



# Knot for Sale

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**Category:** Romance, Lesbian Romance

**Description:** I crossed an ocean to escape my family, and it still wasn't far enough.

After fleeing from London to New York, I reinvented myself. I was no longer Emma Huntwell, orphan daughter of a murdered crime syndicate boss. Instead, I became Emma Hope, a high-powered runway model with a thriving career.

Now my past is catching up to me in the form of threatening text messages and disappearing fashion clients. When my agency threatens to fire me, I know I'm being blackballed by someone powerful behind the scenes.

My last chance to salvage my career finds me on a yacht off the coast of Greece, competing against a dozen other models for an exclusive contract with The Secret Boudoir. But my father's old rival is here as well, and he's not content with killing my career. He wants revenge of a far more personal kind.

Trapped on a boat with my heat coming on and my blocker pills stolen, my only hope lies with a mysterious billionaire and his two intimidating bodyguards. Gabriel Rosencranz has his own score to settle with the Huntwell crime family—and right now, I stand firmly in the way of his goals.

Neither of us have room in our lives for a pack. But fate doesn't always care about our plans.

**Total Pages (Source):** 106

# Page 1

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ONE

Emma Hope

THE CONTROLLED CHAOS behind the scenes of any live fashion show had to be experienced firsthand before you could truly appreciate it. I stood pliant and accommodating among the babble of voices and the confusion of scurrying feet, while two stylists simultaneously handled me like a posable doll.

One of them was frantically swapping out the shiny black five-inch heeled sandals I'd been wearing for a different pair of five-inch heeled sandals, these a metallic gold color with intricate ankle straps. The second stylist was attacking my cleavage with fresh powder, muttering something under his breath that I couldn't make out.

Meanwhile, the clothing designer—a thirty-something pot-bellied beta man wearing a white t-shirt, skinny jeans, and a large, extremely ridiculous-looking fur hat—was passionately expounding on my supposed backstory for the dress I was modeling. I was a young Greek demigoddess, apparently... on the run from Zeus after defying him. When I heard a roll of thunder from the venue's sound system, I was to whirl and look over my shoulder in fear, clutching my voluminous white skirts and fleeing along the runway to show off the flow of the satiny fabric to best effect.

All this, while wearing the aforementioned five-inch heels, of course.

Such was the life of a runway model in New York City. I nodded agreeably as the stylists finished primping and buckling.

“Five seconds!” someone shouted.

The designer blanched, hurrying behind me to lift the diaphanous train of the toga-like dress in readiness.

“Go, go, go!” called the assistant, and just like that, it was showtime.

The moment I emerged from the wings onto the catwalk, I became a different person. I was no longer Emma Hope, formerly Emma Huntwell—the orphaned omega daughter of a dead London crime boss, who struggled with food issues, an occasional stutter, chronic anxiety, bad taste in men, and paying the rent on time.

The skirts billowed out behind me like clouds in the breeze as I strode onto the runway to the sound of popping flashbulbs. For the next few moments, I was a demigoddess on the run from the father of the gods; an object of fascination and desire from the all-too-human audience seated four rows deep at my sandaled feet.

Their faces were a blur in my peripheral vision. I stared straight ahead, fierce and proud, my eyes highlighted by black-stripe makeup that had been softened with shimmering blue across my eyelids and cheekbones, like an ombre superhero mask.

I was two-thirds of the way down the catwalk when recorded thunder boomed over the loudspeakers. Caught out, I whirled half around, looked over my shoulder, and fled the rest of the way down the runway, my extravagant skirts rippling like water behind me. When I reached the end, another roll of thunder rumbled. Executing a neat turn that deftly avoided any tangling of fabric, I ran lightly back toward the wings, looking to and fro as though I feared a retaliatory lightning strike directly from the heavens.

As I reached the wings, I passed the next model darting out as though she, too, were fleeing something terrible—wearing a similarly themed but otherwise quite different

toga-like dress. Like stepping through a portal between worlds, fantasy abruptly crashed back into reality.

I hurried toward the dressers, who were already waiting with the next outfit—this one, swimwear. They quickly stripped off the toga-dress and hung it, leaving me in my nude-colored pasties and C-string thong among the bustle of backstage. Within sixty seconds, I was redressed in a drapey two-piece swimsuit with different shoes and a flowing sash tied around my waist, ready for the next round.

So it went, until the designer's entire collection had been duly unveiled. Strut, pose, turn, strut. I could do it in my sleep, which was handy since I was running on... not very much of it, these days.

When the last model returned from showing off the final ensemble, we went out on the stage en masse, flanking the eccentric designer with his eccentric hat as though all of us were ready to fall into bed with him there and then.

It was a good show. No one had slipped and fallen, or turned an ankle, or fainted from low blood sugar under the lights. The audience seemed appreciative, and so did the designer in his embarrassed, socially awkward way.

More importantly, it was a paycheck—if not a huge one. Those had been worryingly thin on the ground of late.

Back in London, I'd had a solid career. I was one of those 'interesting' faces, the kind that held people's attention because my gray eyes were a little too big and my chin was a little too narrow. The alien look, they called it, because it tended to keep consumers' eyeballs stuck on an ad for longer than a picture of one of the pretty 'girl-next-door' types would.

I'd been a hot property, in high demand, and the money had come rolling in. Then

everything had fallen apart. I'd hooked myself to the wrong man—part of the old Huntwell crime syndicate I'd grown up in. I found out the hard way he'd been playing me like a string quartet, and he had a bloody fiancée he'd never bothered to tell me about.

Figuring he probably hadn't told her about me, either, I tracked her down and texted her to let her know what she was signing up for. Percy hadn't taken that well, to put it mildly. He'd summarily dumped me before I could dump him, while also threatening to have me blacklisted in the modeling industry.

So, I did what I'd always done when times got tough.

I ran.

In fact, I ran all the way across an ocean, and sometimes I still didn't think it had been enough. Percy eventually ended up in prison along with his father. But someone else in his orbit still had it in for me, even now.

Paper paycheck in hand—because apparently Lyrik Sherina LTD had never heard of direct deposit—I dragged my exhausted body onto the subway. I was already absorbed in mental calculations about how many calories I could afford to eat tomorrow. When that train of thought grew too depressing, I looped an arm around the nearest pole and pulled out my phone to check messages.

These days, such a perfectly normal activity came with a side order of adrenaline. They were sporadic, but the vague, threatening text messages I'd been getting since Percy had been sentenced to prison never stopped completely; not even when I'd changed my phone number. Sure enough, as soon as I unlocked the screen, there it was.

Time's up, bitch.

I deleted it, pretending those three simple words hadn't sent me into full-on fight or flight mode.

## Page 2

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In addition to the random personal threat, there was another text from Jessica, reminding me that the rent was due in two weeks. Also, one from a fellow model I'd met at the show tonight, asking me if I wanted to go out for drinks. I replied to both, trying to ignore my still-pounding heart—I know and no thanks, too tired, respectively.

Voice mail had to wait until I was at my stop and outside of the noisy station in the Lower East Side. Keeping an eye on my surroundings and a hand resting close to the pepper spray in my pocket as I walked, I dialed and set the phone to my ear.

“You have one new message.”

“Please be my agent with a new gig,” I muttered. Gigs had been too few and too far between in New York, especially lately.

“Emma. Darling. It's Paul.”

I sucked in a breath, hope sparking. Just one more decent job, and I'd at least be set for this month.

“I need you to come in first thing on Monday, pet. Another client has canceled on us, and the higher-ups are getting antsy. Jared and Clio want to discuss your future with the agency. You know I'm on your side, sweetheart, but—”

I disconnected the call mid-message, my stomach roiling as clammy sweat popped out on my brow. ‘Your future with the agency’ might as well have been code for ‘we're cutting you loose.’ Stumbling to a halt outside my apartment building, I stared up at the window of the cramped, eighth story flat I shared with two other random

people.

A couple of hours ago, I'd been a demigoddess. Now, I was about to be unemployed, someone was sending me anonymous threats, and I only had enough money for maybe two weeks before I was broke and homeless, as well.

## TWO

Emma

SINCE STANDING ON the pavement staring stupidly up at the dingy gray edifice where I lived wasn't a practical long-term strategy, I eventually kicked my arse into gear and went inside, trudging up eight flights of stairs. 'Stairs' versus 'lift' was an ongoing existential debate in this building, based largely on the fact that the lift smelled like cat piss and made alarming grinding noises when it moved.

Tonight wasn't the kind of night where it felt safe to tempt the patron saint of fifty-year-old steel elevator cables.

The hallway leading to my shared flat was an ode to flaking plaster and poor paint-color decisions. Whether the second to the last door on the right could be considered a haven from my troubles largely depended on Jessica's presence or absence. Not because Jessica was a horrible person or anything like that; she was just the one with her name on the lease. Elijah and I were subletting from her. As such, my guilt at not being able to come up with this month's rent would be exponentially worse if I had to look her in the eye this evening.

I wasn't sure if Elijah would be home either. Like me, he was an omega. Unlike me, he didn't try to hide it or contort himself to fit inside a beta-shaped box. He'd slunk away a few days ago smelling of rose petals, rainwater, and arousal, after informing us that he was off to share a natural heat with one of those skeezy rent-a-packs who



advertised on night club notice boards. Not that he'd used the word 'skeevey,' of course.

I had no idea how he managed it without coming apart at the seams.

The UK at least had robust alphomic anti-discrimination laws in place, yet the country was still massively beta-dominated. On this side of the pond, there were far fewer legal protections for our kind, and the prejudice was a lot more open. As far as I could gather, Elijah had taken one look at the prevailing societal headwinds, shrugged indifferently, and proceeded to do whatever the hell he felt like doing.

In his defense, it seemed to be working out pretty well for him. He was in high demand for both catalogue and runway modeling jobs, and I never had the impression he was hurting for cash. Maybethatwas his secret. Maybe there were more expensive rent-a-packs out there that weren't as skeevey.

But...nope. The idea still made my skin crawl... though at least thinking about it had distracted me from my own troubles for a few minutes.

I stuck my key in the lock and let myself inside the flat—orapartment, as the Yanks insisted on calling rental units. The place was a mess, but that was no surprise. It wasalwaysa mess, and I was one-third to blame for that.

In other circumstances, calling out, "Hey, I'm back! Is anyone else home?" at a quarter past eleven would be rude. In a New York flatshare occupied by three fashion models, it was a given that no one would be asleep before midnight.

## Page 3

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A lanky, auburn-haired form stirred on the sofa, stretching like a lazy tomcat. “Hello, dove,” Elijah said. “Did you have a gig tonight?”

His voice was raspy—either because he had, in fact, been napping before I came in, or because he’d had one or more cocksdown his throat recently. I hummed an affirmative sort of noise in response, setting my bag on the pass-through kitchen counter and heading for the fridge.

“The Lyrik Sherina Autumn Collection, yeah,” I told him. “How was your heat? No offense, b-but you look like someone ran you through a clothes wringer b-backward.”

Aaand now my stutter was making an appearance. Wonderful. Still, at least it was only Elijah. With him, I could let it go without judging myself too harshly... meaning it probably wouldn’t make my anxiety spiral until I could barely put a sentence together.

“Oh, mygod, Em.” His expression went distant and dreamy as he visibly disappeared downkinky memory lane. “There was this woman with the longest alpha clit you haveever seen. And,damn, did she know how to use it. She and one of the males put me in this crazy sex position where—”

“You know what,” I said quickly, cutting him off before he could wax lyrical about the benefits of the upside-down wheelbarrow position or some such. “Never mind. I can live without that information. You’re good, though?”

Hesoundedas though he was good, notwithstanding the line of livid bite-marks marching down the length of his bare, baby-smooth torso—including a particularly

brutal one placed squarely over his left nipple. I dragged my eyes back up to his face with difficulty, only to find him smirking at me. Amusement lurked behind his forest green gaze.

“Believe me, I am spectacular right now,” he said. “Assuming I don’t have to move for the next three days or so.”

Something of my dour mood must have come through in my facial expression despite my best efforts, because he sobered abruptly and rolled into a sitting position with a wince of abused muscles.

“You, on the other hand, are clearly not spectacular. What’s up, dove?”

I looked away, fiddling with the cap of the water bottle I’d grabbed. “Is Jessica here?”

“No,” he said, “she’s not.”

It wasn’t a surprise, for all that it was a relief. Jessica was hardly ever here; not since she’d started dating a new girl a few weeks ago. I sighed, deflating like a balloon, and flopped down on the far end of the dilapidated couch.

“I think I’m about to get dropped from my agency.”

Elijah twitched backward in surprise. “What? Why? With your looks, you should be a hot property. Everyone wants your kind of vibe!”

I offered him a sour smile. “Tell that to the clients who keep canceling their contracts with me. I guess the agency owners finally got tired of it. I’m meeting with them first thing Monday morning to face the music.”

His angular face screwed up in a moue of distaste. “Ugh. First thing in the morning? That’s just cruel.”

It was nothing more than a stupid joke about the late hours models kept, but somehow, his expression of outrage on my behalf succeeded in doing what a threatening text and the prospect of imminent unemployment hadn’t managed earlier. Tears welled up behind my eyes, burning as they gathered like an assembling army, ready to declare war on my mascara.

Elijah’s face fell, and he scooted across the distance separating us. “Hey. Hey now. Don’t cry, dove.”

I let him gather me up in his arms, even though I knew how dangerous it was to allow anyone to get too close to me. I couldn’t afford to rely on other people, but sometimes you just needed a hug, damn it... and Elijah gave really good ones.

When you were five-foot-ten and female, the opportunities to feel tiny and protected were few and far between. I wasfreakishly tall for an omega, but Elijah had me beat with his lithe, six-foot-one-inch frame. I tucked my head under his chin and accepted the no-strings comfort being offered.

“You’re letting this career get to you too much,” he said, after a few minutes. “You haven’t been taking care of yourself, Em.”

I made a wordless noise of protest, even though it was true.

“Maybe this is a sign to step away for a bit,” Elijah continued. “You can’t let modeling destroy your health—physicalormental.”

I swallowed hard.

“But what else would I do?” The words escaped without my permission, a bare whisper.

Silence settled between us.

“I don’t know,” Elijah said after a short pause. “Anything you wanted. Go back to school, or go into fashion design, or... start your own damned agency and treat the models like actual human beings?”

I huffed, painfully aware of how unlikely any of those things were to happen. When my lack of response grew too awkward, he sighed.

“Look, do you want to come back to my room tonight?” he asked. “I’ve still got the heat hangover from hell, but I expect I can manage a few hours of chocolate ice cream and cuddling.”

## Page 4

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From a beta, it would have been a blatant pick-up line. From him, it was a totally innocent offer. In the absence of either an active heat cycle or alpha arousal pheromones, sex between two omegas wasn't generally on the table. Elijah, I knew, had turned his bedroom into a proper nest, with blankets and fairy lights and mountains of squishy pillows everywhere. I wanted its comfort—and his—with sudden, desperate longing.

That abrupt, crippling need was enough to have alarm bells clanging inside my brain. I jerked away and stood up, putting distance between myself and the things I couldn't afford to want.

"I don't need anest," I snapped, scrubbing at my damp cheeks. "I need paying jobs that don't disappear out from under my feet."

Elijah blinked up at me like a recently debauched, green-eyed owl. "Em. I hate to be blunt, but you need a nest more than anyone I've met in the last ten years."

Red flags waved frantically in the air, joining the blaring mental alarms. I took another step backward, away from him. "Why would you say that?"

Elijah grabbed a pillow from the sofa and hugged it to his stomach, still examining me intently. His expression grew cautious. "Don't take this the wrong way, dove—but you're not nearly as subtle as you think you are. You must be popping pheromone suppressor pills like clockwork, but I know perfectly well you're an omega like me."

THREE

Emma

ELIJAH KNEW MY secret. Other omegas were always the hardest to trick, damn it. I wavered, part of me wanting to let everything go; to be weak for once. It wasn't as though Elijah was going to call up my agency and announce my omega status to the world. I doubted he cared one way or the other, aside from being worried for me.

But the idea of letting my guard down was too frightening—especially now, with things already falling apart around me.

“My gender designation is none of your damned b-business,” I said coldly. “Not everyone can flaunt it like you do without paying a p-price. Some of us have a hard enough t-time of things without also dealing with anti-omega p-prejudice.”

Jesus. I had to get a grip on myself. The last thing I needed was to walk into my agency on Monday and end up stuttering through my meeting with the owners.

Elijah looked mildly hurt by my words. Not a surprise; he was probably still swimming in hormones after his heat. He drew breath to reply, but I whirled and stormed out of the room before he could get past a plaintive “Em! That’s not—”

I power-walked to my bedroom and closed the door behind me, collapsing onto the edge of the stupid beta-style bed with a choked-off noise of frustration. How had this day gone off therails so spectacularly? Everything had been fine until I left the Lyrik Sherina show.

My phone dinged. With a sense of sick foreboding, I pulled it out of my pocket and unlocked the screen.

Four words.

See you soon, bitch.

The text stared at me from its cheerful blue bubble, raising gooseflesh along my arms. It was too much. I deleted it, set the phone next to me on the mattress, and burst fully into tears. Afterward, I sat there staring at the too-white bedroom wall for a very long time, my face caked with ruined makeup and dried tear tracks.

What the hell was I doing? Lashing out at the one person in my immediate circle who was actually on my side? My creepy text-stalker had one thing right. I was a bitch, one hundred percent.

Outside my closed door, I could hear someone moving around quietly. Another door opened and shut—Elijah's bedroom.

I rose from my pathetic hunch, feeling more like an arthritic octogenarian than a beautiful Greek goddess in a flowing designer dress. Time to make things right... or as right as they could be, anyway.



## Page 5

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Step one... pajamas.

Step two... makeup removal and skin care routine.

Step three... go apologize to my roommate for acting like a raging maniac.

I changed. I crept into the hallway and ducked inside the bathroom for a quick shower, followed by butter cleanser and moisturizer for my tear-ravaged face. Afterward, I stood in front of Elijah's closed door for at least a full minute, screwing up my courage for the next step.

Heartfelt apologies had never been my strong suit. I knew that, and I wasn't proud of it. I'd also never had an abundance of good friends in my life. Acquaintances were safer—not because they were any less likely to screw you over, but because it hurt less when they did.

I knocked on the door lightly. After a few seconds, Elijah opened it, looking wary. He probably thought I'd come to berate him some more. Had he heard me crying earlier? I'd tried to be quiet...

Stop, I told myself firmly, knowing none of that was the point.

"Hi," I said, the word emerging raspy. I cleared my throat. "I... uh... I'm really sorry about earlier. I acted like a total bitch, and you didn't deserve any of it. Sorry."

I cringed internally at the awkwardness. Yup. Definitely not my strong suit.

Elijah looked down at me from his three-inch advantage of height, his brow furrowing. The silence stretched between us awkwardly.

“No,” he said, then quickly shook his head. “I mean, it’s fine. Apology accepted, obviously. But I shouldn’t have confronted you like that. That wasn’t cool. It’s not my business if you or anyone else chooses to pass as beta.”

I chewed my lower lip, rolling it between my teeth for a moment before letting it pop free. “I’m not used to having people worry about me. I guess I d-don’t handle it very well.”

His slight frown melted into the sweet smile that had charmed a thousand photographers. “Hmm. There might be atinybit of room for improvement, yes.” He held his thumb and forefinger a fraction of an inch apart to demonstrate.

Relief that I hadn’t torched our nascent friendship eased some of the tension in my shoulders. I took a deep breath and let it out slowly. Somehow, this next part felt even harder than knocking on his door had been.

“Is your offer still open?” I managed, thankful for the lack of linguistic plosives to stumble over.

His smile turned gentle. “Course it is, dove. You’ll have to run back and get the ice cream and spoons for us, though. I’m still walking bow-legged.”

The ice cream wasn’t simply chocolate. It was Chocolate Turtle Sundae. I tried not to resent Elijah. Not only did he seem to live a charmed existence as an omega in the modeling industry—but apparently, he could also gobble down ice cream loaded with salted caramel and pecans without gaining any weight.

We sat propped on comfy beanbag chairs, passing the carton back and forth. I tried to

limit myself to dainty nibbles, my mind calculating calories on autopilot in the background with every tiny, decadent spoonful.

Elijah's room looked like an explosion at a soft-goods factory. It was a mess, to be honest—and I immediately fell in love with it with a passion that frightened me. The warm lighting came from two incredibly cheesy matching lava lamps in a red-orange sunset color, plus the many strings of fairy lights hung around the walls, just below ceiling height—also in a soothing red tone.

It made the space feel womblike rather than cramped, and inside me, some deeply buried omega instinct uncurled from its customary tense hunch.

“This is nice,” I said wistfully, passing the ice cream back to him. It was starting to melt, and somehow that made it taste even better.

“It's a disaster area,” he said in a cheerful tone, not seeming concerned by the admission. “But it's home, at least for now.”

I licked my spoon and waved off the return of the ice cream container. My room down the hall had never felt like a real home to me. Since my father died in a hail of bullets when I was sixteen, nowhere had.

Elijah scooped up the last of the runny chocolate and caramel. When he was finished, he took my spoon, setting the empty container and silverware on a low side table that already boasted a small collection of takeaway boxes.

“Fair warning,” he said. “I'm about five minutes from crashing again. You're welcome to stay, though. I've always hated being alone for the first few nights after a heat, you know? Just don't expect me to be very stimulating company, beyond a bit of light snoring and drooling.”

Unfortunately, I couldn't really relate—since I'd always been careful to avoid natural heats. But I could imagine how it might feel. Several days of uninhibited fucking, knotting, and snuggling, after which you were just supposed to go home and stare at the walls in solitude? It sounded awful—yet another reason I couldn't even conceive of using a rent-a-pack.

“I'll stay,” I said, telling myself it was for Elijah's benefit, not mine. Keeping him company was the least I could do after he'd been so nice to me and fed me ice cream, right?

“Good,” he said simply. “Make yourself comfortable wherever. There's, um, plenty of pillows and blankets around.” He rubbed a hand over the back of his neck sheepishly as we both contemplated the mountains of cushions surrounding us.

I laughed; my first real laugh in what felt like ages. Elijah snorted in self-deprecating amusement and crawled over to the corner that he apparently used for sleep. I hesitated for a moment, frozen by indecision. Then I mentally shook myself and crawled after him.

In for a penny...

## Page 6

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The blanket Elijah lifted for me smelled of old-fashioned rose blossoms after a thunderstorm. Together, we shoved pillows around until we were cushioned on all sides, and I could almost pretend we were at the center of a pile of protective packmates. My head fit perfectly in the dip of Elijah's shoulder, and his arm came around my back to press me close. Two minutes later, he was snoring softly, dead to the world.

Dangerous, my instincts warned.

Shut up, I told them, burying my nose in the rich scent at the base of Elijah's throat.

Tonight, I would be an omega. Tomorrow, I would try to come up with some kind of contingency plan for paying next month's rent. And bright and early on Monday morning, I would present myself at the IMGE offices to find out whether I still had a career.

FOUR

Emma

MY SUNDAY BRAINSTORMING session hadn't yielded anything terribly useful when it came to making money appear from the ether. As it stood, if I paid the rent, I wouldn't be able to afford food. And if I paid for food, I wouldn't be able to make the rent.

Jessica—a dark-skinned, willowy girl with short, natural hair and twinkling brown eyes—appeared a little after eleven a.m., while Elijah and I were sitting slumped over

the cluttered kitchen table. He was eating a bowl of Cap'n Crunch. I was still running on last night's ice cream.

"Heya. Did you and Dee get out of church early or something?" Elijah asked.

"Ha," Jessica said flatly. She eyed him with mild interest. "Must've been a good heat. Your love bites are showing, playboy."

Elijah shrugged a shoulder, unconcerned. "They'll heal up before my next shoot. In the meantime, someone should appreciate them, even if it's only my roomies."

Jessica snorted.

I took a couple of controlled breaths, planning my words so I wouldn't stumble over them. "How's Dee doing?"

I'd only met Jessica's latest girlfriend a couple of times, but she had a forthrightness and unapologetic butch ethos that I found appealing. I was genuinely rooting for the pair, even though Jessica had never been one for long-term relationships in the months I'd known her.

She smiled now, though—and in my estimation, it was the smile of someone who was rethinking their lifelong allergy to commitment. "She's doing good. The gallery opening is going better than anyone could have expected. She's even been contacted by a couple of investors."

I smiled back, finding it oddly uplifting that not everyone seemed to be struggling the way I was. "I'm really happy for her. She does some amazing work." Sobering, I forged ahead. "I've got bad news, and I'm sorry to dump it on you like this, but it wouldn't feel right k-keeping it to myself."

Jessica set her handbag on the table and sat down, giving me her full attention. “The rent, I’m guessing?”

I cringed inwardly, forcing myself to hold her gaze despite the instinctive omega desire to look down at the floor. “Yeah. More clients have cancelled on me, and now the agency is calling me in for a meeting tomorrow. I’m k-kind of freaking out, to be honest.”

“I can confirm that she’s freaking out,” Elijah said, with limited helpfulness.

Jessica rested an elbow on the table, massaging her temple. “Okay. I had an idea this might be coming. I know you’ve been having a hard time getting gigs. Do you think your agency is going to dump you?”

“Maybe,” I said miserably.

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“You got a backup plan if that happens?” Jessica’s tone was matter of fact.

Elijah chewed and swallowed a mouthful of crunchy cereal. “So far we’ve come up with selling some of her clothes—”

“That’s a Band-Aid, not a plan,” Jessica interrupted.

“And trying to monetize a YouTube channel on makeup tutorials or something,” Elijah finished.

Jessica tilted her head, considering. “What do your subscriber numbers look like?” she asked me.

“On YouTube? Dismal,” I said. “I’ve got decent numbers on Insta, though.”

“Not an immediate fix, then,” she observed. “Still, it might be worth doing.”

“I thought maybe the clothing sales could bridge the gap,” Elijah said. “And who knows, maybe the meeting won’t be as bad as we’re thinking.”

I was pretty sure it would be. “Look, I know how all this sounds. I’ll start applying for jobs right away if it’s bad news tomorrow. Waitressing... or I hear bartenders can make pretty good money. It’s just... well, even if I get something right away, it will be a couple of weeks before I get paid.”

Elijah groaned, leaning back in his chair dramatically. “Em. Donotbecome one of those models who waitresses on the side.” His spoon clattered against his empty bowl



as he dropped it. “This whole thing makes no sense. Look at her, Jess—why is this girl not inundated with clients beating down her door?”

At least he wasn’t trying to talk me out of the modeling industry completely, like he had last night. I huffed.

So did Jessica. “You’ve got a hot look, babe. I dunno what the problem is either. But I stopped trying to second-guess the bigwigs a long time ago. Give me whatever you’ve got for the rent, for right now. But I can’t front you. This place may be a dump, but it costs a fuckin’ fortune.”

I slumped. “I know. I’m not asking to become a charity case. Let me see what happens in the morning. I’ll know more then.”

Bright and early on Monday morning, I dabbed extra concealer over the bags beneath my eyes and dressed to kill while I still owned the clothes to do it. Squeezing into the rush hour press of bodies, I ignored the occasional wolf-whistles and unsolicited comments about my appearance.

I presented myself at the IMGE offices promptly at five minutes to nine, pulling my beta fashion model persona around me like a cloak.

I’d learned the skill of becoming someone else early on. My stutter had manifested late, after my mother’s death in a car crash when I was thirteen. That made it harder to treat, despite access to the best speech pathologists that money could buy. I’d never truly shaken it, but I’d found workarounds.

The most useful was the one I employed now—namely, playing a role. It wasn’t foolproof, but as long as I could be Emma Hope, Professional Model <sup>TM</sup>, I could probably get through this without making a fool of myself. It was Emma Huntwell, orphaned omega living thirty-five hundred miles from home, who was the basket

case.

“You can go in, Ms. Hope,” chirped the receptionist. “They’re expecting you.”

“Thank you, Staci.” I offered my most professional smile.

The conference room was very beige and very modern. I hated it, like I hated most spaces designed solely for beta sensibilities. The wall of windows facing east probably added an extra ten grand a month to the lease on the place, and it made me want to curl up and hide in a corner.

I stuffed the reaction down deep, because Emma Hope, Professional Model <sup>TM</sup>, didn’t care about windows. Paul, my agent, rose from his seat at the table in an awkward show of chivalry, fiddling with his too-wide tie. For someone who worked in the fashion industry, even indirectly, he seemed not to have much of a sense of personal style. I’d never seen him in a properly tailored suit—only unflattering jackets that were too wide for his narrow shoulders and bulged over his middle-aged paunch.

“Emma. Thank you for coming, sweetheart. You’re looking lovely as always.” He indicated a chair across the table, isolating me like a prisoner in front of a tribunal.

I smiled and took it. “Thank you.”

Jared and Clio Verlicci hadn’t risen. The owners of IMGE Ltd. were a married beta power couple in their forties. They were sharp as nails and dressed to the nines, as different from their agent Paul as it was possible to be. I knew, with a creeping sense of sick dread, that they hadn’t built this company from the ground up by being sentimental.

“Mr. and Mrs. Verlicci,” I began. “May I ask why you called this meeting?” There was no point in dragging things out, after all.

Clio Verlicci's smile could have cut glass. "Ms. Hope." Her thick Italian accent caressed the name. "I'm certain you already have an inkling. Unfortunately, our clients don't seem terribly taken by you recently. And that is a problem at an agency like this one."

I swallowed against the dryness in my throat. "And have these clients explained why they don't wish to use me? I assure you, I strive for the utmost in professional behavior. I'm never late. I don't argue or otherwise behave in a difficult manner. If there's something I need to change—"

"They have not specified a reason," Clio cut in. "Sometimes, a model simply falls out of favor. It happens."

My heart thudded in my throat, so hard and fast I worried they could see it thrumming from across the table. "Are you letting me go?"

Paul looked down, arranging his pen and notepad in precise harmony on the table.

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“That depends,” said Jared. His skin had the rich olive glow of the Mediterranean, but unlike his wife’s accent, his was all New York.

“On what?” I asked cautiously.

Paul still wasn’t looking at me. He picked up the pen he’d so carefully rearranged only moments before, twiddling with it nervously as he cleared his throat.

“We’d like to offer you one more opportunity,” he said. “It’s a bit... unique, as these things go.” He paused for long enough that I started sweating beneath my designer blouse.

Jared gave him an irritated look and took up the conversational mantle. “The Secret Boudoir is recruiting a new crop of models for their Spring Collection. We’d like you to audition.”

“O... kay?” I hazarded, not sure if I should be relieved when the atmosphere inside the conference room felt so stilted. Lingerie modeling had lost much of the stigma it used to have, and The Secret Boudoir was a household name—even if it didn’t inhabit the same rarefied perch of commercial success that it had a decade ago.

It wasn’t my dream job by any stretch, but no one could deny that TSB had catapulted a number of models to stardom over the years.

“Excellent,” Jared said. “The auditions will take place on a yacht off the coast of Greece, where you and the other models will be assessed based on your appearance, attitude, and ability to represent the company in a positive light. There will be several

investors and other guests present, so it's vital that you make the best impression possible, if you understand what I mean."

My stomach dipped unpleasantly. "Is this an image modeling job?" I demanded, using the industry term for a gig that was understood to involve escort duties, if not outright prostitution. Image modeling was where washed-up models desperate for money went to watch their careers die.

Beads of perspiration had popped out on Paul's balding head.

Clio's eyes glittered like diamond-edged knives. "We're offering you a genuine opportunity to become a model for a well-respected company. If you're not interested, I'm certain there are other girls who will be."

Jared laid a hand on his wife's arm, quelling her. "The client will pay you twelve thousand dollars plus travel expenses for the week."

My breath stuttered. "Twelve thousand d-dollars?" That was more than I'd been paid for a gig since I left England.

"Half up front, half upon completion," Jared confirmed.

Paul finally looked up, meeting my eyes. Say no, his expression said.

But twelve thousand dollars was life-changing money for me right now. More importantly, I had a past that none of the people at this table knew about. If worse came to worst, this wouldn't be the first time I'd spread my legs for a powerful man in exchange for security—or at least the illusion of it.

Far from it.

“Done,” I said, wondering what the weather was like off the coast of Greece at this time of year.

FIVE

Emma

THERE REALLY WAS no subtle way to go from ‘Oops, I don’t have the rent’ to ‘Here’s this month’s money, plus next month’s while I’m at it.’

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Jessica raised a perfectly plucked brow at me as she checked her Venmo balance. “So, not out of a job, then?”

“Apparently not,” I agreed. “It’s kind of a strange gig, but it pays better than anything I’ve had since I moved to the States. Also, y’know, Greece.”

I doubted The Secret Boudoir would have much trouble filling out their roster of hopefuls. I’d been in the business long enough that the lure of exotic locales and rich men should have worn off by now, but even I was a little bit excited about the prospect of a superyacht cruising the Greek Isles. Some poor waif with stars in her eyes and an inferiority complex would be completely taken in by the glamorous bauble they were dangling in front of us like a carrot.

“You know anyone else who’s going?” Jessica asked.

“I’m not sure. I think they’re still recruiting.” I frowned at a loose thread on the sleeve of my white leather jacket, already mentally running through the contents of my closet as I tried to decide what would be appropriate to take. “They didn’t give me a list of names or anything.”

“Well, be careful.” Jessica frowned, slipping her phone back in her jeans pocket. “I don’t have to tell you that the whole thing sounds fishy.”

I snorted. “For twelve grand, they c-can use me as a sushi model if it floats their boat. I mean... if it floats their yacht.”

“Wait, who’s becoming a sushi model?” Elijah asked as he walked into the kitchen.

“Because that sounds, like,superunhygienic.”

“I’m not becoming a sushi model,” I said patiently.

“Tell Emma that she’s walking into a situation that’s deeply suss,” Jessica said. “I’d repeat myself, but she’s clearly not listening to me. Also, I have a date at nine.”

“I know it’s suss,” I told her. “I just don’t care because it’s also my temporary ticket out of poverty. I’ll be careful, Jess. Have fun tonight. Tell Dee I said hello.”

“I will,” she promised. “I’ll even try to do the posh accent for her.”

My mouth opened in outrage. “My accent is notposh! How very dare you?”

“If you say so.” She smiled at me, patting her phone in her back pocket. “Thanks for the cash, babe.”

Elijah murmured a distracted goodbye as she strode out of the kitchen, her narrow hips swinging. Then he turned his green eyes toward me. “You got a gig? A ‘suss’ one? I thought you were worried the agency was going to dump you.”

With a sigh, I flopped down at the table and opened the plastic container of salad I’d picked up on my way home from running errands. Errands that I could now afford to do.

“The Secret Boudoiris auditioning models for their Spring Collection. And for some reason, they’ve decided to do it on a superyacht full of rich people who will be partying off the coast of Greece.” I stabbed a disposable bamboo fork into the slightly soggy lettuce.

“And they’re paying loads of cash up front for this ‘audition’?” Elijah sounded



understandably skeptical.

I shrugged a shoulder, chewing.

“You do know what this really is, right?” he asked.

Apparently, he wasn’t going to let this go.

I swallowed limp green leaves and Caesar dressing, wiping the back of my hand across my lips. “Yes, I know what an image modeling gig looks like, Elijah. I also know what an empty bank account looks like.”

“And you’re okay with that?” he asked cautiously. “Glorified escort work?”

“I don’t know how glorified it is,” I replied in a wry tone. Then I sobered. “No offense, but you don’t really know that much about me. It’s true, this isn’t how I’d pictured my career in New York going. But if they’re working through the agencies, then TSB really will be recruiting models on that yacht, not just arm candy. I intend to get one of those contracts.”

I emphasized this with a stab of the fork.

He didn’t look reassured. “I really wish you wouldn’t do this, Em.”

The words were quiet, but they pricked my temper, nonetheless.

“It’s not really your c-call, is it?” I shot back, murdering another chunk of baby romaine with a vicious poke of bamboo tines.

No, it’s not,” he agreed, not rising to meet my tone. “But I bet if I came home spouting a story like this, you’d try to talk me out of doing it.”

“No, I wouldn’t,” I lied.

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“You totally would,” he countered—and apparently, we were both twelve again, engaged in a game of ‘yes you would, no I wouldn’t’ in the schoolyard.

“I wouldn’t,” I insisted.

A stubborn look crept over his angular features. “Fine. I’ll call my agent first thing in the morning and ask her to get me an invite.”

I swallowed the involuntary screech of ‘What?’ that wanted to escape, and nearly choked on my salad. He was clearly bluffing. Wasn’t he?

“Sure,” I said, trying to sound casual. “It’s the first week of December, though. D-don’t you have conflicts with another photoshoot?”

“Nothing that pays as well,” he jabbed back. “And certainly nothing on a big-ass yacht floating in the Mediterranean. I can work on my tan.”

When the hell had this conversation gone off the rails? I stared at him, not sure if continuing to argue would make things worse.

“You’re okay with ‘glorified escort work,’ then?” I asked, unable to resist.

His eyes narrowed. “I don’t plan on taking any. Because unlike you, I don’t need the TSB contract.”

“And you prefer to be the one paying for ‘company,’ rather than the one getting paid for it?” As soon as the words left my mouth, I regretted them.

“Yeah,” he said flatly. “I do. Because the person paying for services is the one who’s in control. Which you should already know if you’re as savvy as you seem to want me to believe.”

God, did I know that. Sometimes it felt like learning that lesson had been my life’s work.

And yet, here I was...again.

“Stay home,” I said tiredly. “Get your tan at a salon, Elijah. You know you don’t actually want to do this.”

He wouldn’t follow through. Not really. He was just trying to make a point.

I managed to convince myself of that, too—right up until I found him packing bags the night before our red-eye flight to Athens.

SIX

Elijah

I WAS NORMALLY smarter than this, at least when it came to my career. I needed an image modeling job for a shopping mall underwear retailer like I needed a venereal disease. The twelve-thousand-dollar paycheck only succeeded in making the whole thing look more dodgy, rather than less.

Frankly, I was surprised Annie, my agent, had managed to get me an invite. There was a certain subset of alphas and male betas who got off on dressing up a male omega in something sweet and frilly in the bedroom, but that particular kink was far from the main focus at The Secret Boudoir.

Which probably means there's some rich old codger on the yacht who gets off on it, I thought sourly.

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I'd achieved a level of success in the industry over the past couple of years that meant I didn't have to deal with as many of the fashion world's bigots and perverts as I used to. When I'd stepped off the bus as a wet-behind-the-ears pup from Tennessee, it had only been sheer luck that had kept me out of serious trouble. Well... luck, and being six-foot-one with bigger muscles than most omegas sported.

Thanks, Mom.

Thanks, Dad.

Not.

I'd scrubbed my 'aw, shucks' accent and reinvented myself from the ground up. The life I'd built for myself in New York was so much better than what I would have had to look forward to back home in Murfreesboro. There was no space for a pansexual omega in my beta parents' strict Christian household. They'd never expected—much less asked for—a throwback son. Though maybe if I'd been an alpha, it would have been all right.

Maybe my mother wouldn't have made the doctors put me on growth hormones so I wouldn't be 'stunted.' Maybe they wouldn't have insisted I try to pass as a beta—a blatantly round and rainbow-colored peg in a drab, square hole.

When I rebelled, they disowned me. And to some extent, I'd been shoving their noses in it ever since. It amused me to think of some old biddy from the First Baptist Church thrusting a catalogue or lifestyle magazine under Mom's nose with my face smiling out at her from the pages.

‘Oh, Darla, isn’t that your little Elijah? My, how he’s grown!’

Sometimes, you took your victories where you could get them. So, I’d eschewed pheromone suppressors and had natural heats with alpha packs I didn’t know... and now, apparently, I jetted to Greece to party on superyachts with rich assholes. Because why not? Life was short, and physical beauty was transitory. Might as well make the most of both while I had them.

And, of course, I was worried about Em.

I didn’t advertise my past, but I didn’t exactly keep it a secret, either. By contrast, Em was locked down tighter than Fort Knox. She was from London. She was hiding as a beta. That was it—the sum total of everything I knew about her background... and I’d had to guess about the second part.

Though I now knew a third thing about her. She’d obviously never been on a gigantic fuck-off superyacht before. Of course, neither had I. Both of us were gaping like fools as a steward led us on board, and we were both trying unsuccessfully to hide it.

You can take the boy out of the Tennessee sticks, but apparently you can’t take the Tennessee sticks out of the boy.

I snapped my jaw shut and shot Em a sidelong glance. She met it with a wide-eyed expression that clearly said, ‘Is this place for real?’

Even living in New York, I sometimes forgot how rich some people could get, if they were greedy and ruthless enough. I’d researched the ship—mostly for shits and giggles—after learning the name from my agent. The *Titania*. Two hundred seventy-three feet long, a top speed of twenty knots, with a cruising range of seventy-five hundred nautical miles. She could accommodate twenty-four guests and twenty-one crew members, with a gross tonnage of one thousand seven hundred and twelve

GT—all of which put her firmly in the top five percent of privately owned vessels.

None of that had prepared me for the reality of what a hundred million dollars could buy a person. That had allegedly been the yacht's price tag, and for that hefty sum, the builder had delivered a vision in exotic wood, shining metal, and state-of-the-art Scandinavian design with a flair for the artistic.

"Please follow me down to B-deck," said the steward. "I'm afraid you'll be sharing a stateroom due to the large number of guests."

"Roomies for life," I quipped, and Em shot me a wry look in reply.

We trekked past a lounge area arranged around a twelve-person glass-bottomed hot tub. It was already occupied by a handful of lanky, scantily clad women—some of whom shot us assessing glances as we walked by. As far as they were concerned, we were the competition. It was a stereotype to say that models were a catty bunch, but clichés became clichés for a reason.

There was a lot of money at stake on this yacht, and even the losers had the potential to score a rich sugar daddy if they played their cards right.

Personally, I was more interested in the free drinks and the break from New York weather. That, and making sure Em stayed out of trouble. I hadn't been kidding when I'd told her she wasn't taking care of her health. I knew the look of an omega who was treading close to the ledge. I'd been there myself.

At best, this excursion could be a chance for her to unwind in ridiculously posh surroundings while netting a lucrative modeling contract at the end of the week. At worst, it could be barely one step up from working a street corner.

'No offense,' she'd said, with the air of someone who had experience in the concept



of sex as a business transaction, ‘but you don’t really know that much about me.’

I wondered, for about the hundredth time, what her story was.

We headed down the grand, teak-inlaid staircase located at the center of the ship, alighting on the B-deck. Light shimmered down from above, filtered through the clear bottom of the hot tub on the top deck. The shifting sunlight illuminated a swimming pool filled with crystal clear water. Unlike the hot tub, it was currently unoccupied. Beyond it, we passed through another lounge area, past another fully stocked bar, and then a small movie theater.

Eventually, an elegantly decorated hallway led us to a series of guest rooms. The steward indicated the correct door and opened it for us. “I’ll see that the rest of your luggage is delivered shortly,” he said, handing each of us an electronic key card. “Please make yourselves comfortable and enjoy the amenities. Dinner will be at seven p.m. on the top deck.”

With a quick bow, he left us to it.

Em let her carry-on fall to the floor and flopped onto the edge of one of the matching beds, taking in the inlaid agate wall separating the sleeping area from the marble-tiled bathroom. “This place is insane. Seriously, who has this much money?”

“Oil sheiks, weapons dealers, tech magnates, possibly some royal families,” I said, testing my own mattress before settling onto it gingerly. “But if it makes you feel better, the lingerie people are almost certainly leasing it from the real owners. So, it’s only costing them—I dunno—maybe ten million dollars instead of one hundred million.”

“Oh, well that’s a relief,” she quipped. “I thought they might be rich or something.”

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“Nah,” I joked. “They’re just the small fry. Total losers.”

She fell back on the bed with her arms spread wide, staring up at the expensive ceiling, which glowed softly with recessed LED lighting.

“You know, I could spend the week sipping martinis by the pool and phoning it in,” she said wistfully. “Tell any rich bloke who gets handsy to fuck off, take my twelve thousand dollars, and worry about the rest of it when I get back to New York.”

I perked up. “Now you’re talking.”

She let out a sigh like a deflating balloon. “Except it was heavily implied that if I don’t have a contract in hand when I step off the plane, I won’t have an agency anymore, either.”

Damn.

“I feel like I’m harping on about this,” I said, “but, again—are you one hundred percent sure that modeling is what you want to do with your life? Because it’s seriously stressing you out, dove.”

She lifted a hand and let it fall back on the bed, limp. “Not having enough money is stressing me out. I like modeling just fine.”

‘I like modeling just fine’ wasn’t exactly a ringing endorsement, but the money thing was a fair point.

“It’s a feast-or-famine business, Em. You know that.”

“I’d noticed.” Her tone could have stripped paint. “Hence me being here in a last-ditch effort to model bras and knickers for a bunch of arseholes who like to party with women half their age on yachts.”

I wasn’t going to win this fight.

Slapping my thighs briskly, I stood up and unzipped my tote bag. “In that case, you’ve got an image to present. Get your swimsuit on, roomie. We’re going to meet the competition and lounge artistically beside a Jacuzzi.”

I had to hand it to her—Emma Hope hadn’t stumbled into her modeling success through luck. She was good.

Her persona played on the slightly disconcerting alien vibe; the kind of presence that made it hard to look away, because you were too busy trying to figure out exactly what it was about her elfin features that was so unusual.

I had the advantage of regularly seeing her stumbling around in a bathrobe before she’d had her first coffee, so I knew it was a combination of unusually large gray eyes and a pointed chin that was ever so slightly unsymmetrical. The end result should have been ten times more valuable than high school prom queen looks. I still didn’t understand why her career was stagnating.

Since I didn’t actually give a shit about the TSB contract, I threw on a pair of swim shorts in a shade of orange that complemented my green eyes and called it good. By contrast, Emma disappeared into the palatial bathroom for twenty minutes and reappeared wearing a smoking hot asymmetrical sapphire two-piece that looked decidedly accident prone.

She'd applied her signature makeup—heavily modified smoky-eyes done mostly in black and charcoal, with striking highlights of royal blue and aquamarine that echoed the color of the swimsuit. Her short, bleached-platinum hair was slicked back on the sides and aggressively spiky on top. Six-inch silver platform sandals that spiraled up her calves with a length of metallic ribbon completed the ensemble.

“Yas, queen,” I said as she emerged. “Way to slay!”

“Let's hope they're in the market for the 'eighties glam rock star' look,” she muttered.

“Dove, anyone with half a brain is in the market for an eighties glam rock star,” I told her, slinging a towel over my shoulder. “Now, come on. Those martinis aren't going to drink themselves.”

We retraced our steps to the upper deck and camped out in a pair of padded lounge chairs, free drinks in hand.

“Did you seriously tell the bartender ‘shaken, not stirred’?” she asked, the corner of her lips twitching in amusement.

“You bet your sweet ass I did,” I shot back, enjoying my Bond moment.

While Em lounged and deployed aloofness like a weapon, I casually surveyed her competition. I at least had to give TSB some points for basic diversity. There were body shapes here beyondstarving waif, and skin tones other than peaches and cream.

And, I supposed, there was me—so maybe my inclusion should have been a tipoff.

After about twenty minutes, the rich dudes started filtering onto the ship. Most of them were old. A couple had heavily Botoxed and bejeweled wives in tow, which

was interesting. A blond alpha in his mid-thirties walked past, barely sparing a glance for the nubile flesh on display around the hot tub. Pity—he had a ‘young Daniel Craig’ thing going on that I could seriously get behind, and the subtle cloud of oakmoss and petrichor that followed in his wake was a delicious change from the chemical stink of expensive aftershave.

I turned to Emma to see if the hotness had registered, only to find her staring fixedly at the gangplank on the far side of the deck, the blood draining from her face. I frowned, following her gaze to find an unremarkable beta about our age embarking with an older bald guy with a beard, who might have been an alpha.

Returning my attention to the lounge beside me, I drew breath to ask what was wrong... but Emma had already surged to her feet and was power walking toward the central staircase as though the hounds of hell were behind her, and she was terrified of catching their notice.

SEVEN

Emma

NO, NO, NO, this couldn't possibly be happening... not here, not now, not during my last-ditch opportunity to salvage my career. To salvage my newlife.

I half-jogged down the staircase, aware that I was one slip away from a sprained ankle or worse—but I couldn't even spare the few seconds it would take to untie my ridiculous high-heeled gladiator sandals and rip them off.

