command in his voice would make me smile if I wasn’t so desperate to obey. Together, they work my trousers down, taking my boxers with them. I was expecting a slower unveiling, but I remind myself this is a dick, not a cruise ship. No need to go breaking some champagne over my bow.

“Fuuuuuuckkkk.” That’s Max again, taking in the sight of my full-blown knot. The other guys have seen a version of it, but I guess it takes a pair of open-mouthed admirers to really bring it to life. Although, Max looks almost worried as he asks, “Does it hurt?”

“It’s... constant. More or less. You get used to it.”

“A chronic monster cock,” he murmurs, then looks at Grace. “I think this is a two-person job.”

She flicks a glance up at my face. We’re all naked in this room, but somehow, I feel the barest, until she reaches up and touches my cheek. “What are your rules, Garth? Is there anything you don’t want us to do?”

“No limits. Just... don’t hurt yourselves.”

They exchange another look and smile. I can’t tell if it’s their competitive or playful sides coming out, but Max nudges me onto the bed and they both resume their positions on my lap. A knee each, close enough to rub up against each other. And then they kiss me.

My knot is pretty much ignored as they focus on my mouth. Long, languid kisses that taste of slick and cum and desire. They kiss each other as much as me, winding their tongues together and feeding them into my mouth. They bite and suck and scrape, until my head is floating a foot off my shoulders. Fuck me. My beast is so blissed out, it doesn’t even try to stop the whine that falls from my lips.

“More.” I’d be shocked at my needy tone, if I didn’t feel like putty in their hands. Right now, I couldn’t cough up a dominance command if my life depended on it. “*More*, please. Kiss me everywhere.”

They slither down my body like snakes. Snakes with roaming hands and tingling tongues, stroking and licking every inch of my skin. I lean back on my elbows but they push me flat, kneeling on either side of me as I sink into the nest. When they reach my cock, they take turns licking my shaft until it’s slick with precum. There’s so much of it, it soaks my knot, and they chase it with their tongues, lapping across the swollen skin until I’m panting beneath them. Max goes for the swollen purple head, slurping it into his mouth until I hit the back of his throat. Grace is still tending my knot, every kiss punctured by a breathy moan. I look down at them, and I’m lost.

“I’m coming! Fuck. Careful, Max.”

But he just rolls his eyes at me and latches on tighter. Grace squeezes my knot with her hand, her eyes on my face, and I blow hard enough to see stars.

When I'm finally done, Max sits back on his heels, dragging Grace in for a kiss. He looks smug until he zeroes in on my inflating knot. His mouth drops open, and I shrug. "You can't keep an uber knot down for long."

"Evidently," he mutters, the other guys coming over to pet their mates and inspect my relentless knot. I'm too blissed out to care, but I push myself up to an elbow when Max takes a deep breath and says, "I'm not sure there's enough slick in the world to make this painless. But I'm ready to give it a damn good try."

"No," I say quietly. "Your heat's spiking back up, and the haze will make you push yourself. I'm not going to let you risk it."

Grace presses a hand to Max's forehead and bites her lip. "You're hot, love. You should listen to Garth."

He gives me a calculating look, then sighs and pushes back his damp hair. "Okay. I've got other knots to take." The heat in the nest definitely kicks up a notch, but he stays focused on me. "But you have to give us something, Garth. We don't want you left out."

I look between them, this pretty pair of soulmates. Don't they realize they've already given me more than I ever hoped for?

"I want to bond you so much it's burning me up," I tell them, but when smiles bloom on their faces, I shake my head. "It's different with an uber. My dominance is extreme. You're not just going to get a connection you can tune into now and then. According to my grandparents, you'll be able to feel me all the time. And it's probably going to heighten your senses, too."

The other guys exchange a volley of glances until Richard, ever the scientist, asks, "And us, through their bonds? With it amplify all of us?"

I tilt my head, trying to remember what my Nonno told me. “You’ll definitely pick up on my moods. And it will probably make you a little more dominant, as well.”

Joshua just shrugs, but Danny gives me a grin worthy of a tiger. “An alpha upgrade? Sounds good to me.”

