

A festive Christmas wreath with white and gold ornaments and lights. The wreath is made of white branches and leaves, adorned with numerous white and gold ornaments, including round baubles and star-shaped decorations. Warm white lights are strung through the branches, creating a soft glow. The background is a dark, textured surface, possibly a wall or a backdrop, with the wreath hanging on it.

Knot for Christmas

An omegaverse Christmas novella

EVELYN FLOOD

Knot for Christmas



Knot for Christmas

Evelyn Flood

First published by Evelyn Flood in 2023

Copyright 2023 by Evelyn Flood

All rights reserved. This book or any portion thereof may not be reproduced or used in any manner whatsoever without the express written permission of the publisher, except for the use of brief quotations in a book review.

Cover by Temptation Creations

Contents

Content warning

About this book

In loving dedication

1. Chapter one - Grace
2. Chapter two – Lucas
3. Chapter three – Grace
4. Chapter four – Drew
5. Chapter five – Grace
6. Chapter six – Ben
7. Chapter seven – Lucas
8. Chapter eight – Drew
9. Chapter nine – Grace
10. Chapter ten – Ben
11. Chapter eleven – Grace
12. Chapter twelve – Lucas
13. Chapter thirteen – Grace

14. Chapter fourteen – Drew
15. Chapter fifteen – Grace
16. Chapter sixteen – Grace
17. Chapter seventeen – Grace
18. Chapter eighteen – Grace
19. Chapter nineteen – Grace

Also By

Stalk me

Content warning

This book contains light references to child abandonment,
foster care and adoption.

If this is okay with you, please keep reading!

Evelyn x

About this book

This book is an omegaverse. That means that the characters have some of the characteristics often seen in wolves, but **they do not shift.**

In loving dedication

This one?

This one's for you, reader.

Chapter one - Grace

The little girl laughs in delight as she turns her face up to the pretty lights. Reaching out, she tugs desperately on her mother's coat. "Mama, look!"

The harried-looking mother with heavy-looking shopping bags glances up at the lights and back down to the little girl. The smile spreads across her face, almost incredulous with wonder as she watches her daughter spin in a circle, laughter spilling out of her with the innocence of a child who has never known anything else.

It's almost magical to watch. But I... I can't.

Swallowing down the lump in my throat, I carefully maneuver around the pair of them. The lights up and down the street are bright and twinkling, the tinkle of festive music spilling from the café down the street. Every store is decked out with a festive display, everyone competing against each other for trade during the busiest time of the year.

Everyone except me.

My key gets stuck in the crumbling door as usual, and I wrestle with it, biting back a groan as the heavy door finally swings open and I can escape into the sanctuary of my bookstore. Moving around, I flick on the overhead lights, spilling warm white across the aging bookshelves that groan with hundreds, if not thousands of books.

We closed early today, ready for another of the signings I've organized throughout the week, each one recognising independent authors from across the city. Chairs are already set out, and I check over the set-up I arranged earlier. Tonight's author will do a short reading, then a signing and meet and greet, complete with fresh coffee and little picky bits of food that never feel like quite enough.

Placing my hands on my hips, I turn in a slow circle, surveying the room.

It's warm, and it's nice. Nice is fine.

Not everyone wants to be slapped in the face with a Christmas ornament every time they venture out of their house during December. My store is a Christmas-free sanctuary, and I'm happy for it to stay that way.

The author arrives an hour later, full of cheerful greetings that fade on her lips as she scans the room. Distracting her with petit fours that cost me a ridiculous amount of money from the delicatessen down the street, I press a coffee into her hands and set her loose on the early arrivals that have started floating through the door. I catch a few double takes, a few

askance glances, but nobody mentions the absolute absence of anything festive.

Not like last night. I was nearly bowled over by the frilly blonde woman who demanded to know why my store wasn't in keeping with the community theme.

One familiar face elbows his way through the crowd, and I can't help but smile at the grumpy look on his face. "Hey, Frank."

"Romance," he hisses. "Stuff and nonsense."

I make a non-committal noise. Frank comes in every single day without fail. He's one of my most regular customers – despite never actually buying anything – and by far the grumpiest. If he wasn't aged at least eighty, I might be tempted to partner up with him.

"People like romance, Frank," I say gently. "And Ellen's books are wonderful. Why don't you take a seat at the back, and I'll get you a coffee and a cake?"

He scoffs, but I spot the way he eyes the little cakes. "Maybe just the one. I won't be staying though."

I hide my smile as I grab a cup, piling some extra cakes onto the plate. "No problem."

When the signing is over, the happy – if somewhat bemused – author packed away, I find him stacking chairs at the back. His walking stick balances precariously against the wall.

"Frank!" I grab one as he wobbles. "You don't need to do that."

He relinquishes the chair reluctantly. “Well, I don’t see anyone else stopping behind to help you, Grace. Any sign of a pack yet?”

His direct question takes me by surprise, and I nearly drop my chair. “Frank.”

“Don’t ‘Frank’ me,” he sasses. “Young omega like you needs a pack of her own. You must be nearly forty—,”

“I’m twenty-seven!” I nearly shriek in horror, and he waves his stick as he sits down on one of the remaining chairs and watches me stack the rest.

“It’s not right,” he mutters. “Happiest days of my life with my Annie. You work too hard. Need to join one of those ‘appy things. Swipe to the right, so to speak.”

My eyes squeeze closed, but my heart softens in my chest. “You don’t need to worry about me, Frank,” I say more gently. “I’m just fine on my own.”

I try to inject some brevity into my words, but they echo around the empty room, and Frank humphs.

I take as long as I can, but eventually, everything is packed away.

“Hey... Frank?” I say carefully. “You know, I can leave you a key.”

It’s the same offer I’ve made unsuccessfully a dozen times before, and I get the same response I always do. With an annoyed grunt, Frank pulls himself up and makes his way slowly to the door. His back is a little more curved than it used

to be, his hands a touch more frail on his stick as he reaches for the door and I dart ahead to pull the heavy wood open.

He purses his lips. "Open tomorrow?"

"Always am." He leaves without another word, and I lean out of the doorway to watch him make his way slowly down the street. A group of older kids are walking down the street, but they ignore him as he turns the corner and disappears out of sight.

Sighing, I turn my head. And jump a mile as a pair of dark blue eyes meet mine.

"Hi, there."

My hands fly up to my chest as I gasp in shock, and he immediately steps back, his hands out placatingly. "Shit! Sorry."

"No," I say breathlessly. "It's fine."

I recognise him, and my stomach does a little happy flip that I very firmly lock away in the Grace hasn't had sex in waaaay too long box. The alpha in front of me comes in at least once a week, always leaving with an armful of recommendations.

My eyes narrow playfully. "You must read at least three books a day if you've gone through them all already."

He raises his hands, a charming smile spreading across his face as he shoves dark blonde hair out of his eyes. "Guilty as charged. I think I'm too late, though. You're closed?"

Chewing my lip, I glance into the empty store. The alpha picks up on my unease and takes another step back. “I’ll come back again. I don’t want to make you feel uncomfortable.”

Sighing, I step inside. “You’re not. Come in.”

He doesn’t make me feel uncomfortable. Oh, no. Mister handsome alpha with the broad shoulders and the giant hands makes me feel a lot of things, but uncomfortable isn’t one of them.

I’m more worried about my behavior than his.

I hold the door open, and he ducks in past me, his scent an almost familiar smoky warmth that curls around me. He turns just as I inhale, nostrils fluttering wide like a rhino’s butthole, and I feel my face flood with scarlet.

That’s not embarrassing at all.

He clears his throat. “I don’t want to keep you. I was just wondering if I could grab some more recommendations?”

I move around one of the tables, keeping a distance between us. “Sure. Any particular genre?”

He looks a little helpless as he spreads out his hands, and I will my heartbeat to slow down.

He just looks so good. Tall, handsome, a little curl in his hair that keeps flopping into his eyes and making me wonder if he has anyone to cut it for him.

I bet he does. The little fizz in my belly, that tiny surge of adrenaline, sinks like a stone. He pauses, as if picking up on

my disappointment, and I offer him a weak smile.

“Can I get your recommendations?” he asks. “I’m happy to be guided by an expert.”

Jeez. Even his voice is perfect. Deep and rumbly, like he’s on the faintest edge of a purr. My hands drop to grip the edges of the table tightly, my knuckles whitening.

That’s it. I’m calling the clinic tomorrow.

He follows my movement, and his slightly bushy brows draw together. “Are you okay?”

“Of course!” My voice is a little too high, and I turn away before I embarrass myself any more. His footsteps follow mine as I walk a little too quickly over to the bookcase. My fingers dance over the spines, and my shoulders loosen as the familiar feel of books beneath my hand grounds me.

“What are you in the mood for?” I ask him over my shoulder. He’s closer than I expected, his commanding presence a blanket around my shoulders as he leans in to take a look.

“Anything you think I’ll like,” he murmurs, and I shiver as his low voice rumbles in my ear. “You haven’t steered me wrong yet.”

Swallowing, I nod. “Okay.”

This is easily my favorite part of this job. Choosing books that I think people will enjoy, trying to match up stories with personality traits. I pull out a couple of options, turning to

spread them out on the empty table behind me. The alpha watches me closely.

“You know,” he says quietly. “It seems rude that I’ve never introduced myself. I’m Lucas.”

Lucas. It suits him.

I blink down at the hand he holds out, and he wiggles his fingers. “I think you’re supposed to shake it,” he jokes. “Unless you’d rather not?”

“No!” I blurt a little too quickly. His smile widens as I slide my hand into his, his grip firm and warm as he squeezes my fingers gently. He doesn’t let go.

“And your name?” His voice sounds a little deeper, now, and I look away from our hands, up to meet his eyes. He has little creases in the corners, a sign of laughter and life.

“Grace,” I say finally, and he tilts his head.

“That’s a beautiful name.”

I pull my hand away from his, turning back to focus on the books. “Thank you.”

Don’t read into it, I tell myself sternly. He’s just being friendly.

He takes all of the books I recommend, every single one, and I wrap them up in paper as he waits patiently after tapping his card against the machine. His fingers brush mine as I hand them over. “Thank you.”

“Maybe these will last you more than a few days this time,” I tease as we walk back to the door. His laugh is full, filling the room around us.

“Probably not,” he admits wryly. I pull the door open, and he turns to me. “I have a feeling I’ll be back pretty soon. It was lovely to meet you, Grace.”

His eyes scan my face, and I fight back the blush. “Haven’t we already met? This isn’t your first visit.”

He shakes his head. “Nope. Now that I have your name, I think we should consider this our first meeting. But not our last.”

Lucas steps outside, glancing back over his shoulder with a frown. “It’s getting late. You gonna be okay getting home?”

My smile feels lopsided, thrown off just as much as the rest of me by this handsome alpha who buys romance books and wraps his lips around my name like it’s candy. “Always am.”

He hesitates, but eventually he nods. “Okay. Be careful?”

He waits for my nod before he walks away slowly, his dark green coat disappearing into the crowds filling the late-night market. I stand there longer than I should, until he’s nowhere to be seen.

A particularly rowdy group breaks into song, snapping me out of my trance as I hurriedly back into the shop, shrugging into my old winter jacket. I take a moment to check everything is switched off before I grab my bag and pull the door closed behind me, locking it carefully.

Despite the late hour, the streets are full of people. Shopping, chatting, sharing. I duck around a beta dressed as Santa with especially grabby hands and the look of someone who's had a little too much eggnog, grimacing.

It doesn't take me long to reach my apartment. As I wrestle with the door, I wonder briefly why every single lock in my life is doomed to be so damn difficult before I stumble into the small space and close the door behind me with a relieved sigh.

I'm in desperate need of a hot bath. With bubbles. And then soft pajamas, and fluffy socks.

Actually, I'll take a scented candle and a rom com too.

Once I'm tucked up on the couch, wrapped up in a fluffy blanket with a glass of wine in hand and a bowl of instant ramen in the other, I can finally wallow in my own little pity party for one.

I bet Lucas isn't on his own. I wonder if he has a pack. If they have their own omega, sweet and soft and pretty. If they're sitting around a table, laughing and joking with each other over home-cooked food.

My heart twists inside my chest, imagining him handing my books over to her with a soft smile. I hope she likes them.

I try to focus on the film. It's one of my favorites, where an omega finds her perfect pack through an arranged mating, but I can't concentrate tonight. My legs and arms feel achy, the hint of a headache beginning behind my eyes.

Oh, crap. Bolting upright, I rush to the mirror. Flushed cheeks and too-bright brown eyes stare back at me.

I definitely need to ring the clinic. My heat is on its way, a little earlier than usual but more than ready to wreak havoc on my life yet again.

Giving up on the idea of my own little movie night, I turn off the lights and crawl into my bed, burying myself beneath the covers until I resemble a little omega burrito, wrapped up tightly until the shivering subsides.

But the loneliness stays.

It always does.

Chapter two – Lucas

“Honey, he’s home!”

Rolling my eyes at Drew, I shake out the scattering of snow that started on my way home and drop the books onto our kitchen table. They thump, and Drew raises his eyebrows as he leans forward to take a look.

“A blossoming romance,” he reads, picking up one and flipping it over. “You’re turning into quite a reader, you know.”

I can feel my face heat up as I reach over and grab it back from him. “Shut up.”

“How’s your pretty omega doing?” he asks. Half-shrugging, I head for the refrigerator, rummaging around in the hopes of finding something other than leftover sloppy joes that have been in there a little too long. Ben’s been working on a commission, and we haven’t had chance to cook much with the overtime we’ve been pulling.

“Fine. She’s... fine.” Frowning, I glance out of the window again. The snow is coming down heavier now.

Should've insisted on walking her home.

I'm tempted to walk back, retrace my steps, but that's a step too stalkerish, even for me.

Giving up on the idea of food for now, I grab the books from the table. Drew follows me into the living room, watching me add them to the small wooden bookcase I persuaded Ben to build last week. "Did you get a name this time, at least?"

Warmth spreads inside my chest, and I poke my tongue into my cheek. "Maybe."

"Well?" Drew throws himself down onto the sofa, a beer in his hands. "Spill the goods."

"Spill the goods on what?" Ben appears in the doorway, his eyes falling on the beer in Drew's hands. Drew wraps his fingers around it protectively, hugging it against him with a grumble. "Get one yourself. I had a long shift."

Ben disappears, coming back and handing me a drink as I settle down too, my eyes lingering on the books. "So... what are we talking about?"

"Lucas's omega," Drew wiggles his eyebrows, and Ben looks over to the bookcase. "Are you planning on reading any of those?"

I clear my throat. "Absolutely."

Maybe. Probably. If only because Grace picked them for me.

"One of these days, she's actually going to start asking you about them," Drew interjects helpfully. "And your whole little

bookish stalker plan is going to fall apart.”

I frown into my drink. He has a point.

Ben nudges me. “So? What goods do we have to spill?”

Sighing, I lean back and close my eyes. “Her name is Grace.”

Grace, who smells like gingerbread and all things fucking delicious, with her pouty lips, hazel eyes and wavy brown, soft looking hair cut just below her chin.

Drew whistles. “Pretty. I’m not on shift tomorrow. I might head on into town and pay her a little visit.”

I shoot up in my seat, and Ben nods. “I’ll come. I’m pretty much done with this job.”

Shit. “I’m working tomorrow.”

They fucking know that, and they both give me innocent looks that don’t fucking fool me at all.

“Oh, what a shame,” Drew drawls. “Looks like we’ll have Grace all to ourselves, Benjamin.”

I fight to keep the scowl from my face. Not that I mind them meeting her. I want them to meet her. I know they’ll see exactly the same thing as I do.

She’s perfect.

I just... want to be there too.

Sighing, I admit defeat. Miguel won’t let me out of another shift, not when I left earlier than I was supposed to tonight to

try and catch Grace at the book signing. “Be gentle with her. She’s... skittish.”

Drew looks outraged, like I’ve thrown down a challenge to his honor. “I’m always gentle.”

Ben chokes. “Remember that time you threw that omega into the swimming pool?”

Drew reddens. “We were playing a game. I was playing.”

“But she couldn’t swim,” I point out drily. We got banned from the socials at the omega clinic for that one.

Ben taps his fingers on his knee. His voice is a little lower, gruffer than usual when he speaks. “You think she’s the right one?”

Drew looks at me too, and I bounce my thoughts around in my head before I answer. “I like her. A lot.”

They both snort. “You’ve been stalking her bookstore for months,” Drew says, pointing at the bookshelf filled with Grace’s recommendations. “We know you like her. But is she even single?”

My mouth dries at the thought. “She has to be.”

Fuck. What if she’s got her own pack at home? Maybe that’s why she’s skittish. She can probably scent my interest a mile away.

“Find out tomorrow,” I order. Drew’s much better at conversation than I am, charmer that he is. And Ben will keep him in line.

I'll be keeping my fingers crossed.

Chapter three – Grace

The heavy box above my head tilts dangerously, and my rickety ladder wobbles.

“Oh, shi—,”

My balance tilts, and the world throws sideways as I tumble off, bracing myself for a hard smack against the floor. I hit something solid, the air rushing out of my lungs with the impact.

Something hard... but also kind of soft. And warm.

Cracking one eye open, I register the strong arms wrapped around me a second before a gruff voice sounds in my ear. “You okay?”

The alpha holding me smells like peppermint. Fresh and minty and mouthwatering. My eyes fly open, taking in the almond-shaped brown eyes staring down at me with concern. A little crease forms between his dark eyebrows. “Grace? It is Grace, right?”

I realize I’m staring at him, my mouth open, and I snap it closed. His face curves into a smile, a dimple appearing in his

cheek.