Don't fall, don't fall... the silent mantra played in my head in time with the clack of heels on expensive inlaid wood. I reached the lower deck and hurried past the lounge, the pool, the theater. Why were the guest cabins hidden away so deep in the bowels of the damned ship?

Finally, I reached the right door, only to have a fresh moment of panic when I remembered that Elijah had our key card, because there'd been no place to stash mine in my bikini. I pounded a fist against the closed door in frustration, near tears.

Had the steward dropped off the rest of my bags yet? Would I have to leave most of my belongings behind? How far would the six thousand dollars TSB had already deposited in my bank account stretch? Maybe I could contact Elijah after I got away, and ask him to send my luggage on to me—

“Em?” My omega roommate had followed me, and dread fought with relief in my stomach.

“I need the key card,” I snapped. “Quickly!”

He held it up, and I grabbed it like a starving hyena tearing a chunk of carrion from the lion’s kill.

“Em, what thehell?” Elijah sounded bewildered rather than angry, but either way, I didn’t have time for it.

I swiped the card clumsily through the slot, cursing when the light stayed red. Elijah took it back from me and swiped it in the opposite direction. I was already pushing on the door when it beeped and turned green.

“I have to leave,” I said, rushing to my carryon bag and rummaging for any suitable clothing I could throw on over my swimsuit. I’d partially unpacked the bag while I was getting ready earlier, but it would only take a minute or two to shove everything back inside. The rest of our luggage sat in a pile in the corner of the room. Maybe I could carry another suitcase... I needed a more sensible pair of shoes.

A hand closed around my upper arm. I gasped and whirled, nearly tripping. My heart pounded like a drum against my ribs.

Elijah whipped his hand away like I’d burned him, holding it palm up in a gesture of nonaggression.

“Em,” he said for the third time. “Please just stop for a second. What’s going on?”

“I t-told you,” I said, my stutter reappearing. I couldn’t even blame myself, under the circumstances. “I have to g-get off this yacht!”

His brow creased. “Because of those two men? The bald guy and the creepy beta with the paunch?”

Even the description sent a trickle of chill down my spine.

“I just... I have to g-go,” I deflected. “I was wrong to come here. This isn’t going to work.”

He still looked bewildered, but also worried.

“I don’t know if there’s time for that, dove. They were getting ready to cast off. I think those two men were the last guests to come aboard.”



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New urgency propelled me toward the bathroom to get dressed and grab the things I couldn't afford to leave behind. Before I'd made it two steps, the floor shifted subtly beneath me, throwing me off balance. The low thrum of engines, which had started about twenty minutes ago while we were on the upper deck, increased in pitch.

"Shit," Elijah said. "Um... I think it's too late now, babe."

Too late. Too late.

The words echoed in my ears.

"I need to speak to the c-c-captain," I said desperately. "Is there a captain? Who's in charge of the b-boat?"

Telegraphing his movement, Elijah reached out slowly and took both my shoulders in his hands. I thought for a moment that he must be shaking, and I wondered why. Then I realized the uncontrolled trembling was coming from me.

"No offense, Em, but I don't think they're going to turn the hundred-million-dollar mega-yacht around for you," he said. "Could you maybe try talking to me instead? Who are those guys?"

My past. They were my past, come back to haunt me.

'See you soon, bitch.'

I'd deleted the anonymous text, but I couldn't delete the memory of it.

“They’re t-trouble,” I managed.

“For you?” Elijah asked. “Or in general?”

“Both,” I replied in a whisper. Then, because I knew it was unfair to keep him totally in the dark when he was trapped on the ship right along with me, I reluctantly added, “The older one is my uncle. The younger one is my c-cousin.”

Elijah’s shoulders relaxed fractionally, maybe because I was finally talking to him. “Okay. So, family trouble. Are we talking ‘awkward Christmas dinner’ here? Or are you in physical danger from them?”

“I d-don’t know,” I said. “I think it’s p-probably more on the ‘ruining my life’ end of the spectrum.”

“Like, maybe they’re going to sabotage your chances at the TSB contract? That kind of thing?” He still looked spooked, but not as actively freaked out as he had been earlier.

I wish I could have said the same. “I told you. I don’t know!” I resisted the urge to pinch the bridge of my nose, knowing it would only smear makeup everywhere. “Maybe.”

Could that be it? I’d ruined Percy Rathbone’s life by exposing his cheating ways, so now Cade and my creepy uncle were here to do the same to me? The world of syndicated crime in London was a brutal one, but it wasn’t as though my arsehole of a cousin was going to publicly kneecap me on a yacht full of millionaires.

God. Why had I run for my room, instead of hiding until the pair walked past and making my escape down the gangplank when their backs were turned? Better to be penniless and wearing nothing but a bikini in a strange city, than to be trapped on this

yacht with Tommy and Cade Huntwell.

Could this be nothing more than a coincidence? Did they even know I was here? The threatening texts said yes—see you soon, bitch—but logic said no. My uncle had no connection whatsoever to the world of international fashion. And I didn't have any proof that the texts were tied to either him or my cousin.

“You're a thousand miles away, dove,” Elijah said. “What are you thinking?”

He was still gripping my shoulders lightly—two points of grounding warmth. I breathed in his rain and rosewater scent and tried to think past my initial panic. The yacht was underway. I couldn't get off unless I wanted to jump overboard, and I wasn't that strong of a swimmer.

“Maybe I'm wrong,” I said with sudden uncertainty. “Maybe it's a c-coincidence that they're here.”

Elijah didn't look convinced. That was fair. I didn't feel convinced either.

“Why do they have it in for you?” he asked. “What's the backstory?”

This wasn't a part of my life that I wanted anyone to know about. And yet, Elijah needed to know. I licked my lips, looking down and to the side—omega instincts coming to the fore.

“I... was sleeping with Cade's best friend, Percy. Cade's my c-cousin,” I clarified. “I found out Percy had been hiding a fiancé from me. So, I tracked her down and warned her what kind of man she was about to marry. She called it off and publicly trashed him. It sent Percy into a downward spiral, and he eventually ended up in prison.”

It was so much more complicated than that—a generations-long tangle of competition and tragedy. Percy had only been the surface layer, but maybe Elijah didn't need to know about the rest of it. Maybe this really was a coincidence, and I could just avoid them as much as possible for the next few days before running back to hide in New York.

I mentally kissed the TSB contract goodbye.

“Ouch,” Elijah said, wincing at my tale of woe. “I mean, it's not like this guy's cheating was your fault, but I guess I can see where the bad blood came from. Still, it does seem like a stretch that they'd wrangle an invite onto someone's mega-yacht just to fuck you over. What about your uncle? Is he pissed off at you, too?”

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That was the part that didn't make a lot of sense. When my father had died, Uncle Tommy had made a bid to control the family syndicate, only to lose out to Percy's father, Hugh Rathbone. The fact that Hugh and Percy had both gone to prison should have been a boon for my father's younger brother—another chance at taking over leadership.

"I don't... think so?" I said uncertainly.

Elijah seemed to consider that for a moment. He let go of my shoulders, taking a step back to give me a bit of personal space.

"Okay. So, maybe they just happened to be on the same yacht as us, or maybe it was planned somehow," he summarized. "Either way, it sounds like the best thing we can do for now is to keep you out of sight. Which... is probably going to deep-six your chances at the lingerie contract, unfortunately."

"I don't care about the fucking lingerie contract," I said, aware that less than half an hour ago, it had been the most important thing in my life. "What do you think? Should I just hide in here with the door locked, then?"

He frowned thoughtfully. "I mean, I assume someone will come asking after you before long. They've already sunk several grand into getting you here, between airfare and your fee. Although..." He brightened. "I just might have an idea about that."

EIGHT

Elijah

AS SEVEN O'CLOCK rolled around, I dressed in my best Greek-island-chic linen trousers and open-neck shirt, ran my fingers through my hair until it was just the right shade of messy, and made my way to the upper deck for the initial meet and greet dinner as though absolutely nothing was wrong.

The trick to orchestrating a good subterfuge was keeping things casual. At least, that approach had served me well during an unhappy and thoroughly dysfunctional adolescence. I assumed it worked in the wider world as well.

The long dining table in the upper lounge area was set for twenty-one people—ten along each side and one at the head. I'd been wondering how many guests were aboard, and this was probably my answer. Models, men in suits, and the two well-preserved wives were milling casually around the deck, several of them moving toward their seats at the table as I approached.

Each elaborate place setting boasted a name card centered on the plate. Assigned seating, then. I supposed it made sense. No doubt the rich dudes who weren't directly involved with *The Secret Boudoir*, but who'd somehow managed to wrangle invites, had been promised a chance to mingle with the models.

And by 'mingle,' I meant fuck, of course.

That was what image modeling gigs entailed, most of the time. It was what Emma had signed up for, and what I definitely hadn't. Although, I thought as Young Daniel Craig seated himself in the chair next to the one reserved for me, I might be tempted into a bit of light flirting if the vibe was right.

Creepy paunch guy sat down on my other side, which was considerably less welcome. I snuck a glance at his place card, which read Cade Huntwell. Em's cousin.

A glance around showed his father, Em's uncle, seated further up, to the left of the table's head.

When everyone was sitting, the middle-aged guy at the head of the table, who appeared to be in charge, rose and tapped his glass with a knife. The high-pitched ringing quieted the remaining small talk around the table.

"Good evening, and welcome aboard the *Titania*," he said. "My name is Ted Casick, chief marketing officer of *The Secret Boudoir*. Thank you all for joining our little cruise, which I hope will be both entertaining and lucrative for everyone."

A small round of applause broke out, mostly among the models.

Ted chuckled. "Now, perhaps we could go around the table with introductions, so we can all get to know one another."

I was watching him closely enough that I saw his gaze flicker over the empty place setting across from me, where Em should have sat. He didn't mention it, though, instead offering a wordless 'please begin' gesture to the model on his right.

She stood, reciting a carefully rehearsed biography in a heavy Eastern European accent. I made note of her name, Irina, and let the rest wash over me. Everyone applauded as she finished with a polite thank-you and sat. Around it went, the models all standing up and channeling their inner beauty pageant queens, while the rich dudes and their wives stayed seated for their introductions.

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“Gabriel Rosencranz,” said Young Daniel Craig tersely, without rising. “CEO of Rosencranz Industries. I appreciate the invitation.”

And wasn't that about as forthcoming as a turtle hiding in its shell. Still, there was information to be gained. He was English, and interestingly, he had the same sort of careful BBC pronunciation that Emma used. Another British model of my acquaintance—one whose daddy held a knighthood—had once told me dismissively that it was the accent of someone who'd grown up in the lower classes and was trying to better themselves.

Her sneer on the final two words had been audible.

I wasn't sure how much trust to put in what had clearly been a catty remark, but it was interesting.

In my turn, I rose and pasted on my best appealing smile. “I'm Elijah Bardot from New York. I have two claims to fame. One, my mother is the second cousin twice removed of the French actress Brigitte Bardot. And two, I appear to be both the token male model and the token omega model on this yacht.” I let my tone turn teasing. “So, watch out, girls—affirmative action is coming for your jobs.”

Titters from some of the models greeted me, along with suspicious looks from others. Most of the rich dudes didn't seem to know what to make of me, though one of the society wives was definitely giving me heavily Botoxed bedroom eyes.

Yeesh.



Em's cousin stood up, having evidently missed the part where the rich guys weren't doing that.

"Cade Huntwell," he said self-importantly. His accent was also English, but closer to what I suspected Ms. Knighthood would have dismissively dubbed 'the lower classes.' He cleared his throat and continued. "My father and I control a substantial operation in London. We're here to forge new business ties. Networking, don't you know. And what better place to do it than on a yacht surrounded by beautiful women?"

I mentally made juvenile gagging noises, becauseew.

The painfully awkward procession continued. Both of the men with wives turned out to be associated with TSB, which made sense. Those wives probably knew better than to let them come here alone. One of the models was a former child prodigy who'd been a concert pianist, which was mildly interesting. Cade's father was named Tommy, and Huntwell the Elder was a lot more commanding and a lot less forthcoming than his son had been. Then again, that was alphas for you.

Speaking of which...

I turned to Young Daniel Craig. Or, Gabriel Rosencranz, rather. "I used to hate it when the teacher made us do this on the first day of classes."

He quirked a pale eyebrow and tipped his glass to his lips, taking a single sip of wine before setting it down. His blue eyes assessed me from russet hair to unbuttoned collar. "Somehow I have a hard time believing that."

Promising start.

I lounged back in the chair, enjoying the hint of fresh moss and petrichor that teased

my nostrils. “Oh, no. Complete wallflower, me. The confident showman you see before you today is nothing but a fabrication.”

“Hmm. Cut from whole cloth, are you? I suppose that’s apt, given your choice of career.” He saluted me with a shrimp fork and turned his attention to his appetizer, evidently unwilling to devote any more effort than that to casual flirtation.

Pity. Still, if I focused on his cool James Bond thing, I could mostly ignore the awkward vibes coming off Em’s creepy cousin on my other side.

I applied myself to the food, which was excellent. Shrimp salad, chicken consommé, couscous with lamb medallions, roasted asparagus, and a refreshing raspberry sorbet marched across my plate. I pitied the poor models who were watching every calorie and started scheming ways to smuggle Em some leftovers.

Tommy Huntwell cleared his throat, and I tensed.

“It seems we’re one guest short tonight,” he said, in a tone that might have been casual.

Casick, the CMO, frowned as he looked once more at Em’s empty chair.

And that was my cue. “I’m afraid Emma is feeling ill,” I said, striving for an equally casual tone. “She’s resting.”

Cade’s greasy gaze landed on me. “In her cabin?” he demanded.

“Well... yes,” I replied, caught out. I mean, where else would she be resting?

“Send the ship’s medic to take a look at the girl,” the elder Huntwell said gruffly.

“Can’t have some Typhoid Mary getting the whole ship sick.”

I barely managed not to mouth ‘Typhoid Mary’ in disbelief. What century was this, again?

But Casick was nodding. “Yes.” He gestured toward a steward. “An excellent idea. Go get Dr. Metzger and send him to Miss Hope’s cabin, please.”

Shit.

Oh well, as strategies went, it had been worth a try. Maybe she could plead seasickness.

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Then creepy cousin Cade pushed away from the table, heaving his well-fed bulk upright. “No need. I’ll get him.”

Alarm bells jangled inside my head. I needed to warn Em about how much of an interest her relatives seemed to be taking in her absence. I stood abruptly, stammering out an excuse.

“Ah, thanks so much for the meal. This has been lovely, but I’m actually feeling a bit out of sorts as well—”

“Sit down, Mr. Bardot,” Casick snapped.

He wasn’t an alpha, but my omega instincts had been trained too well as a child. It was the exact same bark that my father would have used to keep me from running off after dinner. I froze, hating my involuntary reaction. Next to me, I felt Gabriel Rosencranz go still.

Casick sat back in his chair, moderating his tone. “I’m afraid there are some contractual discussions still to be addressed. I would request that you and the other models not leave the table until we’ve gone over everything.”

I glanced to the side. Cade Huntwell was already walking away, heading for the grand staircase leading to the lower decks... and Em.

NINE

Gabriel

IT CERTAINLY HADN'T taken long for the hairline cracks in this operation to start showing. Beside me, the attractive male omega who smelled like springtime in my grandmother's rose garden had frozen like a deer in the hunter's sights, his green eyes wide and worried.

I was here for one reason, and one reason only. I didn't need an omega-shaped distraction, and I sure as hell didn't need any kind of distraction that might blow my cover. The Huntwells didn't know me—not by sight. Frankly, it was unlikely they'd recognize my real name, either. My family had simply been one of their many nameless, faceless victims.

Unfortunately, I'd always been weak for omegas in distress. Also, there was a small but nonzero chance that this missing model—Emma, she'd been called—was somehow tangled up with my reason for being here. Tommy Huntwell hadn't exactly been subtle about his desire to have the organizer, Casick, check up on her, and that smarmy twat Cade had been far too eager to stick his nose in where it wasn't needed.

“Now look here...” the omega—Elijah—began. Worry soured his damask rose scent, turning the notes of spring rain into a summer storm.

I stood, addressing Casick. “You must pardon me, but I need a word with this young man as well. Don't worry, I'll be sure to return him afterward so he can sign your various contracts and NDAs.” I lifted a hand to hover behind the omega's lower back without touching him, a wordless suggestion to shift his extremely well-formed arse. “Shall we?”

The omega blinked at me, and his eyes really were the most extraordinary color, like a forest at sunrise. I supposed that sort of thing would be a distinct selling point within the modeling industry.

He cleared his throat. “Yes. Of course. I'm sorry, Mr. Casick—I'll be back in a bit.”

Casick's hard eyes followed us as I ushered Elijah away, but one of many perks of being a recently minted billionaire was that people tended not to contradict you, especially in public.

Freed from his momentary paralysis, the omega hurried in the direction Cade Huntwell had gone. I followed, my long legs allowing me to make my stride look purposeful rather than rushed.

My nervous companion jogged down the first flight of stairs to the B-deck landing. There, he paused, turning to face me. His eyes didn't quite meet mine, but he'd clearly had practice subsuming his omega instincts.

"Thanks for that," he said in his broad American accent. "Do you know where the medical, uh, infirmary thingie is on the ship?" He glanced around, but Cade Huntwell was already out of sight.

"No," I said, "but it should be easy enough to find out. First, though, perhaps you'd care to tell me what the hell is going on."

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He flinched, the movement barely detectable. “Here’s the thing. I don’t know the details myself—and even if I did, I’m not sure they’d be any of your business. But it would be best if we can keep Cade Huntwell away from my friend Emma. There’s, um, some history there, even if I’m not clued in to exactly what it is. She didn’t know he and his father were going to be here, but after that performance, I get the distinct impression they knew she was going to be here. And I can’t say I like that idea very much.”

I nodded thoughtfully. That ‘nonzero chance’ was looking more and more likely. “I see.” A steward approached us, coming up the stairs from C-deck. I flagged her down. “Excuse me. Where might I find Dr. Metzger?”

“He should be in his quarters on the crew deck, sir,” the steward replied. “Cabin C9.”

“Thank you,” I told her.

She dipped her chin and hurried away on her previous errand.

The omega glanced in the direction of the guest cabins, chewing his lower lip for a moment before he let it slide free of his teeth. “I should go check on Em. Just in case that creep Cade went looking for her directly rather than getting the doctor like he was supposed to.”

It was interesting that he considered such a possibility to be likely. Still, omega instincts were finely honed, especially when it came to danger.

“Very well. You do that. I’ll pay cabin C9 a visit and ensure Huntwell doesn’t tag

along for the examination—assuming he did, in fact, go to retrieve the doctor as ordered. If he didn't, I'll join you at your friend's cabin. Which one is it?"

I watched him waver... saw the moment he decided he needed an ally badly enough to take a leap of faith regarding my trustworthiness.

"B-5. Second from the end on the left." He licked his lips. "And, um, thanks again for doing this."

"Go," I told him, tipping my chin in the direction of the guest suites.

He nodded and hared off at a fast jog. I dragged my eyes away from his model-perfect body and started down the stairs to C-deck, wondering if there might be something useful to glean from this strange interlude after all.

Cabin C9 was buried behind the crew amenities—kitchen, dining room, break room. This section of the ship was utilitarian rather than luxurious, but it nevertheless gave the impression of being a cushy berth for those crew members who could successfully land a job here.

The entire ship was clean and well run, a shining example of the sort of thing extreme wealth could buy—or at least rent—for the week. When I approached cabin C9, the door was ajar and male voices emerged from within. It seemed my target had indeed gone for the doctor rather than making a beeline for the private room of a female model.

I cleared my throat and knocked lightly on the doorframe to announce my presence. A thin, bespectacled beta man in his sixties craned around, his bushy eyebrows drawing together.

"Yes, may I help you, Mr...." the doctor began in a pronounced Germanic accent. He



trailed off, his eyebrows rising in a question. The iron-gray caterpillars seemed to possess and independent life of their own. It was rather hard to look away from them.

“Rosencranz,” I said, making the effort. “Forgive me. I was hoping for a private word with Mr. Huntwell.”

“Can’t right now, mate,” said Cade, barely sparing him a glance. “Got this model chit to check up on. You heard.”

I stared at him.

Dr. Metzger stared at him as well, his eyebrows twisting into a new, perplexed configuration. “Normally, a doctor confers with his patient privately,” he said.

Cade looked momentarily confounded. After an awkward beat, he rallied. “Well, you don’t know what cabin she’s in.”

And you do, I thought. How interesting.

“Cabin B5,” I said helpfully, giving the pair my best urbane smile.

“Ah, thank you.” Dr. Metzger looked between us for a moment as though unsure what exactly was going on between us. Then he gathered up his doctor’s bag and straightened, giving a small cough. “If you would excuse me?”

It was clear he didn’t particularly want to leave either of us in his unlocked quarters, and I couldn’t blame him. I stepped aside, clearing the doorway. “By all means.”

He and Cade exited, Metzger closing the door firmly behind him. I let him slip past me, and then turned, cutting the younger Huntwell off before he could follow.

“Now, about that private word,” I said.

Cade shot me a frustrated glance, lifting a finger in a ‘just a minute’ gesture.

“Casick will expect a full report on the girl’s health!” he called after the departing doctor.

Metzer raised a hand in acknowledgement that he’d heard.

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I quirked an eyebrow as Cade's attention returned, reluctantly, to me.

“What's so important that it couldn't wait?” he demanded, his tone growing peevish.

I stared at this soft beta pup with his piggy brown eyes and bad combover. I'd underestimated how great the temptation would be to pound him into the utilitarian beige carpet with my fists. But that wasn't why I was here. That kind of revenge was meaningless, especially if it meant I'd be handed over to the authorities at the next port and hauled away in handcuffs, high net worth or no.

“Ah, well, we're fellow Londoners, aren't we?” I said. “You spoke of networking opportunities, and I thought we might discuss how our respective businesses have the potential to help each other. Now, what exactly is it that you and your father do?”

I watched the walls go up. Cade was stupid, but he wasn't that stupid.

“We have a diversified portfolio,” he replied in a monotone. “And... what about you? You're the crypto bloke, right?”

There were few less respectable ways to break into the wealthy classes than by being the beneficiary of a lucky bet on Bitcoin—and other rich people weren't shy about reminding me of that fact at every available opportunity.

“In a manner of speaking,” I replied easily. “I made my first ten million by investing in cryptocurrency early, and my first hundred million by shorting the subsequent crash. But I have, as you say, diversified my portfolio into other, more lucrative opportunities since then.”

Gossip would have it that those other opportunities involved Russia in ways that weren't necessarily legal. I had no idea if Cade Huntwell was privy to that kind of gossip or not.

Whatever the case, a spark of interest crowded out some of his previous frustration with me. "Is that so?"

I let the silence stretch rather than replying aloud to the inanity. Gears appeared to be turning inside his thick skull. Slowly. Ponderously. I imagined I could hear them grinding and wondered if anyone had thought to oil his brain recently.

"Maybe you should talk to my father," he eventually decided.

"What a wonderful idea," I said, aware that a conversation with Tommy Huntwell would involve considerably more potential pitfalls than a conversation with Cade, who was an idiot. I took his arm and steered him toward the main staircase. "Perhaps we should return to the top deck, and you can arrange a personal introduction for me."

TEN

Emma

A HURRIED KNOCK on the cabin door sent my heart rate skyrocketing. It was followed by the click of the electronic lock opening. I relaxed when Elijah appeared in the doorway, looking about as stressed as I felt.

"Oh, thank god," Elijah said. "He's not here."

That... wasn't the most reassuring greeting.

“Who’s not here?” I demanded, the words emerging a bit shriller than I would have liked.

Elijah ran a hand through his artfully messy hair. Though, to be honest, it was looking considerably less artful than when he’d left for dinner. He was noticeably flushed and out of breath, as though he’d run here.

“Cade Huntwell,” he said grimly. “You were missed at dinner. Your uncle told our host to send the ship’s doctor to look at you. Cade offered to go get him. I was worried the asshole might come straight here instead. They clearly know you’re on board.”

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My heart kicked hard against my chest. “Cade’s coming here?” Shit, shit, shit. I needed to get out.

But Elijah shook his head. “No, I think we’re okay. We’ve got an ally, oddly enough. A guy—an alpha—named Gabriel Rosencranz. He helped me out; offered to go find the doctor and make sure Cade didn’t tag along with him.”

An ally? Analphaally who’d randomly decided to help us?

“Why?” I asked cautiously.

Elijah gave me a sheepish shrug. “My A+ flirting skills, I guess? I talked to him at dinner before the shit hit the fan. He’s pretty hot.”

I spent a few seconds trying to take that on board. “O...kay?”

“But the doctor is still coming here, I assume,” Elijah continued. “How good were you at playing sick to get out of school when you were a kid?”

I thought back to my childhood, which had been unconventional, to say the least. “It never really c-came up.”

Elijah digested this. “Wow. England must be pretty different from the States. Okay. Just, um, tell him you’ve got really bad seasickness, I guess. That you didn’t want to come to dinner because you were afraid you might hurl on a multi-millionaire.”

I drew breath to say that’s not even a proper plan, but I was interrupted by another

knock at the door.

“Ms. Huntwell?” The voice was muffled and sounded German. “My name is Dr. Metzger. May I come in?”

Elijah was frowning. He mouthed the words ‘Ms. Huntwell?’ at me, but there was no time to try and explain about my name. At least he already knew I was related to Tommy and Cade, so it shouldn’t have come as a complete shock.

There didn’t seem to be any way to avoid Dr. Metzger without bringing even more attention to myself. I mouthed ‘sorry, it’s complicated’ to Elijah and went to open the door.

“Hi,” I said, trying to sound suitably pathetic.

Metzger had a sort of ‘Albert-Einstein-with-a-better-barber’ vibe going on. He was carrying a leather satchel, and his wild gray eyebrows were drawn together in concern.

“Hello, my dear,” he said. “I understand you’re not feeling well?”

I belatedly wrapped an arm around my stomach, hunching my five-foot-ten-inch frame to something less impressive. “Uh, yes. That’s right.”

“Well, I’ve come to take a look at you, in that case.” Metzger squeezed past me into the cabin. “Let’s see what the trouble is.” His gaze fell on Elijah, his frown deepening. “If you would excuse us for a few minutes, young man?”

Elijah crossed his arms and didn’t budge. “Actually, I think it would be best if I stayed.”

Sudden humiliation at having dragged my innocent roommate into this slow-rolling disaster flooded me like a tidal wave. “No, it’s all right.”

Green eyes pinned mine. “I’ll leave if you want, Em. But I’ll be right outside, okay?”

The humiliation burned hotter. “Okay. Thanks.”

Another hard stare at me, and Elijah left. On his way out, he flipped the inside security latch on the door so it couldn’t close completely, leaving a one-inch gap and ensuring the main lock wouldn’t automatically engage.

I steeled myself and turned to the doctor. “Sorry, whatever this is, it hit me earlier this afternoon. I’m sure it will pass.”

“No harm in doing a few diagnostic tests,” said the doctor, placing his bag on the end of the bed and unzipping it.

I submitted to a stethoscope, temperature check, eye, ear, nose, and throat examination. Metzger hummed and muttered to himself throughout the exam.

“No sign of fever or infection,” he said, straightening. “I’ll need to take a blood sample next—”

I flinched back. “No. No blood sample.”

It would take an in-depth pelvic exam to tell visually that I was an omega—but a blood test would also make it pretty damned obvious.

He hesitated. “Are you afraid of needles, dear?”



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“Yes, that’s it,” I lied, jumping on the excuse. “Absolutely t-terrified. I faint dead away every time.”

“You have merely had unskilled medical professionals before,” Metzger said. “I promise it will be very quick—”

“I said no!” I interrupted, before consciously moderating my tone. “I... I think it’s probably just seasickness, all right?”

Metzger’s expression turned cool. “If you’re concerned about what other things a blood test might show, I already know you’re an omega masquerading as a beta, Ms. Huntwell. Your cousin informed me.”

In that moment, I didn’t have to feign nausea. My stomach flipped and then dropped like a stone. I’d grown up with enough gangsters to recognize ‘that’s a nice secret you’ve got there, it sure would be a shame if something happened to it’ when I heard it.

“My name is Emma Hope,” I whispered, hating how weak it sounded.

Metzger waved the words away. “It hardly matters what you choose to call yourself, child. You’re here for one reason, and it isn’t to hide away in this cabin pretending to be ill.”

Somehow, I didn’t think the one reason he was referring to had anything to do with a lingerie modeling contract.

“Elijah?” I called. “Could you come back in here, please?”

Elijah appeared in two seconds flat, and I could have kissed him for that. He shot a cautious look at the doctor.

“D-Doctor Metzger was just leaving,” I managed.

I watched as the doctor looked between the two of us, assessing whether it was worth the effort to push things further. After an uncomfortable beat, he packed away his instruments and removed a small pill bottle from his bag, placing it on the bed.

“Take two of these for the nausea and go join the others on deck,” he said. He picked up his satchel and sidled around Elijah, giving him a wary berth. On his way out the door, he added a final parting shot. “I’m sure your family is eager to see you.”

I probably blanched at that. At least, it felt like all the blood had drained from my face.

Elijah closed the door firmly behind him. The lock clicked, and he hooked the security latch arm in place for good measure.

“What the fuck,” he said. It didn’t sound like a question.

“Cade told him who I was.” I rubbed at my temples, trying to force back the incipient headache. My hands shook. “And also, that I’m an omega.”

There was a pause.

“Well, that sucks,” Elijah said. “What do you want to do now?”

I let my hands fall to my sides. “I have no idea.”

“I don’t think Ted Casick and your creepy relatives are going to let you hide in here much longer.”

“I know,” I snapped, and immediately felt bad for it. Flopping down to sit on the edge of the bed, I dug the heels of my hands into my eye sockets. “Bloody hell.”

After an awkward beat, Elijah sat next to me, the side of his leg pressing against mine.

“I have a suggestion,” he said, sounding hesitant.

I gave my eyes a final rub and looked at him. “What?”

He blew out a breath. “I think we should see if Gabriel is willing to claim both of us as his personal arm candy for the rest of the week. He’s loaded, and he’s an alpha. Plus, he’s already proven his ability to keep your cousin in line.”

I frowned, uneasy. “What do you mean?”

Elijah shrugged a shoulder. “He told me he’d keep Cade from following the doctor here, and he did. These rich dudes are only on the yacht because they want one-on-one time with a hotmodel. Or multiple hot models. If we attach ourselves to him, maybe it’ll keep the others off your back.”

“And you trust him after knowing him for, like, five minutes?” I asked, skeptical.

“He helped us when he didn’t need to, and he did everything he told me he’d do,” Elijah replied simply.

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I scoured my brain for alternate ideas and came up empty.

“Which one is he?” Because if this involved shagging some bald, married dude with a beer gut, I was going to need a lot more alcohol than I’d managed to drink so far.

“Young Daniel Craig,” Elijah said with relish.

I wracked my brain, my memory of the afternoon hazy. Then an image popped up. Blond, thirties, posture like someone had shoved a ramrod up his spinal column.

“Oh. He came aboard just before my uncle and c-cousin did, right?”

“Yup,” Elijah agreed. “I was just about to point him out to you when you freaked and ran off.”

I winced. “Sorry about that.”

Elijah sighed. “It’s looking more and more like you had good reason to worry.”

I licked my lips, considering the options. There weren’t many, so it didn’t take long.

“Okay. I can get behind a few days of Young Daniel Craig. What’s his name again?”

“Gabriel Rosencranz.” Elijah pushed himself to his feet. “Come on. Get dressed before anyone else decides to show up at the door, and let’s go find him.”

Reluctantly, I climbed the stairs to the top deck with Elijah. We’d managed to miss the breakup of dinner. The guests and models had split into pairs and small groups.

The sound of laughter and conversation filled the air, the scene illuminated by hundreds of small lights strung around the lounge area.

Elijah pointed out Ted Casick, the organizer, and steered us well clear of him. From the sound of it, both of us would be on his shit list now. But Casick was the least of my problems, and Elijah had no interest in the Secret Boudoir gig anyway.

After a circuit most of the way around the deck, Elijah stopped me with a hand on my arm. “There,” he said, jerking his chin toward a quiet corner under the main awning.

I followed the gesture and saw Uncle Tommy and Cade deep in conversation with a blond man who must have been Rosencranz.

My misgivings swelled. “Why is he talking to them?” I whispered.

The sight had given Elijah pause, as well. “I mean... he did say he’d keep them away from you? I guess this is one way to do that.” He straightened his shoulders. “Maybe you’d better stay here. Let me handle the sales pitch.”

This did nothing to lighten my misgivings, but the hell was I walking up to Tommy Huntwell and propositioning an alpha I didn’t know from Adam right under his nose.

“If you’re sure.”

Elijah looked less sure than someone about to march into a lion’s den, but after a short hesitation, he nodded. “One alpha seduction coming up.”

I watched as he donned insouciance like an old coat and crossed the distance to the three men lounging in the corner.

“Evening,” he said, when all three looked up.

Cade and Tommy looked irritated. I couldn't see Rosencranz's expression; his back was to me.

"Ah. Mr. Bardot," Rosencranz said. His accent was practiced RP, not too different from mine. "Good evening. To what do we owe the pleasure?"

Elijah smiled his catalogue model smile—the one that convinced people they wanted to buy whatever he was selling. "I just wanted to let you know that my friend is feeling better. I was hoping the three of us might get to know each other."

The blond alpha's response was lost beneath the pounding of blood in my ears, because at Elijah's mention of his 'friend,' Tommy Huntwell's small gray eyes narrowed. He immediately began scanning his surroundings—and I was poorly hidden, standing almost directly in front of him. I saw the moment he noticed me. His icy gaze latched onto me, pressing down on me like a crushing weight.

The message behind that gaze was crystal clear.

Revenge.

### ELEVEN

Gabriel

WELL, THIS SITUATION just got more and more interesting. Tommy Huntwell hadn't reacted overtly to Elijah Bardot's approach, beyond appearing mildly irritated by the interruption. I'd been about to put the omega off, suggesting a meeting at a later time—but I'd barely started speaking when the other alpha's gaze had narrowed, staring at something behind me.

Huntwell's expression twisted into something that could only be described as feral, and that was enough to have me glancing over my shoulder, following the direction of his glare.

My glimpse of short, platinum-dyed hair and elfin features was fleeting as the woman who'd drawn Huntwell's ire ducked behind a structural pillar and out of sight. My main impressions were 'tall,' 'pale,' and 'terrified out of her mind.'

Tommy Huntwell's voice drew my attention back to my immediate surroundings. His somewhat disturbing scent markers of cordite and fresh snow had sharpened noticeably—a predator honing in on prey.

"Cade," he said, "you need to go and see Mr. Casick about the matter we discussed earlier."

Cade gave him a lugubrious blink. "But we were talking business."

“Now,” his father said, and Elijah flinched almost imperceptibly at the hint of an alpha bark in his tone.

“Fine,” Cade grumbled, heaving himself out of his chair.

He headed off in the direction of a larger group of people on the foredeck, moving away from the woman—the mysterious Emma Hope—lurking in the shadows behind me. I wasn’t at all certain Cade had even noticed she was there.

Not for the first time, I wondered how betas managed to survive, with as much of the world as they missed on a daily basis.

I would have given a lot to know what matter the Huntwells had been discussing with Ted Casick—but whatever it was, it apparently involved Ms. Hope. This impression was strengthened by the silent S.O.S. flashing behind Elijah’s green eyes. It was an expression that very clearly said help.

I hadn’t become a billionaire without learning when to pivot, and I did so now.

“On second thought, Mr. Bardot, it’s too nice an evening to spend talking about trade deals. Mr. Huntwell, as we have all week, perhaps we could discuss the potential synergy between our respective businesses at more length another time.”

Huntwell seemed more preoccupied with the figure in the shadows than the conversation I was abandoning. He’d successfully shuttered his earlier vengeful expression into something neutral, but his close-set gray eyes still focused over my shoulder rather than on my face.

“Yes,” he said absently. “Another time.”

“So, drinks?” Elijah asked, too fast and too bright.



“Lead the way,” I told him, rising. I didn’t offer to shake hands with Huntwell before departing. Some things were simply a bridge too far. Instead, I gave him a curt nod.

Elijah made a beeline for his companion’s less than stellar hiding place. He didn’t slow as he gathered her up, heading toward the bar.

“Gabriel Rosencranz, this is Emma Hope,” he introduced without stopping. “Emma, this is Gabriel. I don’t know about either of you, but I need a stiff drink.”

“G-god, yes,” Ms. Hope muttered, a slight stutter marring her BBC accent.

“Saying it’s a pleasure to meet you would probably be a bit facile... at least before I find out exactly what you’re getting me into,” I said.

“If you’re playing silly buggers with the Huntwells, it’s more about what I c-can get yououtof,” she shot back.

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“Drinks first,” Elijah said. “For god’s sake, try to act natural, both of you.”

He pasted on a smile and sidled up to the bar. I was reasonably sure I saw his long, copper-colored eyelashes flutter at the bartender. “Vodka and tonic, please,” he requested, before turning back to us. “What’ll it be for you two?”

I gestured for Ms. Hope to order first.

“A Fairy Godmother, please,” she said, making me feel both old and hopelessly out of touch, since I had no idea what that was.

“Bourbon on the rocks,” I said.

We waited while the bartender made the drinks with a flourish. The Fairy Godmother apparently involved absinthe as well as a slew of other ingredients. It arrived a less putrid shade of green than absinthe straight from the bottle would have been, at least.

Elijah handed our drinks to us, and I was struck again by how tall they both were. Perhaps that was another unwritten rule of the modeling industry, but there were only a few inches of difference between myself and Ms. Hope, while Elijah and I were nearly of a height. I led the way to an unoccupied section of the railing near the bow of the ship, looking out across an unbroken expanse of moonlit waves.

“Well,” Elijah said awkwardly, “this is nice.”

Apparently, he’d hit the boundaries of whatever forward planning had gone into this little venture.

“Yes,” Ms. Hope agreed. “Um. Pleased to meet you. Thanks for d-doing this.”

With her back to the main part of the deck, her shoulders looked as tense as though she expected someone to physically tackle her from behind. The faintest hint of blackcurrant from her cocktail tickled my nose along with the stronger smell of absinthe, mixing with the now-familiar rosewater scent of Elijah’s pheromones.

We stood, sipping our drinks, with Elijah intermittently attempting banal small talk to defuse the increasingly awkward atmosphere. I returned his volleys to the extent necessary not to leave the poor bloke twisting in the wind, but small talk had never been my forte.

When the drinks were finished, I raised an eyebrow. “Would it better serve your purposes for me to invite you both back to my cabin?”

They exchanged glances. I could sympathize with their conundrum. Follow an alpha they didn’t know back to his room? Or stay out in the open, where the Huntwells could easily find them?

“That might be safer,” Elijah said.

Ms. Hope gave a single, tight nod.

I shepherded them back to the main staircase, stopping only to exchange pleasantries with a few people who’d probably discovered how rich I actually was and wanted tonetwork. God, how I hated that kind of thing, even though it was a necessity in business.

Elijah sparkled in the presence of other people, though I imagined I could see the hairline cracks in his façade. Ms. Hope, by contrast, appeared to be past the point of professional masks. No doubt she was as skilled as her companion in selling an image

during better times—but whatever mess she was wrapped up in, it had stripped her of that ability, at least for the moment.

I unlocked my cabin door and ushered them inside. There was no way to close it completely without the electronic lock engaging. Unfortunately, we needed to have a serious conversation, and I didn't want any passing betas listening in through the gap.

"I'm sorry about the lock," I told them. "If you want to leave at any point, just say so. But if you're staying, I expect some answers."

Ms. Hope crossed her arms—an unconscious defensive posture. The smell of roses and rain already filled the cabin, but the alluring hint of absinthe and blackcurrant still clung to her. Perhaps she'd spilled a bit of the drink on her white sheath dress, given how badly her hands had been shaking.

"I think you'd better tell him, Em," Elijah said. "We're a bit short on allies, here."

Ms. Hope huffed and turned away.

"The Huntwells aren't good business partners," she told the jade-inlaid wall. "They do have a business back in London, but it's not exactly what you'd call..."

"Legal?" I suggested. "Yes, I'm aware. What's their interest in you?"

Her shoulders stiffened, though she didn't move otherwise. "Tommy Huntwell is my uncle. He and my father didn't get on, to put it mildly."

"I see." I slotted that information neatly into place. "Elijah said you didn't know they were going to be here, but they knew you were here."

Her shrug was a jerky thing, like a marionette controlled by a clumsy puppeteer.

“Looks like it.”

Elijah cleared his throat. “Could they have, I dunno, manipulated you into accepting this gig somehow?”

At that, she turned. “I don’t see how.” But her gray eyes—the same color as Tommy Huntwell’s, now that I thought about it—looked haunted.

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I had the sense that she was still holding quite a bit back, and I debated how hard to push for all of it. The woman looked like she was one wrong question away from bolting like a startled deer.

Deciding that it wasn't worth spooking her into running out of the cabin—and possibly straight into her uncle's arms—I backed off. I knew better than most people what the Huntwell crime syndicate was capable of.

Indicating the luxurious suite, I said, "You might as well make yourselves comfortable. I need to take care of some work and email my nightly check-in, but please help yourselves to the television and the minibar."

"Actually..." Elijah began, before I could disappear into the small adjoining office area.

I paused, turning back to them. "Yes?"

God. None of the other vapid beta models on this yacht held the slightest appeal for me. That sort of thing was very much not why I was here. But even I couldn't deny that these two were beautiful in a way that had nothing to do with makeup and avant-garde clothing.

Elijah looked like he was about to choke on his next words. "We were... uh... wondering if you'd be willing to take us off the meat market for the rest of the cruise."

"Classy," Ms. Hope muttered. "Way to sell it, there."

Elijah hurried on. “This kind of gig is as much about selling dates with hot models as it is about fashion contracts. And, I just thought, if you staked a claim on us, that would keep the Huntwells away from Emma.”

At the words ‘stake a claim,’ my traitor of a cock gave an interested twitch. I buried the unwanted reaction beneath memories of Theresa’s sweet, innocent face.

Not why I was here, damn it.

Elijah was still talking. “And please understand that I am in no wayspeaking for Emma. But if you agree to this, I’ll do my best to make it worth your while.”

He looked a little sick, and Ms. Hope’s gray eyes went wide and shocked. “Elijah! You don’t have to—” She cut herself off with a sharp shake of her head. “If we need to make that kind of deal, I’ll be the one to make it. Not you.”

She met my gaze head-on for the first time, and I couldn’t prevent the slight, unhelpful lurch of my stomach.

File this under ‘not how I expected my evening to go.’

“No deals of that kind will be necessary,” I said firmly. “I’m willing to play your game, mainly because it helps me, too. I don’t need additional distractions, and if I’m seen to be taken by you two, I won’t have to fend off other people’s advances.”

Because these two weren’t distracting at all...

Ms. Hope looked at me warily, as though trying to gauge my sincerity. She exchanged another glance with Elijah, who gave her a cautious nod.

“All right,” she said. “That’s what we’ll do, then. Appearances only. No

distractions.”

The little niggling sense that told me when I was being an idiot stirred from its home in my subconscious.

“Then we have a deal,” I said. “Will you be wanting to stay here rather than in your own cabin?”

“Yes,” Ms. Hope said quickly. “I doubt they’d dare come at me here in your quarters.”

The niggling sense of idiocy niggled harder.

“No doubt you’re right,” I told her. “Let me walk you both to your cabin and you can pack whatever you’ll need for your stay.”

Which was how I found myself standing outside the firmly closed door of guest cabin B5 like a complete berk, trying not to listen to the muffled voices coming from within. I blamed alpha hearing for my lack of success in that venture.

“Are we making a mistake?” Ms. Hope’s voice vibrated with tension.

“Coming on this cruise at all was a mistake. This is damage control.” Elijah’s tone sounded grim and businesslike.

“I’m really sorry I dragged you into this, Elijah.” The words were accompanied by the sound of fabric rustling, followed by a zipper.

“I dragged myself into it, dove. We’re here now. Let’s just concentrate on getting through this and getting off the damned boat.”



Footsteps moved deeper into the cabin. More rustling and clinking followed. Then, the sound faded to stillness.

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“Elijah?”

“Hmm?”

“I... I c-can’t find my pills.”

Now, the sounds coming from the front of the cabin went quiet as well.

“You don’t mean...”

More frantic clinking.

“Someone’s b-been through my things. They’re not here!”

A second set of hurried footsteps moved toward the back of the cabin.

“Are you shitting me? Someone came in here and stole your pheromone suppressors?”

A jolt kicked me in the chest. Another puzzle piece slotted into place. Emma Hope was an omega in hiding, and her uncle must know that.

“It’s worse than that!” Her voice sounded panicked now. “They took my heat blockers! Elijah, I’m d-due in less than a week!”

TWELVE

Emma

I SEARCHED FRANTICALLY through my belongings as Elijah rushed into the bathroom. Everything was ever so slightly disarranged, like I'd stepped into a parallel dimension in a sci-fi movie.

"You came out here when you're due for a heat?" Elijah stopped in the doorway, bracing both hands against the frame as though he needed the support. "Em, for god's sake, what were you thinking?"

My hands trembled, sending bottles and vials rattling against the marble vanity. "It shouldn't have mattered! I d-don't have natural heats, not ever!"

That's what the blockers are for, I wanted to scream at him, knowing that none of this was Elijah's fault. All of it was mine. My fault, and my fucked-up family's.

"Dove," Elijah said, as though speaking to a frightened wild animal, "if this is your first natural heat in however long, it's going to be a real bitch. Suppressors can really mess you up if you take them too many times in a row."

Panic was already thrumming along my nerves. I didn't do heats, damn it. My whole adult life had been one long battle against anything that ripped away my control. My stutter. My pheromones. My family—the parts of it that had survived, anyway.

And topping the list, my omega heats.

I could not go into heat while trapped on this boat full of perverted old men, with Tommy and Cade stalking me like a pair of hunters on safari. My vision started to gray out at the edges, and I realized I was breathing too fast. Hyperventilating.

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Grasping at the things I could control, I started box breathing. Inhale for a count of four, hold for a count of four, exhale for a count of four, hold for a count of four. A throbbing pain had taken up residence in my head, courtesy of stress or absinthe or both.

A knock sounded at the cabin door, nearly making me jump out of my skin.

Elijah startled as well, his head whipping to look over his shoulder. “Crap. That must be Gabriel wondering what’s taking so long. I’ll go stall him.”

I managed a wordless nod, still fully involved in trying to keep my world from spinning completely off its axis.

Elijah hurried to the cabin door. I heard the lock click, and the faint creak as it opened.

“Sorry,” Elijah’s voice filtered back to me, full of contrition. “We brought a truly obscene amount of luggage. It’s a model thing.”

“Unfortunately, it appears you’ve also underestimated how acute alpha hearing can be.” Gabriel’s tone was no-nonsense. My heart skittered, stuttering for a beat as the breath left my lungs explosively. “Let me in, I’m not having this conversation in the corridor.”

He’d heard us. He was an alpha, and he’d heard everything. Gabriel Rosencranz knew I was an omega, and that I was going into heat unless I could find my blockers in the next seventy-two hours. My knees wavered, and I barely managed to stumble

two steps and collapse onto the closed lid of the toilet.

“I don’t think that’s a good—” Elijah sounded weak and frightened. Of course he did. He hadn’t signed up to block the door against an alpha with more power and money than god.

“You can tell me what an entitled asshole I am inside, with the door locked,” Gabriel said. Footsteps entered, brushing past Elijah and striding through the bedroom toward my bathroom bolt hole. “Preferably, at a lower volume, so no one else passing by ends up getting an earful.”

Abruptly, I wanted a warm, safe nest more than I’d ever wanted anything in my entire life. A cozy den that no one would dare enter unless I invited them, where I could burrow under a huge pile of blankets, and scream and cry until I felt in control again.

The bathroom door was wide open. Gabriel stopped at the threshold, staring in at me with his pale brows furrowed in concern.

“May I come in?” he asked.

“No,” I quavered, huddling in on myself.

He nodded acknowledgement, though his striking blue eyes were hard. “At least this saves me having to interrogate you about what other secrets you’ve been keeping.”

“G-go to hell!” I snapped, which might have been more impressive if I hadn’t been hunched on a toilet, shaking like a leaf in the wind.

Elijah elbowed his way past the alpha blocking the door, and Gabriel let himself be moved. My omega roommate crouched in front of me, a hand on my knee as he looked up at me, trying to catch my eye.