Max snorts, swatting his thigh, but Grace is already stretching out beside me. She takes my hand and kisses the palm, then rests it against the side of her neck. Max quickly follows suit on my other side, and the rest of the guys fall silent, knowing what a big moment this is for me.

But Max eases my hand off Grace. He’s circling a patch of skin on his throat with his thumb, his eyes more serious than I’ve ever seen them. “Me first. If it’s too much, my haze will take the edge off.” Grace makes a sound of protest, but Max gives her a look. “You get hurt, it will fuck me up a lot worse. It’s better he starts with me.”

I grimace, but he’s right. I can smell his slick, and feel the heat rising off his skin. He’s not unbreakable, but omegas are built to take a lot during the haze. Which he proves a moment later as I sink my teeth into his tender skin. He makes a breathless sound that collapses into a moan, and I feel a flush of slick – or maybe even cum - across my thigh. His hand flutters up to my face, stroking my stubble as he sucks a breath between his teeth. “Hell, Alpha, you’re a beast.”

Biologically true, but it doesn’t sound like a complaint, so I hold his gaze as I dig a little deeper, planting my bond next to my packmates’. Max feels like a supernova in the darkness of my lair, and I think of my grandparents, and how love can glow like a lantern. “You gonna be my little ray of sunshine, Omega?”

“I’m going to be your *dominant-as-fuck* ray of sunshine,” he says, his chest heaving as he stares at me in wonder. “Holy shit. I feel like I could fuck the whole world.”

That makes the other guys perk up, but I’m already stroking my way up Grace’s neck and feathering my fingers across her lips. Max has given me a burst of confidence, but I hesitate, staring at the tender skin of her throat. “I’m not like your

stepfather, but I *am* an uber,” I warn her, “and the potential is there. You really want to let something like me inside you?”

“More than anything,” she echoes my words, smiling against my fingers. “I trust you, Garth. I want your bite.” Her gaze slides Max’s way, her lips quirking up. “And I want to feel whatever the hell he’s feeling.”

She might be trying to lighten the mood, but it’s a siren’s call to my beast, and I feel it stretch under my skin. I nod at my packmates, and they all touch some part of her, just enough to make her eyelashes flutter as I fit my mouth to her throat. I can’t help kissing and licking until she’s shivering under me, but then I can’t hold back any longer.

I want *her*; inside me, beneath me, around me. Any way she’ll have me.

I bite and she gasps at the pain, but our packmates distract her, and she melts as the bond sinks in. I see her, and she’s not a ray of light, but a window thrown wide open. A portal to the freshest, sweetest air I’ve ever tasted. And I don’t just embrace it, I consume it, until there’s a jolting tug in my chest. Our bond settling, or maybe my beast finally calming the fuck down.

A sound that’s more vibration than language comes out of my throat and Grace looms over me, her eyes wide. Max is right beside her, skin to skin as they stare down at me, entranced. But it’s Grace who says what they’re both thinking. “So, *that’s* what coming home feels like.”



28. EPILOGUE - GRACE

Three months later

The air in the ballroom is a heady mix of alpha musk and omega perfume, shot through with the unmistakable aroma of professional envy. Which is fine by me, since House of Omega has just swept the board at the Fragrance Foundation Annual Awards, including the coveted prize for Innovative Perfume of the Year. The way people are talking, Magnetism won't just be winning awards, but will revolutionize the way the industry looks at perfumery.

“You smell happy,” Richard murmurs, leaning down to press his mouth to his bonding mark. My heart flutters under his lips, and it doesn't take long before he's working his way across the other bites. It gets a few grunts from our other packmates, but I just grin. Richard's a bit obsessed with marking his territory. And it's a pretty sweet turnaround from the way he used to sprint out of the room every time he saw me.

Although, in the weeks since we bonded, I've learned I was never far from Richard's line of sight. I've made an effort to befriend our bodyguards – mainly by slipping them handmade creams for the omegas in their lives – and they've completely spilt the tea. Richard might not have been able to smell our scent-bond, but he had his eye on me from the moment I wormed my way into his life.

And I've grown to like the attention. I even went up on stage with him to accept Magnetism's award, since I've spent the last three months working almost exclusively on the product. It's given me the insight into the business I always dreamed of, and next week, I'll be working directly under Garth as business liaison for the expanding product range. Not just scents that work on bonded mates, but a new technology that Richard believes might help unlock the fragrance of soulmates.