A freaking dimple.

Seriously. At this stage, the universe has to be fucking with me. Is it Hot Alpha Week? Is there some sort of awareness month happening right now that I didn't know about?

Clearing my throat, I will the heat in my cheeks to die down as I shift, and he immediately places me back on my feet. A large hand holds me steady as I find my balance, and I blow out a breath, catching sight of the books scattered around on the floor. Another alpha with chocolate-brown hair is carefully picking them up, a stack balanced in huge hands as he turns to me.

Definitely Hot Alpha Week.

My books look tiny in his hands as he holds them up ruefully. "Sorry I couldn't catch them all. I don't think any broke."

Shoving my hair back, I take the books from him. "Thank you."

"My pleasure." Neither of them move as I turn to place the collected stack carefully on a table, trying to gather my breath.

Wait.

"How do you know my name?" I spin around, my eyes landing on the brown-eyed alpha. He's a little shorter than his friend, dark hair cropped close to his head and tanned skin that crinkles when he smiles. He holds out his hand.

“I’m Drew. This is Ben. I think you might already know Lucas? We’re his packmates.”

My brain flatlines. Just full-on gives up on existence as I blink at them gormlessly. “Lucas.”

My voice is a croak. That’s it. That’s all I say. They glance at each other and then back to me.

“You sure you’re okay?” Drew asks carefully. “That was a hell of a fall.”

I hide my shaking hands in the pockets of my knitted dress. “Oh! Yep, absolutely fine. I would have bounced.”

My voice sounds a little high-pitched, and the other alpha glances up at the shelves and back to me. “Do you do that often? Carry heavy things up and down shelves by yourself?”

A little prickle of self-indignation flares up. “Every day. I’m normally fine. That box wasn’t in place properly. Not the first time, and it won’t be the last.”

The alpha – I think Drew said his name was Ben – flushes, a dull red spreading across his cheeks. He shifts back on his feet, the movement stretching his red flannel shirt to hint at some pretty impressive muscle definition. “I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to insinuate anything.”

Well. His apology seems sincere – and a little sweet- and I can feel my prickliness dissipating as I turn to grab the books, trying to regain a little equilibrium as I carry them over to the signing table. “No problem.”

They both follow me, and I turn back to them, dusting off my hands. “Do you need any help looking for anything?”

Drew looks around, as if he’s only just noticed we’re in a bookstore. “Uh... what would you recommend?”

His words make me pause, a hint of suspicion winding through me as I look between them. Ben looks uncomfortable, his hands digging deep into the pocket of his jeans. “You know, I gave Lucas a big pile of recommendations just yesterday. And another one last week. You must all really enjoy reading.”

They both turn scarlet.

Something fizzy erupts in my stomach, and I walk over to a random shelf, rearranging the books in some sort of random order I’m going to have to work out later and put back. My heart is pounding inside my chest.

Stop it, Grace. Don’t even think about it.

“Maybe you need a gift for your omega?” I blurt out, and then immediately want to slap myself in the face. Both of them frown, and Drew shakes his head. He takes a step closer to me, his words low and intimate.

“We don’t have an omega,” he murmurs. “Not yet, at least.”

The pounding turns into full-blown hammering.

“O-oh. So... the books?”

Drew tilts his head, a smile spreading across his face. “Lucas seems to be acquiring quite the collection, you know.

Interesting, since he hasn't really shown an interest in reading... until around two months ago."

My hand shakes, and another book drops to the floor. I bend down, but Ben is already there, and our eyes meet. His are a deep, darker green, little flecks of hazel peeking through.

"Breathe," he orders quietly. "Are we making you uncomfortable?"

He holds out the book, and when I move to take it, he doesn't let go.

I swallow. "This is... unexpected."

He nods. "Lucas told us all about you, you know," he says softly. "We just wanted to come and say hello."

"And maybe ask if we could take you out." Drew's voice sounds close, and when I get to my feet, I find myself sandwiched between two ridiculously handsome, large alphas. Their frames swallow mine up, their heat pressing into me.

My legs start to shake. It's been a long, long time since I had this much interaction with any alpha. "Take me out?"

I sound like a parrot, and Drew grins. He leans forward, and I jump as he pulls on a loose curl from my braid. "I think that's what we said."

His tone is teasing, and I flush. "You... want to take me on a date?"

I've never been asked out by a pack. Nobody ever even looked twice, not even the hookups I found in crowded bars

after too many glasses of wine. But these men are completely focused on me, so much so that I have to force back the edges of a whine in the back of my throat.

Drew curls my hair around his finger. “Yes,” he whispers. “We’d really like to take you on a date, Grace. What do you say?”

I open my mouth, but the bell above the entrance tinkles, and I rip myself away from the small space between Ben and Drew with a squeak. The beta woman who’s just walked in glances between us, her cheeks coloring as if she can scent the hormones leaking into the air.

Squaring my shoulders, I move to help her, collecting her dark romance order and wrapping it up with shaking hands, even as I’m intensely aware of the two watching men. They don’t take their eyes off me for a moment.

I feel like bait. My own scent rises, gingerbread filling the shop as Ben lifts up his chin and very obviously sniffs the freaking air.

The beta woman almost runs out as soon as she’s paid, and I wedge the door open to let some of the cool air in, along with a scattering of snow. It’s not settling yet, but it will.

Pressing my hands against my burning cheeks, I tentatively turn to face them. Ben leans forward, and the look on his face... he looks hungry.

“You smell like Christmas,” he rasps. “Gingerbread and cookies and caramel.”

The heat in my stomach douses with cold, and he picks up on the change immediately. “What’d I say?”

Smoothing my hands down my dress, I swallow. “I don’t... I don’t do Christmas.”

Matching looks of surprise spread across their faces, and I immediately want to bite back the words. But it’s true. I don’t do Christmas. Despite the fact that my scent is, in fact, reminiscent of a Christmas cookie.

Thanks, mother freaking nature.

“You don’t like it?” Ben asks, watching me closely. “Or you’ve just never celebrated?”

My left shoulder tips up in an awkward half-shrug. “Both, I guess. I just... I thought you should know.”

Drew hums, his eyes flicking between Ben and me. “Seems to me like if you’ve never tried it, maybe you should? Just once. Enough to really know if you don’t like it.”

He doesn’t ask why, and I’m grateful. But his words make me uneasy. “I... I don’t know.”

Ben steps forward, then, his hand resting on Drew’s arm as he goes to speak again. “Maybe we should take it slowly,” he suggests, watching me closely. “Little steps.”

I nod. Little steps feel doable.

He smiles, and it fits his face perfectly. Like he smiles often. “Okay, then. We’re going to go now.”

Drew makes a sound of protest, and I stifle my laugh as Ben reaches back and not-so-carefully jabs him in the side. “But I want to talk to Grace!”

Ben briefly raises his eyes to the ceiling, but they’re twinkling when he looks at me. “Next time,” he says gruffly. “We’ll be back. Lucas, too. That is, if Grace is happy with that.”

They both look at me, and I feel that damn flush crawling up my neck again. Drew gives me a wide-eyed pleading look from behind Ben, and it makes me smile. “That sounds... yeah, I’m okay with that.”

“Good.” Ben nudges Drew towards the door not-so-gently, but not before he darts forward and presses a quick kiss to my cheek.

I inhale in surprise, catching his minty scent as he pulls back with a wink. “See you tomorrow, pretty omega.”

My eyes move to Ben as Drew heads outside. He stops in front of me, his face uncertain. “This wasn’t too much, right?”

His sweetness relaxes me, and I shake my head, a touch ruefully. “No. Drew’s a character, though.”

“You’ll never meet anyone with a bigger heart,” he says quietly, too softly for Drew to overhear. “We’ll be back tomorrow, Grace.”

He hesitates, and I hold my breath. But he leans forward, his lips brushing against my cheek. My heart stutters in my chest as he breathes in, warm against my skin. “Tomorrow.”

There's a rumbling beneath his words, his eyes bright as he shifts back with a nod and follows Drew. My feet carry me to the door without thought as I watch them stroll away, Drew animatedly gesturing with his hands as Ben listens. They both turn, and I duck out of sight with flaming cheeks.

Way to play it cool, Grace.

I wait a second, and peek around the doorframe.

They're still looking. Drew blows me a kiss, his teeth flashing with a smile before they turn around and disappear.

Darting back, I push the door closed and flip the sign to closed.

Just for a few minutes.

I need wine tonight. Lots of wine.

And maybe my vibrator.

Chapter four – Drew

I feel like a little kid as I bounce in my chair. Ben looks up from the pizza we picked up on our way home. “Stop it,” he scolds.

I can’t help it. “She’s perfect.”

Ten minutes with Grace makes me wonder why the hell it’s taken Ben and I so long to haul ass into town and go to the bookstore. No wonder Lucas has enough books to set up his own shop.

“Slow, Drew,” Ben stresses. “Lucas was right. She is skittish.”

Maybe, but our future omega – and she is ours, no matter what the stick in the mud over there says – is fucking perfection. The way her breath caught in her chest, the little movements her mouth made when she was thinking, that fucking adorable little crease between her eyes, the thick-lensed glasses she was wearing. Her fucking scent.

She’s the best fucking Christmas gift I’ve ever seen.

I bury my head into my hands with a groan. “She doesn’t like Christmas, though.”

Ben is frowning when I look up. “I don’t know. It sounded to me more like she’s never had one. Maybe her family didn’t celebrate it, or...”

Or maybe she didn’t have a great childhood.

It could be any reason, but my chest still tightens with protectiveness. “I’m going back tomorrow.”

“Drew.”

“Nope.” I cut off the argument Ben is about to make. “I won’t overload her. But I have an idea.”

In fact, I have many, many ideas, but Lucas and Ben will sit on me if I try to throw them all at Grace at once. Not that I would.

Lucas looks tired when he walks in, oil and grease still staining his arms as he moves over to the sink and scrubs. He glances at us over his shoulder. “Well? How was she?”

Leaning forward, I push the pizza box over to him. “Shy. A little nervous. Perfect.”

Lucas’s smile spreads over his face as he drops into his seat. “Yeah?”

He looks between us, and Ben nods in agreement. “I like her too,” he says quietly. “She feels like she was made for us, Luc.”

Quickly, I outline our interaction with her, and Lucas polishes off the last of the pizza, slapping my hand away when I try to grab some. He grumbles at me when I pull a face. “I didn’t have any dinner.”

When he’s done, he stretches, popping the muscles in his back. “So how are we going to do this?”

“Softly,” Ben demands. “I don’t want to frighten her by setting three massive alphas on her.”

I wave his concerns away. “Easy. We start the mating process. With gifts.”

Lucas grimaces. “I don’t want her to think we’re trying to buy her.”

“Not like that. I mean little things. Trinkets. Things to make her smile – and make her think of us. She might not like Christmas, but every omega enjoys a little spoiling.”

And something tells me that Grace is definitely in need of a little spoiling.

Ben’s nod is slow. “Presents. I’m up for it.”

“But I’m first,” I jump in. I have an idea for tomorrow in mind already.

I hope Grace is ready for us. Because I have every intention of making her ours before New Years Eve.

I'm already leaning against the entrance to the bookstore when Grace approaches the next morning. Her face lights up when she sees me, and she chews on her lip as she tries to hide her smile.

"It's okay," I assure her, "I know you're delighted to see me again."

She grins then, digging out her keys from the pocket of her worn brown coat. I cast my eye over it, biting back my frown. I'm not going to be an asshole about it when we barely know each other, but her coat is nowhere near warm enough. She's shivering as she pushes the heavy door open, and I follow her inside without waiting for an invitation.

I hold up the coffee cups. "I come bearing gifts. Coffee?"

Hazel eyes lock onto the cup in my hands, and she gives me a pleading look. "I would love some coffee. I didn't have time this morning."

When I hand her the cup, she takes a deep swig. "God, I needed that. Thank you."

"No problem." I settle with my shoulder against the wall, watching as she sets her coffee down and begins moving around. It's clear that this is her space, and I'm happy to watch her, learning her routine. "How long have you had the store?"

She casts a look at me over her shoulder as she leans down, flicking on a floor lamp next to an old stuffed leather chair. "Maybe... three years now? It's gone quickly."

I smile as I watch her bustle around. "It suits you."

She laughs, a tinkling, shy laugh that disappears almost as quickly as it appeared, and I find myself desperate to hear it again. “I hope so. It’s all I ever wanted, really.”

“Did you read a lot as a kid?” I want to know everything about her. I want to know what she was like as a kid, if she had thick glasses like she does now and a cute little button nose. But something about my question throws her off, and her smile gets smaller.

“Something like that,” she says, before she disappears into the back. She reappears with another box, and I lurch forward to take it from her. She glowers at me dramatically from under her lashes, but there’s a hint of laughter there too. “I can carry a box of books, you know.”

“Oh, I have no doubts.” I place the box down where she directs me. “But since I’m here, you may as well make use of me.”

She picks up her coffee again. “And what about you, Drew? What do you do?”

“I’m a firefighter.”

I may or may not flex my muscles as I cross my arms, and her eyes drop down before they return to my face. Grace frowns. “Isn’t that dangerous?”

My hand reaches up to rub at my neck. “Ah... sometimes, I guess. The job can be difficult, for sure. But I have a great crew, and everyone is good at what they do. You don’t need to worry about me, Grace.”

She doesn't say anything else, but she chews on her lip as she looks down. My fingers reach out, pulling the abused flesh free.

"Hey," I murmur. My thumb rubs at the spot she's been chewing. "Habit?"

Her cheeks flush. "Maybe. I don't always realize I'm doing it."

"We all have those," I tell her. "Mine is jiggling my foot. Drives the guys nuts, but I genuinely don't notice."

This is fun. Trading little pieces of each other. I could do it all day, but I have a shift to get to. When I have to say goodbye, a good twenty minutes later than I should have left, Grace looks disappointed.

"Okay," she whispers. She pushes her hair back. "Will I... no. Never mind."

Grinning, I reach out and open my hand. She glances down, a flash of interest in her eyes at the pretty rose-pink box, tied with a golden ribbon. "You'll be seeing me real soon, Grace," I promise her. "The others will be along too. I think Ben was planning to stop in, and I'm sure Lucas will be on his way home from work. But this is for you."

Her fingers hover over the gift. "You bought this for me?" she asks softly.

Carefully, I take her hand in mine. Flipping it, I set the little box into her hand, and she curls her fingers over it

instinctively. “Mmmhmm,” I say, watching her face. “You ever been spoiled, Grace?”

She blinks, as if confused. “Spoiled?”

I take a step forward, and she backs up. But I don’t stop until her back is against the wall, her breathing heavy and her scent spiking everywhere, little spicy hints of gingerbread that make my mouth water as I lean in close and whisper in her ear.

“We’re going to spoil you, Grace. I don’t think anyone ever has, and that’s a crying shame. So you keep that, and know there’s a lot more where that came from.”

Her breathing stutters in the space between us, our lips a few inches apart. I desperately want to lean forward, want to press my lips against hers and taste her, but I hold myself back with every goddamn inch of self-control I have. Instead, I trace the same path as yesterday, pressing my lips against the soft skin of her cheek and breathing her in.

Taking a step back, I wink, trying to push back the sudden protective urge to cover her completely, to roll her around in my scent until every single alpha out there knows that she’s ours. “Later, baby.”

She chokes out a laugh. “Is this where you offer to tie me up and make me your bedroom slave?”

I blink. Rapidly. Her face deepens, turning bright red as she looks down. “Um. There’s this book, and he says – you know what? Never mind.”

“No,” I breathe. “We’ll definitely be picking this up later. But I really have to go.”

Even though all I want to do is press her back against the wall and demand to know exactly where that came from. Because the spike in her scent didn’t lie, and I am here for it.

Chapter five – Grace

I'm still mentally punching myself in the face an hour later, when Frank comes wandering in. His nose is bright red from the cold, and I hustle him into his favorite armchair and stoke the fireplace up, making sure the cover is on properly. His hands are shaking when I hand him a coffee, and he curls his thin fingers around it. "Thanks, Gracie."

"No problem." I'm relieved he's here. It'll stop me playing over the excruciating moment that I thought Drew was quoting a freaking romance book at me and basically offered to let him tie me up.

I can't do this. I'm no good at flirting and picking up signals.

I'm a wreck. They're going to realize that I'm a terrible omega, and they'll run as fast as possible in the opposite direction.

My hand reaches into my pocket, curling around the little box that I still haven't opened.

A throat clears, and I jerk back to look at Frank. He's watching me skeptically. "You feeling alright, Grace? Lookin'

awfully flushed. It's not the flu, is it?"

"No!" I say hurriedly. "Nope. No flu here, Frank. I'm just... a bit distracted. What did you want today?"

He hems, a cough racking his frame. "A thriller, I think."

"Coming up." It only takes me a minute to grab one from the little stack of books I've put aside for him to read, and he settles happily into his armchair where he'll stay until I close up for the night.

I get caught up in a late-morning rush of customers, and I don't stop until well after lunch. The bell rings, and I glance down from where I'm slotting some books into one of my taller shelves.

Ben takes off his hat, looking around until his eyes land on me and he smiles. His bulk takes up most of the available space, and behind him, Frank looks up with suspicion. His eyes flit to mine, and then back to Ben, who's stepped forward to hold onto my ladder.

"We have to stop meeting like this," he jokes, and I make my way down the wooden rungs until we're facing each other. His nose looks a little red, but he's warmly dressed, a thick overcoat and a deep, wine-colored scarf wrapped around his neck.

"I promise I don't spend all day risking my neck," I assure him. "Just a few hours here and there."