“Hey.Hey, don’t panic, okay? We can report this to the captain of the ship, or whoever’s in charge of security. Demand they search your cousin’s belongings for your pills.”

Gabriel let out a skeptical grunt. “Anyone with half a brain will have thrown the pills overboard. And while crediting Cade Huntwell with half a brain might be generous, the same can’t be said of his father. Tommy almost certainly gave the orders to search your rooms.”

My heart sank.

“Well...” Elijah sounded mulish. “Maybe there’s an omega on the ship’s crew. We could see if anyone else has what she needs.”

I kicked gently at his shin to remind him that I was sitting right here, and even in my current state I didn’t appreciate being spoken about in the third person.

“If someone else on the yacht has heat blockers, it’s b-because they need them,” I muttered.

Gabriel shifted in the doorway. “This isn’t a productive discussion. When would you have taken the heat blocker?”

“In three days,” I said, defeated.

“And you’re already overdue for a pheromone suppressor,” he said. “I assume I would have been smelling absinthe and blackcurrant whether or not you’d had that drink earlier.”

“Not overdue,” I shot back, as though I needed to somehow convince this alpha stranger that I was capable of managing my own omega symptoms. “My stress levels

just overwhelmed it.”

It wouldn’t be accurate to say he softened, exactly, but his businesslike intensity ratcheted down a notch. “Understandable. So, a blocker in three days means you’re due in five to seven days.”

I gave a miserable nod.

“That’s going to be tight,” he said, possibly to himself. He lifted his chin, addressing both of us. “Come on. Pack up the rest of your things—all of it. There’s no time to waste.”

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I exchanged a look with Elijah—a silent conversation about whether I still wanted to hide away in an alpha’s cabin now that he knew my heat was coming on. The only thing keeping me from reassessing my earlier decision not to fling myself overboard and try to swim for it was the fact that Gabriel seemed to be finding this latest round of revelations an irritation rather than an opportunity.

“Fine,” I said. I grabbed Elijah’s hand and let him pull me up with him, surprised to find that I wasn’t feeling as shaky as before. The idea that it might be thanks to Gabriel’s alpha pheromones pumping reassurance through my omega nervous system made me simultaneously feel angry, and like I wanted to crawl into a hole and hide forever.

Neither Elijah nor I had unpacked completely, so it took less than thirty minutes to jam everything back in our luggage and pile it up by the door.

“Take what you need for tonight,” Gabriel said, picking up two of the larger suitcases. “I’ll have a steward bring the rest.”

Elijah and I each grabbed our carry-on bags—packed, by long habit, with anything we didn’t dare risk to the possibility of lost luggage. I tried to ignore the knowing looks we got from the other passengers we passed on the way back to Gabriel’s cabin, with its jade accents and lingering scents of rich moss and petrichor.

“Make yourselves at home,” he said, closing the door behind us. “I hope you two won’t mind sharing the bed.” He set down the luggage he’d been carrying and disappeared into the side nook designed as office space. His voice carried out to us, already sounding distracted. “I probably won’t sleep tonight; there’s a fair amount of



logistics involved in getting us off of this yacht in the next few days.”

Wait. What?

I dropped my overnight bag next to the bed and followed him into the office nook. “Hold on. What do you mean, getting us off the yacht?”

I became aware of Elijah hovering behind my shoulder, but my focus stayed on our unlikely would-be savior. He looked up from the laptop he was powering on, raising an eyebrow at me.

“The thing about money,” he said, with a thin smile that didn’t reach his eyes, “is that it creates almost as many problems as it solves.” A slight pause. “Almost. But every now and again, it does allow one to organize things that wouldn’t otherwise be possible. Now, if you’ll excuse me, I need to make a private call. I’ll let you know what the plan looks like in the morning.”

## THIRTEEN

Gabriel

CURRAN HAD BEEN the one to insist on nightly check-ins via email. Probably, this was because he’d grown up in the nastier parts of the London gutter, and he believed there was a statistically meaningful chance that Tommy Huntwell would decide to kneecap me and have me thrown into the Mediterranean at some point during the voyage.

While that eventuality wasn’t high on my list of concerns, there was value in having a written record of everything I’d learned, especially one that someone else could access if need be. Not that I’d learned very much of use.

I opened my VPN client and routed the laptop's internet traffic through a server in Amsterdam. Internet coverage at sea was tricky. Not that the cost was prohibitive if you were rich enough; it was just the issue of sneaking satellite hardware into a position with a clear line of sight to the sky without someone in the crew noticing it.

Better to use the mega-yacht's existing satellite infrastructure and worry about encryption at the data transmission level. Anyone trying to spy on me would find my emails and video calls disappearing into a black box in the Netherlands, giving them no useful information.

Next, I ran a check for key loggers or other spyware that might have been installed by someone on the crew with access to this cabin. When everything came up clean, I pulled up my email and typed out a quick message.

Need to speak with you about an urgent matter only peripherally related to the syndicate. Will call you in ten. I have guests in my cabin who don't need to know any details of my purpose here, so mind how you go.

I hit send and waited impatiently for ten minutes to pass, listening to the low murmur of voices coming from elsewhere in the cabin. Already, the rich scent of omega pheromones was beginning to permeate the small suite of rooms. I couldn't afford to become distracted, but I still missed the clock ticking over, scrambling to open the video calling software nearly a minute late.

Biting back a curse, I watched the red phone icon ring once before immediately turning green. A moment later, Curran Hayes' weathered face appeared on the screen, scowling at me.

"What the hell, Blondie?" he greeted.

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“We have a problem,” I said. “Something unforeseen has come up.”

“Yeah, you said.” Curran’s brown eyes narrowed, examining me through the video connection. “You did a sweep for bugs before you called me, right?”

Damn it all.

“No. Hold for a minute.”

I hauled out a metal briefcase from beneath the desk and opened it, powering up the portable RF detector and magnetic field probe with its green, circuitry-embossed wand. After methodically waving it over every surface in the office area, I stowed it again and returned to my seat.

Unmuting the call, I nodded. “It’s clear.”

Curran was still watching me like he was worried I’d been replaced by a Midwich Cuckoo. “Where’s your head at tonight, boss? You’re starting to worry me.”

“My head is eyeball-deep in plans to get two people off this yacht within the next three days, as it happens,” I said. “And by people, I mean omegas—one of whom happens to be Tommy Huntwell’s niece.”

There was a longish pause.

Then, “You’re kidnapping Huntwell’s niece? Pardon my French, but what the fuck?”

I tamped down my irritation with Curran's inability to read my mind from fifteen hundred miles away. "They're estranged. She didn't know Tommy and Cade were going to be on the yacht, but it's looking more and more like they may have lured her here for unknown but probably nefarious purposes. She's been hiding as a beta. They got into her cabin to steal her suppressors and heat blockers. She's due in less than a week."

Another pause, shorter this time.

"Oh.Balls."

"To put it mildly," I agreed.

"And the other one? You saidtwopeople."

"A male model friend of hers. I don't think he has a direct connection to any of this, but I can't exactly leave him behind to face these arseholes alone."

Curran huffed. "You do realize that Onyx and I are in London, your yacht is moored in Lisbon, and you're off the coast of Greece?"

I swallowed a growl. "I'm aware, thank you."

"Just checking."

"There's a reason I pay you two as well as I do," I pointed out. "Pull out the bank card; make it happen. I don't care how. Oh, and bring heat blockers with you."

Curran looked like he'd taken a bite out of an unripe persimmon. "I'm tellin' you right now, boss—I don't think it's feasible. Not in three days. Four, maybe."

“Make it feasible,” I said, past the sinking feeling in my chest. If it could be done in three days, Curran would have said so. He wasn’t the type to lower expectations so he could look like a hero for coming through early.

He didn’t comment on my sharp remark.

“What about the rest of it?” he asked instead. “You walking away?”

Acid burned in my stomach. “I don’t know yet.”

Curran grunted. “Better figure it out pretty damned fast, then. I’ll keep you posted.”

With that, he disconnected the call.

He was right, damn it. I was here for proof; some kind of leverage to use against the oily snake in the grass who’d taken my sister. I wouldn’t get that proof by abandoning ship—literally—halfway through the week. But I also risked blowing my cover completely with this stunt, unless I played things very, very carefully.

The eccentric billionaire persona might conceivably stretch to cover absconding with two desirable omega models during the middle of the cruise—especially if enough money changed hands with that slimeball organizer from the lingerie company, Casick. If I was right, he was in this trafficking scheme up to his eyeballs, and he might not care who was buying the merchandise as long as the price was right.

Sending the omegas away and staying behind myself would look a lot more suspicious, though. This ruse only worked if I was a love-struck alpha beguiled into irrational behavior by the attentions of two irresistible omegas.

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Setting it aside for now, I closed down the laptop and stared at it for a long moment. The soft voices from the other room had gone quiet. Pushing away from the desk, I rose and went to check on my unexpected guests.

I found them both on the bed, fully clothed, with all the lights off except for a single bedside lamp. Ms. Hope—Emma—was fast asleep, draped against Elijah's side with his arm around her shoulders, looking younger now that the lines of stress at the corners of her eyes had eased.

Elijah was awake. His startling green eyes fixed on me, unblinking.

"You already knew the Huntwells," he said.

He'd been eavesdropping, of course. I could hardly fault him after I'd done the same thing earlier. Honestly, I'd expected it—that's why I'd warned Curran to keep things vague.

"Should we take this conversation elsewhere?" I asked quietly, indicating the sleeping girl in his arms with a tilt of my chin.

"We're roommates," he said. "Trust me when I say that a nuclear bomb wouldn't wake her up right now, thanks to jet lag, plus stress, plus absinthe."

I nodded, accepting it. "Yes. The Huntwells have a history with my family. I'd prefer not to discuss the details."

"A bad history, though?" he asked. "And if that's the case, how come you're

buddying up to Huntwell Senior?”

I debated how much to say. “I’m confident you’ve heard the old adage, ‘keep your friends close’—”

“‘But keep your enemies closer,’” he finished. “Right. Next question. I appreciate the fact that you’re helping us out... but if we get in the middle of whatever your deal is with Emma’s uncle, how likely are we to end up at the bottom of the ocean, feeding the fishes?”

It was close enough to my own musings earlier that I couldn’t prevent a snort from escaping.

“How likely is it that you’ll end up taking a swim if you don’t accept my help, given that the Huntwells already appear to have a grudge against your friend?” I shot back.

“I don’t honestly know,” Elijah replied. “It may be hard to believe, but this is my first brush with the London mafia, or whatever you guys are.”

I bristled at being lumped in with the men I was hunting, but I also doubted any protests I might make would do much to convince him.

“In your position, I’d be a great deal happier getting off this yacht in a few days than sticking around to find out what Tommy Huntwell’s endgame is,” I told him.

Elijah winced. “Fair. I’m not sure a few days is going to be soon enough, though. Not for her.” He looked down at his sleeping bedmate.

I had no answer to that—mostly because if it wasn’t soon enough, I had no earthly idea what to do next.

## FOURTEEN

Emma

I WOKE UP feeling as though I'd downed an entire bottle of absinthe rather than a single cocktail. How had I ever managed to sleep through the night? I'd thought I'd end up staring at the ceiling until dawn, given all the terrifying things hanging over my head.



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It was definitely a bad sign when the prospect of being destitute and homeless within the next couple of months barely even rated a mention. Right now, I was more worried about getting through the next week with my skin intact.

Fortunately, despite my throbbing head and fuzzy, foul-tasting mouth, my brain immediately supplied me with the basics of where I was and who I was with. I was in an alpha's cabin. His rich pheromones permeated the space—right down to the bedding I was lying on. Elijah was somewhere close, his sweet floral scent weaving together with the heavier notes of alpha musk.

As if my thoughts had summoned him, my roommate poked his head around the fancy room divider. “You’re awake. That’s good. Splash some water on your face and come out to the private deck. The door’s just on the other side of that little office nook. There’s breakfast, and hopefully an update from His Highness, the Duke of Moneybags.”

“Um,” I said brilliantly, but he’d already disappeared.

In the absence of better options, I dragged myself out of the alpha's bed and hauled my overnight bag into the alpha's palatial bathroom. Some of Elijah's toiletries shared space with a razor, a toothbrush, a comb, and some simple, unscented styling product.

I wondered what it was like not to require fifteen separate bottles and jars just to function in a professional setting.

Sour stress pheromones were still squeezing out of my pores in the absence of my

suppressors, so I took the world's fastest shower and pulled on a simple caftan dress before padding out to the small section of open-air seating walled off for use by this cabin's guests. Calling it a deck was misleading; it was more like a little balcony recessed in the ship's hull. It contained three deck chairs, a small table, and a spectacular ocean view, though.

The salt-tinged breeze was refreshing at this hour, even if it held the promise of heat and humidity to come. Elijah was sprawled in one chair, attacking a plate heaped with eggs, fried potatoes, bacon, and waffles. He swallowed an improbably large mouthful before greeting me with a "Morning, dove—help yourself," before diving back in.

Gabriel Rosencranz rose from the second chair as I stepped onto the little balcony, offering me a sharp nod as he moved to uncover the selection of dishes on the table. I tried not to appreciate the way his rumpled shirt gaped open at the neck, or the way his rolled-up sleeves revealed sinewy forearms and a breadth of muscle that wasn't terribly obvious beneath his well-tailored linen suits.

"Good morning, Ms. Hope," he said, handing me an empty plate. "I hope you slept as well as could be expected, given the circumstances."

I took it from him, noticing the lines etched deeper around his bloodshot eyes, hinting at a long night spent staring at a screen rather than sleeping.

"Better than you did, I suspect," I told him. "And you should probably call me Emma, if you're p-playing the role of my new sugar daddy."

"As you like, Emma," he said. "And of course, you may call me Gabriel."

"Not Gabe?" I asked, attempting to distract myself from the way his voice sounded, wrapping around the syllables of my name.

His expression soured, though I thought I detected a hint of self-mockery there, too. “Preferably not.”

“Gabriel it is,” I said lightly, dragging my focus back to the long list of things I really didn’t want to think about. “Elijah said there was news?”

“Of a sort,” he said, reseating himself on a deck chair that had been adjusted into the most upright possible position.

I placed a piece of dry toast on my plate and wavered for a moment before adding a slice of bacon. Pouring a small glass of orange juice, I took my breakfast to the remaining chair and sank down on it, placing the juice next to me on the hardwood deck.

“Go on,” I prompted, taking a bite of toast.

“I have two trusted employees attempting to arrange a rendezvous at sea within the next few days,” he said. “Unfortunately, logistics are not in our favor, since they’re in London and my own yacht is in a different part of the Mediterranean.”

“A few days,” I repeated slowly.

“It’s the best I can do, I’m afraid.” He didn’t look happy about it. “For what it’s worth, they’ll be bringing along heat blockers for you, and they’re well aware of the urgency of the situation.”

“It could still work out all right, Em,” Elijah said around a mouthful of waffle. “Especially if you’re a day or two late. You know how heats are.”

I did not, in fact, know how heats were. I’d made it my life’s work not to know how heats were. Even so, I grabbed the lifeline being thrown to me.

“Okay,” I said. “Thanks for that. And... after we get on your emergency lifeboat? What then?”

“We can drop both of you off in Athens,” Gabriel said. “You’ll need to wait around for a few days, but I assume your return tickets were part of whatever contract you signed to come out here in the first place.”

Elijah set his now-empty plate down. “Yeah, we checked last night that they hadn’t been cancelled or anything. We should be okay if we can find a cheap hotel near the airport.”

I wasn’t sure that cheap hotels near the airport were really a thing in Athens. I also wasn’t sure what I was supposed to do if I did manage to get back to New York safely. The first half of the payment for this gig from hell had bought me a little time, but after this disaster, I could guarantee there wasn’t going to be a second half. I was also going to find myself without an agency, once it became obvious that I’d bailed without even making a token attempt at getting a contract with The Secret Boudoir.

This might be the final nail in the coffin for my modeling career. If Uncle Tommy knew I was in New York, maybe it was time to get on a bus to somewhere with a lot of cows and cornfields, where I could try to reinvent myself. There were probably places in middle America where I could live on a waitress’s salary until I figured out something better. I tried not to think about what it would feel like to say goodbye to Elijah, and Jessica, and all the other people I’d come to know since I’d moved to New York.

“Earth to Emma,” Elijah said, frowning. “Emma, please respond.”

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I wrinkled my nose at him, abruptly recalled to a yacht cruising off the coast of Greece, where I was days away from going into a heat I didn't want while surrounded by people who apparently wished me ill because of who my father had been.

"Stop it," I told him. "I'm listening."

Gabriel raised an eyebrow at me—one that clearly conveyed I hadn't been. "I was asking if you'd prefer me to make a fuss with the yacht captain regarding the break-in and your missing items. I'm more than happy to do so, but it seemed presumptuous to act without your permission."

Anger over the entire situation rose up like bile, hot and unexpected. Pre-heat mood swings for the win. I didn't like how appealing it felt to let the big, strong alpha take care of this for me... but I also couldn't face the stress involved with slinking in and trying to do it myself. The omega hiding as a beta, whining to an authority figure that someone took my pills, when I'd been using those same pills to misrepresent myself to the people who'd organized this cruise in the first place? No, thank you.

"Yes, go ahead," I said, defeated. "Not that I expect it to do any good, but..."

"They should at least be made to feel uncomfortable for letting it happen," Elijah finished for me. "Here, here." He lifted a half-drunk glass of orange juice in an ironic toast.

I lifted mine in return and drained it.

"Consider it done," Gabriel said. "Now, if you'll excuse me, I prefer to deliver my

bollockings early in the day. Will you two be all right here?”

“In your luxury cabin with room service and a private deck?” Elijah asked. “I expect we’ll muddle through somehow until you get back.”

“Indeed.” Gabriel glanced at his watch—a Rolex, if I was any judge—and nodded. “I’ll be as quick as I can. I’d suggest not opening the door to anyone while I’m gone.”

I couldn’t help the shiver that ran down my spine at his words.

Half an hour later, I stood in the spectacular walk-in shower, taking advantage of it properly after my quick rinse earlier that morning. The rainforest showerheads poured warm water over me, washing away the dregs of sleep and worry. At least, they washed away the dregs of worry until I realized that I was fantasizing about having both Elijah and Gabriel in here with me, their hands sliding soapsuds over my bare, heated skin. Gabriel would press his body to mine from behind, his callused hand slipping over my flat stomach and delving lower—

I jerked back to awareness with a gasp, my heart and pussy throbbing in time with each other.

“Fuck,” I whispered, leaning my forehead against the cool respite of the marble surround. Not yet. Not yet. I just needed to hold on for a few more days.

## FIFTEEN

Gabriel

CAPTAIN CARVALHO WAS a no-nonsense beta woman with cropped jet-black hair and tanned, weather-beaten skin. Her English was spotty, while my Portuguese was essentially non-existent, so we’d been relying on a cabin boy with a decent

knowledge of both languages to get our points across.

“The captain says she will ask the crew if anyone saw anything,” said our erstwhile translator. “But if there is no evidence of a break-in—damage to the lock, belongings scattered, that sort of thing—then there is very little she can do beyond that.”

Ted Casick was also present for this awkward, impromptu meeting. He’d been propping up a wall, listening to the painfully slow exchange, his arms crossed over his chest.

“I have to say, Mr. Rosencranz,” he began, in his grating American accent, “if this girl was lying about being an omega in the first place, it sounds like she isn’t exactly a reliable witness.”

It was strange how Elijah’s soft Midwest drawl could be so pleasant to listen to, while Casick’s New York accent felt like nails on a blackboard to my sensitive ears. There were a number of things I wanted to say. What kind of omega would purposely lose her heat blockers in a snake pit like this... we know it was Tommy fucking Huntwell... it’s obvious to anyone with eyes that you’re neck deep in this scheme, you spray-tanned asshole.

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But saying any of those things aloud wouldn't serve my goals in this situation. There was no option but to extricate myself from this damned yacht right along with the omegas. Doing so meant there would be no witnesses to the crimes about to be committed. However, staying behind would ensure that my cover with the Huntwells ended up being well and truly blown.

"I believe her," I replied simply, before returning my attention to the captain and our translator. "Thank you for agreeing to investigate the matter. I'm sure you understand how distressing it is for something like this to happen, given the guests' expectation of privacy in their own cabins."

I hadn't meant it as an implication that I suspected a member of the crew—but based on the hardening of Carvalho's expression as the cabin boy passed on my words to her, that's how it had been received.

Diplomacy—international or otherwise—was definitely not my strong suit.

The captain bit out a short sentence in Portuguese.

"She says we'll keep you informed," said the cabin boy.

After a brusque farewell, the captain returned to her duties, our translator darting out of the room at her heels. I swallowed a sigh and turned back to Casick.

"If you have a few minutes, I'd like a word," I said. "It's a matter only tangentially related to this other...unpleasantness."



The CMO's gaze sharpened with interest. "Would this matter have anything to do with the only two omega models on the boat having moved into your cabin yesterday?"

He'd been paying attention, then. Not really a surprise, under the circumstances.

"It does," I replied. "I've been led to understand that it may be possible to, how should I put this... 'buy out' a model's contract with The Secret Boudoir?"

Casick raised an eyebrow. "One model's contract? Or two?"

I could practically see the accounting calculations running in his head.

"Two," I confirmed. "Apparently they come as a set."

The man's lips twitched, and a snort of amusement escaped him. "Alphas and their harems," he said. "Middle Eastern sheiks have got nothing on you guys."

I took a moment to imagine punching Casick in his flabby gut, indulging my rough-and-tumble East End roots before placing the impulse firmly back inside its box.

"We prefer the term 'pack'," I said mildly, not bothering to point out that the ratio generally ran several alphas to one—or sometimes two—omegas, not the other way around. One alpha trying to satisfy multiple omegas during a pack heat sounded like a quick—if potentially enjoyable—route to an early heart attack.

"Right," Casick said. "Like wolves, huh?" He tapped the side of his nose knowingly. "Well, since you ask—normally, this sort of negotiation happens a little later in the week. But for the right price, I'm sure we can make an exception. There's a slight catch, though..."

He trailed off.

“Yes?” I prompted, trying not to let my impatience show.

“You see, we normally require our models to sign a rather extensive set of legal documents at the beginning of events like this one.” Casick examined his nails. “Unfortunately, I still don’t have signatures from either of the omegas. As I recall, the girl was feeling ill that first evening, and the boy left the dinner meeting rather... abruptly, you might say.”

He was needling me purposely—we both knew I’d been the one to abscond with Elijah before he could sign anything.

“That shouldn’t be an issue,” I said evenly, refusing to rise to the bait. “I’ll simply ask them to sign the papers now. Perhaps you could have someone bring the contracts to my cabin later?”

“That can be arranged,” Casick said, his tone equally bland. “Now, I suppose we should discuss the price of a double buyout.”

When I returned to the cabin an hour or so later, I didn’t even have to open the door to know that we had a problem. Emma Hope’s sharp absinthe and blackcurrant scent was seeping into the corridor, tickling my nostrils and going straight to my cock and balls.

I willed the reaction away with more difficulty than I cared to admit and knocked before letting myself in.

Elijah looked up. “Hi. Any luck with the captain?”

I closed the door and slipped off my jacket, feeling abruptly too warm as I glanced at

the second figure hunched on the bed, a hot water bottle pressed to her stomach.

“I’m afraid not,” I said. “In fact, I may have given her the impression I was accusing a crew member of the theft. In my defense, there was a pretty significant language barrier.”

“I didn’t expect her to do anything,” Emma said, sounding as miserable as she looked.

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I nodded. “I know. Anyway, she’s aware of it; she said she’ll ask the crew if anyone saw anything suspicious.”

“Y’know, there’s a decent chance itwassomeone in the crew,” Elijah said. “Who did the actual breaking and entering, I mean. Think about it—the door locks automatically, and it wasn’t forced. With all the money floating around on this yacht, it wouldn’t have taken much at all to bribe some poor employee with a high credit card balance or gambling debts.”

“That’s true,” I allowed. “But either way, I wouldn’t hold my breath waiting for the perpetrator to be dragged to justice. There isn’t much justice to be had in company like this.”

“You don’t know the half of it,” Emma muttered.

She was wrong, though. I very much did.

“There’s something else we need to discuss,” I told them. “And I’m afraid there’s no way to sugar coat it. I’ve taken steps to expedite our departure once Curran and Onyx manage to reach us.”

“Okay...?” Elijah said slowly.

“But I’ll need both of you to sign the contracts that the rest of the models signed on the first night,” I continued. “No matter what sort of outrageous quasi-legal horse shit is buried in the fine print.”

Emma's delicate brows drew together, and she straightened partway from her dejected slouch. "What kind of quasi-legal horse shit do you expect to be hidden in the fine print?"

Anger coiled in my gut. "The kind that binds you into a legal obligation that's barely one step up from indentured servitude, and then allows a third party to buy out those rights without your knowledge or agreement, thereby absolving The Secret Boudoir of any further legal liability for you."

"Dowhat, now?" Elijah asked in alarm. "That's... that's not how modeling contracts work!"

"No," I agreed, "It's not. But it is one of the ways that international human trafficking rings work."

## SIXTEEN

Emma

HUMAN TRAFFICKING. Maybe I should have been more surprised, but somehow, I couldn't summon any emotion other than resignation. Uncle Tommy had always berated my father for his unwillingness to steer the Huntwell syndicate deeper into the sex trade.

Elijah mustered enough outrage for both of us. "Sex traffickers! We're stuck on a yacht with fucking sex traffickers?"

"Hopefully not for much longer," Gabriel said calmly.

He always seemed to be calm. I didn't think I'd ever heard him so much as raise his voice during our admittedly brief acquaintance. Did that icy control ever break?

God, I felt awful today. My body had been swinging back and forth between the extremes of red-hot horniness and feeling like I had the flu, all of it combined with the worst case of beta PMS imaginable. I clutched the hot water bottle closer to my aching uterus.

“Why the hell would we sign these contracts now that we know what’s in them?” Elijah demanded. By contrast, he was about as far from icy control as it was possible to get. An erupting volcano made a better comparison.

“Because doing so will make it simpler for me to get both of you off this ship,” Gabriel replied.

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Was he this way when he had sex, I wondered idly—all cold and self-contained? Or did he lose control and turn into a beast? My cramping passage gave an unhappy throb, and I gritted my teeth.

“No offense,” Elijah was saying, “because I know you’ve already helped us out when you didn’t have to. But the reality is, we don’t know you from Adam! Why are you even here, if you’re not in on the scheme? I can’t imagine these people would invite a bunch of randos aboard if they’re busy selling sex slaves on the side.”

Gabriel’s grim little smile didn’t come anywhere near his glacier-blue eyes. “Gaining an invitation to this function—” He practically spat the word. “—required more work than I care to think about. But I assure you, I didn’t come here as a buyer.”

Elijah paused, the gears in his head turning visibly. “Wait. Are you some kind of undercover cop? Like, Interpol or something?”

A sudden certainty coalesced in my mind, though I couldn’t have said why or how. “No. This is personal for you, isn’t it?” I forced myself to meet his alpha gaze without letting on that the effort set off fireworks in my belly. “You might as well tell us. You already know my secret. And I don’t think Elijah’s going to sign those papers without knowing yours first.”

It was a pure guess on my part. But Gabriel knew my uncle. Knew him and hated him. How many people had Tommy Huntwell hurt over the years? How many lives had he destroyed?

I watched the alpha silently debating how much to say.

The change in Gabriel's scent signaled his capitulation before his expression did. He took in a deep breath through his nose, his nostrils flaring, and let it out slowly.

"My sister," he said with obvious reluctance. "She was an omega. She was kidnapped by a splinter group of the Huntwellcrime family when she was twelve years old. We never saw her again. The missing persons case is still technically open, but the police told us years ago to make our peace and mourn her, because she was almost certainly dead after a decade of that kind of life."

My heart ached for yet another victim of my messed-up family.

Elijah fumbled for a chair and sat down abruptly. "Oh my god." He swallowed. "So, you're... what? On some kind of mission of vengeance?"

"I'm on a mission to see that Tommy Huntwell and anyone associated with him goes down," Gabriel said, as though that was a perfectly reasonable sentence. His eyes fell on me, his pale brows twitching. "Present company excepted, of course. At any rate, you can rest assured that I have no interest in buying and selling human beings, when that's how I lost my baby sister."

Elijah looked gobsmacked. He sat in the chair, his arms hanging limp at his sides. "Fuck. Fucking...shit."

"Quite," Gabriel replied.

I wasn't sure if my next words were because my higher brain functions were shutting down in the face of my hormones, or because it seemed unfair to hold it back, knowing what I now knew.

"My father was Jimmy Huntwell," I said quietly. "He was shot to death when I was sixteen."



Gabriel blinked. I thought I could see puzzle pieces rearranging themselves behind his startled gaze.

“Jimmy Huntwell,” he echoed. “The head of the Huntwell syndicate before Hugh Rathbone took over.”

I nodded, curling tighter around my hot water bottle. “Tommy and my father never saw eye to eye. Tommy wanted to expand into the sex trade. My father insisted the syndicate stay focused on other ventures that were... less illegal, I guess you’d say.”

“But also less profitable,” Gabriel finished.

I shrugged agreement.

“Rathbone is rotting in prison after he tried to fly too close to the sun,” Gabriel said. “That means there’s an opening at the top of the organization.”

A shiver wracked me. “And Tommy’s trying to t-take it.”

That didn’t surprise me in the least. He’d been spitting mad when Hugh Rathbone moved into the power vacuum after my father died. He must have been biding his time all these years.

“Yes,” Gabriel confirmed. “He’s here to make allies. The economics of this cruise don’t make sense otherwise. This yacht cost ten million—at a minimum—to lease for the week. They’re not going to recoup that outlay by selling a handful of high-end sex slaves to a ship full of wealthy bastards. No... this is a networking opportunity. How better to gather a group of traffickers in one place than to offer up prime merchandise in a discreet venue?” He seemed to suddenly realize how that might sound to his current audience of two. “Er... no offense.”

But Elijah was too focused on me to have registered the slight.

“Emma. You never told me any of this.” He looked bewildered. Even hurt.

“I don’t tell anyone any of this,” I shot back, refusing to feel guilty about it.

“Yeah? Well, it still might have been nice to know... especially after you realized your uncle and cousin were aboard.” The hurt was more obvious now.

My moratorium on guilt flew out the window. “I know. I’m sorry.” I gulped a deep breath that did nothing to ease the tightness in my chest. “It was safest if you never heard the words Huntwell crime syndicate. You were no threat to them if you were just another random model.”

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“Threat?” He scoffed. “Nah, apparently I’m just a piece of meat they’d like to sell.”

“Unlikely.” Gabriel’s voice was a monotone. “I looked you up. You have a thriving career. You’d be missed. Most of the models here are struggling. In fact, I’m rather surprised you’re here at all.”

I winced as the ‘struggling’ barb hit home.

“I invited myself,” Elijah said. “Or, rather, I pressured my agent into doing it for me.”

Gabriel frowned. “Why?” he asked, sounding bewildered.

“To keep an eye on me,” I said miserably.

The alpha looked between us. After a moment, he softened. “I see.”

I tried to un-mire my brain from the quicksand of approaching heat. “So, if we sign these contracts, then you’ll have bought us? And you’ll get us off this boat with you?”

“Essentially, yes,” Gabriel said in a cautious tone. “Obviously, I’ll release both of you from this sham of a legal agreement immediately afterward. Not that it would stand up in the courts of any civilized country to start with.”

I turned to Elijah. “I think we should do it. Uncle Tommy won’t go after you if you’re already bought and paid for.”

He scowled. “He won’t go after me? What about going after you?”

I lifted a listless shoulder and let it drop.

Gabriel cleared his throat. “If he was the one who lured you here, it seems likely that this is the punishment he intended for you. Sexual slavery, with the added degradation of being in a vulnerable state as an omega in heat.”

My gorge rose. I swallowed the bile back down.

Elijah shot out of his chair and started pacing. “This is crazy.”

“I think we should do it,” I said again, my voice a hoarse rasp.

Running a hand through his messy hair, Elijah gave a jerky nod of his head. “Okay. Okay, if it gets you off this yacht, I guess that’s the most important thing right now.” He rounded on Gabriel and pointed at him accusingly. “Do not make me regret this, Moneybags.”

Gabriel only raised an eyebrow.

Ted Casick showed up in person the following morning with the contracts. I’d swung back to the desperately horny end of the spectrum overnight, but where Gabriel’s presence made me want to crawl into his lap and lick him, Casick’s made me want to vomit.

His cologne gave me a headache, the cloying scent mixing with the room’s comforting atmosphere of roses and the deep woods after a thunderstorm, souring it. His open curiosity and the way he kept sniffing the air in my direction had me wanting to scream and dig a hole straight through the deck plating so I could disappear.

Gabriel hid it well, but I thought I could sense his displeasure every time Casick glanced my way. Elijah just looked terrified.

“Here we are.” Casick set down two manilla folders on the desk. “If you could both initial and sign in the yellow highlighted areas...”

“I’m not comfortable signing this without knowing what it says,” Elijah said quickly.

This part had been scripted, so that Gabriel could get a chance to read the contract in detail—and it was all the more effective since Elijah’s reticence was unfeigned.

“It will be written in lawyer-speak,” Gabriel said, with the air of someone comforting a highly strung pet dog. “I’ll look it over for you if you like.”

Elijah hesitated before nodding... also scripted. “Okay.”

I kept silent but gave a similar nod.

“Not a very talkative one, are you?” Casick asked me with a smarmy smile.

Gabriel gave him an unblinking stare that apparently reminded him of whose property he was currently ogling, because Casick coughed, his cheeks coloring.

“Yes,” he blustered. “The contract. Here you are, though I assure you it’s all perfectly straightforward and aboveboard.”

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I swallowed the disbelieving scoff that tried to escape, hunching down in my chair as my guts chose that moment to cramp with fresh discomfort.

Gabriel opened the manila folder and began skimming through the contents page by page. He rested an elbow on the table, absently clicking the expensive-looking pen held loosely in his hand as he flipped pages.

“Hmm,” he said. “Yes. This all seems to be in order. Please sign, both of you. You have the addendum ready, Mr. Casick?”

“That’s the one where you contract us to model for your company, right?” Elijah asked, still dutifully playing his role.

“That’s right,” Casick said condescendingly. “Can’t have the one without the other.”

We initialed and signed, though the shakiness of my hand was bad enough that a jury might have had a difficult time proving the signature was actually mine. When we were done, Casick took the completed contracts and settled back in his chair with a satisfied smile.

“There, all finished,” he said. “Such a lot of fuss over nothing.”

“Indeed,” Gabriel replied blandly. “Thank you for brokering the deal. You should know that I have a craft set to rendezvous with the Titania in two days. As much as I appreciate your hospitality, we’ll be departing as soon as it arrives.”

Casick frowned, his smug expression collapsing. “Leaving? That’s...” He searched

for a word. "... highly irregular."

Gabriel gave an unconcerned shrug. "I don't see why. Our business here is completed, isn't it?"

Casick glanced down at the contracts in his hands. "Well, yes, but—"

"Excellent." Gabriel cut him off. "I'll inform the captain once I have a firm ETA. Thank you for your assistance, Mr. Casick. Now, I believe Ms. Hope is feeling unwell. Perhaps you could excuse us."

Casick gaped like a fish for a couple of seconds, and if I'd felt less like death, I might have enjoyed it. At Gabriel's pointed look, he rose and stammered something about informing him of the details before we left. Gabriel escorted him out of the cabin and returned a minute later, looking grim.

"Well, that's done." He gave me a critical once-over, and his frown said he didn't like what he saw. "With luck, Curran will have those rendezvous details for me tonight—" he began.

Unfortunately, my stomach chose that moment to flip-flop like an amusement park ride. I scrambled for the eleganten suite, and barely made it to the toilet in time to empty my stomach contents into the cool porcelain bowl.

## SEVENTEEN

Curran

"BOATS. IT JUST had to be a bloodyboat, didn't it." I scowled at the gently rolling blue waves surrounding us in all directions.

Onyx looked up from the charts spread out on the desk. “I told you to take some Kwells for nausea before we left, old man.” The Australian accent—barely softened, even after several years spent in London—added an extra layer of snark to the pronouncement. “If you’re seasick, it’s your own fault. Also, it’s a sloop, not a boat. Boats don’t cost this much to hire.”

“I’m not seasick,” I groused. “I just don’t like boats.”

Onyx made a scoffing noise and went back to the charts. I suppose I was lucky my fellow bodyguard had a background in sailing, otherwise I would have been stuck hiring additional crew to run the damned sloop. And considering we were likely to have an omega in heat on our hands on the way back to port, I was happier not having to deal with strangers in close quarters.



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“Am I supposed to be, I dunno, trimming the mainsail or something?” I asked, impatient to be getting on with it.

“No,” Onyx said, more firmly than seemed strictly necessary. “We’re anchored, you great wally. Look here. If the wind holds, and if the boss man’s right about the Titania’s speed and heading, we should be able to reach them tonight.”

“Good,” I replied. “Does that mean we can finally get this thing moving?”

Onyx grunted an affirmative, unfolding their lithe, six-foot four-inch frame from the stool they’d been sitting on while hunched over the charts. Twenty-eight years old to my early forties, tawny skinned next to my London pallor, and with their short-cropped kinky hair dyed a vibrant yellow, about the only thing Onyx Sun and I had in common was that we were both alphas. That, and we’d both suffered enough of a mental lapse to end up working for a rich, self-destructive wanker with a vendetta against a crime family whose members would happily put a bullet through his brain at the first opportunity.

My excuse was that I’d known Gabriel Rosencranz since he was a pup—the daft idiot. I’d known his sister Theresa, too. I wasn’t sure what Onyx’s excuse was. The money, probably. Gabriel paid well.

Willis, my former partner, had retired a couple of years ago. When a half-Black, half-Chinese, non-binary Australian expat with bright yellow hair had showed up to apply for the position as his replacement, I hadn’t expected all that much. I’d been wrong about that assumption—although I still had no idea how Onyx had even heard about the job opening in the first place. It wasn’t as though we’d put out a want ad in the

newspaper.

I should remember to ask sometime.

Now, though, we had other things to worry about. “So, do you need help with all the rigging... stuff, or not?”

“Nah, mate.” Onyx rolled sleek, well-muscled shoulders and twisted their neck from side to side, vertebrae popping audibly. “See if you can reach the boss man on the satellite link and update him on our ETA. If I need an extra pair of hands, I’ll let you know.”

With that, they jogged up the steep, claustrophobic staircase leading to the deck, leaving me alone in the cabin.

I sighed and pulled out the laptop. Communication had been enough of a pain in my arse when we’d had a solid internet link on my half of the connection. Now we were both reliant on satellite, and only one of us was on a fancy superyacht. The forty-foot sailboat we’d managed to hire in Piraeus was... not a superyacht, to put it mildly.

I’d managed to pry a few more details out of his nibs while we were en route from London to Greece, but I wanted to talk to these omegas directly. God only knew how Gabriel had managed to reach the age of thirty-four while still being such a clueless prick, but someone needed to address the elephant in the room.

Wishing really hard that the girl Emma’s heat would hold off until we got there would make fuck-all difference to the outcome. We had the heat blockers Gabriel had requested—but if it was too late for blockers to work, trying to take them anyway would only make the whole mess worse. Someone had to bring up alternatives and apparently, as the only adult in the room, that was my job.

The satellite link took its sweet time connecting, but eventually, my call went through. Gabriel and his two acquired omegas had been sequestered in his cabin for the last couple of days, so it didn't take long for him to accept the call.

His stupid, serious face appeared on the screen, glitching and lagging for a couple of seconds before the video settled.

"Yes?" he snapped, and all it took was one look at him to know we weren't going to be feeding this girl a blocker pill and sailing on our merry way.

Christ. The poor wanker had probably never been stuck in a confined space with an omega coming into heat in his life, and it showed in the tense lines etched around his eyes and mouth.

"Hello to you, too," I greeted. "We're headed your way. Onyx says if the wind stays good and your coordinates are accurate, we'll reach you sometime tonight. How's the girl doing?"

Gabriel shot a harried look off camera. "Not great. She's resting."

Somehow, I doubted that, but whatever. "I need to talk to her. To both of them, actually. Get them on screen for me, eh?"

He scowled. "What? Why do you want to talk to—" he began, only to break off at my sarcastically raised eyebrow. "Oh. I see. Just a minute."

Good. He might be clueless, but at least he wasn't that clueless.

The screen image jerked and froze again. When it unfroze, two figures were sitting down in front of it, pressed close so the webcam showed them both. My heart clenched. God, they were so young.

“Hi,” I said, modulating my tone to something better than my habitual gruffness. “You must be Emma and Elijah. I’m Curran. In case you didn’t hear it earlier, Onyx and I should reach you sometime tonight. But before we get there, we need to talk about your heat, Emma.”

There was no other way to describe it—the poor girl looked terrified. Her huge gray eyes were red-rimmed, and not just from lack of sleep. She’d been crying.

“Do you have the heat blockers?” she asked quickly.

“I do,” I told her. “But we still need to discuss other contingencies. When would you have normally taken them?”

“Yesterday,” she said, with clear reluctance.

“And from the looks of it, your heat’s coming on early.” I wasn’t proud of the way the words made her wince, but I also wasn’t willing to dance around it.

I met the lad’s gaze through the screen. The video chose that moment to stutter again, but I still saw his tiny, grim nod of confirmation.

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“Here’s the thing,” I went on. “If you try to take blockers too late in pre-heat, all they’ll do is make the whole thing a hundredtimes more miserable for you. Gabriel says you’ve been using blockers for a long time, right?”

“I don’t have natural heats,” Emma gritted out. “Ever.”

She sounded scared and angry. Fresh tears welled in her bloodshot eyes.

There was probably something in her background that had caused her to make that decision on a totally rational basis, but stubborn denial about the situation wasn’t going to serve her now.

“I hate to be the one who has to say this out loud, sweetheart,” I told her, as kindly as I could. “But it looks like you’re about to. And I also apologize for this next question, because I know it makes me look like an asshole. I’d be more of an asshole if I didn’t ask it, though. Elijah, in your judgement, is Emma still able to make rational decisions about what she wants?”

Elijah looked ill, but he nodded. “She is, yeah.” In reaction to Emma’s look of outrage, he muttered, “Sorry, dove. I know why he’s asking, though.”

I filed the endearment away for future reference, because this would be a lot easier if there was at least one person present that Emma had reason to trust.

“Good,” I said. “Here’s the thing. If I’m right, and we’re too late for blockers, you still have a few choices to make. First, you can lock yourself in one of the cabins here on the sloop with Elijah on guard duty at the door, and tough it out. Second, if you

and Elijah have the kind of relationship that wouldn't make it too awkward afterward, you can both lock yourselves in with a bag full of sex toys, and he can try to help you through it."

Emma's already large eyes bugged further, while ruddy patches darkened Elijah's tanned cheeks.

"Third," I went on inexorably, "you'll have access to at least two, and possibly three alphas who understand the meaning of 'no strings attached,' if you want us. Because this heat is going to be rough after so long on blockers, and giving your body what it truly needs is the only way it's going to be anything other than awful for you."

I could only imagine what Gabriel's pasty face looked like, since he was off-camera. It didn't matter. I wouldn't push the issue if Emma Hope wanted to suffer rather than spend a few days with alphas she didn't know. But I'd damned well offer her a better option in hopes that she'd take it, because I knew what years of blocker use could do to an omega's biology.

No one deserved that kind of shit.

"You don't need to answer now," I went on, before either of the omegas managed to overcome their shock. "Talk about it privately and tell Elijah what you decide, Emma. We'll take his word as yours if it comes down to it. Anyway, Onyx and I are bringing prophylactics as well as the blockers, so you'll be covered whatever you decide."

"I don't even know you," Emma rasped, and dear god, did I feel for the girl.

What a fucked-up corner to be backed into.

"I get that," I said, as gently as I could. "But you know Gabriel a little, by now. Him

and me and Onyx—we're as good as pack. And the most important thing is that whatever you decide, that's what we'll do. Dunno how much my word is worth to you in a situation like this one—but you have my word on it. Just let us know what option you want to go with.”

On screen, the two omegas exchanged a long, shell-shocked look.

## EIGHTEEN

Elijah

THIS WAS NOT the kind of responsibility that anyone should have for another person, ever... and I was coming apart at the seams.

Emma and I were locked in Gabriel's cabin while he conferred with the yacht's captain about the rendezvous at sea. My nerves were thrumming, partly because it turned out transferring people from one ship to another at sea was freaking dangerous, even when one of them wasn't half-delirious with oncoming heat... and partly because if Tommy and Cade Huntwell wanted to do something about us leaving, they'd have to make their move soon.

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Apparently, the yacht's captain was less than thrilled with the transfer, and she had made her feelings known. Strenuously.

Em's pheromones were spiking, her distinctive fruity absinthe scent filling the cabin like an old-fashioned London fog. It was screwing with my brain, trying to convince my instincts that coming along for the incipient fuck-fest sounded like a spectacular idea. I had no clue how Gabriel had managed to maintain his icy calm for the last twenty-four hours.

I needed some of that same calm, though, because I was officially the person charged with making sure Emma didn't end up hurt, traumatized, abused, or pregnant. Or, for that matter, mysteriously lost at sea after becoming a disposable sex doll for some rich bastard and his two bodyguards.

My gut said we could trust Gabriel, and by extension, Curran and the mysterious Onyx. But, again, my gut was also being influenced by proximity to Emma's perfume, and I couldn't be sure it wasn't my stupid instincts whispering at me to trust the hot alphas and let them take care of everything.

Just like I couldn't be sure Emma's instincts hadn't been whispering the same thing to her earlier, after Curran contacted us and baldly laid out Emma's options. Gabriel had given us privacy afterward to talk, but all Emma had wanted to do was pace restlessly in the confined space of the cabin like a caged tiger at the zoo.

"I want the blocker," she'd said. "That's still my first choice."

"But?" I'd prompted, because even then it was painfully obvious that a blocker



wasn't going to hold back the tide at this late date.

She'd hugged herself, her shoulders hunching—her jerky pacing never easing up. “But... it's just sex, right? I've had lots of sex. Lots. What's another couple of partners in the grand scheme of things?”

I wasn't proud of the relief I felt in that moment, but I also knew that a few days of constant sex toy use wasn't going to cut it. If she'd asked for me to help her through her heat, that just would have meant listening to her crying and begging for the real thing until her body finally gave up on the prospect of getting pregnant and her heat petered out, unfulfilled.

Not a fun time for anyone involved.

“Just so we're crystal clear on this,” I'd said, “you're saying if it's too late for the blocker, you'll accept help from the alphas?”

She'd given a tight nod, not looking at me, her restless feet finally stuttering to a stop. “Yes. But only if the blocker won't work.”

God, I thought, if you're out there, please, please let these alphas be trustworthy.

Fast forward to the present, and Em was back in her familiar hunch on the bed, rocking back and forth with a pillow clutched to her stomach. Her face was flushed, and tears tracked steadily down her cheeks.

I crawled onto the bed and knelt in front of her, not touching. I knew all too well the way an omega's body could swing back and forth between craving touch and being repelled by it in the run-up to heat.

“Hang on, dove,” I said, knowing it wouldn't really help. “They're going to be here

any minute now, I'm sure of it."

She didn't look up, her face twisted in a grimace of discomfort. The cramps must be getting worse, which wasn't a good sign.

A knock sounded at the door—two slow, three fast, two slow. Gabriel. The lock clicked a moment later as he used his key card. I turned in time to see him hesitate in the doorway as though he'd hit a brick wall.

Pheromones again.

He recovered quickly, clearing his throat. "They're here. They've dropped anchor on the port side. Time to leave."

I rose from the bed. Emma remained frozen, her eyes fixed on Gabriel, pupils dilated until they almost swallowed her gray irises.

"Em," I prompted.

She blinked and rose on shaky legs, not protesting when I darted out a hand to steady her.

Gabriel seemed to be holding himself very still. Then, he, too, blinked free of his reverie. "The luggage is waiting down by the swim deck. They hired a forty-foot sailboat, so there should be enough stowage to take everything with us. Just as well—I'm not in any real hurry to leave these people a forwarding address."

"Let's go, then." I was a nervous wreck at the prospect of putting Em in these alphas' hands, but staying here on this floating snake pit in the sea wasn't an option.