A crowded room, a busy street, your eyes lock with a stranger... In fact, why not on a bus to an interview that will

change your entire life?

The air thickens as the dancing starts up and the omega gowns start to flutter and twirl. Max, who's wearing a rose-gold blazer in the same hue as my dress, collapses against my neck like I'm the last oxygen in the room. "God, don't these people know how to open a window?"

"It's snowing outside," Joshua says mildly. "And we probably smell just as ripe as they do."

I wrinkle my nose at that, reaching out to brush my wrist under Richard's nose. It's where I splashed Magnetism on myself tonight, accentuating our already hypnotic scent-bond. Richard breathes in, his pupils dilating as his brain absorbs and catalogs our scent.

"Top notes?" I quiz.

"Sex," he mutters. "Woody, spicy, fruity sex."

I huff a laugh. "And if I ask you about the heart notes, are you going to say the same thing?"

He slants a glassy look my way. "As long as you're wearing that dress, I am."

I preen, and wave at Sally, who's sitting at a nearby table with the pack who's just started courting her. They're guys from the banking world, and know nothing about fashion or fragrances, but that doesn't stop them sniffing her every chance they get.

The dress she made for me is from an old Homecoming Omega range. It has a vintage taffeta skirt, covered in lush gold rosettes, but the strapless bodice is anchored by a pair of sexy, leather suspenders. For the personal touch, they're the ones Garth was wearing when we bonded three months ago. To keep the surprise, I stole them from his closet, and I'm pretty sure he's now scheming to take them back.

"I may never take this dress off," I tell Richard, while Garth gets out of his chair and circles the table towards me. "I think it goes nicely with my new dominance boost."

Garth grins, which he's been doing a lot lately. At first, it was strange, since I had a lot of unresolved issues about ubers, but now I barely see his designation. He's just Garth, our pack alpha, our CEO, and the man who's never once given me a reason to hide.

When he reaches my side, he leans down to press a kiss on his bite mark. "Do you want to dance, mate?"

"I was just going to ask her that," Max pouts, then points a finger at Daniel. "Do *you* know how to foxtrot, Mr. Knuckledusters?"

"I know how to let my omega lead, if that helps."

"Good enough," Max pronounces, and I smile at Daniel as he comes around to collect his dance partner. He's wearing the tux with the leather trim, but he has a gold rosebud from Pop's garden pinned to the lapel. Pop's home, now safe from any future loan sharks, is undergoing a careful and devoted restoration, but the rose garden is still as wild and untamed as ever.

We circle through a few dances, with Richard and Joshua cutting in, but eventually I end up in Max's arms. "Right where you belong," he sighs into my hair, and that special little bond inside me – the one that shines just a little brighter than the others – gives a happy wink. "You still up for our after party, gorgeous woman?"

I lean back in his arms and smile. "I'm so ready, he's starting to suspect something. When we were dancing, he kept asking if my shoes were pinching."

Max shrugs. "That's just because the guys are obsessed with your feet. We've never met a woman who can orgasm just by getting her toes sucked."

"That's because you never stop feeding me your slick." I roll my eyes, while Max gives a smug little hum. I'm not kidding. The other day I was at the fashion hub, and a visiting designer asked if I needed her to call my pack, because I was clearly going into heat.

“Then why don’t we foxtrot back over to our table and collect our mates? We’ve scooped the prize pool and eaten all the wieners. No reason to stick around.”

I laugh and we head back to our pack, giving Garth the signal that we’re ready to go. But before I can grab my clutch, he’s pressing me down into the nearest chair. It takes me a moment to locate the source of the horrible stench wafting my way.

“Asshole alert,” Max mutters as Kayden and his packmates come to a stop on the other side of the table. “Who the hell invited them?”

“I did,” Richard says quietly, and I can’t stop the hurt that blooms on my face. I haven’t seen my stepbrother in weeks, not since I ran into him outside Jasmine’s sorority house. It was my last-ditch effort to convince her to get away before her bonding ceremony. I had a whole escape plan ready, but she just gave me her glorious smile and turned me down. Of course, Kayden used the opportunity to hurl some abuse my way. It was ugly, and my bodyguards got a reaming, but watching Jasmine walk away with him was the hardest part to take.