He laughs, and it's the kind of deep, husky laugh that you feel in your chest. And... other places.

Hastily, I duck around him and head for the coffee pot. “Drew said you’d call in,” I say over my shoulder. “You want a coffee?”

“I’d love one.”

I busy myself with the pot, and when I turn around, Ben is running his hand over the rocking chair I keep in the corner. “Don’t sit on that,” I burst out. “It’s broken.”

“So I see.” He tilts it back a little. “Want me to fix it?”

“I... you can do that?” I look between him and the chair. “I found it at a donation place, but I was never able to work out how to make it actually... well, rock.”

He tilts the chair back to examine the structure. “Yeah, I can fix this. I’m a carpenter by trade. It’ll be easy, really.”

My fingers twist together. “That would be amazing, actually. I’ll pay you, of course.”

His brow dips into a frown as he turns, crossing his arms. “Absolutely not.”

My own arms cross. “Then I won’t let you touch it.”

A hint of a smile plays around his face. “Fiery. I like it.”

My mouth parts, but nothing comes out as I blink. Ben steps forward, his finger reaching up and gently nudging my mouth closed. His hand spreads out until he’s cupping my cheek. “How about a trade?” he suggests softly. “I’ll take a coffee, and you let me fix this for you.”

My eyes flick between him and the chair. “I... okay. If you’re sure? It doesn’t feel like much.”

He grins. His thumb softly strokes my cheek, drying out my mouth as I watch him with wide eyes. “Well, I would have happily done it for nothing, but something tells me you’re not used to people helping you.”

Swallowing, I step back, dropping my eyes from his far-too-damn-perceptive-for-his-own-good stare. “It’s not a bad thing to be independent.”

“No, it’s not.” He still watches me intently, so I turn towards the coffee machine. “But it’s nice to have someone to lean on sometimes, right?”

“Right.” I stare down at the machine, my eyesight blurring.

Thankfully, Frank decides to intervene. His hacking, very obvious cough breaks into the space between us. “And who are you?” he asks.

Ben’s footsteps shuffle on the floor. “Benjamin Harrow, sir.”

He sounds respectful, and it earns him an extra brownie point. Frank, however, is well and truly on my shit list.

“Frank. Are you going to mate that girl?” he asks outright, and I whirl around in horror. “Frank!”

I think I can see Ben’s shoulders begin to shake, but to his credit, he doesn’t laugh outright, clearing his throat before he responds. “I’d like to start with dating her, sir. If she’ll let me.”

Frank humphs, but he catches my narrow-eyed look and ducks his head down, lifting his book. “Dating. In my day...”

In my haste to separate them, I grab Ben by the hand and drag him away, dropping his hand abruptly when there’s a safe distance between him and Frank and shoving his coffee into his hands. “Here you go.”

Ben grins down at me. “I like him. Very... direct.”

I purse my lips but don’t respond to the undertone in his words. Ben takes pity on me and focuses on the rocking chair, digging out a set of rusty-looking tools from the back room and looking far too at home as he works. He glances over at me, and I flush, embarrassed to be caught staring and burying myself in my inventory checks for a good hour or so, pulling myself away to serve the customers that wander in and out and making sure Frank is topped up with coffee.

“So,” Ben says as he brings his empty cup back to the counter. “What are you doing on Christmas Day this year?”

Shrugging, I take the cup from his outstretched hands, turning to wash it out at the sink and setting the machine for a fresh cup. “Not much. I volunteer at a shelter in the afternoon. The rest of the day I’m normally reading.”

“No family?” he asks softly, and I shake my head, relieved to get it out of the way.

“Nope. No family. How about you?”

He takes the fresh cup from me with a murmured thanks. “We normally start out at home, have some breakfast, then

head over to my parents' place for lunch. We're pretty motivated by food."

The laugh catches in the back of my throat. No doubts whatsoever on that score. They're all mammoths.

He wiggles his eyebrows at me, and I snort. "I bet you eat them out of house and home."

His grin spreads. "You'd probably be right," he admits ruefully. "But that's just a bonus. It's nice for us all to be together. We don't manage it much during the year, so we all make an effort to get there for at least one day. We're pretty noisy once we get going."

My chest clenches. If his family are anything like him, I can see it. A family of laughter and teasing, of light-hearted scolding and games that make them belly laugh.

It's a world away from my little bare apartment.

Dropping my eyes, I shift on my feet. "It sounds nice. I'd better get back to work. Are you sure there isn't anything else I can give you?"

Ben's voice is gentle when he responds after a pause. "Not right now. Thank you, Grace."

I should be saying that to him, but I nod jerkily and hide in the back room, only coming out to serve the few customers that make it in. I can hear Frank and Ben murmuring, but I'm too much of a chicken-shit to go back out and join in.

My hands tighten on the spine of a special edition book I've been waiting for.

This is my space. This is where I belong. Their world... I wouldn't even know how to exist in a group like that. I never have. My whole life has been on the outside, looking in.

I don't belong with them.

My chin wobbles, and I sniff heavily. The gold-embossed title of the book I'm holding swims in front of me, and I swallow several times, forcing the ridiculous pity pit inside my chest to back down.

I am lucky. I have a roof over my head. I have this place. I have friends – even if my biggest one is several decades older than me and the modern reincarnation of Scrooge.

It's enough. It has to be.

By the time Ben carefully pops his head around the door, his eyes cautious, I've shoved down every little seasonal omega emotion into a little locked box. His eyes scan me carefully before he tilts his head with a soft smile. "I need a tester. Want to do the honors?"

I follow him out, taking in the fixed rocking chair and the pretty green and gold patterned pillow that definitely wasn't there earlier. Ben blushes when I cast him a questioning glance. "There's a homeware store next door. I thought you might be more comfortable."

Do not soften, Grace.

Ben holds out a hand, and there's the faintest hint of challenge in his eyes that makes me reach out my own in response, my fingers curling around his as he tugs me over to

the chair and encourages me to sit down. The smile on my face grows as it feels steady underneath me, and I laugh when Ben tilts it back, his hands on either side rocking it gently as I rest my head against the back and close my eyes.

“It’s perfect,” I say softly. “Thank you, Ben.”

His fingers brush my shoulder, and he gently squeezes, keeping up the rocking. “You’re very welcome, Grace.”

He doesn’t stay long after that, ducking out with a brush of his lips against my cheek. It’s when I retreat to the desk that my eyes catch on the little gift box with my name written in sharp, spiky writing.

The stained glass heart catches in the light, shades of amber and gold and green when I hold it up, biting my lip to try and keep the smile off my face.

“That’s more like it,” Frank calls out, and I jump, my eyes flicking to him guiltily. “Boy knows how to treat an omega. I like him, Gracie. You should keep that one.”

Smiling, I hook the heart over a little nail in the wall next to me, so I can see it.

Maybe I like Benjamin Harrow, too.

I’m locking up for the night, Frank already having turned the corner when Lucas appears. His breath puffs out in little white clouds as he sprints up the street. “Grace!”

Lots in my thoughts, I jump a mile, and he gives me a sheepish look as he skids to a stop. “I’m so sorry I’m late. I thought I might have missed you.”

My lips twitch as I lean against the closed door, wrapping my arms around me for warmth. The air is biting cold, and this coat is definitely on the way out. I don’t think I could patch it any more. Lucas frowns as he skates his eyes over me. “You’re cold.”

“I’m fine,” I insist, but he’s already shrugging out of his thick coat.

“Take this one.” His voice is edged with the hint of a growl as he wraps it around me, ignoring my protests.

“I can’t take your coat!” I yelp. “It’s freezing, Lucas!”

“I know,” he points out, pulling the edges around me until I’m swathed in warmth, peppermint and Lucas. “That’s why you’re taking this. You walking home?”

His voice tells me there’s no room for arguing and he’s not going to take the coat back, so I pull it around me, sighing a little at the heat. “Pushy alpha,” I mumble, and he shrugs shamelessly.

“You think I’m gonna let you walk home in the cold without it?”

He falls into step beside me as I begin to walk, and I throw him a glance from under my eyelashes, meeting his eyes. Both of us glance away, and he lets out a low laugh. “So.”

I push my tongue into my cheek. “I seem to have made some new friends.”

I’m trying to be cool and collected, but my words come out too high, a little breathless, and I bite down on my tongue hard. When I look at Lucas again, a deep red has spread over his cheeks. “I’m sorry,” he says ruefully. “If we’re bombarding you.”

I’m considering his words, not paying attention as we move to cross the road. There’s a squealing sound, the screech of tyres, and a deep shout, and I lose my breath as I’m pulled back tightly into Lucas’s chest. The truck barrels past with an angry beep, but Lucas doesn’t look away, his eyes frantically scanning my face as his hands rub up and down my arms. “Grace!”

I suck down precious oxygen into my lungs. “I – sorry. I’m fine.”

“You’re shaking,” he growls. He pulls me into him, his arms wrapping around me in a hug as I instinctively bury my face in his chest. “You scared me.”

“Sorry,” I whisper shakily. My legs begin to shake, and he pulls me closer.

“You’re okay,” he murmurs into my hair. “I’ve got you.”

I let myself relax into him, let him hold me up. Just for a minute.

And then I pull back, swallowing as heat suffuses my cheeks. “I’m so sorry.”

Lucas tilts his head, the tip of his nose red with the cold. “You’re feeling okay?”

I give him a shaky nod and reach out for the button, careful to keep back from the road this time. “I was... distracted.”

“Really?” he murmurs. Pushing my glasses back, I brush my hair back, trying to regain some equilibrium. “And just what was distracting you?”

My look is distinctly haughty. “You know exactly what was distracting me, Lucas... what is your surname?”

“Garcia,” he tells me as the lights change and we fall back into step. His hand still comes up to cup my elbow, and he gives me a pleading look. “Humor me, please. I nearly lost you to a runaway truck.”

“It wasn’t going that fast,” I point out, and his hand tightens on me. “Fast enough, Grace.”

When we reach my apartment, I start to shrug out of his coat, but Lucas presses it back around my shoulders. “Keep hold of it,” he says quietly. His hands move from the material to cup my cheek. “It looks better on you.”

Our breathing sends out little white clouds in the icy air, and Lucas looks down at me. His eyes look bright, even in the dim light thrown off by the street lamps next to us. “I’ll see you tomorrow.”

My brain short-circuits as his eyes drop to my mouth. But he doesn’t move. “You will?”

“Mmmhmm.” He takes a strand of my hair between his fingers, and I scrabble for the rest of my brain.

“Why did you buy the books?” I ask softly. His eyes flick up to mine, and they crease at the corners.

“Because you chose them,” he whispers. “And I wanted a little piece of you, Grace. But I don’t think it’s going to be enough.”

“No?”

He shakes his head. “Not nearly enough. But it’ll do for now.”

He gives me a little nudge. “Go on inside where it’s warm.”

“Pushy alpha,” I grumble half-heartedly. He gives me a heartrending smile, one that reaches all the way to his eyes.

“Believe me, Grace. You haven’t seen anything yet.”

I bite back my smile, giving him a frown that makes him laugh as he turns, making his way back up the street.

“Inside!” he calls as he turns back and catches me watching, pausing to lean against a lamppost until I’ve pulled the door closed behind me.

Maybe I haven’t seen anything yet. But something tells me I’m going to.

Chapter six – Ben

Drew and I are pressed up against the window of Grace's bookstore, watching her laugh at something Frank is telling her from his armchair. My heart squeezes inside my chest at her affection for him. The old alpha comes off as cantankerous, but I can see the affection he has for Grace a mile off.

That, and he threatened to kneecap me if I hurt her.

I believe him.

Drew nudges me. "You've got it, right?"

I nod. "Shall we go in?"

"One more minute," he says, staring through the glass. "I like watching her."

"Creeper," I mutter, and he jabs me in the side as I move around him to pull the door open. I know exactly what he means, though. There's something about Grace that just draws you in, something peaceful. I could watch her for hours.

I could, but her eyes lift to meet mine, the smile spreading across her face as she takes in Drew and I sending an ache

straight to the back of my throat.

I want her to always look like that when she sees us.

I'm going to make damn sure of it.

“Hey, pretty omega,” Drew calls out from behind me, pulling the door closed. “We’ve come to see if you’re free for a date this evening.”

Grace looks between us both, her cheeks pinking. “A date?”

Carefully, I place the box down on the counter, watching the way her eyes light up. “We thought we could try out the market,” I say carefully.

Her eyes flash to mine, something like concern filling them. “Oh.”

Half-smiling, I nudge the box towards her. “We won’t wrap you up in tinsel and kidnap you, I swear.”

Drew’s head pops up next to mine, and he winks as Grace traces her finger over the gold tissue. “I make no promises.”

She laughs, and carefully undoes the haphazardly tied ribbon that I tried my best to make look like a bow. “Lovely wrapping,” she says, shooting me a shy smile that I tuck away in the ‘must see again’ box. It’s filling up rapidly.

I cough into my fist. “I tried.”

“I mean it,” she murmurs, but her focus is sharpening on the box, her hands running over it. Drew and I watch as she examines it carefully. Something tells me she’s definitely not

used to receiving gifts. My eyes drift to the little glass heart hanging from the hook next to her head.

“It’s safe,” Drew whispers dramatically, and Grace chokes on a laugh as she carefully lifts off the lid. “Oh!”

Both of us fidget in place as she lifts out the little things we put together for her. “It’s absolutely fine if you don’t like any of it,” I assure her. “We can swap it, take it back.”

“No!” she yelps, hugging a small package to her chest. “This is... I love it.”

“You haven’t opened them yet,” I say softly, and her smile widens.

“You got them for me,” she says, just as quietly. “So I’ll love them. Whatever they are.”

Fuck. I think my heart just melted.

She very precisely lifts the tape on the first package, taking care not to rip the tissue as she unwraps the scented candle tin. Lifting the lid, she breathes in the scent and her eyes flick up to mine. “It smells like you!”

Self-conscious, I shrug, suddenly embarrassed by the random thought process that drove me to pick it up in the first place. “Maybe a little.”

“I love it.” She takes another deep inhale before carefully placing it to the side and unwrapping the next one. Drew bounces next to me as she unwraps the soft, fluffy red socks with white pom poms, and she laughs as she holds them up.

“You couldn’t have chosen any better. I love fluffy socks. Have a whole collection of them.”

Drew beams as she places them gently next to the candle and does the same again, smoothing out the tissue and setting it aside with the ribbon before she looks down. Her lips round in a cute little ‘o’ as she looks down and then back at me, her face softening. “Did you make these?”

I nod as she turns over the bookends in her hands, examining the carved whorls I placed into the wood. “You probably have a lot of these already.”

She shakes her head, her hair flying as her fingers tighten on the wood. “None like this, though. Nobody’s ever... ever made anything for me before.”

She looks up, holding my eyes and moving over to include Drew, too. “Thank you.”

“There’s more,” Drew coaxes playfully, and if her laugh sounds a little choked, we don’t call her out on it as she pulls out the pretty bath bombs, the handmade chocolate cups and the cute stationary that the girl in the shop assured us Grace would adore.

“There’s so much,” she mumbles, her cheeks reddening as she looks up. “And I love it. But you didn’t have to.”

“You’re right,” I say, and she begins to nod. “But we wanted to, Grace. We want to give you things. That’s not going to change.”

I'm torn between wanting to kiss the confused little frown straight off her face and going on a rampage to find out exactly what happened to put it there in the first place. As she sets out the gifts in a little line, I glance around. Frank is watching us from his chair, pretending to read a book but his eyes staring over the top. He sniffs when our eyes meet, but his nod is reluctant approval.

Drew spreads out his hands. "So, can we kidnap you for food and festivities at the market this evening, Grace?"

Her teeth clamp down on her lip, and he reaches out to tug it free, wiggling his eyebrows at her. She laughs, but I can sense her hesitation as she looks out of the window.

"Ever been?" I ask casually, and she shakes her head.

"Never too late." Drew taps his fingers in a little pattern on the counter. "Come with us, Grace. We'll bribe you with hot chocolate and marshmallows."

Her finger reaches out to touch the edge of the bookend, and she looks up at us with an edge of mischief. "Okay. You've convinced me."

Drew whoops, throwing himself into the most ridiculous celebratory dance I've ever seen. But Grace cackles, throwing her head back before she slaps her hands over her mouth.

"Don't stop," Drew orders. "That laugh is infectious."

She shakes her head frantically, muttering something about a rhino that I don't catch. Eventually, she lowers her hands. "I don't close for another thirty minutes, though. Is that okay?"

“No problem,” I say instantly. “In fact, I noticed the latch on your cupboard was coming undone. I’ll just take a quick look while you finish off.”

She lifts one eyebrow at me, silently telling me that she hasn’t forgotten our previous discussion, and I blink innocently as I head to the back room where I stored the tools. “It’ll just take a minute!”

Drew settles in to chat to Frank as I fix the latch, trying not to stare at Grace as she serves some last-minute stragglers. Her smiles come easily as she teases out information from them, helping them to find books they’ll enjoy.

When she flips the sign on the door, Drew bounces to his feet. “Frank,” he announces. “You’re an alpha after my own heart. Can I interest you in a visit to the market with us?”

Frank blinks, his mouth twisting into something halfway between a smile and a scowl. “Do I look like my knees will hold me up for that long? Bleeding young alphas think they know everything. No, I’m going home.”

I catch Grace’s twitch, raising my eyebrows in silent question. She glances away from me, biting her lip again as she hurries to fetch Frank’s thin coat, carefully helping him into it.

“Can I take you home, Frank?” I ask, and he waves his stick at me as he shuffles towards the door.

“No, thank you,” he says, his eyes moving to Grace. “You look after this one, though. You hear me?”