It was the middle of the night, and under other circumstances, that might have spared

us some of the gawkers. Unfortunately, this was a boat full of models and rich would-be playboys, so there were still people up and partying. Emma cringed and pressed closer to me every time someone turned and stared, her instincts on high alert.

She needed to be curled up in a warm, private nest right now, not on display in front of a bunch of freaking strangers with her asshole of an uncle lurking god-knew-where.

Instead of going up to the top deck, we were headed down. Silly me, I'd assumed that two ships at sea pulled up close to each other and lowered a gangway between the decks to transfer passengers. It turned out, trying to do it that way was insanely dangerous and only really happened in emergencies.

Instead, they dropped anchor a short distance apart and ferried people back and forth in dinghies, assuming the conditions were calm enough. That felt more dangerous to me, not less... but what did I know?

At least we could both swim. Looking good while diving into a pool was practically part of the job description for models.

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The captain was waiting for us, overseeing the transfer personally. She didn't appear pleased. A young kid in a steward's uniform who looked like he was still in his teens was standing next to her. I recalled that Gabriel had told us Captain Carvalho didn't speak much, if any, English.

"They're taking the last load of luggage over now, sir," said the kid, addressing Gabriel. He snuck a curious look at Emma, tucked against my side with her face hidden against my neck. I tried to glare back at him, and he looked away quickly.

We stood in awkward silence until the sound of an outboard motor drew our attention. A small, three-person dinghy pulled up to the edge of the swim deck, which had been lowered to a position a couple of feet above the waterline. Floodlights from both vessels illuminated the water between the Titania and the much smaller 40-foot sailboat anchored nearby, glinting off the gentle swells of the Aegean Sea.

The dinghy's pilot tossed a rope to the young steward, who snugged the little vessel up tight to the edge of the deck. I got a brief impression of tawny skin and yellow-dyed hair as the newcomer grinned up at us. This had to be Onyx.

"Hey-ho, boss," they greeted. "Fancy meeting you here. Ready to catch a lift?"

"More than ready," Gabriel replied. "I assume it will take two trips?"

"Unless you feel like paddling along behind," Onyx agreed, tossing up a pair of life vests. "Whoever's going first, get these on."

"We'll go," I said quickly. I wasn't about to send Emma across without me, when

there'd be nothing to stop the sailboat from taking off with her. I also wasn't thrilled with the idea of us being left behind on the Titania without the protection of Gabriel's presence—even for a few minutes.

God, this whole thing was so fucked up.

Gabriel only nodded and retrieved the life vests from the deck, helping me get one on Emma and then steadying her while I strapped mine in place. I didn't miss the way she swayed into his personal space... or the barely audible possessive growl he failed to stifle in response.

Stepping into the rocking dinghy from the relative stability of the enormous yacht was terrifying. Watching as Gabriel handed an unsteady Emma down to my waiting arms was even worse.

"No worries, Rosebud," Onyx told me. "We'll get you two safely aboard the Calliope in no time. Then Curran wants a word."

I held Emma tight against my side and didn't reply. She was crying again—soft, agonized sobs that tore at my heart.

Faster than I expected, the dinghy sidled up to the back of the sailboat. There was no swim deck, only a short ladder. Onyx moored the little craft firmly to one of the rails, and a face peered down from above us.

I recognized Curran from our video call.

He gave Emma a quick once-over and frowned. "You'd better hand her up to me. Not sure I want her trying to climb a ladder on her own."

It wasn't much of a greeting, but I couldn't exactly argue since I didn't want her

climbing a ladder either. Onyx and I supported Emma and helped her reach up to where Curran grasped her wrists, lifting her onto the sailboat as though she weighed nothing.

This close to the dinghy's Australian pilot, I caught a whiff of clean spruce and bayberry, my stupid omega instincts immediately relaxing in response to alpha pheromones without a hint of anger, fear, or stress in them.

Dragging my head on straight, I climbed up behind Emma, accepting a steadying hand from the middle-aged male alpha at the top as I clambered onto the deck.

"Get 'em settled, yeah?" Onyx called up. "I'll be back in a few minutes with the bossman."

"Don't drop him overboard," Curran called back, deadpan.

Subtle amber and myrrh replaced Onyx's clean forest scent as the wind shifted. My brain was performing a series of wholly unwelcome flip-flops, and I couldn't afford that, damn it.

"Thanks for doing this," I said cautiously, aware that it was in both our interests to keep these alphas well-disposed toward us.

"Thank us in a few days, if we manage to get her through this shit untraumatized," Curran said. "Come down to the cabin, Elijah. Let's get her as comfortable as we can. Then you can tell me what she decided."

Without ceremony, Curran scooped Emma into his arms and led the way toward the bow. She was still crying, but she clung to him like a limpet and buried her face in his neck as though she'd known him for years.

Or... as though she was scenting him. Christ, she was scenting him.

I hurried after them.

The staircase leading belowdecks was narrow and steep, but Curran eased Emma's body sideways and didn't so much as bump her ankles against anything. I followed them down, passing by a compact galley and dining area to a larger space bounded by built-in seating.

The entire living area had been strewn with pillows, cushions, and blankets of all description. I came to an abrupt halt, staring, as Curran waded through the profusion of soft goods and lowered Emma into a protected corner where two of the built-in couches met.

The scents hit me an instant later. Bayberry and spruce, amber and myrrh—infusing the blankets, the pillows, and sundry articles of clothing that had been draped over the backs of the couches.

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It was a nest. They'd made Emma a nest on a rented sailboat in the middle of the Aegean Sea. Emma backed up tight into the corner and curled into a ball, hugging her knees. Curran gave her temple a soothing stroke and turned to find me gaping down at him like a fish.

"Right, Elijah," he said. "Let's have a serious talk."

### NINETEEN

Emma

I NEEDED TO stop feeling like this. My awareness swam in and out of focus. One moment, I could pay attention to what was around me—night air, saltwater, glaring spotlights—and the next, everything dissolved into a sea of scents and feelings and aching desire.

It was terrifying. I couldn't stop crying, not even when strong arms lowered me into a pile of soft cushions, sturdy walls at my back so nothing could sneak up behind me. The scent of two alphas made my head spin, almost succeeding in covering up the faint, stale scents of other random people who'd been in this space over the past weeks.

A new cramp wracked my gut, and I hunched over, clutching my knees close to my chest as a small whimper escaped. Roughened fingers stroked gently over my temple, a tantalizing brush of coolness in the midst of my sweltering heat. I tilted my head, chasing the sensation.



“Right, Elijah,” said a gruff voice in the half-forgotten cadence of home. “Let’s have a serious talk.”

“I need the blocker,” I said, before Elijah could draw breath to answer. “Give me the blocker, now!” I couldn’t let my control slip any further than it already had. I needed the pill that would make everything feel normal again... that would make this stop.

Two pairs of eyes landed on me, and my chin tipped sideways, showing throat before I could stop myself. I jerked my head down, averting my eyes—my heart pounding.

“She’s too far gone,” Elijah’s voice said. His rose-and-rainwater scent wafted together with the scent of the alphas, sour with worry and stress. “There’s no way a blocker will work now.”

What... what was he saying? That couldn’t be right! He was supposed to be on my side!

“Give me the pill!” I demanded, hating the shrillness of my voice. “Give it to me!”

I choked on a sob, wrenching one arm free of its death grip on my knees with the intention of scratching my nails across Elijah’s worried face. I couldn’t do this without the pill. I couldn’t!

A strong hand caught my wrist before I could strike out, and I snarled at the face that loomed in front of mine. The cool fingers from before returned to cup my cheek, and my snarl turned into a whimper, dying in my throat.

The face was careworn, with fine wrinkles at the edges of the eyes and mouth. A plain face... pleasant enough, but almost nondescript, with unremarkable brown hair and brown eyes. There was nothing nondescript about the scent, though. It was the rich scent of an antique chest in the family attic, opened for the first time in decades

to reveal its fascinating secrets. Amber and myrrh, exotic and addictive. I swayed forward, desperate to scent him again.

“Emma.”

My name in that familiar East London drawl tipped me back into coherence. I stared, probably gaping at him like a fish. His thumb smoothed over my cheekbone, smearing tears. A name floated up. Curran.

Curran and... and Onyx had come to rescue us from the yacht before my uncle could do anything terrible to us. More terrible. So, this must be their boat, with its cushions and blankets on the floor of the cabin, and two reassuring scents threaded through the air.

“S-sorry,” I whispered, clenching my fingers so my nails weren’t curved out like talons, ready to rip and tear.

Control. I had to keep control.

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“S okay, dove.” Elijah’s tone was laced with anxiety. So was his scent.

Curran ducked his head until I reluctantly met his gaze. “You’ve done nothing to apologize for, pet,” he said. By contrast, his scent was clean and free of negative emotions. Reassurance distilled into a little glass perfume bottle. “But we’re telling it to you straight. If you take a blocker now, it won’t stop your heat. You’ll just be trying to throw up your own toenails the whole time. We’re in the middle of miles of saltwater, and there’s no medical support nearby. I won’t be giving you the blocker because it would be physically dangerous for you if I did. I’m sorry.”

I tried to make the words make sense, and slowly shook my head back and forth, sensitive skin sliding against Curran’s callused palm where it still cupped my cheek.

“No,” I said, trying to sound calm and reasonable, and not like a crazy person. “No, you have to. I need it.”

But the alpha’s expression was unyielding. “You don’t need what it will do to your metabolism, Emma. Now, can you tell me what scares you so badly about going into heat? That’ll help the rest of us figure out what’s best to do to help you.”

I realized I was shivering. Why was I shivering when it was so hot in here? I licked my lips. Then I had to fight the sudden urge to turn my head and lave my tongue up Curran’s palm. Startled, I jerked my head away from his touch. He let me, his light grip falling away from my wrist as well.

He’d asked me something, I realized. What had he asked me?

“What was the question?” I whispered.

“What is it about your heat that frightens you?” he repeated patiently. “Is it because you don’t know us, or—”

“I have to keep control,” I blurted. Because that... that was important. If I ever lost control during sex—

“Oh, dove.” Elijah sounded quietly devastated. “I’ve got really bad news for you.”

“Can you tell me a bit more about that, luv?” Curran prompted.

I tried to get some moisture in my mouth, which felt terribly dry despite the ocean all around us.

“I c-can’t ever lose control. Otherwise, they’ll know.”

Elijah drew in a sharp breath. “Oh. Because you’ve been hiding as a beta.”

Curran glanced away, exchanging a look with him, then brought his brown eyes back to me and nodded. “So, you’ve been living as a beta, and you’ve had beta lovers? Is that right?”

I gave a hesitant nod in return.

“And if you’d ever let yourself enjoy it enough to come, you’d’ve clamped down on them and given the game away,” Curran went on.

I nodded again, feeling suddenly ashamed. Then I got angry at myself for the shame. And then the tears started welling up once more. My eyes ached. But then again, so did everything else.

Curran's brows drew together. "No offense, pet. But that sounds like a miserable way to be getting on." He hesitated. "Have you ever had a natural heat before?"

I shook my head. Ma had given me blockers the moment I started perfuming when I was thirteen. That had only been a few weeks before she'd died. The tears ran faster.

Curran let out a soft curse, though it was clear he wasn't angry at me, specifically. He breathed in... he breathed out. The tension in his shoulders melted, and his scent gained a deeper note of reassurance. I swayed toward him again, my brief stretch of lucidity fragmenting into sparkling fractals.

"All right, pet," he said, the words a low rumble. "You don't have to hide from us. We already know you're a perfect, beautiful omega. And around here, we look after omegas. We keep them safe, and we make sure they have whatever they need."

His brown gaze flicked from me to Elijah, who gave a stuttering little half-breath in response.

Elijah swallowed audibly. "She said earlier that she'd accept your help if the blocker didn't work. Yours and the others. But I won't let you just start...rutting on her when she's this scared. That's not going to happen."

"Damn straight it's not," Curran said. "Maybe you weren't listening a minute ago. Omegas get what they need. She's going to need us within the next few hours—and she'll need you, too, Elijah. But she also needs to be in control... so she'll be in control. Now, why don't you help her get out of this life vest. Orange isn't really a good color on either of you."

"Tell it to Louis Vuitton," Elijah muttered, but some of the sourness was fading from his scent. "Their stylists might disagree, at least for her."

Curran gave a wry snort. “Make yourself comfortable. The others’ll be back in a few minutes, I expect. Can you eat something? I imagine we’re both gonna need it.”

Elijah knelt next to me and started tugging at safety buckles. “Maybe something light.”

Curran nodded and rose a bit stiffly. “Don’t envy what you’re having to do for her today, lad,” he said. “But I admire the hell out of the way you’re doing it. And I know this may sound like a load of malarkey right now—but things really will be all right in the end.”

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Elijah's fingers fumbled on the last buckle. He steadied them and pulled the life vest off, tossing it aside. "Thanks," he rasped, settling beside me in my protected corner.

Drawn to his coolness in the face of my raging fever, I burrowed under his arm and let him pull me close, until I could press my nose against the crook of his neck and breathe in his familiar scent.

### TWENTY

Gabriel

"NOT EXACTLY HOW you thought you'd be spending the week, eh, Boss?" Onyx asked wryly. The little boat we were in bobbed on the sea's gentle swells its outboard engine letting out a low, monotonous growl.

"That's putting it mildly." I'd been trying to convince myself that there might be unseen opportunities here, and I wasn't simply abandoning my hunt for proof against my sister's abductors. It might even be true, but it didn't change the fact that I'd bailed on the investigation solely to keep Emma Hope and Elijah Bardot from succumbing to the same fate.

"And she's Huntwell's niece," Onyx continued. "That could be useful. Maybe she knows where some of the bodies are buried."

As though just realizing how that would sound to someone who'd lost a sister, Onyx's dark gaze flicked to me to gauge my reaction.

“So to speak,” I said evenly. It was unlikely I’d ever find out where Theresa was buried... assuming she’d been buried at all.

Onyx had enough sense not to dig the metaphorical hole any deeper, and I didn’t blame them for the slip. The dinghy eased up to the ladder at the back of the rented sailboat. I climbed up to the deck of the ship and unbuckled my life vest, not waiting for Onyx to finish stowing the little three-person craft on its davits before I headed toward the cabin.

The sloop appeared utilitarian rather than fancy—quite a contrast after the gaudy display of riches aboard the *Titania*. I located the stairs leading down to the interior, which someone, and by ‘someone’ I meant Curran, had turned into an approximation of an omega nest. The scent hit me an instant later, my own pheromones mixing with four others in a way that had my feet stuttering to an unplanned halt. My unhelpful dick leapt to attention, straining toward the pair huddled in the far corner of the room.

Suddenly, I couldn’t seem to get enough of that scent. Or enough air in general. Both omegas stiffened. Elijah’s eyes went wide in a way that I suspected mirrored my own, and Emma leaned forward with a low-pitched whine that went straight to my balls.

“Oh, good. You’re here.” Curran broke the moment by grabbing my arm and unceremoniously rolling up my sleeve. I blinked and tore my gaze away to frown at him. “Stay still while I give you this jab.”

I didn’t protest when he lifted a small hypodermic syringe and pressed the needle into my upper arm, dispensing its contents into the muscle.

“Should I ask?” I said afterward, rubbing the sore spot.

“Just a dampener,” Curran replied, already dumping the used syringe in an empty plastic milk container he was apparently using to store sharps for later disposal. He



turned to a small refrigerator in the galley area and started rummaging inside. “Onyx and I already took ours. Our guest is understandably ambivalent about an unplanned heat with strangers, so I’m making sure no one on our side goes into rut. We’ll still be able to help her out, but we won’t lose control.”

“Oh,” I said. The impact of the mingled scents in the cabin began to dull as the drug slipped through my bloodstream.

Curran straightened with another syringe in hand. “This one’s birth control. Elijah, have you got any experience giving intramuscular injections?”

Elijah stared at him like a deer in the headlamps. “Absolutely none.”

Curran nodded, wading through the piles of pillows and blankets strewn over the floor. He approached slowly, crouching in front of the pair. Far from seeming frightened, Emma listed forward, into his space. Elijah helped him roll up her sleeve, and she barely seemed to notice the prick of the needle. She was too busy scenting Curran’s neck.

Christ.

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I had a feeling that dampeners would only be able to do so much in this situation.

“There we are,” Curran said, stroking through Emma’s short platinum hair before gently disentangling from her and rising on creaking knees.

“Thanks,” Elijah said, still looking shell-shocked.

Onyx entered as Curran was disposing of the second needle.

“What did I miss?”

Rather than answer, Curran rummaged in the refrigerator once more. “There’s yogurt here—strawberry, blueberry, or plain. That work for you, Elijah?”

A faint hesitation, then Elijah said, “Blueberry, please.”

Curran grabbed up a plastic tub, a spoon, and a bottle of water and took it to him. When he’d handed off the food and drink, he gestured Onyx and me to the built-in sofa farthest from the omegas’ corner. We sat down, and I tried not to watch the spoon disappearing between Elijah’s lips... or the way Emma burrowed against him, nosing at his mating gland.

“Emma and I had a bit of a talk before you got here,” Curran said. “I’ve promised her that she’ll be in control of whatever happens. That means she chooses when, how, and with whom she has sex.”

Onyx gave an easy shrug. “No problem here. Just like to be useful, me.”

Curran's gaze moved to me next, and I couldn't help a hint of irritation at the idea that he apparently thought I needed a minder, just because I'd never spent a heat with an omega. Where the hell would I have found the time?

"None of us asked for or expected this turn of events," I said, keeping my tone calm since I suspected snapping at him would upset Emma. "And I'm confident all of us agree that minimizing any potential trauma to our guests is job number one."

"That we do," Curran replied with a nod of approval.

"Can we also agree that job number two is getting this boat as far away from the Titania as possible before we drop anchor?" Onyx asked dryly.

With a jolt, I realized that we were still floating within a hundred yards of the yacht, with Tommy and Cade Huntwell aboard.

"God, yes," I said, wondering if the damn dampener was working after all. Where the hell was my brain?

"Thirded," Elijah said wholeheartedly.

"On it," Onyx said, rising gracefully from the sofa. "There's a cove by one of the outlying islands about two hours away if the wind holds." A dark eyebrow arched. "I suppose you'll have to entertain yourselves without me. After all, someone has to sail the ship."

After Onyx departed for the helm, the rest of us waited for Emma to make the next move. She huddled with Elijah for a good hour and a half, watching us with wariness that slowly morphed into mindless need.

Her huge gray eyes held very little in the way of rationality, and even with the effects

of the dampener dulling her scent, it was obvious she was thinking with her hormones rather than her brain as her heat ripened. When she finally moved, it was to crawl across the space separating us until she could stalk up the length of my seated body and nuzzle against my throat, breathing in deeply.

My cock, which apparently hadn't received the memo about being dampened, twitched hard. I kept my hands loosely at my sides through an act of will, trying to ignore the rapid pounding of my heart. Damn it, nothing should smell as good as these two omegas smelled. I didn't even like absinthe.

After a torturous few moments, Emma abandoned me in favor of giving Curran the same treatment. When she'd sniffed her fill, she slid back to the floor next to him, curling up at his feet.

His hand lowered to stroke her head like a cat's. She closed her eyes and pressed her cheek against his knee while I tried not to die of whatever ailment was currently afflicting my pathetic arse. Priapism, probably.

"That's it, beautiful," Curran said in a gruff rumble. His slow petting never paused. "Take your time. Get to know us a bit while your body figures out what it wants."

A strange, low noise reached my ears, and it took a moment to place it as a rough alpha purr. My brain stuck fast on the idea of Curran...purring. Should I be doing the same thing? How did you even do it? I'd never purred in my life.

Growled? Yes.

Snarled? More often than I cared to admit.

Purred? Not so much.

Before I could follow that spiral too deep, Elijah crept out of his corner and dropped down next to me on the uncomfortable sofa, a couple of feet separating us. The dampener had also dulled the nuances of his rich rosewater scent, but it hadn't dulled his body language. His shoulders were hunched as though against an expected attack, and when he brought up his arms to wrap around his own torso, I saw the tremor in his hands.

With Curran's deep, rusty purr still trilling in my ears, I turned half toward our second omega guest.

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“Are you all right?” I asked, frowning.

“Yes,” Elijah said.

My frown deepened. “Really?”

Elijah looked away, his trembling giving way to whole-body shivers.

“No,” he whispered, so softly I could barely make out the word.

TWENTY-ONE

Elijah

DAMN IT. I WAS losing it, and I hadn’t intended to let that slip out. “I need some air,” I managed in a strangled tone. I was aware that if I left, I’d be leaving Em alone with the alphas. But, if I stayed, it would be so I could melt down in front of her.

That was worse, right?

I lunged up from the lumpy sofa and power-walked toward the cramped staircase leading to the deck—trying not to look like I was fleeing. I had to get my freak-out pheromones out of this confined space. And, more honestly, I had to getmeout of this confined space full of mingling scents that had somehow tripped a switch in my hindbrain. A switch that had no business getting tripped now... or ever.

The third alpha, Onyx, was up here somewhere. Sailing the ship, so they were

probably too busy to notice a hyperventilating omega staggering over to the nearest railing and clutching it for dear life. That's what I told myself, anyway.

The sea air—thankfully free of mingled alpha and omega perfume—slapped me in the face in a way I desperately needed. It was cool this late at night, the same breeze that filled the sails above me rustling through my hair like fingers.

No. Not like fingers. Like... something random that rustled hair and wasn't remotely sensual or alluring.

Unbidden, the image of Curran's gnarled fingers stroking over Emma's head rose in my mind's eye. They were worn and callused, those hands. Hands that had seen hard work, and maybe some fights as well. I wondered how they would feel running over my—

I drew in a sharp breath, clutching the railing until I could feel my knuckles grinding.

"Goddamnit," I whispered.

My chest ached. I stared out across the water with wide, unblinking eyes. The Titania was long gone. Out of sight, leaving the little sailboat skimming through the darkness all alone.

Alone.

I'd left Emma alone with two alphas.

My mind circled endlessly. Spiraling. The ache in my chest was getting worse. My peripheral vision had turned gray and fuzzy. I couldn't catch my breath, even though I was gasping air like a drowning victim.

“Elijah.”



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My name reached me an instant before the deep-woods scent of oakmoss and petrichor. I whirled, my lower back impacting the railing with bruising force. The deck lights illuminated Gabriel Rosencranz, crypto billionaire, pausing in mid-step with his hand raised as though to settle a wild animal.

“Easy, there. We went to a fair amount of trouble to get you here. I’d rather not have you fall overboard in the middle of the Aegean.” He let his hand fall, looking almost as out of his depth as I felt.

An ugly bark of laughter wrenched free of my throat—the kind of noise that would have any modeling agent worth their salt tearing up my contract and running for the hills. It wasn’t asanekind of laugh.

I choked it back before it could turn into real hysterics, feeling as though it burned my esophagus on the way down. “IsEmma okay?” I asked, my voice high and thready andwrong. “I shouldn’t... I shouldn’t have...”

I shouldn’t have left her alone with you.

Yeah, maybe that part didn’t need to be said aloud.

A frown creased Gabriel’s pale brows. “I’m not sure ‘okay’ really applies to the situation. But she didn’t panic when you left. Apparently, Curran has hidden depths he’s been keeping quiet. Who knew?”

“He seems nice,” I forced out.

Gabriel blinked. “That... is another adjective I have difficulty applying to the subject at hand.”

I was clutching the railing behind me so hard that my fingers hurt. Focusing hard, I peeled them free one by one and turned to look out across the water again. “If he’s a serial killer on his days off, this would be a really bad time to drop that information on me.”

There was a pause just long enough to be worrying, and then Gabriel approached the rail to mirror my pose from a couple of feet away, contemplating the starlight glinting off the swells as the Calliope skimmed past them.

“No. He’s not a serial killer. He’s a bodyguard,” said the alpha. “I’d be dead a few times over if not for him, and sometimes the job isn’t pretty.”

I digested that. Or rather, I stared blankly toward the horizon while my brain made soft gibbering noises in the background. How was any of this real?

“I gather this isn’t at all what you expected of this cruise,” Gabriel said, in the understatement of the century.

I managed to catch the insane laughter before it escaped this time, and the sound I made was more of a ridiculous, honking cough.

“Yeah. Little bit.” I held my thumb and forefinger an inch apart in demonstration.

“You were roommates in New York?” Gabriel said. “I’m not certain many roommates would step up the way you have for her.”

I rested my elbows on the rail and lowered my face into my hands, scrubbing roughly at the smooth skin. This experience was going to put worry lines at the corners of my

eyes, wasn't it? I'd have wrinkles at the age of twenty-three, and I'd never be able to get work again.

Straightening abruptly, I let my hands fall to hang limp above the passing water. "I don't know how this happened. Every time I make a decision, it seems like the only reasonable choice, and... and..." I gestured around us. "Somehow, here we are."

"Like boiling a frog," Gabriel murmured.

I scowled at him, not appreciating the way my sympathetic nervous system was backing away from the cliff in the presence of his soothing alpha scent. Alone, I could handle his pheromones. It was all three of them together that—

I shook my head sharply, derailing the thought before it could take form.

"Boiling a frog?" I echoed.

"They say if you try to throw a frog in boiling water, it will jump out. But if you put it in tepid water and raise the temperature slowly enough, it won't." He huffed. "Scientific nonsense, of course. If you throw a frog in boiling water, it will die immediately. Whereas if you raise the temperature slowly, it will jump out as soon as it gets too warm. But for some god-forsaken reason, that's the way the metaphor goes."

I stared at him.

He let out another frustrated breath. "My point is, you made a series of decisions, none of which seemed individually life-altering, only to find that the end result leaves you essentially acting as pack for Emma." His voice lowered to a mutter. "I'm somewhat familiar with the feeling, believe it or not."

I was speechless for a moment as the truth of that sank in.

“I... yeah. I guess I did.” I hesitated. “Am.”

Gabriel nodded absently. “So, my earlier question stands. Are you all right?”

I swallowed and licked my lips. “No. But... maybe, yes?”

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He gave a nearly inaudible breath of laughter. “Well, that clears things right up.”

The deck shifted subtly beneath our feet, and I grabbed for the rail again. Gabriel turned to look over his shoulder, and I followed suit. The sails had gone limp, no longer bellied out by the light wind. The sound of ropes swishing and pulleys clanking marred the night’s silence, previously broken only by the shush-shush of waves against the hull. A few moments later, something heavy splashed nearby. The ship’s anchor, maybe? Shortly after that, Onyx strolled up to us.

“Little dark for sightseeing,” they said, hitching a foot up on the railing next to me, bracketing me between alphas. Oddly, I didn’t feel trapped.

“I just needed some air,” I said, willing down the warmth that tried to rise to my cheeks.

“Mm,” Onyx hummed. “Getting a bit intense down there, I imagine.” A jerk of the chin indicated the cabin below. “Never had old Curran pegged as a daddy caretaker type, either. You think you know someone...”

“Shall I tell him you said that?” Gabriel asked wryly, as I breathed in the combined scents of oak and spruce.

Onyx shrugged, supremely unconcerned. “Not like he can fire me. I work for you, not him. It’s kind of sweet, actually.” They hesitated. “On second thought, maybe don’t tell him that last part.”

I was relaxing despite myself, and suddenly I couldn’t decide if that was good or bad.

Onyx pushed off the rail, rubbing broad hands together. “So, is it almost time for the hot, consent-informed sex now? Because I’d hate for the old man to burst an aneurysm trying to keep up with an omega half his age. That would just be embarrassing.”

Gabriel eyed his employee sidelong. “You’re clearly not entertaining a career change into diplomacy, then,” he said tartly. “Elijah, are you ready to go down?”

“So to speak,” Onyx sing-songed, *sotto voce*.

No, I thought. But maybe yes.

“We probably should,” I said. “Sorry, I shouldn’t have come up here in the first place.”

“Always better to step away for a few minutes than lose your shit in front of the wrong people,” Onyx said carelessly. “Don’t worry, she’s probably got Curran wrapped around her little finger by now.”

Gabriel snorted.

I took a deep breath and let it out, gratified when it didn’t feel like there was a steel band around my lungs. “Okay. Let’s go,” I said.

This would be fine. All of it would be fine. And my reaction to the mingled scents in the cabin before had probably been a fluke, that’s all.

This was fine.

TWENTY-TWO

Emma

THE COMBINATION OF three alpha scents combined with mine and Elijah's was driving me crazy, but in a good way. My reaction felt wrong... I'd been around alphas before, even in groups, and it had never hit me this way before. Was it because my heat was taking over my good sense? Was that why the mingled pheromones choking the cabin made my cramping muscles relax and my fear retreat?

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Those scents wove through my smoldering thoughts, assuring me that all my needs would be met, and I would never want for anything again. It frightened me because it felt like a siren song. It crooned to the deepest parts of me that my fear of letting go and fucking them all into exhaustion was ridiculous. It whispered that I could cast aside my control, and they would take care of me.

The fragment of my rationality that was still holding on insisted that I was in a dangerous situation, trapped with Elijah on a boat with alphas we barely knew. So why the hell did I feel safer than I'd ever felt in my life as I curled at Curran's feet, his hand stroking my hair as his soothing alpha purr rumbled in low counterpoint?

I should be worrying about why Elijah left. I should be worrying that Gabriel had followed him. Instead, I could think of nothing else but the growing pulse of want between my legs.

My knickers felt damp. I squirmed, satiny slickness rendering the folds of my pussy frictionless, like the finest lube. Even those small movements sent tingles of pleasure up my spine in a pulsing wave.

It was so hot in here. I needed my stifling clothing off. With a needy whine, I began wriggling out of my caftan top. I wasn't wearing a bra; I hadn't been able to tolerate the discomfort of underwires and confining straps when I dressed this morning. Or had it been yesterday morning? It didn't matter.

The brush of light fabric against my painfully erect nipples sent another wave of lust through my body.



“That’s it, pet,” Curran said. “Get comfortable. Whatever you need.”

My eyes zeroed in on the growing bulge beneath my alpha’s trousers, and I was suddenly desperate to know if his mouth-watering scent was stronger there. He’d said I could have whatever I needed—

My train of thought was derailed by the sound of footsteps coming down the staircase, followed by a fresh wave of that mind-blowing combination of scents. I whimpered and turned toward the newcomers, the fire that had been growing in my belly tightening into a spike of ravenous hunger too strong to deny.

“Oh, now look at you, beautiful.” Onyx’s rich, Australian drawl caressed me like cool hands, and I shivered in delight. “Are we getting naked now? Good.”

I watched, unable to tear my gaze away as they carelessly stripped off their white linen shirt and tossed it aside, barely breaking stride. Onyx crossed to the section of couch across from me and toed off their trainers, kicking them aside as well. Mymouth watered as khaki capris and underwear followed. Naked, the androgynous alpha flopped down on the seat, legs spread invitingly, taking up space with an easy assurance so different from my own instinctive desire to hide myself away.

“So, I guess we’re starting, then?” Gabriel’s familiar tones reached me, but I couldn’t look away from the feast laid out for me across the cabin.

“Are you okay, Em?” Elijah asked.

I nodded and licked my lips, still not looking at either of them.

Curran’s rough fingers touched my jaw, urging my face up to meet his gaze. “If you want Onyx, have them, sweetheart. No need to hold back until it hurts. Go have fun.”

I frowned. He was right. Why was I holding back? What I wanted was right there.

This was stupid. I started to stand up, but the world went swimmy. Falling back to my hands and knees among the sea of cushions, I crawled instead.

“Condoms?” Elijah asked tightly.

The word was meaningless. I ignored it, but Curran said, “In the cup holder to your left when you need them, Onyx.”

Onyx smiled, a lovely flash of white teeth. “I know, old man. I helped you stash them all over the damned boat, remember?” A long finger crooked in my direction. “Come on, lovely. You’ll probably want to explore a bit first. Most people do.”

Hell yes, I did. I managed to wriggle out of my leggings and knickers as I approached, my legs getting tangled for a moment before I kicked free. God, I was so wet. Even on those rare occasions when I’d indulged with a vibrator and synthetic alpha pheromones in an attempt to see what all the fuss was about, I’d never been this wet before.

Finally naked, half-frantic with need, I climbed the dusky-skinned alpha’s body like a tree until I could get at the scent gland on their neck. The clean smell of berries and spruce was like a drug. I couldn’t get enough of it. When Onyx nosed against my mating gland in reciprocation and let out a low hum of appreciation that vibrated against my overheated skin, my pussy clenched hard. A new pulse of slickness added to the growing mess between my thighs.

The alpha’s body was all rangy muscle. Succumbing to the impulse, I licked my way downward, pausing to take everything in. Brown nipples peaked under my tongue, underlined by thin, horizontal lines of scar tissue a few inches lower down, at the base of hard pecs. The scars, too, were a slightly darker color than the surrounding

skin, and the texture under my tongue was different.

There wasn't a spare ounce of fat on Onyx's taut body. An eight-pack marched down to a narrow waist and hips, accented by a clear Adonis belt pointing the way to a thatch of dark hair. The folds hidden beneath it were different than mine. For obvious reasons, I'd never been with an alpha before—male, female, or other. But it didn't take a genius to know that there was treasure nestled among those folds; I just had to tease it out.

Onyx made a low noise of pleasure as I delved in for a taste. The flat of my tongue rasped over the blunt tip of an alpha clit, barely protruding now, but promising much more with the right motivation. The taste of sweat, salt, musk, and the clean tang of the forest enveloped me. I closed my eyes and sank into it.

Why had I resisted this? Why had I been so scared and ashamed earlier?

"You're too good with that pretty Cupid's bow mouth, my lovely," Onyx purred, stroking my hair. "Seems a bit one-sided, though."

I whimpered as the hand tangled in my hair eased me away, but then Onyx was sliding off the couch to lie back among the pillows on the floor. The hand moved to my hip, nudging me around.

"Go on, climb aboard," Onyx said, tugging until I was on my hands and knees, facing the opposite direction.

My brain might have been reduced to a puddle of heat-scrambled mush, but it sure as hell understood that suggestion. I clumsily threw a leg over Onyx's face, keening as they dragged my sex down and started eating me out like a starvation victim who'd just been presented with a seven-course meal.

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I could relate. Diving back into my own appetizer, I coaxed and teased Onyx's delicious alpha clit out of its sheath. It was long. Not quite as thick as the beta cocks I'd dealt with over the years, but with a very promising swelling near the base.

And, god, what Onyx was doing to my pussy was probably illegal in several jurisdictions. The amount of slick I was putting out seemed like a potential drowning hazard. What had been tingles rushing up and down my spine when I'd been squirming earlier had turned into rising waves, each one higher and hotter than the last, building toward a tsunami that felt like it would sweep me completely out of my body.

I cried out around the clit I was happily using to choke myself, unable to escape the rising tide.

When the tsunami broke, it took every last bit of rationality with it. I was no longer Emma Huntwell, Emma Hope, or any of the other personas I'd built around myself like walls. I was a creature of pure need, and right now I needed this stiff clit somewhere besides my mouth. I pulled myself up with shaking limbs and dragged my sex down Onyx's torso, leaving a wet trail in my wake.

"Condom," I heard someone say—and then hands were holding me, restraining me while Onyx fumbled with something below me.

I snarled and growled at those interfering hands, but it was only a few moments before they released me. With a final snap of teeth to convey my displeasure, I straddled Onyx's hips and sank down, reverse cowgirl style.

There was no slow savoring of the penetration. I didn't have time for that bullshit. I slammed down, drawing a low growl from my alpha captive. That was so good that I needed to do it again right now—and again, and again, and again until I was jerking up and down wildly, trying to find the best angle.

Hands closed around my hips, but these hands were here to help, not restrain. Onyx lifted and lowered me in the wild rhythm I needed so desperately. Screams echoed around the cabin in time with my uncontrolled thrusts, and I only realized they were mine when my throat started to hurt.

My orgasm barreled toward me, and the screams grew too large to fit through my throat. My entire body went rigid, only Onyx's grip keeping me moving up and down. Great, uncontrolled tremors built from the base of my spine outward, doubled and redoubled when the knot inside me swelled, filling me perfectly.

Onyx grunted, hips jerking until we were both spent and shaking. My body clamped down on theirs with a strength that was almost painful... until it wasn't. All the terrible tension that had been building inside me for days rushed out like a retreating tide, leaving me a heavy, beached thing unable to move under my own power.

More hands caught at me, supporting me and turning me to lie on my side among the pillows. Onyx followed the motion, not that they had much choice since we were tied together.

"There you go, pet," Curran said from someplace nearby. "Well done. You were just perfect. Wasn't she perfect, Onyx?"

"A perfect tornado," Onyx said, sounding a bit shell-shocked. A wiry arm wrapped loosely around my body from behind, the palm coming to rest over my pounding heart.

Curran snorted. “That’s as may be. Time to rest now, Emma. We’ll watch over the nest until you’re ready for the next round.”

## TWENTY-THREE

Elijah

“I, UH, I NEED TO use the head,” I blurted, making my escape from the pheromone-laden cabin for the second time in less than half an hour.

Gabriel and Curran’s eyes followed me as I scrambled for the half-open sliding door on the far side of the central space. I kept my gaze locked on the toilet and tiny sink visible through the gap, pointedly not looking down at Onyx and Emma tangled together among a pile of pillows as I passed.

After the obscene luxury of the Titania, this cramped space with its plastic-lined shower stall and tiny mirror felt positively claustrophobic—but it also went some way toward meeting my sudden and urgent omega need for a dark bolt hole to hide in.

The door caught awkwardly on its tracks before jumping once and sliding closed. It had a flimsy privacy lock, which I engaged with shaking fingers—despite the fact that it would slow a determined alpha down for about zero-point-five seconds if I was lucky.

It didn’t matter. These alphas weren’t a danger to us. That much was obvious after everything I’d seen. And honestly, that was the problem. These alphas were safe. They were so fucking safe that I couldn’t seem to be in a room with them for more than five minutes without my brain going ‘Yay, pack!’ while cheerfully ditching every bit of common sense I’d ever possessed in favor of planning how many bedrooms our house would need, and what color to paint the nursery.

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I was so hard in my pants that it was becoming painful.

I was so stupid that it was also becoming painful.

What the hell was happening to me? I'd been with so many rent-a-packs over the years that I'd lost count. And I'd never suffered this kind of dewy-eyed omega delusion bullshit. These alphas weren't looking for a six-bedroom Craftsman in upstate New York. Apparently, they were about to declare war on a major London crime family, which was about as far from picket fences and nurseries as you could get.

It was just my instincts playing tricks on me because of the stress. That was all. In the normal course of things, the crazy patchwork scent of sweet and sharp, rich and musky wouldn't affect me like this. I just needed to get the craziness out of my system, and everything would be fine. Emma was knotted and out for the count. She'd be all right without me for a few more minutes.

Stifling a groan, I unbuckled my designer Luca Faloni belt and slid my pants and boxers down to my hips. I was leaking slick like I was the one in heat, not Emma. The others had probably been able to smell it, even with the dampeners they'd taken. That should have been mortifying. Instead, the thought made my dick twitch and a fresh pulse of dampness slide down my inner thighs.

I bit the inside of my cheek hard to keep from making noise as I shoved a hand between my legs and jammed three fingers inside myself, then grabbed my cock with the other hand and started pumping.

One of the alphas would do this for you, whispered a little voice in my head. They

wouldn't even give it a second thought...

I came hard, a weird, choked noise slipping past my control as slick squirted around my fingers and clear omega fluid pulsed from my dick. My muscles quivered and jerked, leaving me feeling like a stranded jellyfish lying in a puddle on the beach when my body finally went limp. I let my forehead thump softly against the wall, standing there panting for a minute before I reluctantly dragged myself upright and started cleaning up with wads of toilet paper.

If the others hadn't been able to smell me before, they sure as hell would now.

Short of jumping in the tiny shower—which would be even more obvious—there was nothing for it. 'Dignity' and 'omega heat' simply weren't concepts that belonged in the same sentence, unfortunately. In the normal course of things, that was part of the charm. Everyone involved was a mess and nobody cared, because it was simply an unavoidable side effect of the process.

This was not the normal course of things.

I flushed the toilet, disposing of as much of the evidence as I could wipe away. Then I washed my hands and braced myself to wade back into the lake of pheromones outside the door. I tried very hard to ignore the way my passage was clenching around nothing, silently begging for something nice and thick and satisfying to fill it up and make all of my problems go away for a bit.

The problems would still be there, I told it firmly.

Yes, but we wouldn't care about them, it shot back.

I gritted my teeth, unlocked the door, and slid it open—because the idea of one of the alphas knocking to ask if I was all right while I was having a silent argument with my



own genitals was just too mortifying. The stereotype of omegas being crazy and emotional was already bad enough without that kind of extra help from me.

None of the others were lurking outside waiting for my return, but Gabriel was watching from his seat with a look of concern on his face. Curran followed his gaze a moment later.

“All right, lad?” Curran asked.

I nodded, not meeting his eyes, and slunk back to my seat. When I braved a look, Onyx was still spooned behind Emma, pale skin contrasting against tawny. The alpha stroked a hand soothingly over Em’s sweat-damp forehead, their brow furrowed in concern.

“She’s feverish, Curran,” Onyx said. “Like, really feverish.”

As though on cue, Emma let out a low whimper of distress. I tensed, because she should be completely insensible for a few hours while her body recovered from its first peak.

“That’s not right,” I said stupidly.

Curran crouched by Emma and felt her forehead as well. Overcoming my shakiness, I joined them, kneeling among the nest of pillows. Emma rooted against Curran’s rough palm as though following the sensation of coolness.

He grunted. “Bloody heat blockers. She’s been on them forever, right? I thought it seemed like we were getting off too easy.”

“What does that mean?” Gabriel hadn’t risen to join us, but he’d moved forward to perch on the edge of the seat, his elbows resting loosely on his knees.

“They bollocks up the hormone balance of a heat cycle,” Curran said grimly. “And the longer you take them, the worse it gets. The first normal heat when you come off them is usually a clusterfuck, though it hits every omega a bit different.”

“Interesting choice of words to describe a heat,” Onyx said. “Clusterfuck, I mean.”

Curran shot them an unamused glance. “Someone get me some ice and a couple of damp washcloths. Dunno how much keeping her temperature down will help, but she needs to be able to rest between rounds.”

Gabriel rose and went toward the galley area, so I returned to the head and went scavenging for washcloths in the little recessed storage cabinets. Goddamn it. I knew all the reasons why omegas used heat blockers. I knew why Em, in particular, used them—even if I didn’t agree with her reasoning. But I still hated them on principal, and this kind of thing was why.

Heats were supposed to be awesome. Obviously, terrific sex was awesome all on its own. But the total, mindless relaxation that came between peaks was a very close second. If Em couldn’t even get peace while she was actively being knotted—

I clenched my jaw and dampened the washcloths, hurrying back to meet Gabriel, who was holding a plastic container of ice from the fridge. Curran took the ice and rolled up a few pieces in each of the cloths, draping one over Em’s neck and mating gland, and the other over her forehead.

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She made another unhappy noise and squirmed, drawing a hiss from Onyx as she jostled the place where they were joined. Em's eyes flitted back and forth beneath her closed eyelids like someone having a bad dream.

Gabriel sat down nearby. "Do we need to try and get her somewhere with decent alphomic medical care?" he asked, his tone tight.

Curran shook his head. "Not a lot that a hospital could do, at this point. Even in the twenty-first century, once a heat starts, adding drugs only makes things worse. Drugs are why she's in this state in the first place."

I felt sick to my stomach, but I said, "I've never heard of anyone actually dying from a bad heat. Only wishing they would."

"There are things we can try, in hopes of making her more comfortable," Curran said. "Depending on which hormones are off. Onyx, let us know when she unclenches and lets you go. Fair warning, you lot—this is likely to be a long few days."

### TWENTY-FOUR

Emma

WHAT HAD FELT like a dream when I was riding Onyx's alpha clit to completion now felt like a nightmare. I needed more, but my body felt paralyzed with exhaustion. Unhappy moans and whines echoed distantly in my ears. Mine? I wasn't sure.

I could barely twitch my fingers. My aching passage finally relaxed, and the wet slide

of Onyx's deflating knot slipping out of me ignited fresh embers of heat that I couldn't do anything about. Other voices reached me, though I couldn't focus enough to make out the sense of the words. Two points of chilly cold draped over my forehead and neck. Even so, sweat trickled down my body, tickling every nerve as it passed. I wanted to wipe it away and couldn't.

As though my thoughts had summoned it, a cool, damp cloth rubbed over my skin, starting with my forehead and moving down my neck and torso. It felt like an electric shock when it passed over my nipples, and more like a stick of dynamite when it swiped between my legs, mopping up the mess of my slick.

I cried out and jerked, or I thought I did. Maybe not, since the cool cloth just kept going, running damply over my legs. When it was done, a light blanket draped over me. More voices filtered in, sounding worried, and the clean scent of roses and spruce bracketed me. Bodies lay down on either side of me, leaving a slight gap between us.

The feverish heat and oversensitivity kept me from giving in to my body's desperate longing for sleep. Time passed in a torturous slide of discomfort and exhaustion. Occasionally the voices would speak, but it sounded like they were underwater, or else I was. When the sweat started trickling down my skin again, the cloth returned to wipe it away.

An eternity later, the awful paralysis began to fade. The burning need had never subsided at all. I rolled clumsily toward the smell of roses and rain, slinging a leg over the familiar form so I could rub myself against it, rutting shamelessly.

Elijah's breath caught. He rolled onto an elbow, reaching out to clasp my shoulder. Not pushing me away, exactly, but definitely trying to get my attention. I looked up at him blearily, the movements of my hips slowing.

“Can you understand me, dove?” he asked. “Do you know where you are?”

I blinked at him, replaying the words a few times until they made sense. But I’d already forgotten the first question. “N-no?” I managed, answering the second.

Why was he trying to talk to me right now? I was so hot—I needed something to fill me up. But I was also so tired...

A new presence joined us, rich incense teasing my nostrils. I swayed toward that scent, something about it reassuring. A craggy face loomed in my swimming vision. Curran, my mind identified after a moment.

“Hi, sweetheart,” he said, in his rough East London voice. “Can you tell me what was happening before you woke up? Were you in pain? Just nod yes or no.”

I thought about it for a few seconds and shook my head no.

“Too hot to relax?” he asked.

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I nodded yes.

He nodded back. “You’re running a fever. That seems to be how blocker withdrawal is hitting you. Last question—when you let Onyx’s knot go, did you still need more? Did it feel like you weren’t satisfied yet?”

“Excuseme, old man,” Onyx muttered from somewhere behind me.

Curran shot a narrow-eyed, quelling glare over my shoulder before returning his attention to me.

I licked my dry lips. “Needed more,” I rasped. “Need more... now.”

Curran’s tense shoulders relaxed a bit. “Okay, pet. I think I know how to help you. Your hormone levels are all over the map, but it sounds like the normal dose of oxytocin from being knotted isn’t enough to fully trigger your knotting fugue afterward.”

I stared at him blearily, the words sliding past without sticking.

He seemed to notice this, because he sighed and tried again. “We’re going to make you come more, this time. Alotmore. Who do you want to have next, sweetheart?”

I clambered into a sitting position, disentangling my legs from Elijah’s—vaguely aware that I’d left a damp smear on his light linen trousers and not caring. I reached for Curran, burying my nose in the rich cloud of amber and myrrh. A strong hand rested in the center of my back, supporting me.

“Fair enough, luv,” he murmured into my hair. “Someone get into the stash and grab a vibrator for me, yeah?”

“Ooh, get the Womanizer,” Onyx said from behind me.

“I have no idea what that is,” said a different voice. Gabriel, I thought.

Onyx sighed, the pillows behind me shifting as they rose. “You want something done right...” The scent of spruce and bayberry retreated.

“You’ll be okay, Em,” Elijah said, though his scent and tone were still worried. “This time’ll be better.”

What would be better would be having a cock inside me. I let out a little growl and started fumbling with Curran’s clothes. Why was he still wearing so many? He gently pulled my wrists away and unbuttoned his shirt, shedding it to reveal a wiry upper body marred in several places by old scars. I stared at one in particular just below his left clavicle—a deep pucker surrounded by a starburst of ropy pink lines.

He glanced down, following my gaze. “If you wanted pretty, you picked the wrong alpha, pet,” he said, sounding mildly amused.

“Christ, is that a gunshot?” Elijah asked, sounding decidedly unamused.