And now he’s *here*, in my world, and at my scent-mate’s invitation.

Kayden’s eyes rake over me in disgust, but before he can open his mouth, Richard takes something from his jacket and slides it across the table. My stepbrother’s sneer only deepens. “The Ferro Club cards are black.”

Richard flips it over, pointing to a logo on the back. “Not if you’re a founding family. My grandfather started the club, and I was given this as part of the inheritance clause.”

Kayden’s jaw flexes, no doubt because he was denied membership after his father was kicked out. “You think I give a fuck?”

Richard arches a haughty brow at him, the picture of elegant boredom. “You should, since I can sign it over to anyone I choose.”

Kayden shoots a glance at Porter and folds his arms over his chest. “And I turn up there, they’ll let me in?”

“I have full veto power for all members. Not even the Club President can stop you from joining if you have that card.”

I don’t give a shit about some elitist alpha club, but the thought of Richard giving my stepbrother *anything* makes my blood boil. I’m about to snatch it off the table when Garth’s hand touches my arm. Kayden, of course, doesn’t miss the gesture, and glares at Richard. “What’s the fucking catch?”

Richard leans across the table, his face now a menacing mask. “You scrub every memory of Grace from your mind. If you ever see her on the street, you turn around and walk the other way. Don’t speak to her. Don’t look at her. Step into fucking traffic for all I care. She. Never. Sees. You. The first time she does, I revoke your membership, and set every jackal in that club on your ass.”

Hatred flashes in Kayden’s eyes, but it’s a lukewarm thing. With my dominance upgrade from Garth, I can see my stepbrother more clearly than ever. A big man, but an ugly little bully.

“That’s it?” he huffs. “I get the keys to the kingdom, and all I’ve got to do is pretend a mousy little bitch doesn’t exist?”

The table creaks as Garth leans his weight on it. Dominance swirls in the air, my bond unfurling inside me like a dark flower. “Shut your fucking mouth, pup, before I do it for you.”

For a moment, Kayden looks like he’s going to fight. But then his gaze snaps to my neck, to the ring of bites on proud display, and he snatches the card off the table. Porter and Derek don’t even meet my eyes as they slink away.

“Fuck,” Max breathes out, dropping a kiss on Richard’s lips. “You’re hot as hell when you’re getting all snooty with the criminal classes.”

It’s true. My scent-mate might have handed over the card, but he took more from my stepbrother than he gave.

No, not my stepbrother. Kayden Sawyer doesn’t have that hold on me anymore. Because even the worst memories of him

– and the fading scar on my wrist – can't compete with the power of my pack bonds.

Besides, I think as I get to my feet, I'm Grace Worth-Rose. You mess with me, you get the thorns.

"Can we go now?" I ask Garth. "Because I really need to get some fresh air."

"And it's time for the after party," Max whispers in my ear as we head to collect our coats and meet our driver.

It's a quick drive home to the tower, and then we're bundling into the elevator. Garth moves to hit the button for our suites, but I smack his hand away. "We need to make a detour," I tell him, ignoring Max's elbow in my ribs.

Garth looks between us, clearly suspicious, but doesn't complain when I lead the way into his office. I point to the chair behind his desk, and while Max is nudging him into it, I open his drawer and bring out a small tube of cream. Rose gold, with KNOT WORTHY stamped on the side.

"What's that?" Garth shoots the other alphas a curious look. "A new product line?"

"You could say that," Richard murmurs, perching on the edge of the desk, while Joshua and Daniel take the visitors' chairs. "It's Grace's invention."

"Mine and Richard's and Max's," I correct him, then squeeze myself between his chair and desk. Sally was clever enough to put a long split in the side of my dress, and Garth's hand clamps down on my bare thigh. "It's been thoroughly tested. Not by me, of course, because that would be awkward in a lot of ways. But the lab signed off on it, so it's good to go."

Garth's hand slides to my hip, clearly ready to pull me into his lap. But I hold firm, nodding at the tube. "It's for you. And we want you to try it."

He leans back in his chair, looking for the fine print. There isn't any, because it's not like we're ever going to mass produce it.