I dip my head in a nod. “We absolutely will.”

Grace’s face is scarlet as she watches Frank leave, before she crosses her arms. “Alphas.”

The word is half exasperated, half entertained, and Drew and I both look unapologetic. She brushes past us, her scent filling my nose, and I breathe it in. It smells... stronger, today. Spicier.

Fucking delicious.

Grace reappears, self-consciously pulling on a familiar-looking coat that’s too big for her, with the sleeves rolled up. I look down to hide my smile, but Drew has no such compunction.

“Beautiful,” he praises. “You wear that far better than Lucas ever did.”

Grace’s snort is half-hearted. “Is he... coming? To this?”

“He’ll be here,” I assure her, and she takes my arm when I offer it. “He just got held up at work.”

And I’m sure he’s massively ticked off about it, too.

After she’s locked up – and I make another note to fix her door – we make our way up to the street, towards the laughter and music coming from the stalls. Drew and I keep Grace securely tucked between us as the crowd gets bigger, careful not to let her get jostled. She cranes her head up to look at the strands of twinkling fairy lights strung between the streetlamps, the gold flickers reflecting in her brown eyes. “It’s lovely here.”

“We come every year,” Drew says, tucking her into his side as a bright-eyed Christmas elf dances past us with a mug of mulled wine in his hands. “Always helps us get into the festive spirit.”

He’s right, but it’s never felt quite like this before. Not with Grace looking around, her eyes wide and her face wistful as she pauses at a stall selling little glass candle holders. She smiles at the stallholder. “Hey, Colleen.”

The woman behind the counter gives her a beaming smile. “Grace! I haven’t seen you here before.”

“First time,” Grace admits softly. She reaches for a pale pink frosted scarf. “This is lovely. Did you make these?”

We hang back, watching as she makes small talk. She draws people into conversation so easily, and I catch myself smiling as I watch her. Drew hovers behind her, quietly buying up everything she looks at twice. When we reach the food stalls, I insist on a cone of roasted chestnuts for all of us. The heat warms my hands as we wander, Grace’s face lighting up as she tries one. “These are delicious.”

We stop for a break at the ice rink, Grace not budging until we reluctantly let her buy us a mulled wine before we settle onto a bench to watch the skaters. Grace stifles a groan as one haphazardly slides across the ice before toppling onto his ass. “That would absolutely be me.”

My eyes meet Drews, and both of us grin.

“Care to test that theory?” I ask lightly, standing and offering her my hand. She blinks, her eyes sliding between us and the ice.

“I really don’t think this is a good idea.”

“We’ll never let you fall, Grace.” My voice is low as she curls her fingers around mine. “Never.”

“Well, I might,” Drew chips in. “I’m a terrible skater.”

He really is, and as I coax Grace onto the ice, her hands held firmly in mine as I slowly pull us backwards, Drew flies past me, arms and legs wheeling everywhere. Grace nearly keels over laughing as she cranes her head to watch him before she turns to me, lifting her arm to wipe at her eyes. “I can’t watch.”

“He loves an audience,” I half-groan. Plenty of people are watching him stumble around, laughs and cheerful offers of help being called out as he stumbles around without actually landing on his ass. A familiar shout makes us turn, and Grace beams at Lucas when he waves at her.

Chapter seven – Lucas

I find them at the skating rink. Drew is being his usual car-crash self, and Ben is patiently skating in circles around the ice, drawing Grace by her hands as he teaches her how to place her feet.

When I call out, she turns to me, and my heart flips over in my chest when her face lights up.

“Look, Lucas!” she calls out enthusiastically. “I’m skating!”

Her eyes are bright, her smile even brighter as I meet them at the edge of the ice. Grace stumbles in her skates, and it feels like the most natural thing in the world to wrap my arms around her. She’s wearing my coat, and my grip tightens. She laughs breathlessly. “Oops.”

I push a wayward strand of hair away from her face. “Enjoying yourself?” I ask.

Her grin softens into something warmer as she looks up at me. “I really am. I’m glad to see you.”

My hand is still against her cheek, her mouth a few inches from mine as I dip my head. I feel her sharp inhale against me

as I press a soft kiss against her lips, tasting her scent as her lips open carefully.

“Good,” I murmur, pulling back an inch. She watches me, her eyelashes dark against her face as she blushes. “Because I’m very glad to see you.”

Her eyes drop to my mouth again, but a crash and a muffled curse sounds behind her. I look over his shoulder to see Drew sprawled on the floor, Ben creased over in laughter as he groans. “I think I’m dead.”

Grace chokes on a laugh as she turns carefully in her skates. “Are you okay?”

“Fine.” Drew presses his face into the ground. “If I stay here, maybe nobody will notice.”

“Everyone noticed,” Ben gasps out. His face is red from the effort of trying to stop his laughter. “Everyone.”

“I’m emigrating to the North Pole,” Drew groans. I hold out my hand and he uses it to pull himself up, giving Grace a mournful look. “You’ll emigrate with me, right, Grace?”

She purses her lips. “Hmmm. Lots of ice in the North Pole, I hear.”

Drew sighs dramatically. “Damn. Maybe not, then. I think I need some eggnog to help with the embarrassment.”

I drop down, my hand wrapping around Grace’s ankle as I carefully undo her skates. Her hand grips my shoulder, and she smiles at me when I look up. “Thank you.”

Once everyone has their shoes back on, we walk up to the open-air bar. Grace sips at her eggnog, her mouth twisting in consideration before she takes another sip and turns to me. “How was work?”

“Long,” I admit ruefully. “My boss has me working overtime at the moment.”

“Because he knows you’re the best, and you let him take advantage of you. You need to open up on your own,” Ben throws the familiar words at me, and I shrug, rubbing the back of my neck. “Maybe.”

“What do you do?” Grace asks, and I point down at the oil stains on my trousers. “Mechanic.”

“He’s very good with his hands,” Drew crows, and I watch as Grace’s cheeks go pink and Ben jabs Drew in the side.

“Ignore him. He was raised in a barn,” I joke, and Drew pretends outrage, tossing a wadded up napkin at me that I bat away. “Rude.”

“Where were you born?” Grace asks. “I’d like to know more about you.”

We settle in with Grace nestled against me, swapping stories. We tell her about my childhood with my older parents before they passed a few years ago, and stories of Ben’s family that make her double up with laughter. Drew goes a bit quiet, and when she looks at him, he shrugs. “I was adopted. I’m pretty close with my parents though. We’ll see them between Christmas and New Year.”

Grace looks down. “That’s... nice.”

“And you?” I ask softly. She chews on her lip.

“I went into the system too,” she says quietly, offering Drew a sad, understanding smile. “I aged out when I was eighteen, and got a job in a bookstore. Not much more to say than that, I don’t think.”

Drew straightens, his brows drawing into a frown. “How old were you when you went in?”

“Eight.” Grace stares down into her empty cup, her fingers gripping the cardboard. “It wasn’t that bad.”

Ben and I exchange looks over her head, and Drew reaches forward, stealing her fingers and winding them with his. “But it wasn’t great,” he says softly. Understanding rings in his words, and she nods.

“No,” she breathes. “No, it wasn’t great.”

When she straightens, blowing out a breath, she shakes her head with a rueful laugh. “Sorry to bring the tone down.”

“None of that,” Ben scolds lightly. “We want to know about you, Grace.”

“Everything about you,” I murmur in her ear. She looks up at me.

“That’s it, really,” she says softly. It’s obvious she doesn’t want to say anymore, so Ben draws her into a discussion on her favorite things, undoubtedly storing her words away for future reference.

But even as he manages to make her laugh again, to make the color return to her cheeks, I hold her tightly against me.

And when her hand slips into mine, I squeeze her fingers, and she does the same.

Much later, after we walk her home, full of food and listening to Drew belt out an off-key Christmas song, she turns to us on her doorstep. Her face is flushed from the mulled wine, but her smile is genuine as she fidgets. “Thank you for tonight.”

“Anytime,” Ben says, and she gives us one more soft smile before she waves and disappears inside her apartment block. We wait until a light goes on upstairs, Grace’s silhouette appearing in the window as she waves down to us before we move.

I don’t want to leave her there alone, and it’s clear the others feel the same. Drew sighs.

“You alright?” I ask him, and he nods, turning back to look at Grace’s apartment.

“I hate that she grew up like that,” he mutters. We’ve talked before about his adoption, and I know that he has a few memories from the system that he prefers not to think about. “I was lucky. She wasn’t. She doesn’t have anyone.”

“She has us now,” Ben says firmly, and I nod.

Grace has all of us. We just need her to realize it.

Chapter eight – Drew

“Drew, Dear, could you pass the milk please?”
“Fuck off, Fernandez.” With a mock growl, I toss the bottle to him, laughing when his face drops in panic as he tries to grab it before it spills.

“Dude,” he protests, clutching his heart. “Don’t do that to me. Not my fault you’ve got such a fun name to play with.”

“You’ll survive.” I’m about to head out to do an inspection when Mira wanders in, her eyes landing on me and a grin spreading that makes me take a step backwards. “Uh. Hey, Mira. I’m just heading out, actually—,”

The petite beta has a grip to rival any alpha, and she grabs me before I can make a break for it. “Not so fast, Drew Dear. You signed up for this shit, same as the rest of us.”

Fernandez starts to laugh behind me, and she fixes him with a glare. “You too, Fernandez. Kit off.”

“Mira, baby,” he protests. “You don’t need to go to all this trouble just to see me naked.”

She snorts as we follow her out of the kitchen and down the hall. “I live with you, dumbass. At this stage I’d pay money not to see you naked.”

“You guys are couple goals,” I croak, trying to hold in my laughter. Mira rolls her eyes as she manages to get behind us, giving us a firm shove towards the waiting photographer. A few of the crew are shrugging back into their clothes, hopping around and complaining about the cold.

It’s near zero, and I give Mira a dubious look that she shakes her head at. “All for a good cause. Besides, this was your idea.”

“I know,” I drawl, unzipping my trousers. “I just imagined we’d be wearing... you know. Clothes.”

A cold spray hits my chest, and I yelp as Mora backs away, staring down at the glistening puddle in the middle of my chest. “The fuck is this?”

She grins, and it’s savage. “Oil. Nice and shiny for the camera. Time to pose, pretty boy.”

“At least you can give one to your Grace,” Fernandez calls out. Fucking loudly. At least a dozen heads swivel to stare at me.

“Grace?”

“Who’s Grace?”

“Damn, Drew Dear, you got yourself an omega?”

I give Fernandez my best death glare as the photographer hustles me into position. “Anyone ever tell you, you have a fucking massive mouth?”

“Mira,” he cackles, and she turns to pin him with a stare that has him ducking his head sheepishly.

Although...

“So,” I say, clearing my throat as I hold the helmet over my goods. “When will these be ready?”

“End of December,” Mira says absently, checking something off on her clipboard. “You guys are the last ones. We already did second shift.”

“Save one for me,” I tell her quietly.

Maybe a calendar of naked firefighters isn’t everyone’s cup of tea, but I want to see the look on Grace’s face when I hand it over anyway.

“Fine,” Mira sings. “But I want to meet your omega.”

I sigh. “Not yet. You’ll scare her off.”

Mira pats my shoulder as I shrug back into my shirt. “We’re pleased for you, Drew. Ignore the teasing. Make sure you bring her for dinner with Ben and Luc when you’re settled.”

When we’re settled.

The words play in my head throughout my shift, until I’m done and dusted and on my way to see Grace.

Mating is for life. We’ve been looking half-heartedly for an omega for a while, but nobody ever seemed like the right

person for us. Honestly, I couldn't really imagine it before. Settling down, a family. But now... I pause at the door, watching her pace as she talks animatedly into the phone.

Now it's all I want.

Grace gives me an absent smile as she runs a hand through her hair. She looks flushed, and I step away to give her some space as she talks. Still, a few phrases float over to me as I run my finger along a shelf.

Coming soon... not sure on my plans yet... need a room...

Heat.

When I catch the last one, my head shoots up, my eyes colliding with Grace's from across the room. She flushes a deep, wine red that covers her neck and down beneath the blue sweater dress she's wearing, spinning away from me as she ends the call.

Her glance is sheepish, her voice soft when she turns to me. "Hey."

"Hey." Frowning, I move towards her, noting the sharp richness of her scent that seems to have deepened since yesterday, Grace catches my inhale, and her fists clench before she takes a step back.

"I'm sorry," she mutters. Her hand shakes as she lifts it again, and I catch it in mine, gently tugging her closer.

"What are you sorry about?" I ask, pushing unruly brown strands away so I can see her face clearly. Her eyes look a little glazed, and my chest clenches in concern.

“Just...,” she sighs, and gestures down. “I’m not doing very well today.”

“Grace,” I whisper. “Is your heat coming in, baby?”

Her lip wobbles, and she nods. She looks like she’s about to cry, and every instinct I have tells me to bundle her up. So that’s exactly what I do.

She softens against me, her head burying into my chest. “I’m getting it dealt with. I just spoke to the OSC.”

“Whoa, now.” I tilt her head back to look at me. “The Omega Support Center?”

It makes sense. As an unmated omega, heats aren’t exactly pleasant. I hear the Center offers them a room to ride out their heat.

Sterile, clinical. Cold.

My hands tighten on her when she nods. “It’s fine, Drew. No big deal, right?”

No big deal. Three plus days of heat, and she says it like it’s nothing. Her eyes skitter away from me, and she swallows.

Because nobody ever made it something.

“Listen to me,” I say firmly. My fingers stroke the soft skin of her cheeks. “Your heat is a big deal, Grace. It’s completely up to you what you decide to do. But I want you to consider coming to us.”

She sucks in a breath. “Drew...”

Her voice is uncertain, and it breaks my fucking heart. “Grace. We’re not in this for a good time, sweetheart. We want you to choose us.”

She shakes her head lightly. “This is... it’s so new.”

“Maybe it is,” I murmur. “And maybe sometimes you just know that something is right. You feel right, Grace. To all of us. And we would be honored if you chose us. Not just for your heat, but for everything that comes after.”

I’d hoped we’d all be together to have this discussion, but I need her to know. The others will understand.

She comes first. And the knowing settles into my chest, wrapping around my heart with a sudden, blinding knowledge that soaks into every part of me.

Mate.

I’ve heard the stories. The rumors of what it feels like to have a mating bond open up, to link your pack to someone. That it’s indescribable.

Grace gasps under my grip, her hand rising between us to press against her chest. “Drew... what did you do?”

It’s hard to talk around the lump in my throat. “I think... I think that’s the start of a mating bond, Grace.”

It feels like there’s a line stretching directly from me to Grace. I can feel Ben and Lucas there, too, and part of me wonders what the hell they’re feeling.

Her lips part as she stares at me. “A mating bond.”

“I’m so sorry,” I say hoarsely. “I don’t... I don’t know how that happened. I didn’t even know it could happen like that.”

But now Grace is there, the awareness of her inside my heart like a brand, small and bright and so fucking warm that I want to wrap my arms around it and never let it fucking go.

I stare at her face, torn between blind panic that I might have signed her up to something she doesn’t want and the sheer fucking joy of knowing that she might really be ours.

Because mating bonds don’t happen for everyone. They happen because they’re meant to.

My finger drops, catching a tear as my chest constricts. “Grace, baby. Don’t cry. I can fix this.”

But she shakes her head, a disbelieving tiny laugh falling from her lips. “I can feel you,” she says with disbelief. Her hand is still over her chest. “I can feel all of you, Drew.”

Chapter nine – Grace

It feels like I've never felt truly warm before this moment. Drew looks panicked, but I'm lost in the knowledge that's settled into my body.

I can feel each of them there. Whatever Drew has done, he's dragged Lucas and Ben along with him, a connection that feels uniquely theirs.

The tears fall faster, and I bury my face into Drew's chest, just breathing him in as I adjust to the feeling. His arms wrap around me tentatively, and I can feel his worry.

"Stop worrying," I mumble into his chest. "I'm not... I'm not upset, Drew."

No. I'm a little overwhelmed, but not upset. A mating bond.

I never thought I'd have one. Never thought I'd find a pack like this.

"But you're crying," he murmurs. His head reaches up to cup my head.

"Happy tears," I whisper. The sigh of relief that he lets out, the way his arms tighten around me... it feels like home.

And I've never had a home before.

When I pull my head back, he smiles down at me, a little unsteadily. "Come home with me, Grace. Ben and Lucas... they're probably on their way already."

I swipe at my cheeks. He's right. If they're feeling anything like this... and I want to see them.

No. I need to see them.

There's a cough from behind us, and I spin around in sudden horrified awareness. Frank has his hand on the doorknob, but his eyes are misty as he looks at us.

"A mating bond," he says softly. "Been a while since I saw one of those."

"Frank." I try to catch my breath, but he waves a hand at me.

"Don't you be worrying about me, Gracie. Let Drew get you home, now. I'll see you soon."

My mouth opens, but he's already through the door, his stick tapping furiously against the ground as he leaves the shop. I sag back against Drew with a groan. "He normally stays all day. It's Christmas Eve tomorrow. I won't see him now until Christmas Day."

Drew squeezes my hips. "I think that just this once, you can take a little time for yourself, Grace. He understood."

My hesitation slips away as his arms wrap around me, and he presses his face into my neck. "Home?"

He says it so easily, but I've never even been there. It's not my home. Not yet, at least, and a shiver of nerves run up my spine as I nod.

“Let's go.”

Chapter ten – Ben

My hands trace the varnished wood of Grace's Christmas present, checking it one last time for issues before I sit back and take in the finished piece. There's a whistle from the doorway, and I swivel to take the coffee Lucas hands me.