Curran grunted, shoving his trousers and underwear down. “’Fraid so. For what it’s worth, you should see the other bloke.” He took my hand and tugged me up with him, supporting me when I swayed. “C’mon, luv. Let’s see how much of a mess we can make of this pathetic excuse for a couch, eh?”

I relaxed into his hold as he sat down, closing my eyes against the mild dizziness as he turned me around and settled me on his lap with my back to his scarred chest.

Rough hands spread my legs, so they hung over the outsides of his hard-muscled thighs. His thick length nestled between my arse cheeks. I squirmed, trying to get him where I needed him.

“Not quite yet, beautiful,” he said. “In fact, let me get this wrapped up before we get any further.”

I whined as he nudged me forward and leaned to the side, reaching for something. Plastic crackled, and I felt him shift beneath me. Then his broad hands closed around my hips and dragged me back where I’d been before.

“Now, let’s get you warmed up. Elijah, you doing okay over there?”

I tried to focus on Elijah, who was sitting as far away as it was possible to get, his legs and arms crossed tightly.

“Great. Never better,” he said. “Just focus on her, okay?”

The chest behind me lifted and lowered on a silent sigh. “You got it, lad. Speak up if you need anything.”

“Sure,” Elijah said.

I frowned, not liking the way his voice sounded or the sourness still hidden beneath his scent. But I couldn’t seem to stay focused on anything except the cock rubbing between my cheeks. Or the rough fingers sliding up my ribcage to cup my breasts and—ahh!—tweak my aching nipples.

I let out a high-pitched yelp and thrust my chest out, seeking more. The first pulse of slick dribbled out of me, and Curran let out a soft huff of amusement.



“Don’t think the couch stands a chance, to be honest,” he murmured.

One hand slid down my stomach while the other continued to torment my nipples. I let my head fall back, panting—already exhausted, but so desperate to come that it didn’t matter if my muscles felt like jelly.

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“You ready for these?” Onyx appeared in my field of vision, proffering two different-shaped vibrators.

“Hold onto them for now,” Curran said, his fingers sliding into my folds to tease circles around my clit. “We’ll use them once I’ve knotted her.”

I moaned, my passage clenching. The hand that had been pinching and rolling my nipples slid up, cupping around my bared throat. Showing throat to an alpha was such anomegathing to do—the sort of submission I’d had to guard against for my entire adult life. But at the feel of that callused hand closing around my windpipe with firm, unyielding pressure while fingers teased the hood of my clit, something tripped inside my brain.

Everything went warm and soft and pliant. The outside world fell away, only the feelings inside my body remaining.

“There you go, pet,” murmured a rough voice in my ear.

I shuddered apart, my mind flattening into a soft, monotone hum. I was vaguely aware that my fingernails were digging into the hard hips beneath mine, grasping like talons. Curran didn’t protest. He also didn’t stop what he was doing, his clever fingers continuing their slow circles, sending electric jolts through oversensitive flesh.

In no time at all, I was coming again—or still coming, I wasn’t sure. The hand on my throat kept me from thrashing around like a landed fish, reminding me that I wasn’t in charge. I could just...let go.

I wasn't sure how long Curran kept me like that, squirming against his hard cock while his fingers wrung orgasm after orgasm out of me. I knew tears were starting to squeeze out of my eyes, and my breath was ragged with pitiful, half-formed pleas. My pulse thundered against his palm.

"All right, beautiful," Curran said, as I let out a desperate sob. "I know what you need."

His hand slid away from my neck, and he lifted me by the hips until I could wriggle into position and sink down on his thick length with a cry of relief.

"I know what else she needs," Onyx said, falling to their knees in front of us. "And it's not a fuckin' vibrator. Not yet, anyway."

I stared down blankly, gasping as Onyx shoved Curran's legs apart, which in turn spread mine wider. I felt like a butterfly pinned in a glass display, pierced through and helpless. Onyx lowered their head, and a broad tongue rasped up the length of my sex, from where Curran's cock disappeared inside me to my overstimulated clit.

Curran twitched hard beneath me. "Fuckin' hell. Guess that works, too."

"Christ." Gabriel's voice from across the room sounded tightly controlled. "I don't recall this kind of shit being on either of your CVs."

Onyx snorted, the puff of air sending a fresh jolt through me.

"Shut it, Blondie," Curran said without rancor. "Your turn's coming soon enough."

"Watch and learn, boss," Onyx added, before diving back in.

The slow roll of Curran's hips beneath me, combined with the sinuous slide of

Onyx's talented tongue, slammed me face-first into a new, higher peak. I sobbed and writhed, so tired and yet so desperate for more, more, more of this. My pussy clenched, trying to pop Curran's knot so I could trap him inside of me properly.

"Don't let her come down," Curran said. "I'll hold off as long as I can."

"Try not to have a heart attack, old man," Onyx muttered against my folds. "I'd never let you live it down."

A long finger slid into my tightly clenched passage next to Curran's cock, and he let out a low curse as I shuddered at the new stretch. Onyx's lips sealed over my clit and sucked, sending the world blank and fuzzy again.

I rode the ever-increasing waves of sensation until finally, finally, Curran groaned and jerked his hips into me, his knot swelling and locking us together.

"Keep going as long as she responds," he said hoarsely. "Use the toys."

My brain said I was done, but my pussy said I wasn't. The alphas must have been listening to my pussy, because as I slumped back in Curran's strong arms, buzzing silicone replaced Onyx's tongue on my abused clit. The vibration tingled along my nerves to where Curran's knot rested inside me, pushing me through another orgasm, and another. He shuddered beneath me each time my inner muscles clenched and pulsed, but he continued to hold me safe in his embrace the whole time.

When numbness threatened to dull my body's responses, Onyx replaced the red silicone cock with a futuristic looking toy culminating in a small suction cup that fit directly over my clit. When it buzzed into life, it was like nothing I'd ever felt. The only comparison I could make was when Onyx had suckled and tongued my nub, but this was a thousand times more intense.

And it had six settings.

My body was too exhausted to do more than twitch and jerk, but my brain was flying, soaring above a sea of endorphins. I clamped down on Curran's cock one final time, my clit vibrating at the same frequency as the suction toy on its highest setting. It seemed to last forever, and simultaneously no time at all.

Then darkness slipped in from the edges of my consciousness, pulling me down into blessed, cool relief. The last thing I was aware of was my body releasing its hold on Curran's cock, and then everything slid into peace and comfortable blackness.

### TWENTY-FIVE

Gabriel

WE WERE MORE than twelve hours deep into Emma's heat, and my feeling of having been hit by a lorry hadn't faded in the least. The dampeners Curran had given me might be dulling the impact of our five mingled scents, but they did nothing to dull the memory of that first impossible hit when I'd walked into the cabin.

Curran and Onyx had already taken their shots before we arrived, but I wondered if that same reaction was part of what was making Elijah so jumpy. Had the omegas smelled the same thing I had?

God, I hoped not—because it was impossible. Scent matches were the stuff of trashy romance novels. They had no place in the real world, where dragging two random omegas into the middle of my personal shitshow would be the worst possible thing I could do to them.

Speaking of the omegas, Elijah had disappeared a few minutes ago for the fourth time since Emma's heat had started. The last two times, he'd returned from the ship's head smelling of slick and omega spend—detectable even through the blockers. I was sure that without them, it would have been powerful enough to knock my higher brain functions completely flat. Happily for my sanity, this time he'd gone up to the deck instead of to the head, presumably to get some air.

I could sympathize.

In fact, I was considering following his example when Curran, who'd ceded his place curled around Emma to Onyx, flopped down next to me on the seat. He had at least put on a pair of trousers, but his scarred upper body was still bare to the waist. Seeing my two bodyguards in this new light was yet another aspect of the situation I hadn't anticipated.

Curran had been my rock for years—ever since Theresa had disappeared. Our families had lived near each other in the cesspit of East London's gangland. He was seven years older than I was, so we hadn't been terribly close when I was a child. But when my sister went missing and I started harassing the wrong people for answers, he'd taken it on himself to look out for me, for some godforsaken reason.

When I'd confided my plan to get out of the slums and become rich enough to track down Theresa's kidnappers, he hadn't laughed me off. And when I grew powerful enough to make myself a nuisance to the area's crime families, he'd stood between me and danger.

He'd taken a bullet for me once, the evidence still a livid mark etched out in scar tissue. Now, he was looking at me with tired but incisive brown eyes.

"She's beginning to stir again," he said gruffly. "If there's anything you want to tell me before she decides you're her next meal, now's the time. You've been even jumpier than Elijah, and he's got cause to be jumpy. You don't. So, what's going on in that head of yours, eh?"

They're supposed to be our pack, but it's impossible, I thought.

Walking away from them is going to break me, even though that's completely irrational, I thought.

Emma's uncle sold my sister into sexual slavery, and I don't know what I'm

supposed to do with that knowledge, I thought.

“First heat,” I said aloud. “You know how it is. That, and I’ve had way more of an eyeful of your ugly arse over the past few hours than I ever needed or wanted.”

Curran gave me a look that said he wasn’t buying it for a minute.

Elijah returned, hesitating on the steps when he saw us talking. “Everything still okay?” he asked.

With a grunt, Curran levered himself up. “She’s stirring. Probably not long until her next peak. She got some good rest this time, though. Look, lad—I know this situation is a mess, but you don’t have to disappear into the loo to take care of yourself if you don’t want to. It’s a heat. It’s not as though you’re gonna offend us.”

Elijah flushed, but he resumed his journey down to the cabin. Meanwhile, I tried not to think about Elijah and Emma both writhing naked in ecstasy among the pillows.

“Didn’t think you needed any more distractions,” he muttered, not meeting our eyes.

“It’s a heat,” Curran said again. “Unplanned, sure. But it might as well be as pleasant as the five of us can make it, and afterward we’ll walk away friends.”

“What happens in the Aegean stays in the Aegean,” Onyx put in from the floor. “Oh, and also—incoming.”



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The irrational pang that had pierced me at the words ‘afterward we’ll walk away’ evaporated in the face of the groggy female omega crawling toward me with an expression full of intent. My cock, which had already been getting a serious workout over the course of the past twelve hours, sprang once more to attention.

Curran huffed and rummaged in his pocket, handing me a clear plastic packet with a cheerful red condom rolled inside. “For when you need it. And keep your teeth away from her neck no matter how tempting it is.”

“‘Reclusive Billionaire Mates Supermodel in Unfortunate Heat Mishap’,” Onyx quipped. “I can see the headlines now.”

I glared at them, mostly to hide the fact that my cock was making a spirited attempt to drill through the fabric of my trousers in response to the mental image. Then all distractions fled as I found myself with a lapful of omega vixen. Just as she’d done when her first peak approached, she buried her nose against my neck and breathed in, her own sharp, fruity scent rising around her like a cloud.

My hand that wasn’t holding the condom packet came to rest on her slender hip without any conscious decision from me. Her body molded to mine perfectly, with none of the awkward dance of knees and elbows that I’d encountered during my rare, previous trysts.

The couch dipped as Elijah sat next to us, reaching out to brush Emma’s pale hair away from her temple. “You all right, dove? Feeling a bit better now?”

“Mmm,” Emma said, and bit down on the tendon running along the side of my throat.

My entire body jolted. I didn't even have time to think how unfair it was that I was expected to keep my teeth away from her mating gland while she was allowed to do this. A low growl rumbled up from my chest, and I tumbled her into the pile of pillows at my feet so I could start tearing at my own clothes, rationality fleeing despite the bloody dampeners.

She stared at me with wide, hungry gray eyes as I struggled free of my shirt, shoes, socks, trousers, and underwear. Then she was rolling over—knees wide, spine arched, upper body pressed to the floor.

Presenting.

I'd never seen it in real life, but it was a staple of alphomic porn for a reason. My mate's bare pussy glistened in the light of the cabin, dripping and ready for me. And just like that, I was gone.

"Condom," Curran reminded sharply. The hint of an alpha bark behind the word brought me back to myself long enough to fumble the packet out from among the seat cushions, tear it open, and roll it on.

Then I was sliding into the inviting space between Emma's legs, lining up, and thrusting into her welcoming pussy from behind. She keened, the sound driving me to move, pounding into her as she slammed herself back onto my cock with each roll of my hips.

Behind me, I could make out Elijah's breathing going ragged. His damask rose scent sharpened, growing sweeter and fuller.

"It's always the quiet ones," Onyx commented from across the room, sounding taken aback.

“Ain’t that the truth,” Curran muttered.

All I could concentrate on was the perfect clench of Emma’s body around mine, and the way her breathy cries rose higher and higher as her movements beneath me grew wild. In what seemed like no time at all, her body clenched hard around my cock. My balls drew up tight, my knot swelling as I emptied myself into her, the condom an unwanted barrier between us.

Panting, I collapsed over her lithe body, catching my weight on an arm and an elbow. Before I could accidentally squash her, I managed to roll us both onto our sides and wrap an arm around her, holding her close.

She was still mewling, her body restless against mine—each tiny movement sparking aftershocks from my dick and balls.

“Vibrators,” Curran said, his voice distant and unimportant. “She’s not done yet.”

Onyx approached a few moments later. “Hey, boss. Um, I just need to slide in here and—”

I snarled, unwilling to let another alpha near Emma while I was knotting her.

“Whoa,” Onyx said, backing off.

“Goddamn it, whelp,” Curran rumbled. “This is why I gave you the fuckin’ dampeners. Give it here, Onyx.”

I tensed, aware that in a fight of either wills or muscles against Curran, I’d probably come up short. Sudden fear of losing the omega I’d so recently gained clenched my muscles.

“I’ll do it,” Elijah said quietly.

I relaxed, my growl evening out to something softer.

It felt like a purr. Christ, I was purring.

Emma relaxed as well, snuggling her back further into my chest.

“Hey, dove.” Elijah settled in front of her. “Need a little more so you can rest?”

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He lowered himself on an elbow, and low buzzing filled the air. My purr deepened as gentle vibrations emanated outward from the place where Emma and I were joined. Elijah's green eyes met and held mine with an expression midway between fear and hunger. My purring grew louder; an instinctive urge to soothe.

Pleasure crested and ebbed as Emma climaxed around my knot... once... twice... three times. My mouth watered with the desire to get my teeth around the juncture of her neck and shoulder, where the smell of absinthe and blackcurrant was so strong, I thought I could get drunk on it.

Eventually, she hummed and settled, her body growing heavy with sleep. The buzz of the vibrator clicked off—but Elijah was still watching me with that same torn expression.

I wasn't sure where the impulse came from, and I wasn't sure why I gave into it. Leaning up on an elbow, I reached out and hooked a hand around the nape of his neck, reeling him in until I could catch his lips in a biting kiss.

He froze for a moment, the thick scent of roses lashed by a thunderstorm flowing around us, combining with Emma's sharper scent. Then he moaned, kissing me back with equal intensity, the forgotten vibrator falling from his grasp.

TWENTY-SIX

Elijah

SOMEHOW, RECEIVING AN attempted tonsillectomy from Gabriel morphed into

Onyx leaving hickeys on my neck while I rutted into their hand, the vibrator I'd so recently used on Emma buzzing away inside me until I exploded with a hoarse cry.

Onyx had at least thought to slap a condom over the toy before putting it in me. I really appreciated that, because safe sex practices hadn't even been a blip on my radar at the time.

I wasn't sure if I felt better or worse now that the terrible tension had finally snapped. I mean—better, I guess. Physically, at least. The view in the aftermath was certainly nice. Onyx could have had a career as an alpha model at one of the more progressive agencies in Paris or Milan, and Young Daniel Craig was still curled protectively around Emma a few feet away from where I lay sprawled and panting.

Some instinct had me searching out Curran. He was sitting nearby, his attention fully on Gabriel and Emma. A thoughtful frown deepened the lines on his craggy face. I followed his gaze to find Gabriel blinking rapidly, looking at the woman in his arms as though he wasn't entirely clear how she'd ended up there.

The rumble purr that had been rolling up from his chest for the last half hour or so died away. He licked his lips and swallowed, his throat bobbing.

"What... just happened?" he asked slowly, after the silence threatened to become oppressive.

His attention zeroed in on me, with my shirt hanging open and bruises ringing my neck, my pants nowhere to be found. Classy as fuck in the heat nest; that was me. Then his startling blue gaze flew to Curran, who gave a gusty sigh.

"An omega's heat happened," Curran said. "Don't worry, everything's fine. Though, for future reference, apparently you have a high resistance to dampeners."

Gabriel looked at Onyx, his eyes wide and horrified. “I growled at you.”

“Shocking. You should lodge a complaint with the HR department, Onyx,” Curran suggested, raising an eyebrow at his fellow bodyguard.

“We don’t have an HR department,” Onyx replied.

“We do have an HR department,” Gabriel said, still sounding appalled at himself. “I mean, the company does.”

“Oh, good,” Onyx told him. “I’ll be sure to draft a formal letter when we get back to London.” They held his gaze for a beat, then snorted derisively.

“You’re exactly where you need to be right now, Gabriel,” Curran said, and I was pretty sure it was the first time I’d heard him address his boss by his actual name. “Mind your omega. She seems better than before, but you’ll be the first to know if she’s in distress.”

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Gabriel's high cheekbones flushed red. He cleared his throat awkwardly, not quite meeting my eyes. "What about you, Elijah? Are you all right?"

"Peachy," I rasped, not sure if it would be less dignified to stay here with my cock hanging out or go rummaging through the pillows for my pants.

"I shouldn't have—" Gabriel began, but I waved the words off.

"Don't mention it," I said, and paused before adding, "Seriously. Don't mention it."

His clear, worried gaze pinned mine for a very long time.

Thankfully for everyone's sanity, Emma's heat seemed to even out a bit after her third peak. Each time she surfaced in response to her hormones spiking, she was obviously exhausted. I was exhausted. I'd say we were all exhausted, but if so, the alphas were a lot better at hiding it.

There wasn't a good way to put the horse back in the proverbial barn now that it had run out the door, so rather than try to hide the fact that watching Em get fucked made me horny, I let Onyx get me off in increasingly creative ways that did everything to relax my body and not a damned thing to relax the knot of tension in my mind.

What the hell was I doing here, on this rented sailboat moored off the coast of a tiny Greek island?

I got the impression Gabriel was asking himself similar questions, because after that first rather spectacular loss of control, he'd been reining himself in so tightly that it



kind of hurt to watch.

After ten brutal peaks, Emma's scent finally began to shift, losing its distinctive heat markers. She was sweaty and pale, and between us, Curran and I managed to get some fluids and a few dry crackers into her before she crashed. Onyx helped us get her cleaned up as best we could when she was too out of it to stay upright in the cramped shower without help. Then Curran carried her into one of the tiny cabins.

"I can stay with her," he said, and it was a testament to the last few days that I didn't even give his offer a second thought before agreeing.

"Thanks," I said, pawing my omega roommate off on this gruff alpha I'd met only days ago. "Onyx, I'm guessing you need to sail the ship? If so, I'll take a shift with Em in a few hours. She shouldn't wake up alone."

Honestly, it wouldn't surprise me if she woke up with no memory whatsoever of where she was or how she got here. She'd already been skating the edge of her heat when we arrived. Still, the alphas' scents would have embedded themselves in her consciousness as being safe over the past few days.

Onyx grunted. "Not sure where we're going yet, but once the boss man tells me, then, yeah—I'll get us underway."

"You might as well get some rest, lad," Curran told me. "She's going to be out cold for the better part of a day."

I nodded. "If not longer," I agreed. "I mean it, though. Thank you."

Onyx smiled, dark eyes crinkling at the corners, and slapped me companionably on the shoulder. "Sorry it was such a rough time for both of you, but I'm glad we were around to help. If you've got some particular place you two need to get dropped off,

you might wanna have a word with the boss about it.”

“Sure,” I said, cursing the unwanted ache in my heart at the casual dismissal. “I’ll do that.”

This was batshit. I was an independent fashion model at the height of my career. What the hell did I want with a pack? Much less, a dangerous pack? For god’s sake, Curran had a gunshot scar. These weren’t the kind of alphas who settled down in a nice pack house somewhere to bake cookies and churn out pups. Just as importantly, I wasn’t the kind of omega who settled down in a nice pack house somewhere to bake cookies and churn out pups. And Emma sure as hell wasn’t.

With a final glance at Emma’s sleeping form in the bunk, I went to find Gabriel. I didn’t actually know where to ask him to drop us off. The Athens airport, I supposed. I also didn’t know what day it was. My phone was almost certainly dead after sitting in a bag for so long. I needed to charge it. Emma’s, too, if I could find it.

I was about ninety-five percent sure we’d missed our return flight to New York, assuming our tickets hadn’t been cancelled after Casick basically sold us as fucking sex slaves. Briefly, I wondered if Gabriel had gotten his money’s worth over the past few days—only to quash that thought as unworthy.

God, I was tired.

I trudged up the cabin steps and found Gabriel leaning against the same stretch of railing where I’d fetched up after fleeing the heat nest on the first night. He looked uncharacteristically rumpled—not that I was in any position to criticize. And... not that it was a bad look on him, for that matter.

No jacket, shirt wrinkled and half-untucked, sleeves rolled up unevenly. His sandy hair looked like he’d been running his fingers through it in an attempt to straighten it,

but only ended up making things worse.

His spine stiffened as I approached, and he turned to look at me over his shoulder. I caught a hint of wariness before he smoothed his expression to neutrality.

“How’s she doing?” he asked.

“Sleeping,” I said. “She’ll be out for ages, I expect.”

He gave a slow nod. “She probably needs it.” He cleared his throat. “So, what can I do for you?”

I propped my elbows on the railing, trying not to look at him. Trying not to smell him. Trying not to remember my mind’s blissful surrender when he’d reeled me in and taken possession of my mouth.

“Onyx suggested I talk to you about where to drop us off,” I said, pleased when my tone emerged even and matter of fact.

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“Oh,” he said. “Yes. Quite.”

I picked at a flake of paint on the railing with my fingernail. “Problem is, I’m not sure what would be best. Were you planning on heading to Athens?”

“By way of wherever the others leased this rust bucket, yes,” he agreed. Then he hesitated, as though debating with himself.

I glanced sideways at him, frowning. “What?”

He let out the breath he’d been holding. “I’m not entirely certain it will be safe for you two to return to New York and go back to your lives as though nothing happened.”

A chill squirmed outward from my stomach. I turned to face him. “What do you mean?”

I was left staring at his square-jawed profile, because he didn’t look away from the expanse of blue water glinting in the morning sun. “You’ve just been trafficked, for all intents and purposes. Emma’s uncle clearly knew she was living in New York, and also how to find her there. Casick had dealings with both of your agencies. If the Huntwells get wind that you’re back in the city, safe and well, they might decide to take some kind of more permanent action.”

The chill froze into solid ice. I grabbed the fabric of his shirt unthinkingly and dragged him around to look at me directly. “Are you fucking kidding me?” I yelped.

He didn't comment on the manhandling. "It's a crime syndicate. They tend not to be terribly fussy when it comes to legalities."

I unclenched my fingers and let my hand drop to my side, where it hung limp.

Gabriel's brow furrowed. "You could both... come back to London with us," he said. "I've got the documents Casick provided for you two, and they aren't anywhere near being legal. I'll be pursuing multiple avenues to connect him to the Huntwells' criminal activity. If nothing else, you'd be invaluable as witnesses during the eventual court case."

My jaw was hanging open. I snapped it shut. "Come back to London with you...?" I echoed blankly, while in the back of my head, a stupid little omega voice shouted 'yes!', while gleefully jumping up and down.

A sneaking suspicion crept around the edges of my consciousness, poking at me until I had to pay attention to it.

"The scent match," I said. "The others had already taken dampeners before we came aboard. But you hadn't. When we walked into that cabin... you smelled it, too."

Gabriel inhaled sharply in reaction to my words, his expression closing off like a blast door coming down.

TWENTY-SEVEN

Emma

"OWW." THE NOISE emerged as the most pathetic of omega whines, and I couldn't even bring myself to care. I blinked bleary eyes, trying to force my surroundings to coalesce into something more useful than a dim blur of gray and brown.

I started to sit up, and nearly fell off the narrow mattress I'd been lying on. Hands caught my shoulders, steadying me, and the paler blur in front of me solidified into Elijah. His worried face hovered a few inches from mine.

“Easy,” he said. “That was a rough heat. I imagine pretty much everything’s going to hurt for a few days.”

I swallowed and licked my lips, reluctantly feeling out my own body. And...fuuuck.

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“Yeah,” I rasped. “Can I have painkillers, please? Because I could really use some painkillers.”

A knock sounded on the flimsy wooden door of... wherever we were. I had a feeling I should know, but everything was one big muddle at the moment. A couple of seconds later, the door slid open on tracks and two alphas peered in.

Gabriel and Curran, my mind supplied, the names coupled with a warm, happy feeling that I wasn't ready to examine too closely. Rich alpha scents mingled with Elijah's rose garden and my own, less familiar fruity absinthe. My mouth started to water, and I had to swallow a groan.

“We heard the whine,” Curran said. “How are you feeling, luv? Need anything?”

“Aspirin,” Elijah said, saving me the trouble. “Or ibuprofen. Something over the counter for the aches.”

He wasn't meeting the others' eyes, I noticed—my instincts still hyperaware after days of being so completely vulnerable.

“Coming right up,” Curran said, his craggy face lined with sympathy.

Gabriel, too, was looking anywhere except directly at us. Disquiet prickled at the back of my neck.

“Where's Onyx?” I asked hoarsely, remembering the third alpha who'd been up close and personal with me during my utter loss of control.

“Sailing the boat,” Curran said, and more details started to filter into my consciousness. None of it helped with the growing sinking feeling.

The Titania.

My uncle.

Casick and his contract.

Abruptly, I wanted something a lot stronger than aspirin.

“We’re en route to the port near Athens where the others rented this rust bucket,” Gabriel said, still not looking at us. “When you’re feeling a bit better, we should discuss next steps.”

Yeah... and there wasn’t enough aspirin in the world for that conversation. Mingled scents wafted around me, missing only the clean sharpness of spruce and bayberry.

“Just get us on a plane to New York,” I said, too quickly. “I, uh... I might have to pay you back for my ticket later.”

“As I said, we can discuss details when you’re feeling more yourself.” Gabriel looked as discomfited as I felt, and Elijah didn’t seem to be faring much better.

“I’ll be right back with those pills,” Curran muttered, and both of them left. Curran returned a few moments later with a small plastic bottle, which he handed to Elijah.

“Thanks,” I managed, stomping on a vivid sense memory of pressing my nose to the juncture of Curran’s neck and shoulder while a rough purr rumbled up from his chest.

“Take a couple of these and try to get some more rest,” he said kindly. “The wind’s



not cooperating at the moment, so it looks like it'll take us awhile to get where we're going."

I nodded, biting the inside of my cheek. When he'd retreated, closing the sliding privacy door behind him, Elijah's tense shoulders slumped as though in relief.

"Something's going on," I said as he shook out a couple of pills and grabbed a bottle of water from a recessed shelf in the wall. "What is it, what's wrong?"

"It's nothing," he said unconvincingly. "Seriously, don't worry about it."

The prickle at the back of my neck grew sharper. "Don't lie to me."

He gestured at the water. "Swallow those first."

I did, chugging half the bottle as my body remembered how thirsty it was. Then I set it down on the floor—deck?—with a solid clunk. "Talk to me, Elijah."

He let out a gusty sigh, glancing away before seeming to steel himself to meet my gaze. "Did you smell them? All of us together, I mean, in the cabin."

The prickle erupted into clanging alarm bells as the sense-memory of being protected and cared for reared its unwanted head. "What do you mean?"

"We're a scent match, Em," he said, sounding defeated. "The five of us... like some fucking alphomic romance novel."

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Denial warred with the memory of the heat nest... of knowing that I was safe, and exactly where I was meant to be.

“That’s not a real thing,” I countered.

“Of course it’s a real thing.” He scrubbed a palm over his face, pulling at the skin. “Why do you think it ended up as a romance novel staple in the first place?” His hand fell to lie limply in his lap. “Gabriel knows, too, even though he won’t admit it aloud. He wants us to come to London with them. Not sure if the other two have realized yet. They’d already taken scent dampeners before we got here; Gabriel hadn’t, though.”

My head was slowly moving back and forth in a soundless negative gesture. I stilled it. “No. I can’t go to London. Tommy and Cade will be there. The syndicate is there. People know me.”

I’d been to London twice in the years since I first fled to New York, both times for fashion shows. And both times I’d been a nervous wreck from the time the plane touched down until the time my return flight taxied down the runway, despite the fact that the fashion venues were nowhere near my old haunts in the East End.

“And your uncle apparently knew exactly where to find you in New York,” Elijah said tiredly. “What’s to stop him coming after you again if he finds out you went back there?”

This was too much, coming so close on the heels of a heat I’d never wanted. Still, the signs had already been in the air. I’d been thinking about contingencies before I’d

accepted the Secret Boudoir offer, when it became obvious that my modeling career was crumbling around me.

“I’ve got a bit of money left from the initial payment for the cruise,” I said stubbornly. “I’ll catch a bus; go somewhere small and out of the way. Get a normal job. Disappear.”

Never smell amber and myrrh or oakmoss and petrichor or roses and bayberry again...

An ache took up residence in my throat, and I refused to acknowledge it because scent matches weren’t really a thing, goddamn it. Not for someone like me. Someone living as a beta. I just needed to get a fresh supply of blockers and suppressors, and I’d be able to put all of this behind me.

My throat closed up completely, my chest giving a fitful little hitch that barely missed being a panicked sob.

No more dusky skin and clean forest scent... no more callused fingers stroking soothingly through my hair...

It was just the aftermath of my heat talking. That was all. It had to be.

Elijah looked like he was holding onto his composure by a thread, but he only nodded. “Okay. Well, you need to talk to Gabriel before we dock. He’s still planning on going after Casick for the human trafficking, and he was making noise about the two of us testifying if it went to court.”

File that under ‘things that won’t be happening.’

Forget about the danger to me. If Tommy figured out that Gabriel was trying to connect him to the case, everyone involved would have a target painted on their

backs. Especially if they were camped out in the same damn city as the syndicate.

“I’ll talk to him,” I said, trying not to think about how well that conversation was likely to go.

It did not go well... but not for the reasons I might have assumed. Gabriel Rosencranz was not acting like an alpha who’d had his knot jammed inside me less than a day ago. In many ways, he didn’t act like my mental picture of an alpha at all.

No... the problem resided firmly in my own head. Apparently, I was forever doomed to suffer explicit flashbacks whenever I so much as scented him or one of the others—much less saw them.

Gabriel pumping into me from behind while I snarled and keened and bit the pillow, trying to get him even deeper. Curran spreading my legs and holding me there like a pinned butterfly while Onyx ate me up like dessert. Elijah and Gabriel kissing above me as though they were trying to devour each other, even as another orgasm slammed through me...

Fuck, fuck, fuck.

“I understand your concerns,” Gabriel was saying, his cool blue gaze focused somewhere beyond my left ear, rather than on my face. “As long as you and Elijah have a plan to stay safe, and the resources to implement it, I don’t claim to have any say over your choices. However, I would take it as a personal favor if you’d both forward your contact information to me, in the event your testimony is needed in any future legal proceedings.”

I worked my jaw for a second, just to make sure there was enough moisture in my mouth to speak. “Thank you. And I should be able to p-pay you back for the cost of airfare within a month or two. I don’t intend to be your charity case.”

He waved the words away. “Please. Don’t give the airfare a second thought. Believe me when I say—that sort of thing completely disappears within the annual corporate travel budget. It’s literally nothing.”

I’d just drawn breath to protest when Onyx ducked down the stairwell, poking their head into the cabin.

“Hey, you two,” they said. “We’re about twenty minutes out of port. Time to gather up your luggage and get ready to disembark.”

### TWENTY-EIGHT

Emma

AS A MODEL, I'D never before felt this self-conscious about the amount of luggage I hauled around with me. Today, as our rented sailboat sat placidly in its moorings, surrounded by blue water and equally blue sky, the pile of suitcases and garment bags sitting on the scuffed wooden planks of the old dock looked borderline obscene.

Maybe it was the state of the port itself. Overflowing baggage carts seemed way more appropriate when being wheeled into five-star hotels by attentive bellhops wearing neat uniforms. Here, the five of us had needed to lug everything down the gangplank ourselves. Well, I say the five of us... in reality, the others had barely let me carry an overnight bag. And that somehow made it even worse.

I still felt like week-old leftovers, and I still needed to sleep for, like, twenty-four hours straight. There was a definite ache between my legs, even with the liberal application of painkillers. That ache would have been more tolerable if it didn't bring the memory of overpowering pleasure with every fitful throb.

At least being in open air meant the scent of the five of us together was less concentrated—almost, but not quite, disappearing beneath the smell of brine and fish.

No... there would be one more trip inside a closed-up taxi as we made our way to Athens' airport, and then I could get back to the inexorable destruction of the life I'd built for myself as a beta. A brief stop in New York, followed by a bus trip to some random Midwestern city surrounded by lots of soybeans and pigs. Or maybe

somewhere in the Southwest. The desert could be pretty, I supposed.

Some sad little voice of omega instinct screamed in denial. I ignored it.

Maybe the ridiculous pile of luggage would require multiple taxis, and I could ride in a different one than the alphas.

“You okay, dove?” Elijah had sidled up to stand next to me and was watching me with concern.

“P-peachy.”

For now, I was utilizing a strategy of denial when it came to the knowledge that saying goodbye to New York would also mean saying goodbye to Elijah. It was for the best. I’d known going in that letting other people get close to me was a recipe for disaster. And here was poor Elijah, on the run from my psychotic relatives after having been bought and sold like a piece of meat.

It was safer for him if he was far, far away from me.

I wouldn’t make the same mistake again. I’d get away and start a new life. Alone.

“You don’t look peachy,” Elijah shot back. “Just saying.”

There was no way to answer without making everything worse, so I kept silent. Farther down the dock, Gabriel and Curran were engaged in what appeared to be an animated discussion with an olive-skinned and weather-beaten man, who I gathered was the owner of the rented sailboat. It seemed to consist of approximately equal amounts of broken Greek from Gabriel and broken English from the old sailor. Onyx, who’d been staying out of it, crossed their arms and ran a wary gaze over our surroundings—which, admittedly, weren’t the best. This out-of-the-way dock was a

far cry from the high-end marina where we'd embarked on the Titania a little more than a week ago.

I stood stoic, waiting patiently until the conversation wound down; doing my best to ignore the unhappiness rolling off Elijah in invisible waves. Eventually, Gabriel nodded and shook hands with the boat's owner. He, Curran, and Onyx returned to join us by the small mountain of luggage.

"There should be a couple of vans coming here to pick us up and take us to the airport," Gabriel said, looking mildly harried.

I imagined billionaires weren't accustomed to having to wrangle last-minute transportation for themselves. He was probably used to having a chauffeur waiting for him with a limousine wherever he went.

Curran grunted. "Be glad we managed to find a boat for you at all on such short notice. Door to door transportation costs extra."

Onyx was still casting a watchful eye around us. "Just so it doesn't take long. This isn't exactly what you'd call a secure location. Especially not with Mount Luggage sitting here in the open screaming 'rich tourists' to anyone who happens to see it."

Curran's expression implied that he fully agreed with the assessment.

"I'm well aware," Gabriel said. "Are you two armed?"

Curran's eyebrows shot up. "Seriously? You ever tried smuggling firearms through customs? The only people with handguns in Greece are the criminals."

"We picked up a couple of fake ancient daggers at a tourist trap and put a decent edge on them on the trip out to you," Onyx added. "That's it for weapons."



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I exchanged a nervous sidelong glance with Elijah, unable to help myself. He didn't look any happier than I felt. Abruptly, our surroundings felt a lot more sinister than they had a few minutes ago.

"Is that really a concern?" Elijah asked. Now he was scanning our surroundings with a worried look as well.

"Almost certainly not," Gabriel said.

Curran scoffed. "Don't mind us. It's just part of the job description for the bodyguards of a rich bastard with more money than sense."

"Someone would have to be awfully organized to try anything before the vans get here," Onyx offered.

And so, we waited—flanked by the two bodyguards and the rich bastard with more money than sense. Curran and Onyx kept a watchful eye around us, but neither of them seemed unduly worried.

We were left alone to wait. The Calliope's owner had disappeared onto his boat, presumably to check that we hadn't trashed it before we got away from him. I tried hard not to think about the various bodily fluids that might have escaped the others' cleanup efforts. Further down the dock, a couple of smaller vessels had groups of people gathered around, but they were too far away for their chatter to be more than the faintest of background noise.

As the minutes ticked by with no random Greek criminals jumping out at us to hit us

over the head and steal our luggage, I gradually relaxed. Even so, when a pair of white vans pulled up to the edge of the docks around twenty minutes later, it was a relief.

Curran jerked his chin at Onyx, indicating they should go try to talk to the drivers. “The rest of you, stay here,” he told us.

Gabriel, whether purposely or in response to some subconscious alpha instinct, stepped in front of Elijah and me. His shoulders were relaxed, and his scent was normal—but his attention didn’t waver from his two employees as they approached the vans.

When the pair were maybe five steps away from the closer of the two vehicles, several things happened in quick succession.

All four doors swung open in unison, and several rough looking men swarmed out of the vans. One man lifted something dark and metallic with a terrifyingly familiar silhouette, resting his forearm through the open passenger side window of the van door he was sheltering behind. Curran lunged toward him, and Gabriel cursed sharply, raising his arms as though to cage us closer behind him.

In the same instant, a muffled noise like someone striking two pieces of metal together sliced through the distant hubbub of people going about their work elsewhere on the docks. Gabriel staggered, a warm splash of liquid spraying across my cheek.

## TWENTY-NINE

Emma

“FUCK!” CURRAN SNARLED, lunging for the van door and slamming into it with

his full weight. It swung closed, crushing the gunman against the vehicle's frame. Curran grabbed the man's wrist—still protruding through the open window—and wrestled a handgun with a silencer from his slackened grip.

I was paralyzed, standing slack-jawed behind Gabriel. The blond alpha fell to one knee, clutching his left arm. He tried to rise again, only to trip over his own feet and collapse onto his side a moment later.

“Rosebud, Absinthe—run!” Curran shouted. “Get help! We'll hold them off!”

He swung around, pointing the business end of the gun at the goon charging toward him from the other side of the van. Another muffled retort, and the goon dropped. By the other van, Onyx was fighting two men with knives, putting the sharpened dagger from the tourist shop to good use.

Elijah stood frozen for a bare instant before breaking himself free. “Em, come on!”

He sprinted toward the distant figures working around the other boats in the dock, screaming, “Help! We need help!” at the top of his lungs.

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My feet were still rooted to the ground, my eyes on the growing bloodstain blooming from Gabriel's arm. He gritted his teeth and got his feet under himself again, clutching the wound with his other hand as he staggered upright.

A fifth goon strode toward us with a switchblade clutched in his hand, while a sixth charged after Elijah. Praying that omega sprinting speed would keep Elijah out of his grasp, I darted past Gabriel's swaying form and threw myself onto my knees in the goon's path.

"Don't hurt him!" I begged, clasping my hands together in entreaty as I stared up at him with wide eyes.

The goon sneered down and spat something in Greek that didn't sound complimentary. He stepped up to me and reached down with the hand that wasn't holding the knife.

Using my clasped hands like a club, I swung them into his groin with all the strength I could muster. The man howled, doubling over, the knife tumbling from his fingers to clatter against the wooden boards of the dock. I lunged for it, ignoring the way my sore body screamed in protest at the sudden exertion.

I came up with the blade held securely in my grip and backed up until I was crouched protectively in front of Gabriel. His harsh, uneven breathing echoed in my ears. I wanted desperately to turn and look at him, but I didn't dare. Instead, I darted my attention back and forth between the goon writhing on the ground in front of me, the knife fight raging by the farthest van, and the direction Elijah and his pursuer had disappeared.

Please let him be safe, I silently begged. Somehow, this must be my fault. No way could it have been a coincidence. If any of the others died because of my screwed-up family, I'd never forgive myself.

Shouts erupted from the direction of the boats moored down the dock from us, and I caught my breath as a small crowd of rough-looking men hurried in our direction, pointing and speaking rapidly in Greek. My shoulders sagged when I made out Elijah's shock of russet hair at the front of the group.

There was no sign of the goon who'd chased after him. Maybe he'd made a run for it when he saw the crowd forming. The guy I'd punched in the groin certainly seemed highly motivated to leave, cursing sharply as he dragged himself to his feet and staggered toward the nearest van, still hunched over in pain.

He and one of the men who'd been fighting Onyx and Curran climbed into the vehicle and peeled away, scattering the crowd as the driver pulled a messy U-turn. Three of the goons lay unmoving on the pavement. Two of them were bleeding heavily. The other was the man who'd shot Gabriel and then been crushed by the van door.

"Drop the knife, Emma," Gabriel grated from behind me. "It's going to be hard enough to convince them who the bad guys are, as it is."

I dropped the knife and stepped back, finally getting a good look at the blood pouring down Gabriel's arm.

Curran and Onyx rushed over to us, reaching us at roughly the same time as Elijah and his pack of Good Samaritans. Curran had ditched the gun at some point, I noticed. Onyx—who was also bleeding—still held the fake-antique dagger. It flew through the air a moment later, disappearing into the water in a smooth arc as I watched.

“Police,” Elijah was saying, somewhat frantically. “We need police! And—Christ, Gabriel, your arm...” He swallowed hard. “And an ambulance!”

“Astynomía,” Gabriel rasped, as two men approached him and started fussing over his wound. “Asthenofóro.”

“We’re tourists,” Elijah tried, as Curran shouldered in and took Gabriel’s arm in his hands, tearing the shirt sleeve away with alpha strength.

More rapid conversation, and one of the newcomers produced a phone and lifted it to his ear. Some of the men broke away to check on the fallen goons, prodding at them for signs of life. The buzzing in my ears was growing louder. When Elijah came up and wrapped shaking arms around me, I couldn’t help but sag against him.

“You’re all right?” he asked breathlessly.

I nodded. “You?”

“I... I think so.” He squeezed me tighter. “Who the hell were those guys? How did they know we were here?”

Onyx joined us, wrapping a strip of torn cloth around what looked like a nasty defensive slash on their forearm. “It was the damned sailboat. It had to be. The captain of the Titania had its name and registration. Casick or one of the Huntwells could have tracked down the owner; bribed him to notify the hired muscle whenever we got here.”

“Bribed... or threatened,” I managed, dragging myself out of Elijah’s arms.

Onyx grunted. “Yeah. Or that.” Dark eyes swept over us, cataloguing our lack of obvious injuries. “Both of you okay? Thanks for getting help so fast, Rosebud. And

for protecting the boss, Absinthe. Remind me not to piss you off, by the way.”

“We’re okay,” Elijah said, though his voice was shaky. “Better than you and Gabriel, anyway. What about Curran?”

“Gonna have a hell of a black eye,” Onyx replied. “Hang on. I need to make sure he ditched his knife. I saw him wipe the handgun grip and put it back in the shooter’s hand to get his prints on it, so at least that’s covered.”

They disappeared into the confusion, while in the distance, sirens approached. Elijah’s tanned skin held a pale, grayish undertone, and I’m sure I didn’t look much better. Every cursed omega instinct screamed to run and find a hole to hide in, but that wasn’t in the cards for either of us right now as the first of the police cars pulled up, lights flashing.

This was the first time I’d seen up close and personal how much difference money and status could make when it came to dealing with law enforcement in a foreign country. What started out as understandable suspicion about who we were and why we’d left three dead and injured men bleeding on the dock, quickly turned into deference.

A translator materialized within the first fifteen minutes at the hospital. Gabriel and Onyx were quickly whisked away for treatment, while the general tone changed abruptly from ‘who are you and what the hell is going on here’ to ‘we’re so incredibly sorry that such a thing could have happened to you while you were visiting our fine country.’

Elijah and I were both in a daze, answering questions with the minimum possible information. I wasn’t even angry when Curran played the traumatized omega card on our behalf, since it meant we were shuffled off to wait in a quiet room with dim lights and soft chairs.

Elijah curled forward, resting his elbows on his knees. “I really don’t feel so good,” he said.



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Reaction, I wanted to tell him. It's always like this once the danger is past. Unfortunately, I wasn't at all sure I could get the words out straight, so I contented myself with reaching over and taking one of his shaking hands.

Mine was shaking, too.

We stayed like that until Curran showed up, maybe ninety minutes later.

"Hey, you two. Time for us to get out of here." His whiskey-rough voice was gentle. "They've released Onyx, and the crypto genius is checking himself out against medical advice." He paused. "I owe both of you an apology. I told you we'd hold off the hired goons, and we failed. We put you both in danger."

I blinked at him, uncomprehending.

Elijah was quicker on the uptake. "It was six against two, Curran."

The alpha huffed out a breath, his kind hazel eyes landing on me. "Six against three, as it turned out. I saw you take that bloke down before I could get to him, Emma."

Elijah stared at me. "You... what?"

"Punched him in the b-balls," I mumbled, dropping my eyes.

"And you got us help, Elijah," Curran went on. "Otherwise, that might've been even uglier. Anyway, the police are satisfied for now, after receiving a pointed phone call from a rather well-known international law firm. There are cars coming to take us to a

hotel near the airport, and this time they won't be full of more hired guns."

Thankfully, the cars were not, in fact, full of more hired guns. And the hotel room wasn't just a hotel room. It was a five-star penthouse suite. Because money.

We'd split up for the trip here, Onyx riding with Elijah and me while Curran babysat Gabriel with his heavily bandaged and immobilized arm. The bullet had torn through his bicep, nicking an artery but not severing it. For a beta or an omega, it would still have been a serious injury. For an alpha, it was less so. Onyx had required stitches but had ditched the sling as soon as we got in the car, and the nasty slice didn't seem to be hindering them all that much.

We trekked to the hotel elevator after checking in, neatly uniformed bellhops following behind with luggage carts. Curran, I noticed, seemed to be watching Elijah and me very closely.

"Right, both of you," he said, once the door was firmly closed and locked behind the last bellhop. "Two things. First, you're both on the verge of a trauma shutdown. So, you're taking warm showers, eating something, and then we're piling into the penthouse nest that this hotel seems to be so proud of. Second, I'd really appreciate if someone would tell me when you were planning on letting me and Onyx know that the five of us are a fucking scent match. Because that seems like information it would have been good for us to have."

## THIRTY

Emma

I'D BEEN HANDLING things. Honestly, I had. Yes, I was feeling shaky and weird, because that was simply how omegas were hardwired. Deal with the crisis, stay alive, then shut down emotionally and physically afterward until the stress hormones reset.

I was an expert in hiding the second part of that equation. I'd needed to be, while I was passing as a beta. I'd had this under control, damn it.

Curran's words cut through me, sharper than the goon's switchblade. He knew about the scent match. His dampeners must have worn off. Had Onyx's worn off, too? Panic clawed through me, because I couldn't keep pretending this thing wasn't real when everyone and their damned dog seemed hell-bent on throwing it in my face.

"Shit," Elijah whispered, and sat down heavily on the nearest horizontal surface—which happened to be a tasteful blue and silver striped sofa.

My heart was thrumming in a frantic, thready rhythm. It was too much—the final straw in a hellacious day. An invisible steel band tightened around my ribs. I couldn't breathe. Red fog swirled around my peripheral vision.

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“Ascent match? What thewhat, now?” Onyx asked, looking at Curran with comically raised eyebrows.

“You heard me,” Curran bit out. “Give it another hour or two and you’ll be able to smell it for yourself. Our pheromone dampeners were already active when Emma and Elijah arrived. No one else in the group has that excuse, so I’d be very interested to hear why they didn’t bother to mention it.”

He was staring straight at Gabriel as he spoke, but even being on the periphery of that alpha growl had me hunching in on myself, trying to be small. Elijah flinched hard on the sofa.

The red mist was swirling in tighter and tighter as Curran faced off with Gabriel, whose expression could have been carved from marble. I couldn’t breathe... I couldn’t breathe...

The strangled omega whimper of distress that tore free of my throat was quite possibly the worst sound I’d ever heard. It was definitely the worst one I’d ever made. Three alphas whirled toward me as though jerked by imaginary ropes. I wanted to disappear through the floor. I wanted not to exist. I wanted—

The terrible tension in the room snapped, the angry line of Curran’s shoulders bowing as all the bark went out of him.

“Bloody hell, luv,” he muttered. “Sorry.Sorry. Come here.”