“It’s knot cream!” Max suddenly bursts out, excitement fizzing in his scent. “To take the air out of your monster tire.”

I gape at him, while the other guys crack up, but Garth is staring at me with his bottomless black eyes. “A knot cream to do what, exactly?”

“What Max said. Sort of. Richard can give you the science, but it’s based on the properties of Max’s slick, an anti-inflammatory agent, plus some soothing oils I use in my other creams. It won’t completely deflate it, but it should be enough to give you a bit of a break...”

I don’t get another word out, because Garth has pulled me onto his lap, his mouth plastered to mine. He kisses me like he never wants it to end, deep, consuming pulls of my tongue that make my pack bonds sing. I don’t know who lowers the zip on the back of my dress, but Max is crouched down, busily working Garth’s fly. When he realizes what’s happening, Garth jerks back, staring in shock at our omega. “What? We’re doing this here? Now?”

For a second our uber alpha looks *nervous*, and I wilt. “Ah. Unless you don’t want to...”

But Garth grabs the tube back off Max, propping me up on the edge of his desk as he sniffs the cream. “Mmm. Vanilla and honey. You really want to try this?”

I can see the edge of his cock through the parted fabric of his trousers and my mouth waters. We’ve played around a lot, but I’ve never been able to talk him into giving me the full alpha experience. “More than anything.”

“Then panties off, mate.” Garth yanks his boxers down and gives me a wolfish grin. “If it doesn’t work... you can still ride the tip.”

I moan, because even that’s a stretch. But I almost tear my way out of my dress, my pretty lingerie set not really getting the attention it deserves. When I’m standing before him in just my rose gold heels, Garth presses a thick finger into my pussy. I’m dripping wet, and he knows exactly how to touch me to

make me gush. A little swirling pressure on my clit, and I'm panting hard as I come on his hand.

"Get your tongue in there," he tells Max, who's still on his knees. "Keep her nice and wet and loose while I deal with my knot."

Max looks up at me from under his lashes, a filthy angel with that dirty gleam in his eyes. He peels me open, his tongue devouring me while I watch Garth apply the cream. *It's medicinal*, I tell myself, but there's something highly erotic about watching Garth rub my cream into his hard knot. And then he gives a stuttering gasp, because it's starting to soften. Not all the way, but enough that he sits back with a stunned expression. "Fuck, that feels good."

"It's only going to get better," Richard tells him, and then my mates are helping me straddle our pack alpha's lap. They keep their hands on us, huddling close, as Garth grips his shaft and gazes into my eyes. "Love you, Grace. Now and forever."

"Love you too, Garth. And that's never going to change."

He groans, stealing the words off my lips as I sink down onto his cock. The stretch is real, but I've had plenty of practice breathing through it. And nothing hurts when I see the emotion shining in his eyes. "You feel so good, baby. So warm and tight. Can you take more?"

I don't even nod, just lean back and bear down harder. Max's fingers slide between us, coated in his slick. He teases me open, rolling my clit until Garth's knot lodges in my channel. It's denser and harder than the other guys, and one thrust punches the breath from my lungs. But who needs to breathe? Because I'm taking Garth Rose's knot. And he's rocking inside me, every thrust punctuated by a blissed-out grunt in my ear. Somehow, he lifts me onto his desk, pressing me down on the antique blotter as he drills his knot inside me.

I drop my head back, my mates sucking kisses from my mouth. The world flickers and spins as Garth drives my pleasure higher and higher. "*My perfect mate. Going to fill you up. My beautiful Grace. Taking every part of me...*"

I don't hear the rest, because I'm suddenly drowning in the hot flush of his cum. I'm so full, it tears another orgasm from me, and I wonder what I look like to my mates, writhing on our pack alpha's cock.

It must be good, because alpha arousal swirls around us, their fingers dipping and tasting as they ease me off his knot. I lean back on the desk, legs shaking, Garth's cum dripping from my parted thighs. He stares at me, a vision of wrecked hair and slack mouth as we ride our aftershocks. "Just one thing," he says as he props my heeled feet on his chest and kisses my toes. "Why did you want to do this here, in my office?"

I blush, but Max reaches over and pinches my red cheek. "Well, let me tell you about a little fantasy Grace has about the star of the office induction video..."



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