"It looks amazing," he murmurs, and I rub at the back of my neck. "Maybe."

It doesn't feel like enough for her. I don't think anything ever will.

"You want to head over to the store?" Lucas asks. "I think Drew was planning to when his shift ended. We can meet him there."

"Sure." Snagging my coffee, I cast a final look over the bookshelf before taking a few steps towards the door. I'm lifting the cup to my lips when a feeling hits me straight in the chest. Choking, I nearly drop my coffee.

What... is that?

I spin towards Lucas, his face paler than I've ever seen it as he grips his shirt over his heart. "Luc?"

My voice is disbelieving, but his face tells me that the same feeling has just hit him with the force of a freaking truck. “Is that...,”

“A mating bond,” he gasps. “Drew started a bond.”

He sinks into the chair I just vacated, both of us blinking rapidly as we adjust. It’s an entirely different feeling to the pack bond. As though every part of me is readjusting to make space for the omega that feels familiar and cherished inside my heart, every part curving itself around her to keep her safe.

Fucking hell. My eyes feel damp, and I blow out a breath.

Ours. Grace is ours.

Luc still looks thunderstruck, and I reach out, tapping his shoulder gently. “Luc?”

He shakes his head slowly. “I can feel Grace, Ben.”

“Yeah,” I say softly. “Me too.”

He looks up at me. “You think something happened?”

“I think Drew happened.” Trust our pack brother to pull something like this.

I’m not upset, though. Not even a little bit. Not if it means Grace will be ours. I just hope that she’s as happy about this as I am.

I pull out my phone, but there’s already a message from Drew letting me know that they’re on their way here. “They’re coming.”

“Shit!” Luc jumps up, his head spinning from side to side and a panicked look spreading across his face. “The house.”

He’s already halfway out of the door by the time I pull myself up after him. “We’re not exactly heathens, Luc.”

But he’s already heading determinedly towards the kitchen. “Don’t care. This is Grace’s first time here.”

He starts loading the breakfast dishes into the dishwasher as I back out and head towards the living room. Scanning my eyes around, I start spotting all the little things you don’t notice when you see something every day, but that you absolutely, definitely notice when your omega and possible mate is coming to your place for the first time. “Shit.”

I can hear Lucas frantically cleaning the kitchen as I start whacking at the sofa cushions, making sure they’re in shape and the blankets are folded up instead of left in crumpled heaps over the side. “Do we have any candles?” I shout, a touch frantically, and Luc bellows back. “In the nest!”

Fuck. Fuck, fuck, fuck. The nest.

My feet pound up the stairs as I make a run for it, shoving my shoes off outside the door and darting to grab one of the candles out of the bags. We’ve been picking up bits ever since we met Grace, but none of it is put away, bags of stuff everywhere that I mentally resign myself to not having time to fix before I run back downstairs, lighting the candle and placing it in the middle of the coffee table.

Lucas skids out of the kitchen just as Drew's key jangles in the lock, and we bump into each other as we both throw ourselves into a chair. Then we both jump up. My palms feel sweaty, and I try to discreetly rub them against my jeans as I look around, trying to see our space from Grace's point of view.

Drew's rumble echoes out to us from the hall, and Lucas rocks back on his heels, forcing out a breath as we stare at the door. Grace's low, melodic voice settles into me with comforting familiarity as the door opens, and he nudges her through.

Grace pads inside with small steps, Drew hovering protectively behind her as her eyes scan our faces. It suddenly feels like there's not enough air in the room as I attempt to take a breath. Her teeth sink down into her lip as she glances back to Drew, and then to me. She pushes her hair back as a soft smile graces her lips. "Um. Hi."

"Hi," I breathe. "Grace..."

I'm not a smooth talker. I've never had to be, always hiding away in my workshop and letting the others handle that sort of thing. But fuck, do I wish I was right now. Her face flushes a light shade of pink as she swallows. "Can you feel it?"

Our heads bob up and down like idiots, and she gives a small nod in response. Drew frowns at us exaggeratedly from behind her, his eyebrows moving in every damn direction in some sort of complicated Drew message that is very clearly telling us to step the fuck up, right now.

I swallow past the huge, panic-shaped lump in my throat. “Grace. I’m... we’re... shit. Are you okay with this? With... us?”

It comes out garbled as hell, but Grace’s face softens as she takes a tiny step forwards, glancing back towards Drew who gives her a reassuring look. “Yes. Ben... yes. I think so. As long as you are.”

Lucas lets out a relieved sigh, and I can’t hold back anymore. Stepping forward, I reach out my hand for Grace’s, winding our fingers together and tugging her forwards into my arms. She sinks into me, her sweet, spicy scent filling my nose as she buries her face into my chest and breathes in.

She softens against me like a puzzle piece I never even realized was missing. My hand reaches up to stroke over the back of her head, and she makes a small, almost purring sound in the back of her throat.

My throat full-on closes up. Drew and Lucas fill the space around us as I lean down and murmur in her ear. “You fit my arms like you were meant for them, Grace.”

Her eyes are damp when she looks up at me, the hazel shiny. “Yeah?”

Her voice is thick, and I pull her closer, breathing her in. “Yeah, baby.”

Grace was always meant to be ours. And when Drew meets my eyes, I reach out and pull him in too, Lucas joining as Grace laughs against me.

Family.

Pack.

Chapter eleven – Grace

Ben shakes against me as I breathe him in, his large hand cradling my head so carefully that I feel tears prick at the back of my eyelids again.

These men.

I never would have imagined this. Not when Lucas first arrived at the bookstore with his charming smile and sweet words. I pull back from Ben, wiping my eyes as I turn to him. He's watching me with gentle eyes, and he doesn't say anything.

Instead, he opens his arms, and it feels like the most natural thing in the world to be circled by them, for his scent to envelop me, his warm breath huffing against my ear as I lean into him.

“There you are,” he whispers, and I can hear the tremor in his voice, the shock and the joy that echoes from my own heart as he pushes my hair back. “We've been waiting for you, Grace.”

A hand strokes down my back, and Drew clears his throat.
“So... what now?”

“A tour,” Lucas murmurs. “And then we’ll see.”

His hands tighten on me, and heat flickers to life in my abdomen at the look on his face. My face flushes crimson, and he raises an eyebrow at me. But he doesn’t call me out as I step back, taking a moment to breathe before I turn to take in their home.

My apartment is a collection of pieces, pushed together to try and create something cozy, but this... this is absolutely a home. The oak wooden floor beneath my feet bounces a little as I move, taking in the red brick wall, the curved soft, buttery brown leather couch, the beautifully carved fireplace and small dining table that Drew boasts was made by Ben. Ben’s cheeks darken as I take in every piece of furniture, seeing his touch everywhere I look.

“It’s not much,” he starts, but I shake my head. “It’s perfect, Ben.”

Maybe it’s not a mansion, but it may as well be to me. The yearning builds in my chest as they show me the small but tidy kitchen, photographs pinned to the wall that I make a note to come back and examine later.

Their scents are everywhere, and the yearning turns into an insistent tug as I follow an animated Drew up the narrow stairs, Lucas keeping my hand in his as Ben follows us. Shoving the feeling down, I take in their bedrooms, my cheeks flushing crimson at the sight of their beds. Scanning my

cheeks, Lucas pulls the door to his bedroom shut, offering me an understanding smile. “We can finish the tour later.”

I want to see everything, to understand all the little parts of their lives that have made these men who they are, and I chew on my lip.

“We have a lifetime,” Ben murmurs behind me, his finger tracing my back and making me shudder.

A lifetime. For the first time, it feels like a real possibility.

And then Drew tugs open another door, toeing his shoes off as Lucas and Ben do the same. My confusion must show on my face, because Drew reaches for my hand. “Come and see.”

My breath catches in my chest, my mouth falling open as I step inside. “Is this...”

“A nest,” Lucas says quietly. “Your nest, if you like it.”

Swiveling, I take in the warm cream walls, the small skylight. The soft matching carpet sinks beneath my feet, and I scrunch up my toes as a shiver of delight runs down my spine.

“It’s not finished,” Ben says hurriedly, but I shake my head.

“It’s perfect.” The smile grows on my face as I reach out to trace my hand along the solid dark wooden shelving built into the wall, my eyes bouncing from one thing to the other. And then it lands on the bed. The giant, soft-looking bed, easily big enough for all of us and then some.

Heat prickles on my neck. My scent spikes in a sudden push of spice, coloring the air around us and making Drew curse

under his breath. A warm hand wraps around my nape, his fingers squeezing gently as I lean into the touch. “Breathe,” he orders softly.

It’s a struggle to draw the oxygen into my lungs, to focus on that when all I want to do right now is take a few steps forward, to tumble down into that soft looking space, dragging blankets and alphas with me until I’m surrounded by them.

Wanted by them.

The soft moan slips out, and Drew pulls me towards him. His brown eyes, darker than I’ve ever see them as his hand slips to my cheek, his mouth descending on mine. Soft and hard, we fit together as our lips meet, Drew swallowing the noise I make with a groan that reverberates in my own chest. Our kiss turns feverish, and I push myself against him, tasting him, drinking in the way he holds me like I’m precious.

We break apart reluctantly, and I stare at him, both of us breathing heavily. Drew squeezes his eyes closed. “What do you want, Grace?”

Right now? I want to feel them against me. All of them. Hot, muscled male flesh surrounding me, pressing me down into that bed, pushing my thighs apart. Pushing into me, holding me down, their fingers gripping my hips.

But I also want to speak to them. To learn more about them, to revel in the feel of the mating bond settling inside me like they were always supposed to be there.

My head spins between them with indecision, and Ben steps forward. “Why don’t we head downstairs?” he suggests gently. “We have time, Grace.”

A little frustrated but mostly relieved, I nod. “That sounds good.”

“Okay.” Drew swallows, pressing his lips against my forehead in a soft kiss as he moves back to give me some breathing space. “Let’s go.”

They settle me into a comfortable spot on the couch, Lucas wrapping soft blankets around me until my blinking turns languid and lazy. My head rests against his shoulder, and he smooths my hair back.

“Rest,” he murmurs. “If you want to.”

I want to talk. But I’m so comfortable here that my traitorous eyes don’t listen.

I slip into a dreamless sleep with Lucas’s arm wrapped around me.

Chapter twelve – Lucas

None of us are paying any attention to the movie, each focused on the sleeping omega nestled up against me. Grace's eyelashes cast small shadows on her face as she breathes lightly and my eyes trace every feature, taking in every detail I can of this female who suddenly feels like the center of our world.

“Shall I get the tree out?” Drew whispers, and I nod silently, stroking her hair back. Ben gets up to help him drag it out from the attic, and Grace stirs as they leave the room, as if she can sense the distance between them.

Her head pops up, her hair tousled and sticking out in an adorable way that I want to see every damn morning. She blinks at me sleepily. “Hi.”

“Hey, you.”

She turns her head, taking in where she is, and her eyes fly wide. Before she can panic, I tap her nose. “No panicking. You didn't sleep for long.”

The tension in her body melts away, and she cuddles against me, curiosity filling her face as Drew and Ben drag in the boxes. “What’s that?” she asks, her voice a little raspy.

They both turn, their faces lighting up. Drew gets to her first, leaning down and brushing his lips against hers. “We’re putting up the Christmas tree. Want to join in?”

Grace looks uncertain, and my hands tighten around her shoulders. “You don’t have to.”

But she shakes her head, sitting up and pushing the blankets aside. “No. I... I’d like to help.”

Drew bounces with excitement, and Ben collars him to help put the branches together. Grace watches them with interest, and I get up, putting a Christmas playlist on and heading into the kitchen. “You like mint hot chocolate, Grace?”

“I’ve never tried it,” she calls after me, and I hear Drew’s gasp of horror as I start pulling the ingredients out.

By the time I reappear, a tray of steaming cups in my hand, Grace is laughing as she examines the handmade baubles Ben’s parents gifted us with a few years ago. His mom made sure to choose the most embarrassing photos of each of us. “Lucas... should I ask?”

“Nope,” I growl, but it’s playful, and Grace beams as she holds up the sphere.

“You were adorable.”

“It was ten years ago,” I defend weakly, and the laugh erupts from her throat.

“He really loved that mohawk,” Ben muses. “Maybe you should try a comeback, Luc.”

I roll my eyes, handing Grace a cup that she wraps her fingers around, soaking in the heat. “The mohawk is gone. Thanks to you two shaving it off while I was asleep.”

“It was a public service,” Drew says seriously. Grace’s shoulders shake as she takes a sip of her drink, leaving a little trail of cocoa behind. Her moan has us all whipping our heads towards her, but she doesn’t even notice, her eyes closed as she takes a deep swig.

“This is delicious,” she says, her eyes widening. “The marshmallows make it, I think.”

I try not to puff up with self-importance over something as trivial as mint cocoa, but I don’t think I manage it. Ben throws a couch cushion at me, nearly knocking my drink out of my hands. “His head is big enough as it is.”

The room fills up with laughter as we put the tree together. Grace’s smile grows as she helps Drew untangle the chaos that makes up our lights, gently unthreading them and looping them around the tree. My chest almost hurts as I watch her.

Finally, I pull out the last box. Grace looks between it and the tree. “What’s that?”

“The final touch,” I announce. “The Christmas star.”

Ben crosses his arms. “Best part.”

Every year, we argue – sometimes good-naturedly, sometimes not – over who gets to put the star on the tree. One

of those ridiculous traditions that seems to have taken on importance over the years. But this year, it feels like the most natural thing in the world to lift out the gold wire star, checking the lights before I hand it to Grace. She accepts it, her fingers running over it. “It’s so pretty.”

“Ben,” Drew and I say together. Ben ducks his head, but he’s grinning as I take Grace’s hand and move us towards the tree. Ben and Drew stand on either side as we look up.

It’s... a really big tree.

“I can’t reach,” Grace says, trying to hand it back to me. But my hands move to her waist, easily lifting her as she squeaks.

“I’ve got you.” My voice is soft. “Put the star on the tree, baby.”

She places it almost reverently into place, and I carefully ease her to the floor, steadying her before we all move back to take it in. Grace leans back against me, and I prop my chin on her head, my arms around her waist. We all stare at the tree in silence.

“Best tree ever,” Drew declares finally. Beneath me, Grace nods in agreement.

“My first,” she admits shyly. “But I agree.”

Around us, soft music fills the room, the twinkling lights making the space feel warm, inviting.

Or maybe that’s just Grace.

I press a kiss to the top of her head, and when she turns, I move to her lips, pressing against them gently. Her eyes look like stars when she tilts her head back.

“Hey – guys?” Drew calls. “It’s snowing.”

“That’s not snow,” Ben says grimly. “That’s a snowstorm.”

“What?” Grace heads to the window to look out at the thick flakes. The sun is beginning to set, but we can clearly see the white settling onto the cars and road. “Damn.”

“Will you stay?” I ask her. “It might not be safe to travel.”

Truthfully, we could probably get her home if we left right now, but I’m not ready to let her go yet. If ever. The guys nod in agreement. Grace gives me a side-eye that tells me she’s thinking the same, but she smiles anyway. “If I can borrow some stuff.”

Drew coughs. “Uh. We actually have quite a bit here. For you, I mean.”

Grace’s eyes widen. “For me?”

“Mating bond or not,” I tell her firmly. “We chose you already, Grace. We’ll always choose you.”

Chapter thirteen – Grace

They choose me.

“I’ll stay.”

The words feel deeper than the question warranted. As though I’m declaring something permanent, something that can’t be undone. But their faces light up, my own smile spreading in response.

Drew whoops, and I have to laugh. “That’s it. I’m making chestnuts.”

Chestnuts. Christmas trees. Hot chocolate.

All of these traditions that I’ve never been a part of. First by circumstance, and then later by choice.

Ben pauses as Drew and Luc head back into the kitchen. “Are you okay? Are we overwhelming you? I know... well, you don’t celebrate Christmas usually. Tell us if we’re too much.”

A lump appears in my throat. “You know, it’s easier to push something away when you’ve never had it. It makes it easier when it never happens.”

It's harder to hope. To wish for something that you know will never come.

Ben's fingers link with mine, and he turns my palm over, pressing a kiss into it. His eyes are understanding, but he doesn't press as Drew reappears, holding a bag of chestnuts above his head like a trophy. "Got them!"

When we're settled around the fire, watching Drew painstakingly place the chestnuts onto a tray, my mouth opens. "My mom left me on Christmas Day."

I'm not expecting to feel the pulse of shock and anger that echoes down our newly-created bond. My flinch is pure reaction, and three matching growls ring out. Chestnuts forgotten, warm hands lift me, and Drew settles me into his lap. His jaw is tight, but his eyes soften as he touches my chin. "Tell us?"

It feels a little easier to explain it to him. He was part of the system too.

Ben and Lucas sit close to us, their warmth comforting as I close my eyes and tell them.

"We didn't have much," I say softly. "My mom was... I don't think she was well. She didn't really remember things like Christmas."

Or birthdays. Or things that really mattered. Like food.

"Everyone at school talked about Christmas," I whisper. "They were so excited. And that year, we made these wreaths

out of cardboard, and I brought it home and put it on our door.”

Not that she noticed.

Drew swallows, and I can feel his pain like an echo of my own as he squeezes my hand.

“I’d never had a Christmas present.” I focus on the warmth of his fingers in mine. “But that year, my teacher gave me one. I don’t think it was anything expensive. It might have even been food. She used to do that a lot, slip me things when no-one else was looking.”

Mrs. Abernale was a good teacher. She tried, when no-one else did.