A moment later, I was enveloped in strong arms, a cloud of amber and myrrh

surrounding me. I gulped air, finally able to take a full breath... and immediately collapsed into tears.

“Nest,” Onyx said firmly. “Elijah, honey, do you need a hand?”

The tiny whine that came from the sofa shouldn’t have made me feel better, but somehow, it did. At least I wasn’t alone in my omega pathos.

“Please,” Elijah rasped.

I had a flash of remembered awareness that both Onyx and Gabriel were injured. Then I let it go. They were alphas. Wounds and bandages wouldn’t stop them from helping Elijah.

“Come on, Absinthe,” Curran murmured against the top of my head. Corded arms swept me up, and I finally allowed myself to turn inward, letting everything go.

I was only vaguely aware of the gentle sway of being carried. The next thing I knew, I was in a nest—cozy and dim and soft, smelling of nothing but neutral fabric detergent and surface cleaner. It wasn’t quite the safe and private me-smell I instinctively craved, but it was so much better than if it had smelled of strangers.

There was an honest-to-god sunken bed inset in the cushioned floor—piled with the most decadent fake furs I’d ever felt against my skin. Designer coats from fancy fashion houses had nothing on the softness of that bed as Curran laid me down in it. I whimpered again, unable to stifle it, and burrowed in.

Then Elijah was next to me, and someone was pulling off my shoes. I let it happen. Let everything around us happen without any further input from me. I didn’t want to think about how good it felt to fall headfirst into trust—but I was falling just the same. This was safe, even if I didn’t want it to be. Even if I couldn’t afford to get

used to it.

Alphas were guarding the nest, protecting Elijah and me from harm while we shut down for a while. I closed my eyes, blocking out everything but the feeling of soft fur blankets and the too-right scent of the five of us mingling together. Curran lay down between us, gathering Elijah against him with one arm and me with the other.

Another body curled up behind me. Gabriel. His nose pressed against the nape of my neck, warm breath tickling my skin. The bed shifted beneath another addition of weight—Onyx, lying down on Elijah's far side.

"However long you need," Curran said. "We're not going anywhere."

His rough purr rumbled beneath my cheek; Onyx's lighter one joining it a few seconds later. Finally, a third purr started up at my back. The deep vibration seemed to resonate in my ribcage, unknotting the terrible tension lodged there.

Elijah made a soft sound like a stifled sob, and his hand scrabbled for mine over Curran's chest. Our fingers tangled, and I let everything else slip away for a bit, floating in a warm sea of security and pure, animal sensation.

When I became aware of my surroundings again, a callused thumb was stroking my temple in a slow, soothing rhythm.

"You back with us, beautiful?" Onyx asked.

I blinked and groaned, having no idea when Curran had slipped out from between Elijah and me, or when Onyx had replaced him. My skull was pounding like a drum, and my stomach made a discontented grumbling noise.

"What time is it?" I asked. The words were a hoarse whisper.

“No idea, sorry,” Onyx said. “Curran and the boss are getting us some food. Three cheers for twenty-four-hour room service.”

My head felt like it weighed a metric ton, but I lifted it far enough to see Elijah still passed out cold with his face pressed against Onyx’s neck, breathing in the clean scent of spruce and berries.

“Oh,” I said brilliantly.

Onyx grunted. “We kind of took things out of order. Nest, food, shower instead of shower, food, nest. It’s all good, though.”

I hated myself just a little bit for asking the next question, but I couldn’t stop it spilling out. “Is Curran still angry?”

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Onyx gave a little snort. “Yeah, he’s royally narked. Mostly at the boss, though. Don’t worry, it’s probably good for his circulation to get that cold, dead heart pumping occasionally.”

It was Elijah’s turn to moan as though he’d just awoken to the mother of all hangovers. “Where are—” he began, only to cut himself off. “Oh. I remember now. What are we talking about? And is there food?”

“We’re talking about scent matches, and there will be shortly,” Onyx replied.

Elijah winced at the mention of the scent match. I didn’t blame him.

“Right,” he said. “About that...”

“Don’t bother,” Onyx cut in. “I understand why you kept quiet.”

Silence settled over the nest for an uncomfortable beat.

“Do you, though?” Elijah asked.

The shoulder I was still half-resting on shrugged, jostling me. “Pair of high-powered fashion models. Half-crazy rich bastard obsessed with bringing down a crime family. Not sure how the math really tallies on that one. And it doesn’t help that one of those high-powered fashion models happens to be genetically related to the same crime family. Complicated.”

“That’s putting it mildly,” I managed, trying not to think about whether I was going



to have the strength to walk away from this pack after what had happened on the dock. After what had happened in this room, for that matter.

What was the right answer?

Argh, I couldn't think. My brain felt like it was packed in cotton wool.

"Oh, my god," Elijah groaned. "Do you smell that? Breakfast foods." The last two words were uttered in a tone of awed reverence.

The smell reached me an instant later. My stomach rumbled again, louder than before. Onyx helped us both sit up properly, just in time for the door to open. Gabriel leaned in, pale-faced and frowning.

"Do you want to eat in here or at the table?" he asked.

Part of me wanted to never leave this room, but the idea of spilling jam on the sumptuous furs felt unthinkable. I met Elijah's bleary gaze. "Table?" I suggested.

He nodded. "Probably for the best."

We managed to get ourselves upright and waded through the piles of pillows to the door, following Gabriel to the nook that had been set up for eating. Curran was already there, removing silver cloches from heaping plates of food.

Elijah and I hung back, trying to read the older alpha's mood.

He looked up, saw us hesitating, and sighed. "No need to look like that, you two. Eat some food, take a nice relaxing shower. I'm not angry at you, and I do understand where your heads were at. But we will be having a talk once everyone's cleaned up and fed."

I exchanged a look with Elijah, seeing the same misgivings written on his face that probably painted mine.

### THIRTY-ONE

Emma

BEING FED AND showered didn't make me any more eager to return to the conversation with the others. There was still a panicky flutter lodged in my lungs. Not least because I knew now what I needed to do to keep Elijah as safe as possible after I'd dragged him into danger like an idiot.

"Have a seat, Emma," Curran said, gesturing to the elegant sofa where Elijah was currently perched.

I sat down next to him, doing my best to control my breathing.

Gabriel, still pasty, had seated himself in a high-backed chair. Onyx had dragged another chair in from the dining nook. Curran was propping up a wall next to the massive white marble fireplace that dominated one side of the main room.

"I d-didn't say anything because I d-don't believe in scent matches," I blurted—and, yay, I could tell already that I was going to be stuttering like a fool throughout this whole thing. "It's just a quirk of b-biology. Not something you b-build a life around outside of romance novels."

"In my defense," Elijah said, "I didtryto say something." He leveled a narrow look in Gabriel's direction.

All eyes turned to the blond alpha. Gabriel didn't drop his gaze, but he wasn't

meeting anyone's eyes in particular as he said, "It wasn't practical. It still isn't. Associating with me puts both of you in danger."

Elijah scowled. "We're already in danger."

I cleared my throat and tried hard to concentrate on my breathing... on pacing and timing my words so the plosives wouldn't get caught on my tongue. "My uncle schemed to get me on that b-boat so he could sell me as a sex slave. I'd never even heard your name when that happened."

"Do we think the Huntwells were after you two? Or were they after the boss when they sent those goons after us at the dock?" Onyx asked. "Assuming they're the ones behind the attack, I mean."

"Of course they are," Curran said. "Who the hell else? It's a good question, though."

Elijah shifted restlessly beside me. "I feel like we're straying off topic. Curran, Onyx—you know about the scent match now. What do you want to do about it?"

Curran grunted. "I want you two to come to London where we can protect you."

"Gabriel already asked us to do that," Elijah pointed out.

"And you said no." Onyx huffed out a breath. "See, the thing is, if the goons had never showed up, and we'd dumped you on a plane to New York before our pheromone dampeners wore off, we might never have even known about it. That's the part Curran's pissed off about."

"And what about you?" I asked quietly.

Onyx leaned forward, elbows resting on knees. The neatly wrapped bandage was

stark white against their dusky skin. “No point in being pissed off, is there? We know now. Still, we might only be employees, but this involves us. We have a say in it, or at least we should.”

“You’re not ‘only’ anything, Onyx,” Gabriel said, sounding tired despite resting with us in the nest earlier. “I was wrong; I should have told you both when we were on the Calliope. But the harsh truth is, nothing has changed.”

“Something’s changed,” I muttered.

Now I was the focus of four pairs of eyes.

“Has it?” Elijah asked.

I nodded, my gaze dropping to my hands, lying tightly folded in my lap. “I think we should go to London after all.”

“You were terrified to go to London,” Elijah said.

I still was. But if we went back to New York—if I left on a bus, seeking obscurity in a small town while Elijah stayed behind in his old life—then my uncle’s people could go after him in hopes of getting information about where I’d gone.

I couldn’t risk that.

“I didn’t think it through,” I told him. “New York wouldn’t be safe for either of us.”

“We can keep you safe in London,” Gabriel said. “Present evidence aside.” He lifted his wounded arm the couple of inches that the bandages and sling allowed.

“Damn straight we can,” Curran agreed. “Private jet to the airstrip, private motorcade

with additional security from there to the Kensington house. No one gets onto that property unless they're supposed to be there."

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“Maybe someone ought to mention that all of this is completely separate from scent matches and the like?” Onyx put in.

A faint flush reddened Gabriel’s cheeks. It was the first color I’d seen on his face since I walked into the room.

“Yes, of course it is,” he said. “I would never tie your protection and safety to... anything else that might or might not be between us.”

Curran rolled his eyes briefly ceilingward. “Please excuse his nibs. He spends way too much time staring at contracts written in High Standard Legalese. We’d protect you anyway because it’s the right thing to do. But believe it or not, we don’t normally spend several hours curled up in a nest purring with people we’ve got on a protection detail.”

Now it was my turn to flush, heat radiating from my cheeks as I remembered the feeling of rough alpha purrs bracketing me, front and back.

“Well, I should certainly hope not,” Elijah said lightly. “Just imagine what the tabloids would say.”

Onyx snorted. “See, now, you think you’re joking.”

Gabriel winced. “Let’s just say that the tabloids are... not entirely absent from my life. I’ll do my level best to keep you both out of them, however.”

Elijah perked up. “Hang on, you’re serious? Oh, my god. Don’t you dare. Do you

have any idea how something like that can blow up a model's career? We could be famous."

I elbowed him. He rubbed his arm as though I'd mortally wounded him.

"Do we even have careers anymore?" I asked pointedly. "I certainly don't. And you've been sold to the highest bidder."

"Oh, hell, no," Elijah said. "I've been illegally sold to the highest bidder, and if I'm reading the room right, that same bidder intends to blow the whole scheme wide open."

Gabriel looked troubled, and I wasn't sure why.

"That was the plan, yes," he said.

"Isn't it still the plan?" Elijah asked cautiously.

"He left the yacht early," Curran said in a gruff tone. "No way to gather information on where any of the other girls might've been sent. And no good way to track 'em now."

A horrible, sick feeling settled over my stomach, making me regret the pastries I'd devoured an hour ago. "You mean, because he rescued us, all the other victims on that cruise can't be rescued?"

Elijah's sharp, indrawn breath echoed in my ears.

"That's right," Curran said. "And before you start thinking otherwise, that decision was ours to make. Not yours."



“If the boss got his hands on a pair of signed contracts that he can use in court, it might even end up saving more people in the long run,” Onyx added.

I barely heard the words. My eyes locked with Elijah’s, and I was sure they mirrored the horror I saw in those green depths.

“We’ll help you take them down,” I said hoarsely.

He nodded agreement. “Yeah. We will. I...shit. I didn’t even think about the rest of them.”

I licked my lips to moisten them. “I’m a Huntwell.” The words burned like acid against my tongue. “I was part of that world until my father was killed. Maybe you can use that somehow.”

Gabriel looked at me, his expression set and unyielding. “Wewilltake them down,” he agreed. “But you’re not getting within a mile of Tommy or Cade Huntwell on my watch. We’ll do it another way.”

I thought of his sister... of the models on the yacht. Some of them had almost certainly received regular contracts with TSB, to maintain appearances. Others hadn’t. The knowledge that I was safe while they might be trapped in hell on Earth ate at my stomach lining like gnawing rats.

“We’ll make this right,” I whispered, knowing I wouldn’t be able to rest until the words were true.

### THIRTY-TWO

Emma

WHEN CURRAN mentioned the Kensington house, I hadn't given it much thought. Not beyond Kensington being a place in London where rich people lived. It never occurred to me that he'd been talking about Kensington Palace Gardens.

Billionaire Row. A place so exclusive that it wasn't available on Google Street View because of security concerns.

I only knew what most people born in London and raised on trashy tabloid stories knew about it. The mansions abutting Kensington Palace had mostly been foreign consulates during the twentieth century. But with the rise of a new class of super-rich individuals emerging in the past couple of decades, properties on the secretive and highly secure stretch of road had begun to find their way into private hands.

At least, they did if those private hands were willing to fork over upwards of a hundred million quid for a fixer upper.

The flight from Athens to London had been uneventful, thank god. It wasn't the first time I'd been on a private jet, but it was the first time I'd been on one outside of some kind of very exclusive modeling gig. It was also the first time I'd ridden in a motorcade of ominous black SUVs—assuming, of course, that three vehicles constituted a motorcade.

“Bulletproof, reinforced undercarriage, run-flat tires,” Onyx said wryly, rapping

bruised knuckles against a tinted window. “It guzzles petrol like an alcoholic in a beer garden, though.”

I should’ve felt like an imposter as we rolled down the M4. Instead, I felt safer than I’d ever expected to feel in London.

That feeling didn’t diminish when the lead vehicle pulled up to a line of bollards at the end of Kensington Palace fucking Gardens, and a grim-faced security guard walked over to check ID. He nodded to someone else in the guard house, and the bollards retracted smoothly into the pavement. We drove past, and I craned around to watch them rise once more from the road behind us, blocking it off from traffic.

Elijah leaned over to whisper, “I feel like I’m missing some cultural significance here. Is this place as big a deal as I think it is?”

“Probably b-bigger,” I muttered.

Onyx, riding shotgun with the black suited and capped driver up front, snorted. “Pretty wild, huh? Funniest part is, a lot of these mansions are total wrecks inside. Too expensive to keep up.”

The nameless driver chuckled. “The secret is to not let anybody close enough to look at them properly. Nice gardens, though.”

It was true. The rigorously manicured gardens with their topiary and abundant profusion of flowers laid out in geometric patterns were every nice. Like, ‘public botanical garden’ levels of nice.

Elijah seemed caught between bewilderment and amusement. “Don’t tell me you’re hauling us to some drafty, hundred-year-old hovel that happens to have really good landscaping.”

Onyx made a half-and-half gesture with one hand. “The renovations on the main living areas are pretty much finished. The rest of it... well. If you like to watch urban exploration videos online, you’re in luck. Let’s just say that the Russians left it in a bit of a state.”

“The Russians?” Elijah echoed blankly.

“The boss got a deal on it, apparently,” Onyx replied. “The place used to be the Russian Consulate, back in the eighties. If you’re in the market, I hear the Nepalese contingent down the street have been trying to ditch theirs on the down-low. I can get you in touch with an estate agent.”

“No thanks,” Elijah said. “I’m good. Besides, my sub-lease in New York isn’t up for another seven months.”

My stomach twisted a little at the reminder of the real world waiting for us outside of this bizarre, self-enclosed universe of money.

“Just as well,” Onyx said philosophically. “The utility bills on these old hulks are outrageous.”

The outside of the former Russian Consulate was very...white. While not the largest mansion I’d ever seen, it was probably the most expensive based on location alone. The gardens were as perfectly manicured as all the others we’d passed, and the entire property was enclosed in six-foot wrought iron fence overgrown with carefully tended hedges.

Tommy Huntwell would not be sending any of his goons to storm Billionaire Row; that much was obvious. We were safe here.

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The inside of the house was a study in contrasts, as Onyx had warned. The place was three stories tall with a garret at the top and a full basement beneath—seven bedrooms, eight baths, two massive sitting rooms, several offices, and some alarmingly narrow staircases. About two-thirds of the rooms were freshly updated and furnished, while the others very much weren't.

“It's a work in progress,” Gabriel had muttered a bit sheepishly, during the informal tour.

“Is this where you usually live?” Elijah asked, giving the cracked plaster and bare floors of the principal bedroom suite a skeptical look.

“No, I have a flat in Chelsea that's a lot less, shall we say, Dickensian,” Gabriel said. “However, the security here is quite a bit better.”

“No kidding.” Elijah raised an eyebrow. “You'd think they were guarding the crown jewels.”

“Technically, those are in the Tower of London,” Curran quipped. “Though I imagine they have quite a few nice baubles down the street at Kensington Palace as well.”

Gabriel installed us in two of the bedrooms that had been renovated and furnished, introduced us to the small house staff that came in daily to do the cooking and cleaning when he was in residence, and then he buggered off to do whatever billionaires did when they were trying to take down a crime syndicate behind the scenes.

“Something involving solicitors,” Onyx said knowingly, after Gabriel and Curran had left. “More cake?”

Afternoon tea was a concept I’d left behind when I’d fled my grandmother’s cramped flat in London for a career in New York. So, for that matter, was cake. The realization that if I was no longer a fashion model, that meant there was no longer any reason to starve myself thin, had hit me on a private jet somewhere over the Mediterranean.

“Yes, please,” I said, and accepted another piece.

“You don’t know how happy this makes me,” Elijah said, pointing at my plate with his tiny fork.

Onyx frowned. “What’s that?”

“She doesn’t eat,” Elijah said. “She’s, like, the salad queen. Green leaves. Fat-free dressing.”

“I’m a model,” I protested, only to shake my head in irritation when I heard myself. “I was a model. They like us skinny, and not everyone can inhale a plate of b-bacon and never gain an ounce!” I stabbed my fork in Elijah’s direction in retaliation.

Onyx made a noncommittal noise. “Just need a bit more exercise in between slices of cake, that’s all. I’ve got a workout area set up in one of the empty rooms—and you two should start some basic self-defense training anyway.” A sly smile tugged at their lips. “Or maybe not so basic in your case, Absinthe. I saw what you did to that bloke with the switchblade.”

And that was how I found myself sparring with a six-and-a-half foot tall, bared-to-the-waist alpha sex god in the disused ambassadorial receiving room of a hundred-million-pound mansion, just down the road from Kensington Palace.

“Okay, maybe that shouldn’t be hot—but that’s totally hot,” Elijah said from the sidelines, as I writhed on a blue gym mat, trying to break Onyx’s hold.

Onyx blinked down at me. “I mean. He’s not wrong. It’s kinda hot.”

I gave a low growl and twisted, omega flexibility giving me the edge I needed to hook a leg between my captor’s and jerk it sideways. I swung my free arm toward Onyx’s now unprotected crotch, pulling the blow an inch before my fist would have connected with a very sensitive area.

They made a low noise of interest. “Okay. Make that really hot.” We untangled from our pretzel-like clinch, and Onyx pulled me to my feet before continuing. “Still, you need a few more tricks up your sleeve than just that one. There’s more to life than punching your attackers in the groin.”

“It’s worked pretty well so far,” I shot back, stretching aching back muscles and pushing my sweaty hair off my forehead.

Onyx chuckled. “Can’t argue that one, I suppose. Come here, Rosebud. Your turn.”

“I’m a lover, not a fighter,” Elijah protested half-heartedly.

“You’re a menace, is what you are,” Onyx said. “But as long as you’re under my protection, you’ll be a menace who at least knows how to break a few common holds.”

“You should know some basics,” I agreed. “Might as well learn them from the hot alpha instructor.”

The admission was a bit of a giveaway—but Onyx had a nose, and I still didn’t have access to scent suppressors. Everyone in the room could smell the pheromones rolling

off all three of us. At some point, between realizing that our rescue had come at the expense of other models' freedom and arriving at this half-renovated wreck of a safehouse, a wall inside me had cracked. We weren't living in a Mills & Boon novel—but arguing that there was absolutely nothing between the five of us felt increasingly delusional.

Onyx grinned, looking both pleased and surprised at the compliment. “Well, Rosebud... you heard the woman. Get that cute omega arse over here. You're gettingschooled.”



### THIRTY-THREE

Onyx

IF EMMA HOPE WAS an alluring mystery wrapped inside a conundrum, then Elijah Bardot was possibly the cutest and most wholesome damn omega on the planet. Together, the pair was doing my head in. My head... and various other parts of my anatomy.

I'd spent a good chunk of my life taking things as they came, going along to get along. As the child of a father from Shandong Province in eastern China and a mother from Sierra Leone, I'd been something of an oddity, even in an immigration center like Brisbane. Throw an extra helping of gender non-conformity on top of that, and let's just say my childhood had been interesting.

My father, a beta, hadn't known what to do with an alpha offspring to begin with. My omega mother had been more supportive, but she hadn't really understood me either. I'd left Australia for London when I was eighteen. Did odd jobs, made a bit of a name for myself in the fighting ring, and parlayed that into a job teaching martial arts to at-risk youth.

When I eventually became a citizen, I was able to get on the waitlist for counseling, and I finally received the top surgery I'd been wanting since I hit puberty. It's hard to describe to someone who doesn't already know how big a deal it is to look in the mirror and have your reflection match the 'you' that lives inside your head.

Not that I was totally miserable before. I wasn't. But I credit that newfound

confidence with landing the gig as Gabriel Rosencranz's second bodyguard after the previous bloke retired—happilynota euphemism. He packed up and moved to Brighton for the sea air.

Anyway, I'd known Curran from my work with the at-risk teens, and when I overheard him talking about the job opening, I jumped at it. I knew how to fight; I knew how to keep my mouth shut...mostly. I also knew how to stand around with a glower plastered on my face, looking intimidating as fuck.

He'd vouched for me, and three years later, here I was. The job paid insanely well, considering I'd only been in two knife fights and maybe a dozen fistfights during that time. I hadn't expected to gain this crazy dog's breakfast of an alpha pack—made crazier by the fact that the bloke signing my paycheck was noticeably less dominant than the bloke who made sure his suits were pressed and opened car doors for him.

Andthathad been before you threw two omega scent matches into the mix.

I'd never seen Gabriel so on-edge, which was saying something for a man whose sole reason for living appeared to be taking down a dangerous London crime syndicate. Between him and Emma, De Nile was more than a river in Egypt. Curran seemed to be waiting for a metaphorical train derailment, and Elijah mostly just looked like he needed a hug.

Meanwhile, I was in the makeshift workout room schooling two perfuming omegas in basic self-defense, waiting to see if we were doing anything beyond light flirting. At this rate, it wouldn't matter that Emma had pulled her groin-punch before it connected. My clit was going to be aching and throbbing like a fresh bruise regardless.

"I told you I wasn't a fighter," Elijah wheezed, after the fifteenth time he failed to break my hold and ended up pinned beneath me on the mat. If he didn't sound so

downtrodden about it, I might have wondered if he wanted to be there.

Omegas had two advantages over alphas and betas—speed and flexibility. Some were more athletic than others, of course, but I'd seen Elijah run when he went for help at the dock. He was no slouch when it came to physical fitness.

I rose to my feet and gave him a hand up. "You've never been in a fight in your life, have you, Rosebud?" I asked.

His answering laugh had an edge of bitterness. "Does running away very fast from fights count?"

"If running away is what keeps you safe," Emma said from her vantage point by the wall, "then running is what you should do."

By contrast, someone had taught Emma dirty fighting. Given her family background, I could guess why.

"Listen to the lady," I agreed. "She knows of what she speaks. You can do this, though. You're worrying about hurting me, when you need to be worrying about getting away."

"Your arm, though," Elijah said weakly, gesturing at the bandages.

A few spots of blood had seeped through around the stitches. I snorted. "My arm will be good as new in a few days, whether you break this hold successfully or not."

"But if Onyx was a real attacker," Emma put in, "you'd want to punch those stitches as hard as you c-could."

That unexpected vicious streak of hers should not have been as attractive as it was.

“What she said.” I gestured him close again and grabbed his wrist. “Now, nice and slow. Show me what you’re going to do.”

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Elijah squared his shoulders and covered the top of my hand with his, holding me in place as he jerked his trapped arm sharply down toward his thigh, pulling me forward half a step. Then he twisted his arm to get his fingers around my wrist in turn, locking my elbow straight and using the newly won leverage to push me down on the mat.

Emma clapped and let out a whistle of approval.

“Holy shit,” Elijah said, sounding genuinely astonished. “I did it.”

I didn’t mention that there were half a dozen ways an experienced brawler could have evaded the move. Turning our lover into a fighter was going to be an ongoing process, assuming I had the opportunity to pursue it.

“Yes, you did,” I told him. “And look, I’m not even spurting blood.” I held up my other arm by way of demonstration.

“Maybe that’s a good stopping point,” Emma said. “I know it’s barely evening, but I’m asleep on my feet.”

I wasn’t sure how much of that was the truth and how much was a polite escape from the pheromone-soaked room, but it didn’t matter. All three of us could smell the sex choking the air, and none of us were going to take it further so soon after uprooting this pair from their normal lives and dumping them headfirst into Gabriel’s crusade.

I wondered idly if they had an outlet with each other. Not that it was any of my business. I hadn’t got that impression during Emma’s heat on the Calliope, but that had been another super-weird and awkward situation that neither of them had asked

for.

“Rest is good,” I said. “I think I heard Curran and the boss tromping around upstairs, so I’ll go see how their excursion went. If either of you need anything, just shout.”

Apparently, the boss’s excursion hadn’t gone as well as he’d hoped. I found Curran by the dry bar, knocking back scotch that probably cost more than most people earned in a month. I made a gimme gesture until he poured a second one and slid it across to me.

“Huh. That bad?” I asked, sipping mine instead of gulping it.

Curran shook his head in exasperation. “His nibs’ fancy lawyer pointed out that nothing in that farce of a contract he signed connects the Huntwells with the trafficking ring. Which I’m sure he already knew.”

I grunted acknowledgement. “He’s beating himself up about the other girls on the yacht, I’m guessing?”

“Course he is,” Curran said gruffly. “It’s just a shit situation all around.”

“Made shittier by the fact that someone’s got their sights on him now, after that stunt by the docks. Or possibly on Emma Hope.” I swirled the contents of my glass, staring into the amber depths.

“Or both of them,” Curran said grimly. “It hadn’t escaped me.”

I drew a deep breath. “So, are we talking about the scent-match thing? Or not?”

Curran raised a grizzled eyebrow. “Dunno that there’s much to talk about. The five of us in the same house? It’ll blow up on us at some point, I expect. Not sure in which

direction, though.”

I tipped my glass up, relishing the burn as the scotch slid down my throat. Setting the tumbler down with a resolute clink, I sighed and raised an answering eyebrow. “Yeah? Well, that’s not the only thing set to blow. I just spent two hours teaching the omegas self-defense down in the workout room. You up for some stress relief?”

He gestured with his empty glass. “That arm okay?”

“Fuck the arm,” I told him. “Right now, it’s the least of my worries.”

The workout room was pretty much as I’d left it, so it was no surprise when Curran stopped in the doorway as though he’d walked into a solid wall.

“Jesus Christ.” His nostrils flared. “You sure all you did in here was spar?”

“Trust me,” I said. “I wouldn’t be this wound up if we’d done more.”

Curran shook his head and went to strip down to his cotton vest and trousers while I closed and locked the door. He shook his muscles out and before long, we were circling each other warily on the mats, looking for openings.

“Guess you’re on board if Gabriel and the omegas end up going for it,” he said, swiping out with a long arm.

I ducked back. “Are you joking? You’ve seen those two. They’re perfect. I mean, what thehell? How are omegas like them scent-matched to a crew of fuck-ups like us?”

Feinting right, I dove left and got in a jab before Curran blocked me.

“They’ve got issues; we’ve got issues,” he said. “Everyone’s got bloody issues. Guess our broken edges were meant to fit together or somethin’.”

“You old romantic,” I accused, and then I was fully involved in the fight, my brain blissfully shutting down everything that wasn’t move, countermove.



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That was the beauty of sparring with Curran. We were evenly matched, in the sense that I was younger and faster, while he was older and more experienced, not to mention dominant as hell. That, along with the knowledge that whoever ended up on top, the match would finish exactly as it did, with our trousers and underwear around our hips, brutally jerking each other off until we both came with matching growls. Afterward, we rolled onto our backs on the mat, thoroughly spent and clutching our swelling knots to keep them from aching too badly.

The slow drain of tension from my muscles and the brief lull in my racing thoughts was a relief, just like it always was. I wondered idly how the hell Gabriel managed to function when he seemed perpetually about to chew his own leg off with frustration. To say the bloke was tightly wound was a disservice to understatement, and as far as I knew, he didn't have a way to let off steam.

I guess that was what Curran meant about things eventually blowing up on us.

"What about you?" I asked him. "Are you on board when it comes to the omegas?"

He was flopped out beside me, limp as a used-up dishrag. "Course I am, you berk. When that kind of happiness shows up knocking on the door, you don't slam it in their faces. But I don't make the decisions for other people, now do I?"

I hummed, noncommittal. "S'pose not. Still, if the boss is being too much of an idiot, you could tell him so. He listens to you."

"It's not just us, though," Curran said, unaccountably gentle. "Emma and Elijah need to decide, too."

I nodded wordlessly. But what if the sweet pheromones still wafting around the room lied? We all knew they wanted us. I just wasn't sure that wanting would be enough.

## THIRTY-FOUR

Elijah

I WAS GOING TO crawl out of my skin. Rest, Emma had said, while excusing the both of us from the overpowering scent of hot alpha in the workout room. What a freaking joke. All I wanted right now was a fat knot inside me. The worst part was, I suspected if I'd asked for it, I would have had at least one enthusiastic taker. Possibly two.

I definitely, definitely couldn't ask.

Asking under these circumstances would be the height of stupidity. And it wasn't that I had anything against casual sex, either. Hell, I was the crown prince of casual sex. That was the problem—ever since that addictive, scent-matched pheromone cocktail had first slammed into me on the Calliope, nothing about this felt casual.

"You're spiraling," Emma said from her perch on my bed.

She'd followed me into the bedroom I'd claimed as mine without any explanation, and I hadn't protested, because the last thing I wanted was to be alone.

"You're not?" I asked in disbelief, because I had a nose, and her scent didn't lie.

"We're both covered in Onyx's alpha pheromones after the sparring session," she pointed out. "A shower might help."

There was a certain reluctance behind the words, and that was enough to stop my

restless pacing around this airy confection of a room.

“You don’t sound like you want a shower,” I said slowly.

Her answering bark of laughter had a faintly hysterical edge to it.

“I don’t know what the hell I want.” She swallowed and looked away. “Back in New York, I used to hate you for how confident you were. Just... having sex with alphas because you felt like it. You acted like it wasn’t d-dangerous. Like it was no big deal.”

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A little pang of hurt zapped through me at the admission.

It took a moment to organize the right words for a response. “I... didn’t realize it upset you that much.”

She shook her head, as though in frustration. “I realize now that I was jealous, more than anything. I’d built it up in my head that the world would end if anyone found out I was an omega. And there you were, just being gone. Being happy. It upset me because it flew in the face of the story I’d concocted for myself.”

I let that sink in.

“And then I just casually outed you,” I realized. “Knowing what I know now, I’m surprised you didn’t punch me in the nose.”

“Or the dick?” she added wryly.

“Or the dick,” I concurred. “And... now? I mean, now that you’ve had a taste of how the omega side lives?”

“It terrifies me how much I want it,” she admitted.

I wasn’t sure if I should say the next part out loud. “After what I’ve seen of this pack, I’m pretty confident you could have it easily enough.” I swallowed hard. “We could have it.”

“Yeah,” she whispered. Then she seemed to shake herself out of whatever headspace

she'd been stuck in. "Except for the small matter that I'm a member of the same crime family Gabriel is hunting, and he hasn't made any noises about wanting omegas in his pack. And the part where my uncle is apparently hunting us in turn."

"Right," I agreed. "Except for that."

I flopped down on the bed, lying on my back next to her. After a moment, she uncurled from her hunched position and lay down with her head on my shoulder.

"I d-didn't ever intend for you to be dragged into this mess," she said quietly. "But I'm really glad you're here, Elijah."

I curled my arm around her slender frame, an unaccustomed tightness rising in my throat. I coughed to clear it. "You know, I've been thinking. About a lot of stuff, but mostly about those other girls on the yacht."

"Me too," she said miserably.

"I think we should go public." I stroked my thumb over her shoulder. "Tell the world what happened to us. Try to blow the whole thing wide open."

Emma went very still in my arms. "Wouldn't that also b-blow up Gabriel's legal case, though?"

"I don't know," I said. "But right now, it seems like he's getting stonewalled. We could talk to him about it, anyway."

I wasn't sure what it said about the situation that discussing a sex trafficking case with Gabriel sounded way less fraught than trying to talk to him about the scent match, or how he felt about a pair of omegas joining his pack.

“You’re right,” Emma said, “we probably should.” She gave a delicate sniff. “But maybe after that shower I mentioned earlier.”

“Aww, c’mon,” I wheedled, only half-teasing. “Don’t you think the conversation would be a lot more stimulating if we showed up in his office smelling like sex and with Onyx’s pheromones smeared all over us?”

She smacked me half-heartedly on the bicep. “No. I donot.”

I manufactured a dramatic sigh. “Dove, you know I adore you. But you still have so much to learn about being an omega.”

She grumbled something unintelligible under her breath, though I was pretty sure I caught the words insufferable git. Then she poked me until I gave up and vacated the bed in favor of getting that shower. Maybe if I made it cold enough, it would get rid of the insistent ache throbbing between my legs—preferably before I caught myself wondering where Curran’s stash of sex toys left over from Emma’s heat had ended up.

“Fine,” I told her. “I’m going. What about you? This place has, like, a dozen bathrooms.”

But Emma was already snoring softly, having somehow evicted me from my own borrowed bed. With a snort of resigned amusement, I went to find clean clothes and my toiletry bag from the pile of luggage in the corner.

The second-floor guest bathroom was thankfully one of the rooms that had already been renovated, and it was as spectacular as everything else in the place. I wussed out on the cold shower in favor of a warm shower coupled with surreptitiously jerking myself off. Spilling over my own hand with several fingers jammed inside my passage wasn’t exactly the knot I craved, but it was better than nothing.

That—combined with washing away the lingering traces of spruce and bayberry clinging to my body—made me at least feel confident that I wouldn't end up trying to climb the next alpha to cross my path like a tree. I ran through the familiar ritual of my skin care routine, examined my haunted face in the mirror for a few moments, and dressed in a simple T-shirt and track pants before padding out into the hall barefoot.

At which point, I nearly ran headlong into Gabriel.

He put out a hand to steady me. “Erm,” he said, blinking at me owlishly.

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I sighed, aware that I'd been doing quite a lot of sighing lately.

“Hi,” I told him. “Sorry about that. Look—Emma’s crashed in my room right now. But we were talking earlier, and the three of us really need to have a discussion about what comes next when it comes to this trafficking mess. You can’t keep us barricaded here like fairytale princesses locked in a tower forever, and... well... we want to help.”

THIRTY-FIVE

Gabriel

EVEN WITH A DAMNED hole in my shoulder and my arm in a sling, the omegas were slowly driving me insane. I steadied Elijah, trying not to stare at the damp curl of his hair or acknowledge the faint scent of sex beneath the cover of soap and lotion—a scent that made me utterly certain he'd just had a solitary wank in the shower.

I made myself step back. Made myself listen to his words.

We want to help.

He was right that the pair couldn't stay in hiding here forever, rattling around a huge old half-renovated wreck of a mansion. But whenever I pictured them leaving it, I had visions of gunfire, or faceless men dragging them into a van and driving off, never to be seen again.

I blinked away the unwanted images. “You’re right. We do need a plan.



Unfortunately, I don't have one yet. Not beyond pursuing the new legal avenues opened by the trafficking contracts."

Elijah leaned back, his shoulders bumping against the wall. He nodded and dragged a hand down his face, stretching the taut skin. "Yeah. I get that." He let his hand fall, meeting my eyes directly. "So, do I understand this right? The main problem is that the contract doesn't connect the Huntwells to any of this?"

Familiar frustration rose. "That's the long and the short of it," I told him. "Let's say I can take down Casick and whoever else is helping him inside The Secret Boudoir. If Tommy Huntwell is ultimately the one behind the trafficking scheme, what's to stop him finding a new lackey to do the dirty work for him? And meanwhile, he's the one who's after you and Emma." I frowned, my shoulder twinging painfully. "Or possibly after me."

"Or possibly all of us." Elijah sounded tired, and I couldn't blame him. Only idiots like me actively signed up for this kind of madness. He'd just been caught in the crossfire.

I changed mental tack. "When you say you two want to help, did you have something specific in mind?"

He gave a faint, one-shouldered shrug. "Maybe. I wondered what would happen if Emma and I went public about what was done to us. Drag it out into the light."

I considered that. It wasn't an angle I'd thought about before.

"Em wasn't sure if that would blow up your court case, though," Elijah went on. "Would it?"

"Not... necessarily," I said slowly. "Not the one against Casick and his cronies,

anyway. But libel laws in the UK are quite a bit different than in America. You can't go out and write an op-ed about how Tommy Huntwell is a crime syndicate kingpin who tried to have you sex-trafficked without hard evidence. Not unless you enjoy being sued."

"Fly us back to New York, and we'll write the op-eds there instead," Elijah muttered.

"I can't protect you in New York," I said.

He seemed to deflate at that. "Yeah." After a moment, he rallied. "So, what exactly do you need to connect the dots to Huntwell? What kind of evidence?"

Now it was my turn to rub at my face, familiar exhaustion tugging at me. "Signed documents. Traceable payments. Directwitness testimony. All the things he's far too smart to let us have, basically."

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“Frustrating,” Elijah observed.

“One word to neatly encompass the last few years of my life,” I agreed.

Elijah nodded to himself. Then, he squared his shoulders as though bracing for something unpleasant. “I guess since I’ve got you here, I’d be remiss if I didn’t bring up the scent match again. I get that there’s a lot on your plate already—but I’m not sure this is something the five of us can just ignore. At least, it doesn’t feel very ignorable from where I’m standing.”

My stomach sank. At the same time, something primal and wholly unwanted rose up in my chest, whispering our omegas, ours.

“I don’t know how something like that could work under the current circumstances,” I managed. “Not without putting you in even more danger. Then there are the optics of it—I paid money for you two. I essentially bought you on the slave market.”

Elijah was silent for a moment. Then he snorted. “I swear, you and Emma are like mirror images sometimes, and you don’t even realize it. Nice speech and all, but there’s one serious problem with that.”

What kind of pro—” I began, only to be cut off mid-word when Elijah grabbed my shirt front and hauled me forward, pressing his lips to mine.

I made a startled noise. An instant later I had him pressed up against the wall with a thigh jammed between his legs and a growl rumbling up from my chest. Optics and half-healed bullet wounds were just about the farthest thing from my mind as my

cock surged to full hardness, slotting against the crease of his hip.

Elijah made a little mmmph sound against my lips, like maybe this was a bit more of a reaction than he'd been expecting. That was fair. It was a hell of a lot more than I'd been expecting. I ground against him, feeling an answering twitch from the smaller omega cock pressed against the front of my thigh.

I didn't even register the sound of footsteps ascending the stairs from the first floor, or the familiar scent of amber and myrrh cutting through the miasma of soap and randy omega surrounding me. Only when a gruff voice reached my ears did I abruptly return to myself enough to stumble backward a step from the lanky frame pinned beneath mine.

"Am I interrupting something here, Blondie?" Curran asked, his tone caught somewhere between irritation and dark amusement. "Because I'd offer to come back later, but I'm not too sure you should be fucking someone against a wall with that arm still in a sling."

## THIRTY-SIX

Curran

GOD, I WAS TRAPPED with a pack full of idiots. Gabriel abruptly pushed away from Elijah as though his skin had become red-hot—leaving the omega panting with his shoulders braced against the wall, like the white plaster was the only thing keeping him upright.

"S-sorry," he said. His green eyes were wide as he lifted an arm and swiped the back of his hand across his swollen lips. "I was trying to make a point, and, well..."

"You succeeded." Gabriel's voice had dropped into a lower register than I was used

to hearing, and the front of his tailored trousers looked like a pup tent.

Any relief I might have gained from popping a knot after my sparring session with Onyx had fled the moment I smelled the two of them rutting in the hallway. However, it was pretty clear that my appearance had snapped Gabriel back to something approaching his usual stick-up-the-arse control. Meanwhile, Elijah looked like he was on the cusp of either making a run for it or bursting into tears from sheer sexual frustration.

Possibly both.

I shot Gabriel a meaningful look.

He cleared his throat. “You’re both right. I see now that we can’t put this on a back burner while we’re trying to come upwith a strategy regarding the Huntwells. Nevertheless, I’d take it as a personal favor if you’d all give me a little more time. I don’t...cope wellwith making decisions about personal matters before I’ve had a chance to overthink them to death.”

“That’s god’s own truth, right there,” I said, mostly for Elijah’s benefit. “In the meantime, the toys from the boat are in the bathroom cabinet if you need them. Everything’s been sterilized.”

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Gabriel made a disgruntled noise but refrained from commenting.

Elijah's cheeks went bright red, but he muttered, "Thanks." He lifted his gaze to a point slightly beyond Gabriel's left shoulder and added, "Think about what I said, okay?" And then he made his escape, disappearing into the guest room he'd claimed earlier.

I rounded on Gabriel, swallowing a sigh.

"Fuck," he swore—rather uncharacteristically.

"What's this thing you're supposed to be thinking about, then?" I asked.

Gabriel turned and slumped back against the same patch of wall Elijah had just vacated, wincing as it jarred his wound. "The omegas have offered to go public with what happened to them. Or to do whatever else it takes to blow this case open."

I considered that. "Huh. Too bad about the—"

"Libel laws, yes," Gabriel finished. "I did explain that part."

With a nod, I paced a few steps down the hall and back, thinking. "He does have a point about needing to shake things up somehow."

"Believe me, I'm aware." He ran his good hand through the tousled blond mess of his hair, disarranged from its usual neat styling by the truly spectacular snogging session I'd interrupted. "I don't think that's the right strategy, though."

“Agreed. Too many possible pitfalls. Other options?” I prodded, because my prat of an employer might be an idiot, but he was also a genius.

Gabriel shook his head slowly and pushed away from the wall. “None that don’t essentially end up using them as bait.” His tone was grim. “Which, I hasten to add, I’m unwilling to do.”

“I’m right there with you,” I said. “Mind you, that brings us back to the part where they’re stuck here for an indeterminate length of time with no idea what the future will bring.”

“Indeed. ‘Like fairytale princesses locked in a tower,’” he continued under his breath, as though quoting someone.

I raised an eyebrow. “At least we’re in the right neighborhood for that kind of thing, with the palace being just down the road and all.”

Gabriel let out a gusty sigh. His shoulders sagged. His dick, I couldn’t help noticing, hadn’t.

“What the bloody hell am I supposed to do about this, Curran? Christ. If you hadn’t walked in when you did, I would’ve had him right up against the wall.”

“It’s a scent match,” I said simply. “It’s not magic on its own—but you already liked them. We all do. Combined with regular garden-variety attraction, it’s like fuckin’ crack cocaine.”

“But what am I supposed to do?” he repeated. “Do you have any idea how this would look from the outside, after what happened on the Titania?”

I peered at him, frowning. “You suddenly wake up this morning giving a shit about

what people think of you? Huh. That's new."

He glared at me. "It's not just me, you sarcastic twat. It's their reputations, too."

"So, maybe you can let them worry about their reputations, instead of doin' it for them," I suggested.

The look he shot me said I wasn't helping.

"I'm an alpha," he growled. "Maybe not a very good one—but worrying about omegas is hardwired in. Now, if you'll excuse me, I'm off to start with the overthinking."

I lifted my eyes toward the ceiling, exasperated. "Who the hell told you that you weren't a good alpha, you pasty-faced, blond-haired prat? Fine. Go on. Overthink for a bit. We can talk when you're done."

I was sneaking a sandwich from the kitchen a couple hours later when Emma slipped in, looking around the room as though to ensure I was alone.

"Evening, beautiful," I greeted, saluting her with ham and cheese on rye. "Want something to eat?"

She shook her head. "No thanks. I need to talk to you. Alone."

I set the sandwich on its fancy china plate and hitched a hip against the granite countertop. "Talk away."

"Seriously," she said. "I need your word that this will stay between us, Curran."



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I tilted my head curiously. “Well, that’s certainly ominous. How about this? My lips are sealed unless it’s something that puts anyone in this house in danger.”

Her pale, pixie-like features were pinched. “It might put you in danger.”

Interesting.

I waved the words off with a careless hand. “Not necessarily a dealbreaker. Dangerous shit is already kind of in my job description. Go ahead.”

She took a deep breath, her slender shoulders rising and falling. “I might know a way to get Gabriel what he needs.”

I didn’t reply that what Gabriel needed right now was a good, hard fuck. “Oh? How’s that?”

“Tommy Huntwell is my uncle,” she began. “Jimmy Huntwell was my father. He was the head of the Huntwell syndicate until he was shot down in a hail of bullets when I was sixteen.”

I frowned, being somewhat familiar with the history there. When Jimmy Huntwell had been offed by persons unknown, a lot of people had assumed Tommy—the younger brother—would step into his shoes. Instead, Hugh Rathbone, one of Jimmy’s lieutenants, had swooped in and consolidated power—right up until he’d been spectacularly brought down on corruption and kidnapping charges with his son Percy. Both of them were currently occupying prison cells at his majesty’s pleasure.

“Go on,” I said.

She turned away, fiddling with a wooden cutting board. “My mum was already dead. She was in a car accident when I was thirteen. So, I went to live with my nan for a while—my mum’s mum. We didn’t really... get on. I left as soon as I got my first high-end modeling gig.”

“But your nan’s still kicking around?” I asked cautiously.

Emma nodded. “She isn’t in great health, but as far as I know, she’s still alive.” Huge gray eyes met mine and held. “She’s also an old-timer in the family. She didn’t talk about it much, but Curran—she knows where the Huntwell bodies are buried.”

I caught my breath as I realized where she was going with this.

“You didn’t get on with her,” I offered, “but how do you think she’d feel if she found out what your uncle and cousin tried to do to you?”

Emma licked her lips. “I don’t know. But I don’t think she’d be happy.”

Finding out her orphaned granddaughter had been auctioned off to the highest bidder as a sex slave?

“No,” I agreed. “I don’t imagine she would be.”

She took another fortifying breath. “It wouldn’t shock me if they keep tabs on her phone. But she’s old and frail. She must have people coming in and out—grocery deliveries, that kind of thing. Curran—do you think you could get to her somehow? Set up a meeting for me, somewhere the syndicate wouldn’t be able to find out about it?”

Plans and logistics were already whirling through my head.

“I dunno, sweetheart,” I said. “But I can sure as hell try. Get me everything you have on her, starting with her last known address. Let me take it from there.”

THIRTY-SEVEN

Curran

MY NETWORK IN the old neighborhood wasn't nearly as good as it had been twenty years ago. Looking back, it had been a tactical mistake to let things slide as much as I had. Mostly, I'd been worried that having a connection to me might put my contacts in danger.

Now, I could've used a few more contacts than I had left.

It took several days and some creative incentivizing to finally find the person I needed. I'd made an executive decision not to loop Gabriel in on what I was planning. For one thing, there was no guarantee it would amount to anything. Emma's nan—one Clarabelle Allen, by name—might be dead, or she might decide to spit in my face and tell me to go hang. For another, Gabriel would just try to stop me going in on my own.

I wasn't an idiot, though. I took Onyx aside and clued them in, so I'd have some backup in case my little sojourn to the East End went tits up.

Emma had given me an address and a phone number, along with as much of a bio as she knew about. I'd never met Mrs. Allen in person. No reason I would have, mind you—she was one step down from being crime family royalty back in the day, whereas I was a sniveling gutter rat from the council estate. She'd been Jimmy Huntwell's mother-in-law. I'd done odd jobson the wrong side of the law for would-be gangsters who were too precious to get their own hands dirty.

Even so, we'd lived in the same world. We might've inhabited different ends of it,

but it was all beneath the umbrella of the Huntwell syndicate. I knew if I could get her alone, we'd at least have a common language.

Onyx leaned against the kitchen counter with folded arms. "You realize if I have to tell the boss you've gone missing in Huntwell territory, he's going to rip out my liver."