“But it was wrapped.” I still remember it, the way the paper crinkled under my fingers as I ran home, so excited that I could barely breathe as I burst through the door. “We didn’t have a tree, so I put it under the window to open on Christmas morning. And my mom was there, and I told her about it.”

I still remember how glazed her eyes were.

“I thought she was listening.” Swallowing, I look down at Drew’s hand. “And then she said we were going for a walk.”

“We walked for a long time. It was cold, and I didn’t have any gloves, and I thought my fingers were going to fall off. But my mom was holding my hand, listening to me talk about Christmas. And there was music coming out of the stores, lights flashing in the streets. So I didn’t care, even when they started to burn.”

“Grace.” Lucas sounds agonized as he leans forward. “You don’t need to tell us this, baby. Not until you’re ready.”

“I am ready.” I look up at him, and he looks so sad that my heart hurts on his behalf.

“We stopped, and she told me to wait while she went to get something.”

I’d thought it might have been a present. That she had finally remembered, even though she never had before.

“She didn’t come back,” I say numbly. “Not for hours and hours.”

Not before someone noticed the freezing, waiting girl outside the church. They took me inside, and gave me a blanket, and they asked me about my mom. Then they called the police.

“When they went to our apartment, everything was gone.”

Everything. Including my present from Mrs. Abernale.

“She left a note saying she couldn’t do it anymore. She didn’t mention me at all. She just disappeared. And... after that, I didn’t really want to celebrate Christmas any more.”

The following year, I had a bunk bed in a group home with too many angry children and not enough love. A new class, in a new school, in a new area. And no Mrs. Abernale.

Drew’s eyes are damp when I turn to look at him. His face is pale as he presses a kiss to my shoulder. “I’m so sorry, Grace.”

“We can take it down,” Lucas says firmly. “We don’t need any of this, Grace. We only need you.” Ben nods, and Drew rumbles in agreement beneath me, but I shake my head frantically.

“No. Absolutely not. This... this has been perfect. Every part of it.”

If I could ever have chosen how to spend my first Christmas... I would have wanted it to be with them.

“I choose you too,” I say quietly, leaning into Drew.

Something tells me I will always choose them.

They surround me with soft, gentle touches and promises that warm me from the inside out. I look up at Drew, catching the contemplative look on his face before I press a soft kiss to his lips. “I think you promised me chestnuts, you know.”

His nod is slow, his grip tight as he reluctantly relinquishes me to Lucas’s waiting arms. “Hot chestnuts, coming right up.”

I love chestnuts, I realize. I love hot chocolate too, and looking at the tree as Ben fusses next to me and they argue over the best film to watch, asking me to choose with laughing faces and soft kisses to my hair.

And it feels like... everything.

The atmosphere deepens when we go to bed. They all linger at the top of the stairs, and Lucas tilts his head towards the nest. “That’s your space, Grace. You decide who goes in, and when.”

My nest.

It doesn't feel completely mine yet, and I can feel the nesting urge starting to pull at me, coaxing me to arrange things just so. But I don't want to let them go, so I try to grab all of their hands at once, tugging them towards the door. "Come in. All of you. I might need to work around you, though."

They settle in against the wall, their eyes on me as Drew shows me the bags. They've chosen so many things, and the care makes my eyes burn as I unwrap the softest, fluffiest blankets. The little cushions, some of them clearly picked by Ben to match the one he bought for my chair in the shop. So many candles, scents to match theirs that I carefully place on the shelves in just the right place. Lucas, Drew and Ben help with the lights, wrapping the little stars against the corners of the shelves and stretching them out across the ceiling until I feel like I'm under a night sky.

Finally, I sit on the bed, my fingers curling into the downy material before I lift a hand to them in silent request. Drew throws himself down on the bed with enthusiasm, making me bounce and laugh as I roll into Lucas. He steadies me as Drew claims the middle spot, Lucas next to me and Ben on his other side. We wriggle into position, each of us laying back and watching the lights above us sparkle.

"It's a beautiful nest." A safe space. For when my heat arrives.

Which will be... soon. Possibly very soon.

“We’re not dressed for bed,” I blurt, and Drew laughs next to me.

“Do you want us all to stay?” he asks, a touch of something deeper entering his voice that makes me shiver. When I nod, Lucas leans over me, his hair falling over his face as I reach up my hand and push it back to see him more clearly.

His finger traces my cheek, dropping down to run along my exposed collarbone. I tilt my head back to give him more access, my chest pushing out in silent invitation.

His lips follow the trail, his touch drawing a pleading noise from the back of my throat. “Please, Lucas.”

“Tell us what you want, Grace.”

“You,” I breathe. “All of you.”

There’s movement around me, my fingers digging into Lucas’s hair as I watch Drew and Ben slide off the bed. Drew peels his dark blue crew-neck tee over his head, flinging it behind him as Ben’s fingers work the buttons on his flannel shirt. The amount of defined muscle on show makes my mouth dry, but my attention is caught as Lucas sits up, moving his hands to the bottom of my dress. His eyes darken as he looks down at me, his face hungry as he traces the curves of my body. The heat in my stomach morphs into an inferno. “This is coming off.”

There’s no question in his voice, not anymore, and I swallow as I lift my hips obediently, helping him lift the dress up until he tugs it over my head, leaving me in my plain cotton black

bra and woolen tights. I have a moment of horrified realization, but when I move to cross my arms and cover my stomach, I find my hands pinned to the bed.

“Don’t ever hide yourself from us,” Drew orders. His hands pin mine to the mattress. “Ever, Grace.”

“You’re perfect,” Ben says hoarsely. His hand slides across my skin. “So soft.”

But it’s Lucas who moves, his hands sliding up my stomach to my bra. His fingers hook into the cups, rubbing across my nipples as they harden for his touch before he tugs the cotton down, pushing my breasts up and out for them to see.

Three matching groans ring out, and Lucas’s face is savage satisfaction as he smiles, slowly. “Pretty, pretty Grace.”

Their eyes on me feel like a branding, as though they’re slowly claiming my body with as much consideration as they gave to my heart.

Ben and Drew dip their heads at the same time, their hands still pinning me, and I cry out as they wrap their lips against each nipple and suck. The differences between them, between Drew’s hard sucking and tugging and Ben’s soft, nibbling licks, makes my head spin. Hot, damp readiness spreads between my legs, my scent filling the air with soft, needy spice, and Lucas inhales deeply.

His eyes meet mine as he shifts down, his fingers moving to pull at my tights. “I want to see you.”

I want him to see me. Want him to see how wet I am for him, for them, to praise me for it. With a whimper, I lift my hips, my fingers curling into Drew and Ben's grip as he peels my tights away, pressing kisses down my legs as he goes until I'm limp and trembling beneath their touches.

"Fuck," Ben rasps against my nipple. "You respond so well to us, Grace."

"Because you were made for us," Drew hums, and I cry out in voiceless agreement as his hand slides down, under the cotton of my underwear and brushing against my curls. "Are you wet for us, Grace?"

"Yes," I choke. Lucas's hands are firm around my ankles, his thumb rubbing in careful circles on my skin as he sits back and watches Drew and Ben. "Lucas. More. Please."

"I'm too impatient to do this the proper way," he murmurs back. Before I can voice the question in my throat, he yanks at my underwear, strong hands gripping the cotton and shredding it. "Much better. Spread those pretty thighs for me, baby."

The need is almost burning as I push them open as far as I can, my scent becoming overwhelming as their own rise up, entwining in the small space as Lucas rumbles in approval.

"Such a good girl," he soothes, and I buck as his palm meets my center, the heat of him right there as he grips me. "So fucking wet for us."

I gasp to the ceiling as he applies more pressure, his hand moving in circles that have my hips twisting and bucking

before his hands move to my hips, pressing them down.

My hands, my hips. All held by them, holding me for them.

“God damn, Grace,” Drew mutters hoarsely. “You’re going to kill us.”

“I think,” I gasp out, “that it’s going to be the other way around.”

Drew swallows any further comments with his mouth, his tongue sweeping into my mouth as though he wants to chase every last taste of me. His lips move down to my neck, Ben passing him my hand to keep as he shifts down the bed to join Lucas.

They’re both looking at me, and the feel of their eyes, the brand, pulls another hot pulse of my slick from me, a silent plea from my body.

Lucas shifts to give Ben space as Drew continues his assault on my neck, gentle bites and licks that make my eyes flutter closed with sheer pleasure as they overwhelm me with their touch.

The feel of warm lips against me has them flying open. “Ah!”

Ben doesn’t devour. He doesn’t overwhelm.

No. In that quiet, determined way he has, he savors.

He kisses my cunt, his lips tracing soft shapes against my sensitive skin before he angles his head, retracing his steps until I’m crying out against their hold. “Ben.”

He rewards the sound of his name with a deep lick directly up my center, rasping over my clit again and again until I'm certain the stars above me are in my own eyes and nothing to do with artificial lights. He groans, the sound vibrating against my skin. "Mate. You taste like sin, Grace. Sin and gingerbread and fucking caramel."

I try to look down at him, but Drew gently wraps his hand around my neck, holding my head still. All I can do is tremble and shake beneath their touches, my voice ringing out as I beg for the release I can feel building in my spine.

A thick finger circles my entrance, demanding entry, and Lucas's voice filters through the ringing in my ears. "You're going to take us all, Grace. Two here."

His finger slides down, pressing against somewhere firmer. "And one here."

The images in my head are overwhelming, my keening a plea as Lucas moves back, his finger pressing inside me before he adds another, testing me and stretching me until I can almost feel that tenuous line snap, ready to shatter me into a million pieces for them to collect and start again.

How did I ever live without this? Without them?

"But not today."

Lucas's hands disappear, that aching close release snatched away, and my groan is half-need, half pure omega frustration. "No."

His laugh is low and intimate as he reaches up. “Taste, Grace.”

He slides his fingers past my lips, and I taste my own slick, the sweetness and the bite of spice. I suck on Lucas’s fingers in silent demand, and he gently tugs his fingers free. “You want something to fill that pretty mouth, baby?”

Anything. I nod frantically, and his lips curve up. “Drew.”

My head whips to the side, as Drew pulls away from my damp, reddened skin. His hands drop to his jeans as he undoes the zipper slowly, his eyes on my face as he pulls his cock free.

Goddamn. My eyes fly wide, and he grins at me as he strokes it up and down, his hands moving against the silken skin. A bead of fluid is already gathered at the top, his cock hard and slightly curved as he tilts his head. “Hold on to the headboard, baby.”

The gruff command has my fingers darting up to twine with the metal, and he nods in approval. “Good girl.”

Fuck. Fuck, fuck, fuck.

“Oh, she likes that,” Ben observes. His finger gathers up some of my slick, and I’m torn between watching him lick me off his fingers and Drew playing with his cock.

Drew wins out. His hand slides beneath my head as he tilts me, my breathing heavy pants as he presses himself against my lips, painting them with his wetness. “Open for me, mate.”

He presses into my mouth, thick and hot and silky, and my eyes close as he groans, deep and low in his chest. “Your mouth, baby.”

“Every part of her,” Lucas murmurs. “Fuck her throat, Drew. I want to see how well our mate can take our cocks.”

The neediest sound echoes in my throat, thrumming around Drew’s cock as he sinks deeper, the swollen width of his knot nudging at my mouth.

“Breathe,” he demands. He pulls back, nudging in again as he finds a rhythm. “Doing so well, Grace.”

The movement rocks my head back and forth, Drew’s hands holding my head in place as he thrusts. “Holy fuck,” he gasps reverently. “I’m not going to last. Not with your mouth sucking me.”

My hand releases from the metal, reaching around and gripping his jeans as if I can pull him any closer, the noises in my throat and chest little cries for more as he buries himself in me, his roar ringing out as his knot swells inside my mouth, impossibly big as my lips stretch to try and take every part of him. His release tastes sweet, the liquid heat pushing down my throat as he erupts with a final shout.

We pause, his knot buried inside my mouth as I try to breathe, to force out the air.

“Fuck.” His voice is garbled. “Luc. I knotted her mouth.”

I blink as I try to pull back, but he’s right. I can’t remove my mouth. In fact, I actually can’t move much at all.

Shit. I didn't even know that was possible.

“Jesus Christ, Drew.” Lucas's face appears next to mine.
“Grace?”

I try to tell him I'm fine, but the words won't fit around Drew. So instead, I close my eyes, blinking languidly. And then I tuck my lips around Drew's knot as best I can. And suck, gently.

“Grace...,” Drew moans. “Fuck.”

Ben appears next to Lucas and pushes my hair away from my face, his lips twitching. “I think our mate likes having her mouth knotted.”

When I nod, he grins. “In that case...”

I can't move my head to follow, but their actions become clear when I feel my legs parting. And Ben's words, his slow, rumbling drawl, makes it very clear.

“My tongue, your fingers?”

My eyes feel too big for my face as I stare up at Drew, and he smooths his hand down my hair. “Breathe, Grace. Focus on that.”

Focus on... I can't focus on anything when I feel Lucas's fingers slide inside me, finding a slow, easy movement that leaves my clit free for Ben's tongue. He takes his time, and the burning inside me reappears, that tenuous release sliding closer as my hips rock for them, my mouth stuffed full with my alpha's knot.

They take their time, pushing me higher and higher, teasing whines and pleading noises from me until Drew is finally able to slide his knot free, his fingers massaging my aching cheeks as they speed up and my mouth opens again in a silent cry.

“Scream for us, Grace,” he demands, his voice as close to a bark as I’ve ever heard from an alpha. “Let us hear you.”

Ben rakes his teeth over my clit as Lucas pushes in another finger, stretching me and sending me soaring off the edge of the cliff. My body stiffens as the scream erupts from my throat, torn out by three alphas who seem determined to wring me dry.

Lucas keeps his fingers inside me as I collapse limply onto the bed, slow, gentle circular movements that make my eyes slide open. “No,” I half moan, half grumble. “Can’t... no more.”

“I know,” he says gently. His fingers slow further. “You did so well, baby.”

Two matching rumbles of approval come from around me, and I stretch in lazy anticipation of their praise, my body tightening around Lucas. But he’s not quite finished.

“Who do you belong to, Grace?”

My lips part. I look to Lucas, then up at Drew, and finally to Ben. All of them watching me with lidded eyes that sharpen at Luc’s question.

“Tell us,” he coaxes. “And then we’ll pet you to sleep, pretty mate.”

As tired as I am, exhaustion beginning to weigh down my bones, his words threaten to ignite a whole new fire. I wriggle experimentally, and his lips twitch.

“No more,” he chastises, tapping his finger on the inside of my thigh in soft reproof. “Time for rest. Answer the question, Grace.”

“You,” I breathe. “All of you.”

His slow rocking trails off into a soft caress as he removes his fingers. Ben leans in, pressing a kiss to my shoulder. “That’s right. Such a fucking good girl, Grace. If you had any doubts about us, wipe them away now.”

Drew jumps off the bed, and I track the open door until he reappears, passing Lucas a washcloth that he uses to clean me up. I’m bundled into a shirt that smells like Ben and warm, soft bedding, Ben and Drew wrapping themselves around me as Lucas settles in behind Drew.

“Sleep,” Lucas orders softly, but my eyes are already closing, a smile on my lips.

And if I dream at all, I don’t remember it.

Chapter fourteen – Drew

I'm in full-blown pouting mode right now.

Grace laughs as she swings our hands together. "This isn't the end of the world, you know."

I push my bottom lip out mutinously, and her shoulders shake. "Drew."

"I know," I mutter. "Man's gotta work."

When she saw the snow wasn't as deep as we thought it would be last night, she insisted on going home today. And since I pulled the Christmas Eve shift at the station, I'm the lucky bastard who gets to walk her.

I'll take any moment I can get. I just don't want to leave her at the end of it.

"I'll see you tomorrow," she says, and her face pulls into a frown. "You'll be careful, right?"

"I'm always careful." Firefighting can be dangerous, too many of us lost to incidents that could have been avoided. None of us ever forget. But now that I have her, I'll be extra

vigilant. I never want to be responsible for Grace answering the door to the worst sort of news.

I tug her closer, breathing her in before our lips meet. “I swear it, Grace. I’ll be careful.”

It’s hard to let her go. But we don’t want to overwhelm her, don’t want to steamroll her life. It’s the only reason Luc and Drew are at home, undoubtedly growling at each other. So I force my fingers to release, force myself to step back and let her find the keys to her apartment.

As she opens the door, turning back to me, I take a deep breath.

“Hey, Grace?”

“Yeah?” she calls.

“I love you.”

She flushes a deep, deep crimson at my bellow. But I don’t give a flying fuck if the whole street heard. Let them.

She’s smiling, though, so I blow her an exaggerated kiss before I reluctantly turn away. I don’t get more than a few steps before her voice reaches me, and I spin back.

She cups her hands around her mouth. “I love you too!”

Her shout is even louder than mine, and the laugh travels up my throat, erupting in a bubble of euphoria as she grins at me.

She’s perfect.

Chapter fifteen – Grace

My heart is thudding as I close the door, my grin too much to contain. I would have killed for a camera to capture the look on Drew's face when I shouted down the street.

Pressing my cold hands to my overheated cheeks, I blow out a breath as I look around. The apartment feels empty. No Drew. No Lucas. No Ben.

Everything feels different now, compared to when I was last here. They didn't want me to leave, and I didn't want to go.

But it's Christmas Eve.

And to celebrate it for the first time... I can't do that without getting something for them to open.

I just don't know what to get them.

I take a few minutes to change before I head out, my feet treading familiar patterns as I head towards the bookstore. Towards it, and then past it, to the market.

I don't look down today. I don't look away from the bright lights, don't shy from the cheerful people calling out greetings.