I didn't pause in packing my duffel bag. "Horse shit. You're more than capable of defending yourself."

"Fine. He probably won't rip out my liver. Instead, he'll just fire me on the spot."

I looked up and cocked an eyebrow. "Tell him if he fires you, I'll quit too."

Onyx huffed. "I mean... if the issue comes up, you'll likely be dead, so I don't know if that's a very compelling counterargument."

Now it was my turn to scoff. I gestured vaguely at my face. "Give me a break. Look at this ugly mug. You think anyone in the old neighborhood even remembers it? Not likely."

"If you say so," Onyx replied dryly. "Now, just to make sure I've got all this right, you got someone to bribe the bloke who's supposed to take her to a doctor appointment, so you can take his place and talk to her alone in the car. Then you'll try to set up a separate meeting between her and Emma."

"Assuming she's amenable, yeah," I agreed.

Onyx nodded. "Right, then. Can't say I'm happy about it, but I can see the potential payoff if she turns out to be a good gran who cares about her daughter's little girl."

“Let’s hope so,” I said grimly.

Emma had been tight-lipped about the details of her issues with her grandmother, but I gathered they involved some combination of Emma having been born an omega and deciding to go into fashion modeling. The first was more worrying than the second. Even forty years after the Alphomic Accords, prejudice still ran deep in some places.

I zipped up the duffel bag.

“All ready?” Onyx asked.

“As I’ll ever be,” I said. “It’s been a minute since I was back in the old neighborhood. Can’t say I’ve really missed the place.”

Black SUVs with bulletproof glass and armored undercarriages would be ever-so-slightly conspicuous where I was going. I borrowed one from the garage at the back of the house rather than using public transit to get where I was going—but only so I could meet the bloke whose car I’d be borrowing for the job.

Well, I say borrowing. In reality, a hell of a lot of cash was changing hands in pursuit of this mission. Fortunately, cash was something none of us were short of. Not around Gabriel.

It bothered me more than I cared to admit hearing him put himself down as an alpha. That was something that needed to change, and I wondered how much it had to do with his apparent resistance to welcoming Emma and Elijah into the pack. I guess no one had ever told the little twat that founding and running a billion-pound company was every bit as alpha as punching someone in the teeth.

I put it out of my mind as I pulled into the public car park where I was meeting my contact. This wasn’t the time for distractions.

A few minutes later, I drove out with a late-model gray Audi A3 that smelled faintly of green tea and coconut. Other than the lingering scent, it was clean but lived in. Just the sort of car you'd use to ferry an octogenarian lady to an appointment with her GP.

The streets in this part of London were still familiar to me, even after so long spent away from it. As I got closer to the docks, some areas that I remembered as being basically derelict showed signs of recent renovation, while others had been bulldozed completely.

I clamped down on any intrusive nostalgia and followed my phone's directions to the run-down terrace housing that Clarabelle Allen called home these days. Parking the car outside, I jogged up the concrete steps to a red-painted door pockmarked with chips and scratches. After straightening my jacket, I cleared my throat and knocked.

Minutes passed, but eventually the door creaked open, revealing a stooped beta woman with a walker, clad in slightly threadbare Burberry. Clear gray eyes set in a wrinkled face fell on me and narrowed.

"You're not Jeffrey," Nana Allen said, in a tone rife with suspicion.

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“No, ma’am,” I agreed. “Jeffrey’s down with the flu this week. He asked me to fill in.”

Those piercing eyes—so similar to Emma’s—remained on me for long moments, unblinking.

“Right, then,” she said eventually. “Don’t dawdle. Getting an appointment at this clinic is too damned difficult to risk being late for it.”

I murmured agreement and helped her make her way down the treacherous staircase to the front walk. She accepted my assistance like a queen, but she waved off my attempt to seat her in the back of the car in favor of taking shotgun.

“I don’t get out often, young man. I want the best view of things on those occasions when I do.”

“We can take the scenic route on the way back,” I told her, and went to put the folded-up walker in the boot. Moments later, we were pulling away from the curb and merging into traffic.

My plan was to play things straight on the way to her appointment, then broach the subject of Emma on the way back. That way, I avoided the risk of having her scream bloody murder to the clinic receptionist if her reaction to my request was a negative one. If worse came to worst, I’d drive her the rest of the way back to her house, dump her at her front door, and be gone before she could get inside and call for reinforcements.



Yep... that had been the plan.

In reality, we'd made it about a mile and a half when she whipped a can of pepper gel out of an inner pocket of her plaid-lined Burberry coat and aimed it at my face.

"Pull the car over and park it, son," she said in a tone of steel. "Because you're not who you say you are, and if you've ever spoken a word to little Jeffrey in your life, I'll eat my hat."

## THIRTY-EIGHT

Curran

I PULLED OFF the road and into the first available parking spot, keeping my hands visible at ten o'clock and two o'clock on the wheel.

"You know, I like you already," I told the silver-haired, pepper-spray wielding pensioner in the passenger seat. "I can see where Emma got her pluck."

It would have taken less than a second to backhand the little black mace cylinder out of the old dear's grip. She was holding it extended in front of her body—an easy target for disarming. I was ninety-nine percent confident it would be unnecessary, though.

On cue, the cylinder dipped a few inches. "How do you know Emma?" Clarabelle demanded.

"My employer rescued her from a bad situation with her uncle and cousin," I said. "She and a friend of hers have been staying with us until we can get things sorted out."

I watched her expression carefully as cars whizzed past us on the road. Either she hadn't learned how to hide her reactions behind a mask—despite the decades she'd spent in this world of organized crime—or else she hadn't learned how to do it where Emma was concerned. I watched the gears turning in her head.

The hand holding the mace fell to rest in her lap. “What kind of situation?” she asked cautiously. “What did Tommy do?”

“I'd rather let her explain in her own words,” I told her. “She wants to meet with you, but it wouldn't be safe for her to do it openly. She sent me to get the message to you and ask if you're willing to see her.”

Clarabelle's lips parted, but she paused for a long moment before speaking.

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“Of course I’ll see her,” she said finally. “She’s my granddaughter.” Her gray eyes narrowed. “First, though—tell me something about her that a stranger wouldn’t know.”

I nodded my understanding. “She told me you two didn’t get on so well after her old man got killed. She needed to get away from this place, but I think she regrets how things ended up between you. This means a lot to her, even if she won’t say so aloud.”

Clarabelle huffed out a breath, her posture softening a bit. “Sounds like she hasn’t changed much, then.”

I tilted my chin toward the road. “Okay if I get us moving again? We can still get you to that clinic appointment.”

Her lips twisted, but after a moment, she gave a single, sharp nod. I pulled onto the roadway, slotting us into a gap in traffic.

“What gave me away, out of curiosity?” I asked, glancing sideways at her. “I’ll have you know, arranging this took a fair bit of work, not to mention cash for bribes.”

Her tone grew acid. “This isn’t your car. It smells like coconut air freshener, and it doesn’t smell like you.”

“Huh,” I mused. “Good one. I’ll keep that in mind in the future.”

“More importantly,” she went on, “Jeffrey knows I don’t like alphas. He wouldn’t

send an alpha to pick me up if he was sick.” She turned a suspicious glare my way. “Jeffrey’s all right, I assume.”

I winced. “He’s fine. Bad news, though. It only took nine hundred quid to convince him to take a sick day without asking any awkward questions about the details. You might want to think twice about trusting him for anything important.”

She cursed under her breath, and it was filthy and creative enough that I had to stifle a choked laugh at the unexpectedness of it.

“I’ll box his traitorous ears until his skull rings like a bell,” she vowed.

“Maybe hold off until after you talk to Emma,” I said. “No point in rocking the boat when we don’t want to raise suspicions with the family.”

Clarabelle muttered something unintelligible, but then she sighed. “Very well, young man. I’ll restrain myself. For now.”

I delivered Clarabelle to her GP, trusting my instincts that I wouldn’t find a flock of rozzers—or Huntwell mobsters—descending on me in the waiting room while she was in the back getting her blood pressure taken.

On the drive back, we discussed the meeting. It ended up being a much shorter discussion than I’d expected.

“Just take me to her now,” Clarabelle said. “If anyone asks, I’ll tell them I insisted on eating a nice lunch at my favorite restaurant, which just happens to be way the hell across London.”

I gave a mental shrug and headed toward Kensington Palace. In many ways, it was a simpler solution than trying to arrange another scheme to get her away from her

house without suspicion. As we turned onto Kensington Palace Gardens, her eyes widened.

“You’re employer, you said.” Her tone grew openly suspicious. “Anyone I would have heard of?”

Given the number of ambassadors and heads of state who lived in the area, it was a fair question.

“Probably not,” I said. “And if you’ve heard his name, it won’t be for the reasons you’re thinking. Does Gabriel Rosencranz ring any bells?”

“Rosencranz,” she echoed. “I don’t... no, I don’t think I know the name.”

“He’s a local boy made good. Got out of the old neighborhood and used his book-smarts to make basically more money than god.” I pulled to a stop at the security barrier and rolled down the window.

The guard gave the Audi an unimpressed look. Apparently, the gray sedan didn’t meet the exacting standards expected for the area.

“Identification?” he asked officiously, despite the fact that I recognized him—and that meant he should damn well have recognized me in turn.

I handed my license over without comment. He gave it a quick glance and nodded, before peering curiously at Clarabelle in the passenger seat.

“Visiting family member,” I told the bloke. “Promise she’s not hiding any bombs in her handbag.”

The guard’s pursed lips told me he didn’t appreciate the joke, but it wasn’t my fault

that he was behaving like a prick. He handed my license back and jerked his head to indicate we could proceed. The security bollards blocking the road retracted into the pavement, and I drove forward slowly.

“I was going to ask how this employer of yours thought he could keep my Emma safe if Tommy’s after her,” Clarabelle muttered. “Guess I don’t need to worry after all.”

“Money can be a pain in the arse sometimes,” I said. “But other times, it comes in right useful.”

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“Like when you need to bribe someone’s driver?” she asked archly.

“That, too,” I agreed.

I pulled past the iron gates leading to the old Russian consulate, driving around the back to the lower-level garage. I’d have to return to the East End later to drop it off and pick up the SUV, but it was worth the hassle if it meant this meeting could happen today.

When we were safely parked, I retrieved Clarabelle’s walker from the boot and winced as I helped her out of the passenger seat.

“I better warn you now—this place is only half-renovated, and it ain’t even close to being disability friendly. Sorry about that.”

She waved the words away like buzzing insects. “Just get me to my granddaughter, you great alpha oaf.”

I helped her to the kitchen since it was on the ground floor, and it wasn’t a total disaster area. “Stay here,” I said, seating her at the kitchen table. “I’ll go fetch Emma and be right back.”

I trotted upstairs and started checking rooms, finding Emma in Elijah’s bedroom. He was sprawled out on the bed with a book; she was sitting hunched against the headboard with her arms wrapped around her knees, staring at nothing.

They both startled when I poked my head in.

“Sorry,” I said. “Change of plan, sweetheart. I’ve got your gran downstairs, waiting in the kitchen. When she heard you were in trouble, she made me bring her straight here.”

Emma blinked huge gray eyes, their color so like Clarabelle’s. Her complexion paled, and she gave a hard swallow. “She’s... here now?”

“That’s what I said. You ready to talk to her?”

“Not really.” Emma uncurled and climbed off the bed.

Elijah had rolled into a sitting position, his book forgotten. “You want me to come with you?”

She wavered for a moment before nodding. “Please. Just... don’t hold it against me if she says something horrible about omegas? Or models, for that matter.”

“Don’t worry, dove,” Elijah said. “People were shooting at us a few days ago. I can handle a few insults.”

We trooped out of the room and headed downstairs. I debated peeling off to find Gabriel and Onyx, but I wanted to get a feel for how this meeting was going to go before I added Blondie to the mix. He’d probably noticed I’d swanned off on my own by now, and there was likely to be shouting involved.

Emma looked uncomfortably like someone heading for the executioner’s block, but she squared her shoulders and walked into the kitchen, me and Elijah following behind.

“Nan?” she said in a small voice.



Clarabelle turned in her seat to stare at the three of us framed in the doorway.

“Emma!” she said, in a tone of two parts exasperation and one part affection.

### THIRTY-NINE

Emma

NANA ALLEN LOOKED older than I remembered. Which was a stupid thing to think. Shewasolder. But she looked frailer. More delicate. Like one good knock would shatter her into pieces. It made something twist unpleasantly in my stomach.

“Good heavens, girl!” she said. “What have you done to your hair?”

My hand jerked up toward the short, bleached-platinum strands before I could stop myself. I knew my natural dark mahogany was starting to show through at the roots. I’d have to decide soon if I wanted to keep the color or go in a different direction.

“I cut it and b-bleached it,” I said, forcing my voice even. “Because I needed to make it as hard as p-possible for Uncle Tommy and the rest of the family to find me.”

Her wrinkled face screwed up. “Your stutter is back.”

I squared my shoulders. “Yeah? Well, I’ve b-been under a b-bit of stress lately, to put it mildly.”

I was aware of Curran and Elijah watching the exchange, but if I thought too hard about what it must sound like to them, I wouldn’t be able to get words out at all.

Nana’s posture softened slightly. “Your alpha attack dog said something about you being in trouble. He wouldn’t give me any details.”

I wasn't sure whether to thank Curran for that or curse him, since it meant I'd have to tell her myself. I licked my lips and swallowed, trying to plan the words before I spoke them.

"Uncle Tommy tracked me d-down in New York somehow," I began. "I think he must've used his influence to b-blackball me in the modeling industry, because my career fell off a c-cliff. He manipulated me into taking a gig on a yacht to keep the bills paid, but he and C-Cade were waiting for me. It was a human trafficking scheme. He sold Elijah and me—" I gestured to Elijah. "—to the highest b-bidder. We were just lucky the highest bidder happened to be a man who was trying to b-bust up the trafficking ring. He g-got us both out safe and b-brought us here."

Heavy silence fell over the room. I wasn't about to add the part where I'd cheerfully fucked my rescuer and his two bodyguards through my unplanned heat. Or the part where I was seriously considering staying with them as part of their pack rather than pulling up my roots and running again.

My gran's jaw dropped as I spoke and hung open in her apparent shock. As I watched, she snapped it shut with a click of dentures.

"I'll have both his kneecaps blown off," she said, her soft cheeks glowing an angry red. "I'll have that whelp Cade buried upside-down in cement. Alive."

I was pretty sure she didn't have the wherewithal to make either of those things happen, but I appreciated the sentiment.

Curran grunted. "I'm in. You need a henchman, or have you already got one on the payroll?"

I opened my mouth to tell Curran he couldn't go around burying people in cement while Gabriel was trying to build a legal case against them, but a low growl from the

hallway cut me off.

“Curran!” Gabriel strode in, Onyx trailing sheepishly behind him. “What the hell do you think you’re—”

He came to an abrupt stop in the doorway, noticing his uninvited guest. “Excuse me, madam—but who are you, and why are you in my house?”

Nana Allen bristled, but Curran got in before her.

“Heya, boss. Sorry about going AWOL. I should introduce Mrs. Clarabelle Allen, Emma’s maternal grandmother. Her daughter was married to Jimmy Huntwell, which is a name I’m sure you’ll recognize.”

Gabriel froze. I could practically see the gears turning inside his head as Nana Allen regarded him with a pointedly raised eyebrow. After a long beat, he seemed to wrench himself free of his paralysis, and he cleared his throat.

“Gabriel Rosencranz,” he introduced himself. “Forgive my discourtesy. I thought I’d mislaid an employee. However, it appears I’ve gained a guest instead.” He shot Curran a dark look.

“Would’ve told you what was going on, boss,” Curran said unapologetically, “but you’d’ve just spent ages overthinking the whole thing.”

“I’ve just b-been telling Nana Allen about what happened on the yacht,” I said, hoping to move the conversation back on track.

Onyx had taken the opportunity to slip into the kitchen behind Gabriel. I wondered if they were on his shit list too for having kept what Curran was doing quiet.

“Did she tell you the part where Tommy Huntwell had someone break into Emma’s cabin and throw all her heat blockers overboard?” There was a simmering anger behind the words that I wasn’t used to hearing from the usually laid-back Onyx. “He would have tossed her to the wolves in the middle of an unplanned heat and let them eat her for dinner.”

Nana Allen sucked in a sharp breath, her nostrils flaring. “Hewhat?”

I’d only encountered that tone on a handful of occasions during my adolescence. It had never boded well.

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“You heard me,” Onyx said. “Maybe my imagination leaves something to be desired, but I can’t honestly think of anything worse you could do to an omega.”

I could only imagine what my gran would make of the six-foot-tall, mixed-race non-binary alpha standing across the kitchen from her. Clarabelle Allen was a product of her upbringing and her circumstances, just like we all were. She’d spent a good chunk of her adult life in a world before the existence of the Alphomic Accords—and even beyond those old prejudices, she had reasons of her own to distrust alphas and their power games.

Right now, though, she wasn’t reacting at all to Onyx’s dyed yellow hair or ambiguous androgyny.

“Is this true?” she demanded, her fierce gray eyes landing on me.

I nodded wordlessly; afraid my voice would betray my emotions if I tried to speak.

“I was there as well,” Elijah said quietly from his spot leaning against the countertop. “It’s all true.”

My gran looked stricken. “If Tommy’s starting up with all that nonsense again, he needs todie.”

Gabriel’s shoulders stiffened. “What do you mean ‘starting up again’?”

The angry flush had receded from Nana’s face, leaving her looking pale and gray. She slumped back in her chair and waved a hand angrily.

“When he was younger. While Jimmy was running things and trying to move the syndicate toward more legal business dealings, he found out that Tommy was trafficking people on the side. Mostly girls. Mostly omegas. Jimmy came down on him like an avalanche and put a stop to it.”

“But Jimmy Huntwell is long gone,” Curran said, with an apologetic glance at me. “And when Hugh Rathbone took over, he started investing in sex clubs and prostitution rings again. But now Rathbone’s gone, too.”

Nana Allen covered her thin lips with one hand.

“One of those omegas Tommy Huntwell trafficked twenty years ago was my sister,” Gabriel said quietly. “We never found out what happened to her.”

“I’ll see him dead, that viciouscur,” Nana Allen whispered. “If it’s the last thing I do, I’ll see him in the ground.”

“Already told you,” Curran said. “I’m in. Just give me some intel on how I can get close enough.”

“No.” Gabriel’s tone was unyielding. “This is going through the legal system. Mrs. Allen, will you help me bring Tommy Huntwell down, so we can get justice for your granddaughter and my little sister? I already have some of the connections I need to drag him to court, but not all of them.”

Nana’s hand dropped. I could see her jaw working for a long moment. “You’ll put him in prison? Him and his spawn?”

“You’re damn right I will,” Gabriel said. “I’ll see them rot behind bars forever for what they’ve done.”

Nana Allen raised her chin. Her heavy gaze rested on me for a long moment, regret visible behind her eyes.

“Fine. I’ll help you, Mr. Rosencranz,” she said.

Everyone in the room relaxed visibly. Well... except for me. I still couldn’t seem to draw a full breath, and my heart felt like it was racing out of control.

“Thank you,” Gabriel said gravely. “If you’ll allow it, it might be best if you stayed here where it’s safe. Curran and Onyx can get you anything you might need—toiletries, medications, just say the word.”

But my gran shook her head. “No. There are people I’ll need to talk to. Take me back to my house. I’ll be in touch when I have what you need.”

“It could be dangerous for you to return—” Gabriel began.

Nana Allen cut him off with a snort. “How do you think I lived long enough to get old among that pit of snakes? I know how to keep myself safe, young man. Now piss off and let me do what needs to be done. You.” She pointed an imperious finger at Curran. “What’s your name again?”

“Curran. But I’ll answer to ‘oaf’ if it’s easier, ma’am.”

“Don’t be cheeky,” she told him. “Help me back to the car. I’ve been gone too long as it is.”

And that was it. No ‘give us a hug, Emma.’ No ‘are you doing all right after everything that’s happened, Emma?’ Not that I’d really expected it. In some ways, it was just as well. If too much attention fell on me, my irrational panic attack might spill over. I’d never wanted to revisit this part of my past.



“Stay out of trouble, child,” was all my gran said as Curran helped her out of the room.

I wasn't sure if I was thankful or disappointed when the others let me leave after stammering out something about needing to be alone for a bit. I think Gabriel was already busy scheming how best to use Nana Allen against the Huntwells, while Elijah and Onyx seemed to take me at my word that I needed some privacy to process things.

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I'd spent a bit of time already poking around the old mansion, peering into disused rooms and exploring crumbling staircases. After grabbing a heavy blanket from my guest room, I snuck up to the garret. No renovation had been done up here, and it had a certain creepiness common to forgotten and neglected places. But in my current mood, I was drawn to the sloping ceilings and cramped space.

I didn't know what I'd expected out of the reunion. More, or maybe less. I hadn't expected Nana Allen to be as angry about what Tommy had done as she was. Yet I didn't get the feeling that she was angry on my behalf, exactly. More like she was angry on her own behalf—like what he'd done to me had been disrespectful to her.

Trying to think about it hurt, so I stopped thinking at all and just huddled in my blanket in the cramped, angular gap between the floor and the sloped roof.

I wasn't sure how much time had passed when footsteps clomped up the wooden stairs and the door creaked open. The reassuring scent of amber and myrrh wafted in.

"There you are, sweetheart," Curran said. "Did the others let you hide away up here all alone?"

I nodded, not meeting his eyes.

"Your gran's back home safe," he went on. "She's well fierce, but she's also kind of a lot to deal with. Can't imagine tryin' to live with her, if I'm being honest. So, are you doin' all right after all of that?"

My throat squeezed, like I was choking.

“No,” I rasped, my voice breaking on the word.

He crouched in front of me, callused fingers stroking my short hair back from my temple. “I figured. Come back downstairs, pet. Being on your own isn’t helping. Not sure it ever has, for you.”

Blinking back the burn of tears behind my eyes, I accepted his hand and let him pull me to my feet, still wrapped in the fuzzy blanket. I wasn’t sure what he thought he and the others could do to fix my fucked-up past, but as I followed him down the narrow stairs with my slender fingers clasped in his broad ones, I felt a tiny bit of the burden of carrying everything by myself slip away.

Maybe... as long as I was here, sheltering with Elijah among Gabriel’s pack... I could let myself lean on them. Let myself surrender, at least partially.

Just for a bit.

FORTY

Emma

CURRAN LED ME down to the pleasant living room that lay on the opposite side of the second floor from the guest bedrooms. Elijah was hunched at one end of the couch with his elbows resting on his knees, looking thoughtful. Gabriel was pacing, and Onyx was propping up the wall next to the massive marble fireplace.

“Found her,” Curran announced, as the others turned to look at us.

It was terrifying how quickly being back in their presence chased my sick panic away. I was in London, up to my neck in my family’s disgusting business. I was once again Emma Huntwell instead of Emma Hope. And yet... here and now, with this pack,

I felt safe.

It wasn't just the security guards and the bollards at the end of the road. The safety I needed wasn't physical. It was emotional.

The kind of safety I'd never had before.

Gabriel came to a stop when we entered the room. He frowned, scanning my face, and apparently not liking whatever he saw there.

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“I shouldn’t have let you go off alone,” he said, as though to himself.

Elijah managed a wan smile for me. “You’re not alone now. Come freak out with the rest of us.”

But I shook my head. “I don’t want to freak out anymore. I don’t want to think about it at all.”

Curran squeezed my hand. “C’mere, sweetheart.” He led me to the couch and pulled several decorative cushions off it, piling them on the floor. “Down you go.” He settled himself onto the sofa and tugged me down to kneel at his feet.

I went, remembering how he’d done something like this when I was going into heat on the sailboat... when I’d thought my entire life was unraveling before my eyes.

In some ways, my life had unraveled—but not in the catastrophic way I’d been picturing. I hadn’t thought there’d be anyone waiting to gather up my loose threads and weave them back together.

Something inside me loosened from its tight knot—an easing of tension I hadn’t known I’d needed. A huge sigh gusted out of me, and I slumped against Curran’s leg, resting my head on his thigh. Callused fingers immediately settled on my hair, stroking me like a cat. Delicious tingles radiated from my scalp down the length of my spine, and I let my worries drift away.

Clothing rustled behind me, the smell of roses and rainwater enveloping us as Elijah settled on the floor next to me, draping his long body against mine. His arm wrapped

around my waist, his forehead pressing against the nape of my neck.

“Oh, good,” Onyx said, the couch shifting as they settled in the spot Elijah had just vacated. “I was getting tired of feeling like you could cut the atmosphere with a knife. This is much better.”

Elijah let out a little groan, his muscles going lax in a way that made me suspect he was getting the same kind of scalp massage I was. Through half-lidded eyes, I saw Gabriel’s shoulders slump. He crossed the few steps to one of the massive, overstuffed chairs opposite the couch and collapsed into it. His expression was a complicated mix of wariness and longing.

It was uncomfortably like looking in a mirror.

“We should probably start thinking about the—” he began.

“Later.” Curran cut him off. “Whatever it is, we should think about it later.” He sighed. “I swear you’re as bad as she is. Today was good news for your legal case. You’re allowed to let things be good for a bit without poking at them with a pointy stick.”

“There are too many things to do.” Gabriel pinched the bridge of his nose, not looking at us.

“Gabriel.” Curran sounded pained. “I know you don’t want to hear this, but it’s not going to make a single whit of difference to Theresa whether you run yourself into the ground or take a few hours and fucking relax. For Christ’s sake, man—you’ve still got a bullet hole in your arm.”

“It’s healing,” Gabriel said gruffly, letting his hand fall to his lap.

“And it’ll heal faster if you don’t work yourself to an early grave, boss.” It was the first time I’d heard Onyx go against Gabriel so openly, even though the words were kind enough.

There was an uncomfortably long silence. Elijah lifted his head, resting his chin on my shoulder so he could watch Gabriel.

“I don’t know how to relax when I’m closer than I’ve ever been to getting justice,” Gabriel said eventually. There was another pause, before he continued, “But... I suppose there’s nothing I can really do until Mrs. Allen comes through for us.”

Or doesn’t, I mentally finished.

I knew she’d try. She’d never broken her word about anything, in my experience. But that didn’t mean she’d succeed.

Curran tugged gently at my hair, reminding me that I wasn’t supposed to be thinking right now. “Spot on,” he said. “Now, stop flapping your mouth for a bit and let the rest of us have a quiet evening...sir.”

Perversely, I felt a chuckle trying to rise at Curran’s combination of utter devotion and fond contempt for his employer. I managed to swallow it, not wanting to offend either of them.

“Message received,” Gabriel muttered. He let his head fall back against the cushioned chair as he took a deep breath through flared nostrils, holding it for a long moment before exhaling. I knew he was scenting the five of us, unconsciously inhaling all the possibilities inherent in our pack-that-wasn’t.

For the first time—maybe for the first time in my entire adult life—I allowed myself to truly think about those same possibilities. What would I have wanted for my life, if

I hadn't been shaped and twisted by the circumstances of my childhood? Who would I have been, if I hadn't been Emma Huntwell, orphan of the crime syndicate?

Who might I still become?

I'd played the role of a beta because being an omega was dangerous—to my career, to my independence, to my physical safety. But now I was kneeling at an alpha's feet, letting his stroking fingers and rich scent drive all my worries away. I'd curled in a borrowed nest with Elijah, with the others—and in some ways, I'd never felt as much like I belonged as I had during those precious times.

What if I lived openly as an omega? What if I had my own nest, one that only smelled like me and the people I chose to bring into it? What if I let my natural scent surround me like a sweet cloud everywhere I went?

What if I had natural heats? Sometimes, at least...

But there was the rub. I only knew four people I ever wanted to share heats with, and they were sitting in this room with me right now. When I tried to picture the what-ifs that surrounded the five of us, my mind shied away.



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I could get tantalizing glimpses. Freedom. Protection. A child with dusky skin and laughing, deep-set eyes. One with red hair and a piercing, summer blue gaze, or wise brown eyes and sandy hair. But if I tried to focus on any of it, it made my chest ache.

Curran's hand stilled. Then his fingers brushed my cheek, and I realized my face was wet.

"Why are you crying, sweetheart?" he asked.

I squeezed my eyes shut.

"Because I'm afraid to dream about a future with you," I whispered, all my walls stripped away.

Silence settled in the wake of the words. Elijah's arm tightened around my stomach.

"Oh, Emma," Curran murmured.

Oakmoss and petrichor tickled my nose. A new hand cupped my cheek, urging me up from my hiding place against Curran's thigh. Gabriel was kneeling in front of me. I hadn't even heard him cross the room.

"Hey," he said, lifting my chin until I met his gaze. "I can't bring myself to think about the future either. It's as though there's a brick wall trapping me here in the present, and it has my sister's name graffitied across it. I've spent so long chasing her traffickers that I can't imagine what it would be like to chase them."

Elijah had straightened away from me when Gabriel approached us.

“Gabriel, you can’t live your entire life for someone who isn’t here anymore,” he said. “Just like you can’t live your entire life based on fear of what might happen if you ever decided to make different choices, Emma. At some point, you both have to live for yourselves.”

“Rosebud is talking sense,” Onyx put in. “Been there, done that, got the T-shirt. Don’t recommend it as a retirement plan. Making different choices and living the way you want to live is a hell of a lot nicer, even if it’s hard at the beginning.”

I swallowed. “I don’t even know who I am. Not now.”

“I don’t know who I’m going to be, either,” Gabriel replied. “Not like these three knob-heads, who are so damned well-adjusted it’s making me want to vomit right now. So, what do you say to sticking around and trying to figure it out as we go along? Because in the end, I don’t know how else we can possibly find out, except by living it.”

I licked my lips, feeling like I was balanced on the cusp of something.

“I will if you will,” I said.

FORTY-ONE

Onyx

I’D ALWAYS BEEN a fairly laid-back individual, especially for an alpha. Or, at least, as laid back as it was possible to be when you regularly pummeled other people for money in front of a screaming, bloodthirsty crowd of gamblers.

But these last couple of days, I'd been starting to think we might be properly on the way to having a pack. Arealpack, with not just one, but two omegas. It was making me twitchy.

Mind you, it was making everyone else in the house twitchy, too.

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Emma and Gabriel had sounded like two people discussing a future. Our future. I was on board. Curran was on board. Elijah had been awfully quiet, but his pheromones had a lot to say whenever he was around us. I sensed he wasn't the kind of omega you could wrap up in cotton wool and hide away in an expensive nest somewhere. Frankly, that was part of his appeal... at least for me.

Elijah had a successful and very public career. He'd also, as far as most of the world was concerned, disappeared mysteriously after a yacht cruise off Greece. But he'd never been blackballed the way Emma had been. If he played his cards right—and if we could keep him safe—something like that could end up catapulting him into even more fame and success.

Emma, I wasn't so sure about. From the sound of things, her career had been on the rocks in a big way—thanks to her uncle and cousin. She didn't seem certain whether she wanted to fight to get it back or move on to something new. I got the impression she'd never had a chance to decide for herself what she truly wanted, deep down.

She'd fallen into modeling at a young age, found success there, and that career had worked for her... until one day it hadn't. Did she want something different? Who would she be if she was Emma Hope-Rosencranz—a filthy rich, bonded omega—rather than Emma Huntwell, hiding away from her twisted family of criminals?

A light knock sounded on my bedroom door. It was late, and not the sort of knock that would have heralded either Curran or the boss. I scented the air, nostrils flaring, the faintest hint of blackcurrant reaching me.

Huh. Think of the devil...

“Come in,” I said, setting aside the book I hadn’t actually been reading.

The door creaked open a hesitant few inches, and Emma poked her head in. “Hi.” She drew her plump lower lip between her teeth, looking like she was torn between staying and bolting like a startled deer. “I, um, didn’t wake you, d-did I?”

I smiled and picked up my book on Australian Aboriginal history, wagging it. “Nope, just reading. Or at least, just staring at the same page for fifteen minutes while thinking deep thoughts. What can I do for you?”

She slipped halfway into the room, still not quite committing fully. “I c-can’t sleep. Too wired. Want to go downstairs and spar?”

She was dressed in a tank top and yoga pants. The faintly outlined points of her nipples proclaimed her lack of a bra underneath. I raised an eyebrow, intrigued.

“Depends,” I said. “On a scale of one to ten, how likely are you to punch me in the clit?”

Two spots of red rose on her cheeks. “I d-don’t know. I guess it depends on whether you can teach me something more interesting.”

Wait, were we doing this? Because it kind of sounded like we were doing this.

“I’m sure I can come up with something better, in that case,” I told her, swinging my legs off the rumpled bed. I glanced down at the T-shirt and sleep shorts I was wearing. They’d do. “Shall we?”

I received a quick nod in reply, and she darted out as abruptly as she’d appeared.

After a moment's thought, I rummaged in my bedside drawer before grabbing my workout bag and following her. Then, because an alpha could hope, I ducked into the kitchen as I passed it, tossing a small glass bottle in the bag with my other supplies.

Emma was waiting for me in the makeshift gym, shifting her weight restlessly from foot to foot. She'd turned the lights on, and the harsh fluorescent overheads leached the color from her skin and pale hair.

I closed the door and set my bag on a bench to one side, standing several feet away from her as I began stretching out my shoulders and spine. "So, I've been wanting to ask. Who taught you to brawl? Because they clearly knew what they were about."

She stopped fidgeting and went still. "My dad," she said softly. "Before he..."

Got killed, I mentally finished for her.

Emma cleared her throat. "It didn't end up helping him at all. Not against half a dozen gunmen."

"No," I said gently. "It wouldn't. It might've saved your life on that dock in Greece, though. He gave you that gift, at least."

"Yeah," she whispered, before drawing her shoulders back and her spine straight. "Who taught you?"

I laughed. "A crusty old Taiwanese bloke in Brisbane. I got tired of the other sprog punching me in the schoolyard because I was different. Wandered into his martial arts school one day. He took one look at me and taught me how to shut down a fight before it properly got started."

She nodded. "He must've been good."

“Oh, he was.” I balanced on one foot, catching my other ankle in my hand to stretch my quads. “Is this really what you want to talk about, though?” I asked, switching legs.

“Yes,” she said, and charged me while I was still standing there like a moonstruck flamingo.

That startled a bark of laughter from me as we went down together on the mat, rolling and twisting. God, but I loved a dirty fighter. That was one thing I definitely couldn't get from Curran. He was brutal in a real fight, but he always played by the rules during sparring sessions.

There was a skill to overcoming an opponent like Emma without hurting them—because, in the end, she was still a slender female omega, and I was a fully trained alpha streetfighter. This didn't have the feel of a training session; not like our last tussle had. I could feel something simmering under the surface, and I was pretty sure winning the match would be the quickest way to uncover whatever it was.

It was like trying to restrain an eel, but within a few seconds I had her pinned and helpless, squirming on her stomach beneath me.

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“Now,” I said. “Tell me what you really want from me.”

She wriggled fruitlessly for a few more seconds, a frustrated puppy growl rumbling up from her chest. Then, she let out a massive sigh and went limp. I kept her pinned, having learned early on that she was the type to wait until I thought the match was over and go in for the kill when my guard was down.

“I want to know what sex with an alpha is like when I’m not in heat,” she said in a rush. “And you’re the only one here who won’t read anything more into it.”

“You could have just asked,” I pointed out, not addressing that last part.

She squirmed again. I held fast.

“Don’t you think this is hot, though?” she asked. “Because it was really hot last time, with you and me and Elijah.”

“So hot,” I agreed. “Good point. Right, objection withdrawn. You want the full alpha treatment? You want to be caught? Taken?”

I transferred both her wrists into my left hand and moved the right boldly between her legs, cupping her hot pussy. Her yoga pants were soaked, and my clit throbbed urgently in response as she shuddered beneath me, her scent spiking.

She whimpered.

“That’s not a yes, Absinthe,” I said, rubbing firmly through the damp fabric.



“Yes,” she yelped.

I shifted my weight so I could roll her over on her back. She gazed up at me with black pupils nearly swallowing the gray of her irises.

“Look at you,” I told her, grabbing my T-shirt with both hands and dragging it over my head before tossing it away. “All my Christmases have come early.”

She continued to stare up at me, her lips slightly parted. It was damned flattering, if I was being honest. I grinned down at her, hooking her waistband with one finger and snapping the elastic against her pale skin. “Right, then. Clothes off. Oil up that pretty body so you’ll be harder to catch hold of. And then you and I are going to have a rematch.”

## FORTY-TWO

Emma

I’D ALWAYS TREATED sex as a game. Or... maybe that wasn’t quite right. I’d treated it as a tool. A way to get what I needed in a world that rewarded beauty but punished vulnerability.

My rules were, first, no sex with alphas. That was a non-starter for any omega hiding as a beta. Scent suppressors were one thing, but they only worked in one direction. That was important because of the second rule—no orgasms. Clamping down on some unsuspecting bloke’s dick like a vise was a surefire clue that would give the game away. There weren’t enough Kegels in the world to mistake that inescapable grip for anything except what it was—an omega grasping for a knot.

Maybe betas would find rule number two shocking, but as long as there were no alphas in the picture, it wasn’t exactly difficult. In the absence of a heat, or of alpha

arousal pheromones, sex was just kind of...there. A series of techniques, like ice skating or car repair.

Add a minimum of acting ability and a passing familiarity with the “I’ll have what she’s having” scene from *When Harry Met Sally*, and I’d never had a complaint from a male beta.

A handful of private forays into synthetic alpha pheromones and knotting dildos had convinced me that the reality didn’t live up to the hype. At least, until I’d had my disastrous, unintended heat.

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Mind opened. Along with a few other sundry body parts.

Nana Allen's visit had pricked at an insecurity I'd been nursing ever since I'd emerged from my heat-haze—sweaty, sticky, and thoroughly sated. How much of my outlook on life had been formed and shaped by the people I'd grown up with?

Alphas were always dangerous.

Omegas were always vulnerable to attack and abuse.

Being a beta was the only safe way to live.

But what if it wasn't? Elijah was an out and proud omega. He'd been safe enough—and successful enough—until he'd stumbled into the middle of my shit-show.

Even in a beta-dominated career. Even using rent-a-packs during his heats.

Meanwhile, I had a beta mother. I could easily have been born a true beta. And if I had been, Uncle Tommy would have come after me all the same. It wasn't my omega status that enraged him. It was the fact that I was my father's daughter. Jimmy Huntwell wasn't around for him to take revenge on... but I was.

I stared into Onyx's twinkling eyes—the irises so dark that it was almost impossible to see where they ended, and the pupils began. I sat up and grabbed the hem of my tank top, peeling it off and tossing it to the side. We continued to gaze at each other, both of us bare to the waist.

“Mmm,” Onyx practically purred, rising gracefully. “I’m still not sure how someone like me ended up banging a supermodel.”

They shucked off their faded sleep shorts, revealing a neatly trimmed thatch of dark pubic hair. The tip of their clit was already visible, peeking out from its hood.

“I’m not a supermodel,” I said, a bit breathlessly. “But if you’d wanted to pursue the modeling route, I can think of some agencies that would have been knocking down your door.”

God, but Onyx was something to look at. It took a lot to break through my layer of cynicism after years spent surrounded by beautiful people. But none of those people had physiques honed in a fighting ring, and almost none of them had the kind of confidence that came with being able to say, ‘I crafted this body specifically to match my innermost truth.’

Onyx snorted in self-derision, but a pleased smile played around the edges of their lips. “Not much call for scars in the fashion industry, I’d imagine—even in the era of Photoshop. Glad you’re enjoying the view, though.”

I wriggled out of my gray leggings, surprised by my lack of nerves. The little pocket sewn into the waist was largely useless, but it had worked to carry the small foil condom packet. I pulled it out and got to my feet, proffering it. “Thought this might be useful.”

Onyx laughed, a single sharp bark. “Great minds, Absinthe. I brought one, too, but this works.”

I handed it over. “I got it from Elijah.”

They nodded. “He knows you were coming to seduce me, then?”

My cheeks heated, though I couldn't have said why. "Yeah. It seemed weird not to tell him."

"He could've joined us, you know," Onyx said. "Maybe next time."

"Maybe," I agreed, swallowing my brain's instinctive freak-out over the idea that there might be a next time.

Onyx crossed to the gym bag sitting on a nearby bench and rummaged in it, coming up with a small glass bottle.

I frowned. "What's that?"

A dark eyebrow canted. "Oil from the kitchen. Did you think I was joking about that part?"

They unscrewed the cap and poured a thin stream into their palm. My heart pattered restlessly, then thundered into a gallop when Onyx rubbed their hands together and closed the final step separating us.

"Hold still." Warm hands, rough with calluses beneath the smooth, silken feel of the oil, slid over my shoulders and down my arms, leaving the skin glistening and frictionless.

My passage clenched, a pulse of slick rolling down my inner thighs. One hand trailed down my flank and cupped between my legs, fingers delving for a moment before moving on.

Onyx grunted. "Damn, girl. Could've saved the oil and just used your juices instead."

Our combined scents were rising like mist, shrouding us. A shiver rolled through me.

The sensation of oily hands sliding over my body was simultaneously overwhelming and frustrating—somehow both too much and not nearly enough. I'd grown touch starved, I thought, despite my recent heat. Or maybe because of it.

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Long fingers stroked over every part of me, pausing occasionally to pour more oil. Onyx took special care with my breasts and arse, sending tingling shocks along my nerves. By the time they were finished, stepping back to assess their handiwork, I was panting softly through parted lips, my pussy throbbing in time with my racing pulse.

“There we are,” Onyx said. “Wouldn’t want to make this too easy, after all.” They shot me a feral grin and returned to the bench, wiping their hands on a convenient workout towel.

The condom packet was lying next to the gym bag. Onyx rested one foot on the bench, exposing their folds to my gaze. “Touch yourself, little omega.” They teased their clit absently, watching me just as avidly. “But fair warning, once I get this condom on, you’re prey. Unless you say the word stop, I’m going to eat you for breakfast, lunch, and dinner.”

I gasped, feeling momentarily lightheaded with the scent of our combined arousal and the knowledge of what was coming next. My hand wandered to my slick breast, kneading it, my palm sliding over the oiled nipple. It pebbled beneath my touch. The jolt of pleasure was a hundred times more intense than any instance of some clueless beta gamely rubbing or licking at my pussy in a pointless attempt at foreplay.

Onyx let out a low hum of appreciation, their clit now fully erect and jutting out from its nest of trimmed black curls. Their smile turned teasing as they tore the foil packet open and sheathed the slender length in latex.

I was still gaping when I remembered the warning. You’re prey. With a startled yelp, I bolted for the far corner of the room at the same instant Onyx lunged for me.

It was a joke. There was nowhere to hide. Not enough room to run, and even if there had been, I wasn't at all sure my natural omega speed could outpace Onyx's cheetah-like build.

I darted behind a weight machine. Onyx chuckled, hemming me into the corner where I'd unwittingly trapped myself. Every time I fainted in one direction or the other, they blocked me. My blood rushed in my ears, every nerve in my body hypersensitive and on high alert.

It felt a little bit like panic; a little bit like hunger. There was only one way this ended, but the longer I could stave off the inevitable, the more intense things would be. My thighs slid against each other with every movement. Sweat beaded, mixing with the oil covering my overheated skin.

I darted left, Onyx matching me step for step, then ducked and bolted right instead. I made it three frantic strides before a long-fingered hand closed around my forearm and tugged—slipping against the oil, but not falling away.

Somehow, an ankle was in front of mine, tripping me up. Then I was on the mat, scrambling and wriggling in an attempt to get out from under the rangy body tangled with mine. Skin slid against skin, giving the illusion that if I just twisted a bit more violently, I could free myself.

I was hot, but Onyx felt like a furnace in the places our bodies pressed and slipped together. All of my hard-won self-defense skills trickled away like water in a cracked glass, leaving me a mindless animal, whimpering and growling as I tried to wrench free.

Fingers thrust into my pussy without warning, startling a howl of outrage from me. I clenched around them, pleasure roaring up my spine like a tidal wave, turning my muscles heavy and uncoordinated. A hand closed over the back of my neck, pinning



me in place with my left cheek pressed to the mat.

I tried to buck, but my oiled knees slipped and slid uselessly. Onyx pumped three fingers in and out of me, an obscene sucking sound reaching my ears with every stroke. The sensation coiled like magma at the base of my spine—pressurized and ready to burst. I panted rapidly, drowning in spruce and bayberry.

My fingers scrabbled at the mat like claws, unable to gain any useful purchase. Then Onyx abandoned my passage in favor of my aching clit, rubbing firmly over it with rapid, rhythmic circles.

I gasped in a lungful of that heady miasma of alpha lust and came hard, my body going rigid as my hips jerked. My high-pitched whine tailed off in a sob when the fingers didn't slow or gentle their movements in the least—rubbing ruthlessly even as a wave of oversensitivity sent me struggling to get free again.

“No good, Absinthe,” Onyx said, with a hint of breathlessness. “You’ll take whatever I give you, and you’ll take it until I decide we’re through.”

The words sent a fresh wave of lust through my belly, and just like that, what had been too much became a tsunami of pleasure. My hands and feet tingled with rushing blood. The fingers drove me back to the brink and over it—again, and again, and again, until my lungs were heaving and my vision gray.

At some point during the process, my body had gone limp except for the violent shudders of climax after climax wracking me. When the final bit of fight drained out of me, the hands that had been pinning me down and pleasuring me disappeared. They closed around my hips, pulling me unresisting to my knees.

Presenting.

A pitiful mewl escaped my throat. The hand returned to the back of my neck, holding my upper body firmly to the mat as Onyx lined up behind me and thrust in. Not thick, but long. Their clit curved in such a way that it dragged inescapably over my front wall with every movement.

I moaned—a shuddering, broken sound.

“I’ve got you, sweetheart,” Onyx said. “You’re so gorgeous like this. Don’t worry... I know just what you need, and now you’re going to get it.”

God, but they were right. This was just what I needed. Every deep, rolling stroke hit me exactly right, building toward a climax that felt like it originated down around my toes somewhere. I couldn’t get away... didn’t want to. Onyx administered pleasure like a punishment, and I was a helpless penitent worshipping at their altar.

When my final orgasm rose up and swallowed me whole, my awareness wavered like a heat haze. When it returned, Onyx was swelling inside me as my muscles clamped down on their perfect, wonderful knot.

Somehow, we were lying on our sides, Onyx’s hard-muscled body spooning me from behind. My head was pillowed on a sinewy bicep, and shaking fingers stroked my breast with gentle movements. I let out a massive breath, some strange, internal tension melting away as I did.

“You’re perfect, Absinthe,” Onyx said, in a tone that sounded like awe. “Just think—if you and Elijah decided to stay, we could have this all the time. Please decide to stay...”

It was stream-of-consciousness... the post-coital mutterings of a knotted alpha. And in that moment, there was nothing in the world I wanted more.

### FORTY-THREE

Elijah

“SO, HOW WAS IT?” I asked, when Emma slunk into my bedroom a couple of hours after she’d left to seduce her alpha. I could have saved us both the trouble—she had the dazed and faraway look of the extremely well-knotted.

“It was...” She paused. Swallowed. Tried again. “It was... good?”

I raised my eyebrows. “That made it sound like you aren’t sure.”

Her tongue darted out to lick her lips. “No, I... I didn’t mean to make it sound like a question. It was good. Really good. And what the hell am I supposed to do now?”

“Bask in the afterglow,” I suggested. Honestly, I wasn’t trying to be trite. Or impatient. I was well aware that all of this was new to Emma, in a way that it wasn’t to me. She was overcoming years of twisted-up thinking about alphas and omegas, and her place in the world.

By contrast, I’d been happily fucking alphas since I was a teenager. Even so, I had limited high ground to stand on in this situation. I knew my way around a knot well enough, but I was dealing with my own internal panic over the prospect of having caught feelings. We were already a scent-match with Gabriel’s pack. That was scary enough on its own. But the fact that I wanted them—that I liked them—opened up new vistas of potential heartbreak that I’d managed to avoid until now.

“Onyx asked us to stay,” Emma said softly. “I thought they were the safe one, Elijah. But they asked, and they talked about what it would be like if we were a pack, and—” She cut herself off, shaking her head sharply.

She hadn’t stumbled over a single word since we’d started talking, I couldn’t help but notice.

Her stutter had barely been detectable back in New York, before all of this mess had started. It appeared under stress, I was pretty sure. Apparently, a good, hard fuck trumped whatever angst she was processing about possibly becoming a pack.

“Did you like what you heard?” I asked, prodding cautiously. “Do you want to stay?”

“Not in London,” she said quickly. “I couldn’t. Too many ghosts. It hurts to be here.”

“But with the alphas?” I pressed.

“I don’t know,” she said plaintively. “If... if everything else were a blank slate, then maybe so. But I can’t undo my family connections. I can’t go back in time and keep Gabriel’s sister from being abducted.”

“If you could, we wouldn’t have met them in the first place,” I pointed out.

She was right, though. God, what a tangle.

“I know,” she said, and let out a sigh that sounded like it came from the depths of her soul. “I thought sleeping with Onyx would make things clearer. But now, I’m even more confused.”

So much for Operation: Explore Sex with Alphas. Ah, well. It had been worth a try—and at least the poor girl got a good fuck out of it. The idea that she’d spent a

lifetime faking it with betas made me feel vaguely nauseated on her behalf.

“You should go have a warm bath,” I said, for lack of anything more constructive to add. “I wasn’t kidding about enjoying the afterglow.”

She huffed out a breath of self-deprecating amusement. “I never thought of you as the practical one before.”

“Oh, dove,” I said, slapping a hand over my heart. “You wound me. Practicality is my middle name.”

Another reluctant breath of laughter. “Really? Wow. I know your parents were terrible, but that’s a whole new level of abuse.”

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She closed the distance between us and wrapped me in a quick hug, the scent of sex and Onyx rising around us. I breathed it in and tried to quell my cock's interested twitch.

"Go," I told her. "Bathe. Now. I might wander down and have a chat with Curran if he's still up."

"Okay," she said, letting me go. "And if that's a euphemism for having sex with him, I'll make sure to be out of the bath by the time you get back."

It wasn't a euphemism. I ended up finding Curran and Onyx together, sharing a bottle of something amber and expensive looking in the kitchen.

They went quiet as I entered, but I was sure the previous conversation must have been about Emma. Onyx's brows creased in concern as she met my gaze.

"Is everything all right?" A hint of worry threaded through the broad Australian accent.

"Emma's fine," I said. "Well, assuming she doesn't get so relaxed in the bath that she drowns. Five out of five for stress relief, by the way."

Curran snorted. "What can we do for you, Elijah? I'm guessing this isn't purely a social call." He lifted the bottle toward me, an unspoken question.

"You can definitely start with a glass of whatever that is," I said.

Onyx reached a long arm toward the nearest cabinet and withdrew a tumbler, which Curran obligingly filled with two generous fingers of alcohol. I took it and sipped, letting the burn of it roll down my throat to warm my stomach. Crossing to the kitchen table, I slumped into a chair while the alphas remained leaning against the counter.

“I think Emma and I are both struggling to picture what the future would actually look like, if we stayed with you,” I began, jumping in without preamble. I was sure they’d been discussing the same thing when I walked in, after all.

Curran nodded slowly. “I hear you. Dunno if we can answer that right now. Not properly.”

Onyx swirled the contents of their glass. “I know he’s trying, but I just can’t picture the boss dropping everything when it comes to the Huntwell case. And without him on board, I’m not sure where that leaves the rest of us.”

“I don’t want to give up my career,” I blurted. “Emma doesn’t want to live in London. The logistics alone—”

Curran grunted. “Logistics don’t mean shit when you’re swimming in money like Gabriel is. And appearances aside, no one here wants to cage you two like a pair of fancy canaries. That’s not what being a pack means.”

I relaxed a bit, then swallowed another mouthful of the very nice scotch.

“No,” I said after a moment. “I know it’s not. It’s just... the feeling that everything’s a barrier, you know? Like there’s no clear way forward.”

“Sounds familiar.” Onyx’s tone was surprisingly glum. “I wish things were simpler.”

“Oh, stop moping, you great Aussie berk,” Curran said. “Both of you. Maybe you haven’t noticed this, on account of you both being such infants—barely out of the cradle, you two. But things don’t stay the same. Just because there’s a ton of shit going on right now, that doesn’t mean it’ll always be like this.”

“We are not infants,” Onyx said. “You’re just ancient, that’s all.”

“Infants,” Curran repeated, raising his glass to gesture at us. “Practically fetuses. Need an ultrasound machine to get a proper look at the pair of you.”

I scoffed. “Don’t mistake a good skincare routine for lack of experience,” I told him, hiding my amusement. “But, okay, I can see your point. It’s only that it’s frustrating, feeling like we’re stuck in limbo like this. Not knowing how long we’ll be here, or what will happen next.”

Curran thought about it for a moment and shrugged, acknowledging the point.

The following afternoon, the first unmarked manila envelope arrived in the post.



FORTY-FOUR

Gabriel

CURRAN BATTED MY hand away before I could grab the unmarked envelope from the pile of post.

“Get off,” he growled. “Christ, Blondie—how are you still alive? Onyx, get me a pair of gloves, a mask, and some goggles. The rest of you, outside now.”

“What?” Elijah asked, wide-eyed. “Why?”

“He thinks it might be dangerous,” Emma said grimly. “Anthrax, or poison or something.”

“Is that a tactic your family is prone to using?” I asked, mentally kicking myself when I saw her flinch in response to the words your family.

“No,” Curran said, answering for her. “It ain’t. Though I can’t help noticing you’re all still in the house. Get. Out.”

He didn’t truly sound all that alarmed, but I exercised the better part of valor and ushered the omegas out of the back door leading into the garden. When it was safely closed behind us, Elijah rounded on me.

“Is he seriously going to fuck around with a poisoned envelope?” he demanded.

I swallowed a sigh. “He’s just being overcautious.”

The door opened and closed, disgorging Onyx, who raised an eyebrow at me. “You want me to tell him you said that?”

“If you like,” I said.

We both knew that Curran was still beating himself up after failing to step in front of me while I was being shot at in Greece. Alpha healing meant that the bullet wound was well on the way to recovery, though it was still bloody sore when I moved it wrong. By contrast, it appeared my loyal bodyguard’s sensibilities wouldn’t recover nearly so quickly.

“I expect it’s fine,” Onyx said, leaning back against the damp white wall of the house with crossed arms. “Good trick getting mail into this place without using the postal system, though.”

That was a fair point, and one that would probably alarm Kensington Palace security if they got wind of it.

“Let’s wait to see what it actually is before deciding how worried we should be about it,” I replied.

We cooled our heels for about ten minutes before Curran came out, an N95 mask hanging around his neck and goggles pushed up to his forehead.

“No anthrax, then?” I asked mildly.

He grunted in irritation at my lack of appropriate gravity. “Nah. In fact, you’re gonna want to see this. Someone’s been busy, and no mistake.”

Back inside, I stared in disbelief at the small pile of documents, photographs, and lists of names sitting on the dining room table, courtesy of Clarabelle Allen and her cronies within the Huntwell syndicate.

“How,” I breathed, scanning page after page of damning evidence linking Tommy Huntwell to the disappearance of more than a dozen young girls—mostly omegas—from roughly the same time period when Theresa had been taken.

I felt blindly behind me for a chair, pulling it forward and sinking into it as my head spun.

“I need to speak to my solicitors’ office,” I said blankly.

“Good stuff, then?” Curran asked, tweaking one of the pages off the pile so he could read it.

“That’s... putting it mildly,” I replied. “Good god. How could she have possibly acquired access to all this?”

Emma was sitting hunched in another of the antique wooden chairs. “It’s why I called her here. She was right in the middle of it all, back when my father was in charge of the syndicate. Tommy and Cade are monsters. I knew there had to be people who wouldn’t be thrilled about Tommy t-taking over. And I figured Nana Allen would know who those people are.”

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“You were certainly right about that,” I said, forcing myself to push the papers away and refocusing my attention on the others.

If there was information about Theresa buried in that treasure trove of intelligence, it would come out soon enough.

Onyx jerked their chin at the messy pile. “That enough to take the bastards to court?”

I scrubbed a hand over my face. “That’s a question for the lawyers. And possibly for the MSHTU.”

The Modern Slavery Human Trafficking Unit was the government department in charge of investigating the illegal buying and selling of human beings in the UK. They’d been politely blowing me off for years—which was understandable given the sheer volume of cases they were saddled with, combined with the lack of any hard evidence to back up my accusations.

Now, that might well have changed.

Over the following days, more envelopes arrived, containing yet more incriminating material.

“How is she even doing this?” Onyx asked, turning the latest one over to reveal the lack of postal markings.

Emma shrugged. “Curran brought her here. She saw the address of the house. And I know you think this place is impregnable, but the truth is there are people in and out

of the neighborhood every day. Gardeners, pool maintenance, renovation contractors...”

I felt a flash of alarm at the idea that I’d been so nonchalant about our safety here. But then again, I hadn’t invited any of the bad guys around for afternoon tea. Clarabelle Allen knew where we were hiding because she’d been here. And while it was true that she’d now shared that information with whoever was sneaking the envelopes into our post, it seemed likely that Tommy and Cade Huntwell would shortly have more pressing things to worry about than getting revenge.

The MSHTU turned out to be extremely interested in our new cache of evidence—especially given Emma and Elijah’s experience mere weeks ago. This was no longer a cold case more than two decades old. It was an ongoing concern.

Ten days after I presented the findings to my solicitors, the authorities opened an official investigation. Four days after that, I walked into the house, realized that the quest to which I’d dedicated my entire adult life was now essentially out of my hands, and had a minor breakdown over it.

Curran found me in an unused and unrenovated drawing room, sitting on the floor with my back propped against the bare plaster of the wall, staring at an untouched bottle of... actually, I wasn’t sure what it was. I hadn’t bothered to check. For all I knew, it could have been paint thinner.

He lowered himself to sit beside me with a soft grunt and a creak of protesting knees.

“Problem?” he asked. “I thought things were going well.”

I stared down at the label of the bottle. Macallan. At least it wasn’t formaldehyde or something.

“They are,” I said distantly. “They’re going so well that the only thing left for me to do is testify at trial about Theresa’s disappearance, assuming I’m even called to do so.”

Curran gave a slow nod. “Hmm. Tragic. Better be careful—you might have to face up to that future you and Emma talked about.”

“Sod off, you sarcastic twat,” I told him.

He snorted in amusement. “You’re only narked at me because you know I’m right.”

I set the bottle down and stared unseeing at the exposed lathing of the far wall. “Yes,” I said. “You really are, damn you.”

FORTY-FIVE

Elijah

IT TURNED OUT, THE UK legal system didn't move any faster than the one in America. It was going to take ages for the courts to unpick what was turning out to be a sprawling conspiracy with international connections.

That should have been depressing. In a way, it was. But it had become considerably less depressing after Tommy and Cade Huntwell were caught at Heathrow Airport trying to flee the country. The pair had been remanded into pre-trial detention, where they would hopefully stay until a jury found them guilty and a judge sentenced them to prison for the rest of their miserable lives.

It didn't mean we were one hundred percent safe, but it meant that we were a hell of a lot safer than we'd been in some time. The way I looked at it, if Clarabelle Allen hadn't succumbed to any convenient 'accidents' yet, after sticking her nose so deep in the Huntwells' business, we were probably okay behind our wall of security in Kensington Palace Gardens.

Mostly, I wanted two things. I wanted a solid proposal from Gabriel, and I wanted to get back to work. When it came to the first of those things, it was time to take action.

Gabriel had, understandably, been called away at frequent intervals over the past couple of months to deal with not only legal matters, but also a billion-dollar company that did something nebulous in the finance sector.

He was here today, though—and so were the others.

“You know, my heat’s due in a few weeks,” I said, into the desultory conversation of the dinner table.

All three alphas went very silent. Emma did as well, although I’d warned her ahead of time that I planned on having this conversation tonight.

Onyx recovered first. “Oh? Got any plans, Rosebud?”

“That depends largely on whether I get any good offers,” I said airily. “If not, I suppose there’s still time to book a rent-a-pack like I always do.”

Onyx snorted, and Curran shot me a look that said I wasn’t as funny as I thought I was. A growl so low it was barely audible rumbled from Gabriel’s end of the table. It cut off abruptly when I met his blue gaze and raised an eyebrow at him.

Everyone else was looking at him, too.

He cleared his throat. “I should apologize. To both of you. It’s been unconscionable of me to let this situation drag on the way I have.”

“No kidding,” Curran said.

Emma shifted in her seat. “No, it’s my fault, too. I know you’ve been holding off because you weren’t sure how I’d react to a formal pack offer.”

“There’ve been a few other things going on,” I offered magnanimously. “But there will always be other things going on. That’s just the way life works. So, my heat. No offense, but I don’t intend to spend it locked in my borrowed bedroom with a knotting dildo.”



This time, I was pretty sure the growl came from Curran. “Damn straight you won’t,” he said.

Gabriel pushed his chair back and rose. “Quite right. Emma Hope. Elijah Bardot. Assuming you can look past our manyflaws, would you do us the honor of joining our pack? I offer both of you my name and my protection, freely and with hope for the future.”

“And his money,” Curran added helpfully. “He offers that, too.”

Gabriel shot him a fondly exasperated look. “Yes. And my money, obviously. I had hoped that would go without saying. Honestly, Curran, you can be such a philistine about etiquette.”

Curran shrugged, a smile playing around the edges of his lips. “You crawled out of the same gutter I did, Blondie. Can’t help it if you’re the one who got ideas above his station.”

“Whereas I crawled out of an entirely different gutter,” Onyx said. “But if you could both shut up for a minute, some of us would actually like to hear the omegas’ answer.”

I exchanged a look with Emma, who took a fortifying breath.

“I can’t live in London,” she said. “There are too many bad memories for me here. And... I still don’t know exactly what I want to do with my life. But I know I want to do something more than lounging around, being a rich man’s kept omega.”

“Ditto,” I said. “To the last part, I mean. I intend to go back to work. I’ve been away from New York too long as it is. My career is there.”

“I’ve never been to New York,” Onyx mused.

“Good place for billionaires,” Curran said, eyeing Gabriel.

“I suppose it is at that,” Gabriel agreed. He met Emma’s gaze intently. “You’re not the only one who sees too many ghosts in London. My parents left here years ago. They live in Portugal now. I have a property near Lisbon—”

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“And a bloody yacht,” Curran put in with a small shudder. “But maybe we could take a miss on that for now.”

“Agreed.” Emma’s reply was heartfelt.

“As I was saying,” Gabriel went on, “I have a property there that might be a more pleasant place for a pack heat than this relic. But I’m not averse to putting down roots in New York.”

“You’d all be okay with that?” I asked. “Starting over in a new country for us?”

“Rosebud,” Onyx said kindly. “Starting over to make a better life is basically what the three of us do. You could almost say we’re experts at it.”

A strange, warm feeling was kindling in my gut. I glanced at Emma and found her wiping furtively at her cheeks.

“Well,” I said. “I guess that’s all right, then.”

I’d been to Madrid as a model, but never to Lisbon. Clearly, I’d been missing out. Gabriel’s property was technically located in the village of Reguengo Grande, about an hour’s drive from the city. The place hadn’t yet lost its cozy charm despite the influx of rich expats—with its shops and coffee houses frequented by the locals, tucked among unspoiled hiking trails and hills dotted with windmills.

The house itself was nine thousand square feet of brick and local stone with exposed beams in the white plaster ceilings, a red clay tile roof, and artisan furniture. A

flagstone patio abutted a pristine swimming pool sheltered on three sides by the house, while garden paths meandered through green grass and a profusion of colorful flower beds covering the two-acre plot.

The landscaping bill alone probably would have bankrupted me.

I adored it. Emma had fallen head-over-heels in love with it at first sight. And that was before we'd seen the nest.

It wasn't unusual for these kinds of rich pack houses to have nests as part of the design, but Onyx let slip that Gabriel had never had it furnished. Not until he'd invited us here for my heat.

I had to hand it to his contractors; they'd worked fast. It was far and away the most extravagant heat nest I'd ever seen. Culturally appropriate for the area to the smallest detail, while also radiating privacy and coziness. It was located centrally on the second floor. No windows marred the womblike sense of privacy.

I wasn't entirely sure what sort of lighting was in use, but whatever it was, it radiated a warm, red glow that deepened the patina of the antique wood furnishings. Every sharp edge was covered with soft cushions or upholstery. Fuzzy, woven blankets draped chair backs and the massive, curved sofa seating that wrapped around a sunken area in the center of the room.

There, the floor itself was made of upholstered cushions. Emma and I had set up a blanket fort there on the very first night.

Despite the age of some of the furniture, someone had taken care to ensure that nothing in the nest smelled of other people. After the better part of a week, it now smelled like us.

The alphas hadn't intruded, respecting the ancient tradition of not entering an omega nest without an explicit invitation.

"We could invite them, you know," Emma said, from where she lay curled up in an armchair with her nose buried in a book.

I was already getting broody, obsessively moving things around, only to move them back half an hour later.

"We could," I agreed. "But I want it to be just for my heat." I added another pillow to the pile I was building in one corner and tilted my head to take in the effect. "It's, y'know, part of the whole thing. Inviting them in, I mean."

"I don't know, actually," she said, putting down her book to give me her full attention. "My only experience of heat involved a rented sailboat."

I paused, straightening from my pillow pile.

"You're okay with this, right?" I asked, suddenly worried. "I know I tend to get the bit between my teeth when I have an idea. And now we're in Lisbon, and you—"

"Stop," she said. "Seriously, Elijah. Stop. You're fretting."

I drew in a lungful of air and let it out slowly. Abruptly, I was burning up inside. "Sorry. Shit. I think I'm..."

"Perfuming like crazy?" she suggested. "Um... okay. As we've already established, I don't know what the hell I'm d-doing. But... maybe you should try to eat and drink something while I go get the others?"

I licked my lips. They tingled, along with several other parts of me.

“Yeah,” I said faintly. “Actually, that might be a good idea.”

### FORTY-SIX

Emma

I'D UNDERESTIMATED ALPHA senses where omega heat was concerned. I'd barely made it to the landing at the top of the main staircase when Onyx poked their head around from the first floor and called up, "Is it time? You want us to come up now?"

"Yes, he's ready," I called back. "Where are the others?"

"We're here," came Gabriel's voice, before Onyx could answer.

"Did you get some electrolytes into him?" Curran asked, as all three came jogging up the stairs.

"Some," I replied. "I told him to try eating and drinking something while he's waiting for us to get back to the nest."

Rich scents filled the air around me as the alphas approached. Onyx smelled pleased and excited. Curran, protective. Gabriel smelled nervous as hell—and perversely, his nerves calmed my own... at least a little bit. I'd felt like the only one in the house who didn't have their shit together. It was oddly reassuring to know I wasn't alone.

Curran sniffed, looking between us. "Jesus, you two. I'm going to send you both to sit in the corner until you stop smelling like you expect an ax murderer to leap out of the shadows at any moment."

Indignation scattered some of my panic, which took flight like a flock of startled birds. “I’m fine!” I protested, aware that the stress pheromones rolling off me would be impossible for an alpha to mistake.

“I believe you,” Onyx said with a grin, rising to my defense in the face of the evidence.

I met the laughing, dark eyes and felt a wave of powerful longing roll through me, tightening in my stomach. Pheromones, I told myself. It’s the pheromones.

“Thank you,” I said, with a sharp nod at the others. “See? At least Onyx understands me.”

“Course I do, Absinthe,” Onyx said, pausing to wrap an arm around me and pressing a brief kiss to my temple. My blood sang, urging me to sway into the solid form and rub against those hard muscles like a cat.

When I pulled back, Curran was eyeing me with a speculative gaze.

“What?” I demanded.

A fond half-smile tugged at his lips. “Probably nothing, sweetheart. Let’s get to the nest before Elijah starts wondering what’s taking us so long.”

Guilt pricked at me. Elijah. He was alone in the nest, waiting for us, and I shouldn’t be slowing the others down like this.

We crossed the short distance to the door of the nest, which stood open after my hasty exit a few moments ago. I’d decided, after much mental hand-wringing, to take a birth control shot at the same time Elijah did, so I could partake in the... er... festivities with absolutely no worries.



We'd all been tested for STDs and come back clean, meaning condoms were now a thing of the past. But Curran had warned me that two omegas together in a pack could screw up the hormones and heat cycles until we eventually synced. Since Elijah and I had started out with our cycles only a few weeks apart, it was a good idea for me to take precautions on the off chance my reproductive system went a bit wonky in the heat nest.

Other than that, there were no blockers or suppressors to be found in the house. I'd stopped taking them by necessity when Tommy and Cade had my cabin searched on the yacht and my pills thrown overboard. Somehow, I'd just... never started taking them again.

It seemed like a different lifetime in so many ways. I was no longer a closeted omega. No longer hiding as a beta.

And I was about to have a pack of my own, even though the idea still terrified me in some ways.

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I think it terrified Gabriel, too—and for pretty much the same reason. His identity, like mine, had been tied up in a single thing for a very long time. I was the perfect, aloof fashion model who only used sex as a tool, never letting anyone near my heart. He was a bereaved older brother on a crusade for justice for his baby sister, too single-minded to even think about letting other people in.

Now I wasn't a model anymore, and these four idiots had pierced all my armor to get at the soft parts that lay underneath. Meanwhile, the march of justice for Theresa Rosencranz had moved on, leaving Gabriel behind, and suddenly he'd been forced to crawl out of his hole so he could deal with messy things like emotions and commitment.

I swallowed hard and knocked on the doorframe, peeking inside. "Elijah?"

My erstwhile roommate had somehow lost all his clothes in the brief amount of time I'd been gone. He was now sprawled in the center of the nest with a raging hard-on and beads of sweat glistening on his skin.

"Oh, thank god," he moaned. "Someone please come in here and fuck me."

"God, I love heats," Onyx declared, brushing past me and shedding clothing with astonishing efficiency.

"Three cheers for an omega who knows what he wants," Curran muttered, following close on his packmate's heels.

I stood frozen in the doorway, staring wide-eyed as Onyx practically dove into the

mountains of cushions littering the center of the nest, tugging Elijah's legs apart and swallowing his cock to the root.

"Ohfuckjesusyes!" Elijah blurted, hips jerking against Onyx's restraining hold.

A pulse of slick dribbled down my inner thighs, and I was abruptly and overwhelmingly aware of the blond alpha standing at my shoulder.

Gabriel cleared his throat. "Maybe Curran was onto something earlier," he said, urging me into the nest with a hand on my lower back.

Prickly heat radiated outward from the contact. I shivered as my nipples helpfully tightened into painful points. Unsticking my feet, I let Gabriel guide me to the far end of the curved sectional sofa, where we wouldn't be in the way.

I sat down, mostly because my knees had abruptly decided that standing up was for losers. After a slight hesitation, Gabriel sank down next to me—a careful few inches separating us.

"Can you believe, I honestly thought this would feel less intimidating the second time around?" he murmured.

Curran, who apparently lacked Onyx's facility for walking and undressing at the same time, had taken the easy road of simply opening his fly while remaining otherwise clothed. He knelt by Elijah's head, and two seconds later Elijah was up on one elbow, craning around to get his mouth on Curran's cock without dislodging Onyx from his cock.

My pussy throbbed urgently, and I tugged the collar of my T-shirt away from my neck to try and get some air against my overheated skin.

“Neither of us is really built for this, are we?” I managed.

Gabriel gave a choked breath of laughter and waved a hand sheepishly toward the pronounced tent in his trousers. “Well...”

My mouth watered. More slick pulsed from my core, soaking my leggings.

“I meant emotionally.” My voice was a low rasp. Fuck. I hadn’t meant for the words to sound sultry.

“Probably.” Gabriel turned to look at me. His pupils had dilated, nearly swallowing the ring of summer blue. His nostrils flared. A furrow formed between his golden eyebrows. “Emma... are you...?”

Curran looked up sharply. A moment later, Elijah pulled off of his cock with an obscene slurping noise. His dazed green gaze focused on me with difficulty.

“Emma.Pet,” Curran said, in his deep, reassuring rumble of a voice. “Elijah’s pulling you into heat with him. You’re safe, love. We’re going to take care of you—”

He probably said some other wonderful and reassuring things after that. I didn’t hear what they were, because the tendon running down the side of Gabriel’s neck was suddenly the most mouth-watering thing on the entire planet. He smelled like a thunderstorm after a long drought, and it was the most natural thing in the world to crawl into his lap and fasten my teeth over it.

A growl vibrated beneath my lips, and before I knew what had happened, I was lying on my back on the comfortable couch, caged by arms and legs and surrounded by the scent of lust.

### FORTY-SEVEN

Emma

WHY HAD I MADE this so complicated when it was actually so simple? Gabriel's strong thigh parted my legs, pressing hard against my core. I moaned and rutted against it, wanting more even as I relished what I already had.

"Get her down here with Elijah, Blondie," Curran said.

Gabriel gave a grunt of frustration, but he slid off the couch, tugging my leggings down as he went. I thought I heard a seam rip; couldn't bring myself to care. Why was it so hot in here? I struggled out of my sweat-soaked tee as Gabriel pulled the leggings over my bare feet and threw them aside like they'd personally insulted his mother.

Then I yelped as I was unceremoniously scooped up and deposited on my back in the center of the nest, surrounded by cushions and the scent of my perfect, wonderful pack. I breathed it in—great, gasping lungfuls of it, headier than the strongest alcohol.

Gabriel was tearing at his own clothes now, and why the hell had he worn clothing with buttons in a heat nest? I grabbed the nearest bit of cloth I could reach and tugged hard, several of those damned buttons popping off to disappear among the piles of pillows and blankets.

His shirt gaped open, and his trousers hung low around his hips with the fly open.

Close enough.

Driven by instinct, I rolled onto my front and got my knees under me, arching my back to basically shove my pussy in his face. Insert Tab A here. Gabriel groaned and buried his mouth in my soaking folds, rubbing his clean-shaven cheeks through the slick mess as though wallowing in it.

His tongue came out, dragging along my slit, and the pitiful remnants of my higher brain functions whited out. Next to me, Elijah groaned. I rolled my head to face in his direction, and found him on his back, his body nearly bent double as Onyx hooked his knee over their elbow and thrust into him with a snarl.

Gabriel's tongue curled into my passage.

"More," I choked out, and was rewarded when the tongue disappeared, replaced by an eager cock. I rocked back, taking Gabriel inside my body almost violently... drawing a sharp curse from him.

Big hands grabbed my hips, slamming me back onto that thick length in a brutal rhythm. My vision lost focus, Elijah's sinuous writhing as Onyx fucked him becoming an indistinct blur in front of me.

Gabriel changed his angle, somehow managing to pound into me even deeper than before. Every stroke plowed across my sensitive front wall. I was making noise without meaning to—a rhythmic, rising wail in time with Gabriel's thrusts.

I only realized I'd lost track of Curran when a heavy, callused hand fell on the nape of my neck, pinning my upper body in place.

"It's good, isn't it, pet?" said the gruff voice. "Good to finally let go."

His thumb stroked lower, grazing my inflamed mating gland, then pressing firm circles over it. I shuddered as every nerve between my gland and my clit roared into life, an orgasm crashing over me.

My body clamped down on Gabriel's cock so hard I thought I'd hurt him, but he only made a strangled noise and jerked out his own release, buried as deep inside me as he could get.

Curran continued to rub my mating gland as Gabriel's knot swelled inside my passage, tying us together. The feeling swam in my stomach, putting ideas in my head that I couldn't ignore.

As though we shared a brain, Elijah began to moan, "Oh, fuck... Onyx... bite me—I need you to bite me, oh god, do it now, do it now!"

Onyx made a low humming noise of want, pulled out, flipped Elijah onto his front, and thrust back in. With effortless strength, they pulled him up to a kneeling position, his back to their front.

There was just enough of a height difference that Onyx could cup Elijah's chin, tip his head to the side, and bury their teeth in the juncture of his neck and shoulder. Elijah screamed, fluid spurting from his twitching cock as he came violently. His body jerked and spasmed for several moments, then he slowly went limp in Onyx's arms.

Onyx pulled away, mouth bloody, panting hard. They lowered Elijah carefully to the cushioned floor, following him down and settling behind him.

Knotted and mated.

My passage clenched at the realization, drawing a hiss from Gabriel.

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“You ready to join them, beautiful?” Curran asked, stroking over my gland with a light, ticklish touch that made gooseflesh rise along my back.

I didn’t even have to think about it. “Mate me, Gabriel. Please... I’m so tired of being alone.”

It should have been hard to say. Somehow, it wasn’t.

“We’ve all been alone too long,” Gabriel whispered. His lithe frame covered mine.

Curran slid his hand away from my neck. “Ain’t that the truth, Blondie. Go on then, do it. It’s past time.”

Lips, slightly chapped, traced a path over my right shoulder and up. My nerves sang in anticipation. Onyx’s low murmurs of love and devotion to Elijah whispered at the edge of my hearing.

“Beautiful, the four of you,” Curran said.

A warm tongue rasped over the aching place at the curve of my neck. I was already slipping into a knotting haze, the outside world going soft and unfocused. When Gabriel’s teeth sank into me, the pain was there, but so was the surrender. Maybe this was what the antelope felt when the lion sank fangs into its throat.

Inevitability.

Acceptance.



The end of one life.

The beginning of another?

Gabriel groaned against my broken skin, the sound vibrating through me. He lapped at the wound he'd made, heat radiating outward from the point of contact. Heat and... something else.

I'd read alphomic romance novels. Tried to scoff at the predictable conclusion, when the omega protagonist submitted to the alpha's bite, tying their souls together until death and beyond.

I could feel Gabriel. The faintly nervy desperation to always do the right thing, to never make a wrong decision. To see justice done and protect those he considered to be under his care.

My breath caught—the pain of the bite, the deep itch as the healing properties of alpha saliva went to work... none of it was important. The knot tying our bodies together still throbbed pleasure, but it was nothing compared to the new bond tying our souls together.

“Emma,” Gabriel breathed. “You’re like quicksilver. So bright...”

Tears slid down my temple and cheek. I couldn't stop them. Wasn't sure I wanted to. I wasn't a poet. I couldn't come up with some great metaphor for everything Gabriel was.

“D-don't leave me,” I sobbed instead, drawing a low noise of pain from him. Gabriel's weight pressed down more firmly on my body, grounding me.

“Never,” he said.

“No one’s leaving anyone,” Curran rumbled. Callused fingers wiped at my tear tracks. “I swear, you two need each other more than any two people I’ve ever seen.”

“Stop being right about things, damn you,” Gabriel muttered against my shoulder blade.

I blinked my vision into focus, checking on Elijah to find him curled, sleepy and content, in Onyx’s arms. Onyx was still murmuring low words of comfort and reassurance, but predictably, the pair had managed their mating with far less drama than Gabriel and I had.

Drama or no, biology was taking over for me, too. My first peak had passed; my body demanded rest. Alphas were guarding the nest. Now, one of them was guarding my heart as well. My mind surrendered to darkness, surrounded by the shape of Gabriel’s protectiveness and awe.

### FORTY-EIGHT

Emma

I WOKE TO A dry mouth, the hum of a second person's emotions inside my head, and Elijah moaning softly as he rutted his fresh erection against my hip.

Someone had tucked us in together, among the pillows and fuzzy blankets. I carefully stretched my neck, feeling out the pain from Gabriel's bite. It wasn't nearly as sharp as I would have expected. Alpha saliva for the win.

Honestly, the ache between my legs was more distracting. My abdomen felt like a black hole, yearning desperately for something to fill it.

A large form stirred on my other side, the scent of amber and myrrh enveloping me. Rough fingers cupped my pussy, pressing between my lips and sliding inside, stretching me open and taking away some of the terrible emptiness.

Elijah mouthed mindlessly at my shoulder, still grinding his arousal against me. Some of the lust churning in my brain wasn't strictly mine, I realized, and I blinked open gritty eyes to find Gabriel propped up on an elbow behind Elijah. He'd managed to lose his clothing properly while I'd been out of it. The defined muscles of his forearm flexed as he worked away between Elijah's legs.

"Don't t-tease," Elijah whined, and I took a dizzy moment to hope my stammering wasn't catching.

Curran chuckled, twisting his fingers and sending stars shooting across my vision. “You heard the lad,” he said. “What about you, Emma? You ready for another knot?”

“Yes, please,” I breathed, as Gabriel manhandled Elijah away and onto his hands and knees.

“Good girl,” Curran said, his voice sending shivers through me. “C’mon. Up you get.”

I wanted to curse with frustration as his fingers slid out of me. But Curran was naked, too—his cock hard and ready, flushed red at the tip. I let him pull me up after him as he settled himself on the couch. He arranged me on his lap, facing away, his dick nestled between the cheeks of my arse. I could feel it twitching—as desperate to get inside me as I was to have it there.

But Curran had other plans. He reached to the side and came back with something in his hand. His other arm circled around me, his hand closing loosely over my throat as he settled me back against his chest and held me there. My passage clenched, soaking Curran’s thighs with slick.

He flicked on the vibrator he held, which buzzed loudly into life. On the floor in front of us, Gabriel positioned Elijah the way he wanted him and thrust in. Onyx gasped in tandem with Elijah’s sharp cry of pleasure. I’d lost track of our third alpha, but they were sprawled at the other end of the couch, watching Gabriel fuck their mate with hooded eyes, and teasing their clit with slow strokes.

Then the vibrator pressed against my folds, and everything slid away except the sudden, overwhelming stimulation and Gabriel’s presence in my mind. His pleasure in ramming into Elijah’s body swirled together with my runaway stampede toward orgasm, climbing and circling in a never-ending feedback loop of lust.

I'd never felt anything remotely like it, and I lasted maybe fifteen seconds before my body convulsed, jerking in Curran's hold.

"Just getting started, Absinthe," Curran murmured against my ear, his hand tightening on my throat to restrain me.

I let out a startled sob of ecstasy, unprepared for the heights my body could reach when I was feeling someone else's pleasure layered on top of mine. Gabriel snarled and redoubled his pounding, while Elijah's mouth opened wide around a sound too big to escape. Onyx panted, yanking their hand away from between their legs, presumably to keep from coming on the spot.

Curran continued to torture Gabriel and me with the vibrator until I was begging, and he was howling. I felt an echo of Elijah's passage clamping around Gabriel's cock. The feeling as he let loose, shooting his load into Elijah, sent me crashing into another orgasm.

When the rush of blood in my brain receded enough for me to think, I realized Curran had set the buzzing toy aside so he could lift my hips and guide me onto his cock. It slid into me without resistance as he lowered me down, filling me perfectly. Before I could do more than whimper, the toy was back, and so was the no-nonsense grip around my throat.

"Fuck," I rasped, and felt Gabriel shudder through the bond.

I couldn't move properly, only squirm in place. Apparently, that was what Curran wanted, because he made no move to thrust into me either. I bared my teeth, determined to make him suffer as much as he was making me suffer. If I couldn't ride him, I'd squeeze him. I clamped down my internal muscles with as much force as I could manage, wriggling my hips in time as I massaged his thick cock.

Curran let out a low groan. “That’s my girl,” he said, rewarding me with a slow roll of his hips.

It was only because numbness was starting to set in beneath the vibrator’s hum that I was able to keep going as long as I did. I felt balanced on the knife edge of orgasm, trapped there in an endless moment of time.

“Ah, you beauty,” Curran growled, shifting his grip from my throat to my hair. He tangled his fingers in the short strands and used it to jerk my head back and to the side. Then his teeth pierced my mating gland, placing a second bite mark messily over the first.

I heard Elijah cry out... felt Gabriel’s triumphant exuberance as blood filled his mouth... but I was coming, coming, coming, and now a second fierce protector was settling into my consciousness as though he’d always been there.

It was too much. Curran’s knot swelled inside me even as his presence did, and I let myself fall into the waiting arms of darkness once more.

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When I regained awareness the next time, Onyx was patiently eating me out. And, oh, fuck, were they good at that. I was on my back, and Elijah was mouthing at my breast in between frantic panting.

“Oh, god,” I moaned, surrounded on all sides by pleasure. Elijah was with me now, too, although his presence felt a bit further removed than Gabriel and Curran’s. It took me a moment to work out that Gabriel was now bonded to both of us. If I strained outward, I could barely make out the sense of a warm, summer night—Onyx, twice removed from me through their bond with Elijah.

Curran was fucking Elijah from behind with tortuously slow strokes, and Elijah’s sobbing breaths told me he’d already come more than once.

“There she is,” Onyx said, lifting their shining mouth from my wetness. “Oh, this is going to be so good, Absinthe.”

Capable hands helped me roll over and get my knees beneath me. I blinked as I realized that Gabriel was slumped on the couch directly in front of me, looking exhausted except for his very hard cock.

I made a hungry noise, and Onyx chuckled. “Thought you might appreciate that.”

“You’re all utterly depraved,” Gabriel said, the words cut off with a gasp when I crawled up far enough to get my mouth on his dick.

I hummed around it, my eyelids fluttering closed as Onyx nudged up behind me and slid in—that deliciously curved alpha clit hitting me just exactly right. I let them rock

me onto Gabriel's cock, choking on the thick length with every slow thrust. His thighs trembled beneath my hands as he fought the urge to thrust.

Elijah cried out hoarsely, the maelstrom of the pack bond resettling. He felt closer than before; his presence more immediate. I couldn't see him from my spot between Gabriel's legs, but I could imagine Curran's teeth buried in his gland.

"God, this is good," Onyx said. "Are you close, Absinthe? I want to feel you in my head when you come."

I nearly came just from that, but I managed to nod frantically around my full mouth. Clever fingers teased my clit, and I jerked my head away from Gabriel's cock rather than risk accidentally biting him in the throes of the mating. Onyx's lean form draped over me. For the third time, sharp teeth broke the skin over my mating gland, only to be followed by the soothing rasp of a tongue.

It felt like a circuit closing. Five individuals, now seamlessly connected as one. Gabriel's jizz splattered across my face in thick ropes as I arched and came hard around Onyx. That lovely, perfectly placed knot swelled inside me. With the last shred of my awareness, I managed to tug Gabriel down to lie on the floor, half under me, so I could nestle his growing knot snugly into my cleavage to keep it warm and safe. I rested my head against the dip at the bottom of his ribcage, with Onyx draped over my back like a blanket.

Sleepily, I slid a hand outward, seeking, and was rewarded when Elijah's fingers tangled clumsily with mine.

"Perfect," Curran said, his voice a reassuring rumble. "That's just perfect."

Days of sex with four other people who could all feel each other's pleasure was...intense. Not to mention exhausting. Worth it, though.



It was my first heat that didn't involve coming off blockers, and this was definitely the way to do it. Curran told me afterward that the fact I was off-cycle might have allowed me to hold onto a bit more rationality than I otherwise would have. Not so long ago, the idea of being even more out of control would have been terrifying. Now, the prospect didn't really bother me.

Elijah and I had three alphas to make sure we stayed safe and sated during heats. Neither of us had to lift a finger, either during our heat or afterward. We spent the next several days recovering in Gabriel's gorgeous house; lounging by the pool, eating amazing food, and basically being waited on hand and foot.

Curran assured us that we would learn to control the bond over the coming weeks. In the meantime, our mental fumbling around each other was occasionally embarrassing and often hilarious. I was aware that this retreat to Portugal was borrowed time in many ways. Our messy lives awaited us back in London and New York, but for the first time I could remember, I didn't feel like someone kneeling under a guillotine, waiting for it to fall at any time.

Beta relationships were only as good as the word of the people involved. By contrast, our pack bond was part of us. Betraying pack was no different from betraying oneself. It was strange not having to worry about what other people were thinking or planning. Even with shielding, there was no hiding from the bond. Whenever there was a problem, there were four other people who loved you available to figure out a solution.

When we finally stood with our luggage by the large circle drive, waiting for the limos to arrive and take us to a private airstrip for our return to London, I wasn't scared of the future.

I was looking forward to it.

Elijah shot me a look from beneath thick lashes. “Ready to jump back in the fray?” he asked lightly.

I thought of my uncle and cousin awaiting the trial that might finally bring them to justice... of my New York modeling career in tatters... of the rest of my life stretching out before me like a winding road without a map.

My lips twitched into a smile as I glanced at my four mates, all of us gathered in readiness to leave. “D-damn straight I am,” I said.

### EPILOGUE

Emma

ALPHOMA MODELING AGENCY wasn't located in the stylish part of Manhattan. But even here, traffic on a Friday afternoon was insane. Nevertheless, the limo was waiting for me in the parking garage—just as it always was on days I worked at the office.

It was one of the many perks of being in a pack founded by a former billionaire.

Gabriel wasn't as obsessive as he used to be about his net worth, and he'd been pouring money into the pack's pet projects since we mated in Portugal three-and-a-bit years ago. My startup modeling agency catering to alpha and omega talent had certainly taken its share of those funds.

I'd spent several months feeling awful about that fact. It had taken a fair amount of therapy—which I'd clearly needed anyway—to get my head around the fact that A) just because Gabriel was now worth \$921 million instead of \$1.2 billion, it didn't mean we were headed for the welfare line, and B) the agency was quickly building a name for itself, so it would probably be making a substantial profit within the next twelve to eighteen months.

When I wasn't having a bad mental health day, I was proud of what I'd done. I had no desire to return to the runway beyond the occasional charity event. For one thing, I liked food too much now that I'd started allowing myself to enjoy it.

But when I was helping new talent navigate a cutthroat industry without losing themselves to it, I felt like I was in my element.

“Hello, Rashid,” I greeted the limo driver. “How was your day?”

“Good, ma’am,” Rashid replied, holding the door for me. “And yourself?”

I smiled a secret smile. “Not bad, now that you ask. Not bad at all.”

It was approximately a forty-five-minute drive to Pelham Manor, although the traffic tonight made it a bit more than that. Even with a chauffeur, I wouldn’t have wanted to make the commute five days a week—but thanks to the wonders of remote work, I didn’t have to.

I watched the scenery go by, the crush of New York gradually giving way to more trees and grass. The house we’d found in an area north of the city wasn’t for the financially faint of heart, but it was perfect for an almost-billionaire with multiple pack members working in Manhattan.

I’d fallen in love with Gabriel’s property in Portugal. So had Elijah. But this was home. I felt the stress of the day melt off me as the car turned into our long, gravel-covered drive.

By necessity, both the house and the surrounding acreage were large. Packs took up space, and packs with two omegas took up more than most. Rashid pulled up to the front door of the sprawling Craftsman-style house and hurried out to get the car door for me.

“Have a wonderful evening, ma’am,” he said.

“You, too,” I told him. “Will you be able to spend some time with your family this

weekend, I hope?”

“Oh, yes,” Rashid said. “John’s parents are coming in to visit, and we thought we’d take everyone to the fall festival in the village.”

I wished him and his family a good time and hurried into the house, my heart soaring as I heard the sound of childish voices laughing and shrieking inside.

My first litter of three had just celebrated their second birthday last week. They were currently in the ground floor living room, trying to climb Elijah like a tree while Deborah, the beta nanny we’d hired, looked on indulgently.

“Oh, good,” Deborah said, spying me in the entryway. “You’re home. I was worried I might be next in line to play jungle gym.”

“Mama!” cried Jason, the only boy of the bunch. An instant later, I was the focal point of a very short stampede, accepting hugs from my little brood.

“It’s so good to be home, my loves,” I told them, crouching down to give and receive kisses. “Say goodnight to Deborah, so she can go and get some rest.”

A chorus of “G’nite! G’nite!” filled the room.

Deborah laughed. “Good night, you little menaces. Emma, Elijah—call me if anything comes up this weekend. Oh, and don’t forget you have a video call scheduled with Mrs. Allen in the morning.”

I thanked her and went to flop down on the couch, dragging half my bodyweight in toddlers along with me. Elijah sat down next to me, and Jason immediately crawled from my lap to his. Rosa burrowed into the space he’d left, and Annabelle squashed herself into the small gap between us.

“How’s Nana Allen doing, anyway?” Elijah asked. “It’s been a few weeks since I spoke to her.”

*Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 12:22 pm*

I stroked Rosa's curly black hair. "Her doctor seems confident that the new heart meds are working," I told him. "Shesays she has a lot more energy now and has been able to get back to her regular activities."

"So, taking down crime families and threatening bodyguards with pepper spray?" Elijah said. "Well, that's a relief. I was afraid London was going to have to recruit a new crime-fighting superhero."

I snorted. Having an ocean between myself and my grandmother was probably best for the emotional wellbeing of everyone concerned. Technology meant we could get together for chats, and she could keep up with the triplets' development as they grew. That, in addition to necessary time spent in London for either legal reasons or business reasons, was the perfect balance for our relationship as far as I was concerned.

"Ahnks!" Annabelle cried, jumping down from the couch and toddling over to where Onyx had just come in.

"Hello, sprog," Onyx said, scooping her up. While Rosa was the one who'd inherited Onyx's dusky skin, blond-haired Annabelle seemed to be the one who'd glommed onto them as a favorite packalef. Onyx carried her back to the sofa and plopped her down on it as she giggled. "Evening, Emma," they greeted. "I just got a call from Curran—he and Gabriel should be home in a few minutes, and it sounds like they've got news."

My smile crept back. "I've got some news of my own. But I'll wait until everyone's here."

True to their word, our missing alphas showed up about ten minutes later. Gabriel, who still struggled with slowing his overactive brain down enough to remember things like familial greetings, strode into the living area like it was a board room.

“The Huntwells’ final appeal was denied today,” he said without preamble.

My breath caught.

Curran tossed his suit jacket over the back of an armchair and sank into it, pulling Jason into his arms when he abandoned Elijah in favor of a new lap. “Also, hello. I’m sure his nibs was working up to that part.”

Gabriel waved him off testily. “Yes, yes. But you know what this means. The case is finally closed for good. No more appeals, no more hearings. It’s finished.”

He was thrumming with nervous energy, and I felt mine rise to match. I handed Rosa off to Elijah and hurried forward to wrap my arms around Gabriel. He embraced me back, holding tight.

“It’s really d-done?” I whispered, overcome.

“It really is,” Curran confirmed. “Tommy and that little prick Cade are in prison along with their old mates the Rathbones, and so are another three-dozen people from the syndicate that were found guilty of trafficking charges.”

I shuddered and buried my face against Gabriel’s chest. He didn’t seem much steadier than me, considering this meant his long quest for justice for his sister was finally at an end. After a moment, I took a deep, steadying breath and pulled away.

“Nana Allen says the syndicate is in a shambles since all the arrests last year,” I told the others. “She doesn’t know if there’s enough left of it to keep things going.”



“And the feds on this side of the pond are still sniffing around The Secret Boudoir after Casick’s conviction,” Curran added. “It doesn’t help all those poor models who went missing on his bloody cruises, but it’s something.”

The triplets were watching us, wide-eyed—aware that the atmosphere of the room had grown strange. I felt almost lightheaded at the news.

“I think I’m going to turn more of the day-to-day operation of the company over to the board,” Gabriel said out of nowhere, running a hand through his sandy hair. “I know I haven’t been as invested in raising the children as I could have been, and I want that to change.”

Elijah smirked at him. “Oooh. Planning on becoming a kept alpha, are you? Living off the labor of your omegas?”

Gabriel didn’t rise to the bait. “You two are welcome to stop working as well, you know. I think we can probably afford it.”

Elijah only laughed. “Not a chance. I’ll be forced out of modeling soon enough, when these three become teenagers and give me gray hair and worry lines.”

“I’m good too, thanks all the same,” I said, throwing off my reaction to Gabriel and Curran’s news in favor of sharing my own. “I just signed Greta Van Wilder to a modeling contract.”

Curran sat up straight, drawing a whine of protest from Jason as he was jostled. “The movie star? You’re kidding! I loved her in Letters from You.”

“Sweetheart, I am so proud of you,” Onyx told me, dark eyes glittering.

“We all are,” Gabriel agreed. “And it sounds like I’ll be in good hands as a kept alpha.” He seemed to shake himself free of the earlier topic of conversation. “Now,

how about a pack outing to celebrate? I'm told there's a festival in the village center for the next few days."

Three toddlers perked up like wolves scenting prey. "Bawoons?" Annabelle asked hopefully.

"All the balloons," Gabriel promised, his tone suitably solemn. "And fireworks, and music, and the ridiculous fried food that Yanks seem so fond of."

I exchanged a look with Elijah, both of us failing to hide our stupid grins. Maybe it hadn't been lightheadedness I'd felt earlier. My wholebodyhad become light, as though a heavy weight had fallen away from my shoulders. As the pack fell into plans for an evening of fun with no fears or responsibilities, safe in the knowledge that our future was secure, I was half convinced I'd float away completely.

"Fried food and balloons sound absolutely perfect," I agreed.