Instead, I smile back. And as I walk, it feels like something loosens inside my chest.

A release of sorts.

Nothing can change my past. But I'm the one in control of my present, of my future. I don't want to spend it holding onto resentment.

I just want to be happy.

With the men who fill my head as I move between the stalls. I wave to Colleen as she chats with the man manning the stall next to hers, and she waves back cheerfully before he captures her attention again. I don't mind. My own attention is caught by a stall further ahead, and the older, ruddy-faced beta behind the counter smiles in welcome. He stays quiet, giving me space as I look over the gifts on display. My fingers reach out to brush against a sign, and an idea for Lucas begins to take shape in my head as I look at the owner. "Would I be too late to personalize these?"

He shakes his head. "I have the tools right here."

Tools.

Once the ideas start, they don't stop. Leaving an hour later with my arms full of packages, I carefully make my way home, one of the items on my Christmas to-do list ticked off. Ripping open my cupboards, I glance inside before hastily closing them again at the reminder that I have a tendency to survive on ramen and box-bought cookies.

Tapping my mouth, I purse my lips and glance at the list again.

I can do this.

I can absolutely make cookies. I mean, how hard can it be?

Chapter sixteen – Grace

“**R**eally hard,” I mutter, glowering at the second crispy set of blackened cookies on my side. “Really fucking hard.”

Damn it. I’m an *omega*. I’m supposed to have some mystical baking skills, to be a whizz at cookery and making all sorts of delicious snacks for my pack. Instead, I’m... just me. No particular set of skills, unless you count the ability to read six hundred pages in a day.

Nothing particularly useful.

There’s a knock on my apartment door at exactly the wrong moment, and my footsteps slam against the floor as I rip the door open to give the latest have-a-go salesman a piece of my mind.

But I choke on my words. Ben straightens, and Lucas tilts his head to the side in question. “Grace? What’s...uh, burning?”

Biting my lip, I take a step back in silent invitation. They slowly move into my space, their bulk taking up a significant

amount of room that makes me suddenly aware of how little space I have. And how worn down everything is.

Gripping my elbows, I wave towards my little kitchenette with a sigh. “I was trying to make biscuits,” I admit, glancing at Ben. “To take to your parents tomorrow. But I don’t think cremated baked goods will be their thing.”

Ben’s face softens, his voice gentle. “You don’t need to bring a thing, Grace. They’re so happy you’re coming.”

Lucas grins. “Brace yourself. They’re loud. Apart from his dad.”

Ben half-protests before he laughs. “Yeah, they are. But we love them anyway. We were actually hoping to spirit you back to the house tonight, Grace.”

I glance at the biscuits, my baking crown shaking a little. “Ah...,”

Lucas slides in front of me, one hand dropping to my waist, the other tipping my chin up. “The house feels empty without you in it,” he confesses. “We were trying to give you space, but it’s Christmas Eve, and we don’t want you to be on your own. You should be with us.”

“Come home, Grace,” Ben adds behind him, pinning me with a pleading look. “Please.”

I chew on the inside of my cheek. “I could make us some food?”

Ben casts a slightly nervous look towards the biscuits, and he half nods, half shakes his head. “Whatever you want.”

“Or,” I propose, eyeing the biscuits too. “I could order us some food. I’m not the best at cooking.”

I swear he nearly sags in relief. “I love to cook. We all do, but I tend to use the kitchen most.”

“No cooking required,” Lucas nearly purrs in my ear. “All we want is you.”

“So... it doesn’t bother you? That I can’t really cook, I mean. I know omegas tend to be into that sort of thing,” I say tentatively, and they both shake their heads.

“We don’t want a cook,” Ben says, a smile playing around his mouth. “If you want to, that’s different, of course. But we don’t expect it, Grace.”

“Enough,” Lucas murmurs. He kisses the outer edge of my ear, enough that I shiver with the memory of his hands against my skin, his demands. “Come home, Grace.”

I glance around my apartment. My empty, lonely, silent place. Lucas’s hands are a brand against my skin, his heat sinking in through my navy dress.

“Yes,” I whisper. His hands tighten, and then relax. “I’ll come home with you.”

“Thank god,” Ben groans. “Lucas has been unbearable all day.”

He humphs, but grins unrepentantly. “Like you haven’t. Pack some clothes, sweetheart. We’ll wait as long as we need to.”

I can hear their lighthearted bickering as I take a few minutes to pack a case with enough for the next few days... just in case. Sliding in the gifts I wrapped when I got home, I zip it closed, hauling it back into the living area where Ben promptly snags it from me. His eyes widen.

“What have you got in here?” he teases, lifting it up and down experimentally. “Rocks?”

“Careful!” I yelp, and he wiggles his eyebrows at me.

“I’ll guard it with my life. You ready?”

Nodding, I swipe my keys from the side. Lucas winds my hand into his as we leave and I lock the door behind me. It feels – not quite final, but on the way there. A portent of what’s coming – maybe sooner rather than later - of the day that I lock this door for the last time.

As soon as we arrive, I take myself off to my nest with my case, carefully hiding their gifts away and adding a few things to the wooden shelves. Lucas raps his knuckles against the door, and I turn, beckoning him in as pleasure swoops in my belly.

“You know you can come in, right?”

He takes a slow step inside, his eyes traveling over me and his shoulders relaxing. As though he hates me being out of his sight. I wonder if it feels for them like it does for me. Like it’s hard to take a full breath when they’re not here.

I wonder if it will always feel this intense, or if the feelings will fade with time.

Lucas stalks forward, a gleam in his eyes, and I swallow as he cages me against the wall, his mouth dipping to leisurely taste my neck. It takes me a moment to put the words together when he speaks.

“To enter my omega’s nest is a privilege. I will never take it for granted.”

Oof. It feels like he’s taken a straight shot to my ovaries, his rumbling tone full of promise that has me melting against him, his arm banding around my waist as he holds me up.

“You are so smooth,” I manage to murmur, and he chuckles.

“I’m glad you like it.”

“Who said I liked it?”

His grin is almost wolfish in nature, as he takes a very deep, very obvious breath. His teeth flash at me. “You did.”

My mouth dries. I have no words to respond to that, so instead, I let my body do the talking. Leaning back, I push my hips forward, watching his face fill with stark want as I brush up against the unmistakable hardness of his cock.

“Playing with fire, mate,” he breathes.

I don’t know how I ever thought Lucas was cool and collected. The alpha in front of me is burning, his hands firm as they tug up my dress and he drops with a thud to his knees, tugging down the cream tights I chose today.

“I love these,” he purrs, yanking them off me. “Will you let me tie you up with them?”

Dear god. I'm not sure that I'll survive being mated to them.

When I say as much, he traces his finger over the wet satin of the underwear I selected on the off chance they might see it. "This little cunt is so wet and needy for me, Grace."

The whine that rolls out of me, high and needy, surprises us both. Luc's eyes flash to my face as his fingers push harder against the silky material, as if they'd push right through. He rubs, hard, and I follow his movements with my hips, my head lolling back against the wall. "Lucas."

"Mate." He follows his fingers with his mouth, his tongue licking through the material just enough for me to feel the barest touch of him, teasing me until my hands drop and I shove my own underwear down with my frustration to be closer to him, giving him access to my soaking pussy.

He growls. "Show me, Grace. Show me how wet you are for me."

When I reach down, spreading myself wide and opening myself to him, I wait for the embarrassment to hit, the urge to cover myself. But Lucas's eyes are a cover in themselves, and I find myself pushing towards him in silent request.

"Don't leave me wanting, Lucas," I beg quietly, and he runs his fingers up my thighs. "Never."

His face buries into me, licking and rasping and little, soft bites at my clit that send me soaring, my head banging against the wall as I lose the strength to stand. Lucas lifts me, curling my legs over his shoulders. My hands sink into his hair as he

holds me open with one hand, his tongue moving over me, in me, with desperate motion until I convulse around him, his name on my lips as he encourages me to ride his face, pressing himself into me until I wonder half-hysterically how the hell he's still breathing even as the climax tears up my spine.

Both of us are breathless as he presses kisses to the inside of my thigh, leaving damp prints behind. "A lifetime with you," he says, looking up at me. "It's not going to be enough, Grace."

And my heart thumps as he leans his cheek against my palm. "So we make it count."

Chapter seventeen – Grace

I wake up on Christmas morning to a freshly-showered fireman pressing a kiss to my stomach. I blink sleepily at Drew, who offers me a soft, half-apologetic smile as he eases up and presses his lips to mine. He smells fresh, a little minty, like he's just finished in the shower. "You're back."

"I am." He draws back, his eyes scanning my face. We both keep our voices quiet, trying to avoid waking the others. I don't remember coming to bed. I remember trying to watch a film, Ben rubbing my feet as Lucas played leisurely with my hair. One of them must have carried me up.

"Merry Christmas, Grace," he says softly. His hazel eyes look gold in the low morning light.

"Merry Christmas," I whisper back.

Our first Christmas. My first Christmas.

A flicker of excitement fills me, and I turn to take in Ben and Lucas. Drew snorts, and I press my lips together to keep from laughing. They've managed to tangle themselves up, Ben's leg pushed between Lucas and their arms entangled.

“So sweet,” Drew murmurs, and I can’t contain my laughter or my shaking, pressing my hand over my mouth to try to contain it. Ben stirs, nuzzling his face against Lucas’s shoulder, and I stuff nearly my whole fist in my mouth as tears spring to my eyes.

Drew winks at me. “Brace yourself.”

It’s the only warning I get before he hoists himself over me – displaying some impressive muscles – and lands directly on top of them, bellowing into their ear as they both jerk awake. “Merry Christmas, you filthy animals!”

“Drew,” Lucas hisses, shoving him off. He squeezes Ben’s hand, and I hold my breath as he lifts it to his mouth. He’s about to kiss it when he blinks, noticing me a good half-foot away on the bed.

I wiggle my fingers in a wave, and Lucas stares down at the hand he’s holding, turning to look over his shoulder. His groan sends laughter erupting from my throat as he buries his face into the pillow. The tips of his ears are red.

Ben finally jerks awake, the combination of mine and Drew’s laughter enough to have him jerking upright, nearly sending Drew toppling before he rights himself. His hair is sticking up in at least six directions, adorable little tufts as he looks around blearily. “What time is it?”

“Early,” Lucas snarls. He shifts over to me, and I squeak as he rolls on top, careful to keep his weight off me as he brushes our noses together. “Minx.”

“You looked so cozy, I didn’t want to interrupt.” My voice is tremulous, choking into a laugh at the end as Lucas pretends to growl, tugging at an errant curl.

“Ben,” Drew pleads. “It’s Christmas. Get up!”

“Alright, you child,” he mutters. Drew bounces, and Ben’s hand slaps at the empty air as he darts out of the way.

“Grace wants to get up,” he says, winking at me, and Ben bolts back up. “She does?”

He takes me in, pinned beneath Lucas. His hand moves out, and suddenly Lucas is no longer there, the heavy thump making me peer cautiously over the edge of the bed.

“Right,” he says slowly. “That is it.”

Then there’s squealing, and mock fighting, and laughter, so much laughter that I can’t suck enough air into my lungs.

“Sorry,” Ben says sheepishly when we’re all collapsed in a heap, trying to catch our breath.

“Don’t be,” I gasp.

At this moment, I can’t think of a better way to wake up on Christmas morning. Or any morning at all, in fact.

We finally crawl out of bed, still laughing as Drew seizes my hand and drags me downstairs. The tree is already lit, gifts placed in tidy stacks underneath, and I take a step back. “Oh – wait!”

I run back upstairs, pulling out their presents from their hiding spot and carefully carrying them back down. All three

of them eye the packages in my arms with interest.

“You didn’t have to get us anything,” Lucas says, approaching me and running his knuckle gently down my face. Ben disappears into the kitchen as I place them under the tree, a little kick of excitement curling through me at the prettiness of the display. He hands me a coffee, and I hug it to myself, considering my words before I take a sip.

“You’ve given me so much,” I say quietly, looking between them. “I wanted you to have something from me.”

“We’ll love it, whatever it is,” Drew declares. He bounds over to the fireplace, and my eyes widen as he lifts off a deep red stocking I didn’t spot last night. “This is for you.”

My fingers trace over the patterns. A stocking.

I feel a little giddy as we all sit down, and I follow their lead, opening mine a little more carefully than they do theirs. It’s packed with little, thoughtful gifts, and Drew scolds me when I try to thank him.

“Not us,” he insists. “Father Christmas.”

I bite back my smile. “Of course.”

The room is cozy as we settle in, and Drew reaches for a roughly wrapped gift with a giant bow on it. My eyes widen when he hands it to me. “This is for me?”

“Of course,” he says, his brow furrowing. “You think we wouldn’t get you a gift?”

I stare down at it, at the packaging tape that wraps around it, very obviously wrapped by an excitable Drew. “You’ve gotten me so much already.”

But my hands tighten on the present anyway, emotion building up in my chest that I try my best to swallow down, remembering another parcel. Another time.

Warm hands close over mine, and I look up at Drew. His smile is understanding as he carefully wipes away the dampness from under my eyes.

“It isn’t the gift, or the price of it, that matters,” he whispers, his words between us. “It’s the intention, Grace. We’re a family. We give each other gifts to recognise that, to make each other smile. And you deserve to have nice things, Grace. It’s our privilege to give them to you.”

The sweet words draw more tears out, and he half groans, half laughs as he wipes them away too. “I’m no good at saying the right thing.”

I shake my head as he eases back, giving him a watery smile. “That was pretty perfect, actually.”

I take my time unwrapping the paper, carefully lifting each piece of tape as Ben and Lucas rib Drew about his packaging skills. Lifting the lid of the small, rectangular box, I push aside the tissue and stare down.

Drew’s cheeks are pink when I look at him. “Do you like it?”

The frame is pretty, a dusky pink painted wood. But it’s the photo and the words that make my heart clench. I vaguely

remember Drew snapping a photo when we were drinking after the ice rink at the Christmas market, and it's right here – the four of us crammed together, all of us laughing, our cheeks flushed from the wine. Except I'm the only one looking at the camera.

They're all looking at me.

And underneath is a short, simple message.

Home is not the place. It's the people.

"I love it," I say, meeting Drew's eyes. I try to find the right words as my hand lands over my heart. "Truly, Drew."

I can't let it go, setting it down reluctantly as Lucas passes me a box, mock scowling at Drew. "I can't believe we let you go first. How do we top that?"

Drew laughs as I open the carefully wrapped silver tissue. Inside is a delicate silver ring, almost webbed in design. My eyes flick to Lucas. "Lucas. This is too much."

He shakes his head. "It belonged to my mother. She left it for me with very strict instructions to gift it to my future mate. And that's exactly what I'm doing."

My chest aches as he kneels in front of me, taking the ring and carefully sliding it onto the finger of my left hand. He rubs his own over it with a smile. "It fits. I wasn't sure it would."

"It's beautiful." I don't know what to do, what to say, so I lean forward, my lips meeting his in a silent thank you. He squeezes my hand before he sits back down, and Ben shifts next to me.

“It’s not much,” he blurts out. The back of his neck is red as he hands me a large box, and he looks at it like he’s suddenly second guessing whatever he’s chosen.

“Whatever it is, I will love it because you chose it.” When I squeeze his hand, he squeezes back, as though he needs the reassurance. He takes a deep breath as I carefully unpeel the tape and open it up.

It takes me a few seconds to work out what I’m seeing. The smile on my face grows slowly, spreading with delight as I take in the detail of what Ben has created.

A small, perfectly made replica of my bookshop sits in front of me, contained within a wooden, square shaped structure. My books, the rocking chair Ben fixed, everything is perfectly recreated. Even Frank is there, his head buried in a book, and my wooden likeness is behind the counter. Every small part painstakingly filled in with paint, bringing the scene to life.

“Press on the button, just there.” Ben shows me where to put my finger, and I gasp as the whole thing lights up, even the lamp next to the rocking chair.

He hasn’t missed a single detail. “It’s called a book nook. I think. You put it in your bookshelves.”

He never does, I realize. He sees everything, takes the time to truly look at everything around him. Very carefully, I hand the box to Lucas before I throw myself at Ben, my arms wrapping around his neck. He jolts in surprise, a quiet laugh huffed out before his arms move around me, cradling me.

“I see you, Ben Harrow,” I murmur, before I turn to look at them all. “I see all of you. And I’m so proud to be your mate.”

What I’ve got them doesn’t seem enough. Not nearly enough, compared to the lifetime and care they’ve gifted me. Lucas traces the sign in his hands, his eyes wide as Drew peeks over his shoulder and nods in firm approval. “You think I should do this, too?”

“You work too hard not to. Follow your dreams, Lucas,” I say softly. He holds up the sign for Ben to see.

Lucas’s garage.

Ben agrees, and when he unwraps the tools, he grins at me. “I could have used these for your book nook, you know.”

He examines his initials carved into the handle, the detail, the soft, supple leather casing. “These are beautiful, Grace.”

Seeing their pleasure only increases my own, and I turn eagerly to Drew. He rips open his gift with all the enthusiasm I expected, and then he stops, blinking down at his present before he throws his head back in a deep, booming laugh.

He peels off the t-shirt he’s wearing, yanking the black material over his head and spinning to display the text across his chest proudly.

Hot stuff.

Ben and Lucas laugh, and then he turns around.

Silence, as they take in the second set of words.

And then—

“Where can I get one of those?”

“Need that.”

Drew wags his finger.

“Nope. This is my gift. Read it and weep, losers.”

I'm going home to Grace is written across the back, and I point at him. “It’s for when you’re on shift, under your gear. You don’t leave without it. The material is the right one, I checked with your station.”

His cheeks crease. “No, ma’am. I might need a few more of these, though. I’m never wearing anything else ever again.”

They all look so pleased with their gifts that my heart sings, even as I look down at my own.

Merry Christmas indeed.

Chapter eighteen – Grace

After we're stuffed full of pancakes – traditionally cooked by Ben, according to Lucas and Drew who very obviously nudged me away from helping any time I made the offer – we get ready and make our way over to the shelter.

“You don't have to come with me, you know.”

Lucas looks down at me, our gloved hands clasped together as we walk through the melting piles of snow. I feel like a snowman, packed up in layers, and I just about feel the squeeze of his fingers. “We wanted to.”

The queue is already piling up outside, and I cast my eyes down it, my shoulders dropping when I don't see him.

“Looking for someone?” Ben asks quietly, and I nod.

“Frank.”

A sound of realization comes from Ben's throat, and he glances down the queue. “I... didn't know. He should have come to us.”

He says it so obviously, so plainly, that he would open up their home to him without question. It hurts my heart. Shaking

my head, I lead him inside. “He wouldn’t have come.”

Despite my pleas, my gentle nudges and even my arguments, he’s never accepted any help from me. But he’s always here, every Christmas for the last nine years.

I try not to worry too much as Helena spots me, her eyes lighting up as she notices the three alphas behind me. “Grace!”

I smile. “Merry Christmas, Helena.”

She gives me a considering look, her own smile growing. “You brought some friends this year, I see.”

“Here to help,” Drew declares. “Where do you want us?”

Helena takes him at his word, directing us all to our positions. I take up my usual spot in the dinner line, getting ready to hand out hundreds of meals to the people who don’t have anywhere else to go this Christmas.

Lucas ends up next to me, Drew and Ben tasked with the drinks station. They chat to each other happily as Lucas and I prep vegetables, peeling and cutting enough to feed an army.

“How did you end up volunteering here?”

I expected the question, but it still takes me a moment, my fingers pausing on the knife. “I spent my first Christmas here. After I left the system.”

I had a shitty little room to stay in, but no job and no food. Lucas’s jaw tightens, his movements pausing. “Grace.”

“Just the one,” I say softly. “I met Helena, and she arranged for me to start working at the bookstore. When Oscar retired

three years ago, Frank persuaded him to let me buy it at a reduced price.”

“That’s why Frank’s name is above the door. You named it after him.”

I nod. “I’ll never change it.”

We work silently, handing over vegetables until they’re replaced with steaming trays, freshly cooked by the volunteers out back.

“Okay, crew!” Helena calls. “Here we go.”

Several hours go by, Lucas and I too busy to talk much, but I scan every face I see.

Why isn’t he here?

Frank always comes. It’s how we met, that first Christmas. He sat next to me and showed me where to go, who to ask about receiving a tray.

I hear the familiar, hacking cough first, and my head shoots up, relief flooding through me. Frank taps his stick against the floor, a bag wrapped around his wrist. “Hey, Gracie.”

“Frank. Are you okay? Here, I’ll get you a plate.”

But he clicks his tongue. “No need. I already ate. I just came to give you this.”

He hands over the bag, and I slowly reach out for it in surprise. “You didn’t need to get me anything.”

“I know.” He rolls his eyes. “Just take the damn thing.”

Lucas coughs what I think is a laugh into his fist, and Frank turns to him with a glower. “Are you taking care of her?” he demands, and Lucas straightens immediately, nodding.

“Absolutely, sir.”

Frank looks at me. “Are you happy, Gracie?”

The unusually soft question makes the back of my eyes burn. I swallow it down.

“Yeah, Frank,” I say softly, leaning into the warmth of Lucas’s arm. “I really am.”

He humphs. “Good. I’ll be going now.”

I look towards the door, and back to him. “Going... where? Do you want the keys?”

I’ve never seen Frank smile before. Never seen much more than a grimace. But he smiles at me now, a soft smile that lights up his entire face.

“We’re really proud of you, you know,” he says quietly. So much so that I lean in to hear him. “So proud, Grace. Now open your present. I’m going home.”

Bewildered, my chest aching, I lean down to pick up the bag. “Frank, what’s—,”

But there’s no one there when I look up.

Lucas frowns, leaning out to scan the last of the people taking a seat. The queue is finished, people around us starting to pack up and chat. “He was right there. Where’d he go?”

I glance down into the bag. A piece of wrapping paper is visible, and something tugs at my awareness. Something familiar.

Slowly, I reach in. My heartbeat is pounding so loudly I'm certain that Lucas must be able to hear it, a buzzing in my head as I lift out the gift.

When I stagger, Lucas grabs me under the elbow. His arms slide under me and then he's carrying me to an empty chair. Ben and Drew come sprinting over, their voices blending together in concern.

But all I can do is look.

Lucas picks up on my stare, and he shushes the others. "Grace? What is it?"

"That's it," I say dazedly, and he looks from me to the gift as I look up in disbelief.

Because the present Mrs Abernale gave me all those years ago... is right here, in my hands. The green wrapping paper with the gold thread is just as familiar now as it was then.

When I say as much, everyone silences.

"Grace," Drew whispers. "Are you sure?"

All I can do is nod. I don't expect them to believe me, but their faces are pale when I look up. It's Ben that breaks the silence first. "But... how?"

I don't know.

I don't know how it's possible.

But as I turn the faded wrapping paper over in my hands, a little note slips out. Unfolding it with shaking hands, I scan the neatly looped handwriting. Once, and then again.

And again, before I hand it over to Lucas.

Grace,

Sometimes, the impossible is the only thing that makes sense.

Be happy, and Merry Christmas.

Annie and Frank Abernale.

Ben gets down on his knees. His face is still pale, but he cups my cheek, nudging the gift towards me. He leans in, kissing my forehead. “Open it, Grace.”

My fingers still shake as I slowly peel off the tape, revealing a knitted, soft toy rabbit with long floppy ears that I know my eight-year-old self would have adored.

And I know I’ll keep it forever. Memories of a teacher who saw a sad, frightened little girl, and of the man who saw the same just a handful of years later.

“Grace.”

Our heads dart up. Drew holds out his phone, his knuckles almost white. “I think... you need to see this.”

Even as I take it, I have a feeling in my stomach, a knowing that’s only confirmed when I look at the photographs. The memorial page for a couple who loved each other so deeply, they died on the same day. On Christmas Day, nine years ago.

The same day I met Frank.

“What do I... what is this?” I ask numbly. Lucas lifts up the sheet of paper.

“Sometimes, the impossible is the only thing that makes sense.”

His voice is hoarse, but the words ring true.

Be happy.

One final demand, from the only people who ever truly saw me. Until my pack came along.

I hold the rabbit close as I stand, my gaze touching each of their faces.

A lifetime, indeed.

“Let’s finish up.” I swallow. “We have a Christmas to celebrate.”

Chapter nineteen – Grace

We celebrate.

My mates don't leave my side as we tumble into the warmth and hospitality of Ben's parents. As his mother enfolds me in a gentle embrace, whispering words of welcome that threaten to let the tears fall. But I hold them back, with effort.

His father is a quiet, kind man, an older replica of Ben, and I can see who Ben will grow to become as he gets older, how his face will change.

It's a nice feeling.

His sister teases us, her husband and children laughing and joking, the house filled with the joy of being together. Nobody is left out, nobody is forgotten.

We eat too much food, drink a little too much wine, play silly games that end in tears of laughter, and nobody asks me why I'm carrying a brown rabbit in my hands, unable to let go of it.

Ben's mother hugs me again at the door. "I'm so happy they've found you, Grace. Come back soon – with or without them. You're always welcome."

With every laugh, every kind word, the little cracks in my heart begin to heal up, building on the strong foundations already laid down by the men who insist on taking it in turns to carry me home because I mentioned once that I thought I had a fever.

It's only as Ben carries me through the door that I understand why.

My heat hits me all at once, as if the little warning signs that normally appear have been blanketed by the events of the day. My back arches, my scent bursting from me in a deep wave of spice that pulls answering rumbles from the men around me.

Hands carry me up to the nest, the needy cramping in my belly already clawing as I moan in Ben's arms. Lucas and Drew run ahead, lighting candles and rearranging blankets that I crawl into as soon as Ben places me down. My hand reaches out from the bundle.

"Please," I gasp. I haven't experienced a heat, a proper heat... ever. Always using the clinics, using medication and toys that make the time pass in a haze.

But not this time. Not with my alphas climbing up alongside me, their clothes haphazardly ripped away as I pull desperately at my own. Lucas and Drew undress me as Ben pulls my mouth to his, licking and sucking on my lip until I moan into

him with an edge of distress, the emptiness between my legs aching.

It's Drew who spreads my thighs, his cock already hard as he nudges against me. He fills me in one slow, deep push. Shoving away that emptiness as he thrusts, our bodies rocking together. My hands pluck at my nipples, and Lucas yanks them away, replacing them with his own as his fingers twist and flick. Ben shifts down next to Drew, his fingers rubbing over my swollen clit.

"Fuck, baby," Drew says roughly. The tendons on his neck stand out, the hormones in the air drawing out their own scents, filling the room around us as I moan against the pillows. "You feel like fucking heaven around my cock, Grace."

"Taking him so well," Lucas praises, and Ben scratches his finger over my clit, the sharpness of the action dragging my first release from me like a tsunami as I cry out, clamping down around Drew's knot as he erupts inside me, heat and liquid and my name on his lips as his teeth sink into the soft skin of my neck, marking me as his.

That initial, almost angry dragging inside settles for a few minutes, Drew pressing sweet, adoring kisses to my mouth, the mark on my neck, my breasts, before he softens, his knot slipping free. The heat wastes no time in beginning to rise again.

"Three days," I gasp, looking at them. "Three days of this."

“We’ve got you,” Ben soothes, the comforting rumble of his voice calm as Drew falls back and he and Lucas take over. They shift me until I’m on my knees straddling Ben, my clit rubbing against his cock as Lucas positions himself behind me and slides inside. He’s bigger than Drew but not as thick, the angle he holds me at exposed and open as he surges into me, again and again.

My breasts bounce, and Ben cups them, dragging a peaked nipple into his mouth and sucking. I can feel him, hot and hard against my clit, and I drag myself against him with every thrust, tipping my head back as Lucas cups my throat.

“Perfect,” he rasps in my ear. “You were made for us, Grace. Made to take our knots. Made to be our mate.”

I feel it. Feel as though my body was designed to be the perfect match to theirs, perfectly aligned pieces as the obscene sound of our bodies slapping together, of Lucas’s panting breaths and my keening cries ring out.

Ben slips his hands down, tweaking and pinching my clit as Lucas bends my head back. His teeth brush my neck. “I love you,” he swears roughly. “Always, Grace.”

And then his teeth are there, sinking in, marking me on the opposite side to Drew as my eyes roll back and I convulse around his cock, my slick slipping down my thighs and coating Ben beneath me as I collapse onto his chest, feeling Luc’s knot locking into place, swelling inside me almost to the edge of discomfort.

Ben is waiting. His hands drop to my hips, and he nudges his cock against my clit. Again, and again. Until the flicker begins to burn again, even the feel of Lucas's knot nestled inside me not enough to stop me from leaning into Ben's movements as he drags me back and forth. Drew gets up, his cock hard again as he pushes against my mouth.

"Suck," he commands me gently. "I'm going to knot your ass, Grace. Going to get it nice and ready, see how pretty you look with our cocks stuffing you full."

I already feel full, with him in my mouth, Ben and Lucas beneath and behind me, and I moan around his length as he pushes against my throat, matching Ben's rhythm as we all move together, a fluid, undulating dance.

I jump when something cold pushes against my ass, but Lucas kisses my back. "Just a little extra, sweetheart. Just to make sure you're ready."

I rip my face away from Drew just long enough to rasp the words out. "We get any more fluid in here and we'll need a damn ark to get out."

Drew huffs a laugh, but it develops into a groan as I take him in again. Lucas moves back, leaving empty air in his place as his knot is freed, but a gasp chokes up my throat as Ben shifts, dragging me onto him in one seamless movement. He's so freaking big that he has to work himself in despite the copious amount of slick I'm releasing, pushing into me inch by inch, holding my hips in place as I try to push myself down.

"No," he growls when I try again. "You'll hurt yourself."

Drew pulls out of my mouth, moving behind me, and the whine that comes from my mouth is one hundred percent heat-filled, petulant, demanding omega. Ben pushes in another inch.

“You’re going to take it all, Grace.” My legs are spread impossibly wider, a slight burn in my hips as it forces more of him into me. “You’ll take every damn inch of my cock. It was made for you.”

And as the last, impossible inch pushes inside, he yanks me down. His arms band around me, pinning my arms to my sides, my face against his chest and my legs split wide, held by Drew and Lucas as he fucks me.

There’s no other word for the wild abandon of Ben’s thrusts, as if his quiet, caring nature has been overtaken by an invading conqueror. I can’t move. Can’t wriggle, can only take, held open for him like an offering as moans fall from my lips in juddering, shaky pants.

I won’t survive it. I won’t survive without it.

My world narrows down to the feel of Ben inside me, to the surging release that grows and grows, building into an explosion that has me screaming into his chest. And all the while, his hips piston, keeping up the momentum and hurtling me straight into a second orgasm. He swings us upright, his arms still around me and his roar a victory.

“Mine.”

Still seated on him, Ben nudges me back with a hand on my lower back until my breasts are bare to the open air and leans down. He doesn't bite my neck. His teeth sink directly over my left breast, a blatant marking that has me shaking again as his knot swells to an impossible girth, tight and hot and stretching as my mouth opens in a silent plea.

He licks over the mark he's made. "Mine."

His voice is pure alpha satisfaction, and Lucas curses. "Damn neanderthal."

"You couldn't," I gasp, running my hands through his hair as he watches me through lidded eyes, "have given me a little warning?"

Because this version of Ben – the one watching me hungrily, as though he'll drag me back onto his knot and fuck me full of his seed if I even try to move – feels a little like an unexpected fourth alpha just entered the damn chat.

"Where's the fun in that?" Drew teases lightly. I feel his heat against my back, and Ben snaps his teeth, his arms tightening around me.

"Only for you," he mutters into my ear. "Nobody else."

He urges me to lie back down on him, his hands running soothing lines up and down my spine as he sighs in contentment. I debate having a quick sleep – just a little one – before the next part of my heat comes in.

But Lucas's voice rings out, teasing and low. "We're clearly not doing our jobs properly if you're sleeping, Grace."

“M not sleeping,” I mutter. Ben’s hand cups the back of my head. “Just resting my eyes.”

“Good.” Lucas clicks his tongue. “Drew.”

My eyes fly open as I feel a finger pushing at the ring of my ass, working its way inside. My pussy contracts around Ben in response, and I groan as the flames return, tugging and twisting at my abdomen. “Wicked, cruel alphas.”

“You won’t be saying that in a minute,” Drew drawls. His kiss is soft against my back, his hand cupping his mating mark as he adds another finger. And damn him, I lift my ass in the air in a silent demand for more.

He runs a hand over the smooth skin of my ass in silent approval as he picks up his movements, his fingers working in and out of me even as Ben begins to rock again. His knot doesn’t seem to have softened at all, but he gently works me anyway. They rock me between them until I open my mouth. “Please.”

Drew kisses my back again, and I swear I can feel the smile on his face. “Please, what, mate?”

My face flushes. “Please... fuck my ass.”

“Good girl,” Lucas purrs, and Drew notches the head of his cock against me. It’s only as he begins to work his way in that I remember his thickness, and panic flares through me. His hands run over my skin, soothing and petting.

“Such a fucking good girl,” he murmurs. His hand reaches around, stroking over my clit as he moves slowly into me, the

sensation of both him and Ben almost too much. Until he begins to pull out, and a growl of my own rumbles through the air. Drew flicks my nipple, and I push back on him. He laughs breathlessly.

“Demanding, needy, perfect little mate.”

And this time, he pushes all of the way in until I can feel his knot pushing against my backside. Ben pauses his rocking, moving his fingers to my pussy, flicking and twisting until that final, stubborn inch disappears inside me.

Three mating marks. Two cocks inside me. My head rolls over towards Lucas, and I hold out a hand. He tsks. “Greedy omega.”

But the words are soft as he climbs up, as he lifts my palm and presses a kiss to my palm.

I manage to summon the last vestiges of sarcasm. “If you’re not up to the task...”

My challenge has the desired effect. His eyes darken, that look on his face that if I wasn’t held on two of my alpha’s cocks would have me running for the door. When he stands, I swallow, looking up at him. He turns so his feet are balanced on either side of Ben’s hips, lifting up my chin. His cock bobs in front of me, long and hard and enough to make me lick my lips.

“I love you,” he says softly. I blink at him. Not what I expected.

“Now shut the fuck up,” he murmurs, “and take my cock like a good girl.”

There it is. My lips open as I take him inside me, as Drew thrusts and Ben’s knot softens only for him to harden again, the three of them taking me, owning me.

But maybe I own them too.

Lucas’s eyes burn into mine, and he nods as if he can hear me.

“Yours,” Drew whispers in my ear. Ben’s hands tighten on my hips.

Who knows. It’s been a wild day.

My first Christmas.

And the best.

Whatever happens, next year will be hard to top.

Also By

Also by Evelyn Flood

The Bonding Trials duet

Denied

Devoted

The Omega War trilogy

Omega Found

Omega Lost

Omega Fallen

Stalk me

If you'd like to keep up with the latest releases, here's how!

Join my readers group on Facebook, The Evelyn Flood
Collective

Subscribe to my newsletter

Goodreads

TikTok

Instagram

Bookbub