

## Chapter 7

Audriana POV:

The first rays of dawn were painting the sky in shades of grey and rose, but they couldn't penetrate the gloom of the unfamiliar office I had been assigned. I hadn't gone home. I couldn't. The apartment would have felt too much like a cage. Instead, I had Ian drop me at the Sinclair Global building a towering monolith I had only ever seen from the outside. Now, I was inside it, sitting in a glass-walled office on the thirty-fifth floor that Ian had assured me was mine for the duration of the project.

The Apex Ventures acquisition file was spread across my desk, a complex web of numbers and legal clauses. For hours, it had been my refuge. I leaned back in my leather chair, the vertebrae in my neck cracking in protest. I had been up all night, fueled by bitter coffee and sheer, stubborn will.

It was strange to be here. Everything was new—the desk, the view, the faint smell of fresh paint. Ian had been efficient: my files, my laptop, even my assistant had been transferred over before I arrived. How he had managed that in the middle of the night, I didn't want to know.

The door creaked open. My assistant, Maya, a bright-eyed young Omega, tiptoed in, placing a fresh cup of black coffee on my desk.

"Morning Audriana," she said softly. "You were here all night again. How are you settling in?"

"Morning Maya," I managed, my voice hoarse. "The deal won't close itself. And I'm still getting used to the new digs."

"Well, this just arrived for you," she said, holding up a sleek, black envelope. "By special courier. They said it was urgent."

I took the envelope. It was made of the same heavy, velvety cardstock as Caden's business card. The Onyx Room's logo was embossed in gold in the corner. My stomach tightened.

I slid my finger under the seal and pulled out the contents. A thick, heavy card, black as midnight made of anodized titanium. An American Express Centurion Card. The legendary black card. And under it, a handwritten note on the restaurant's stationery.

'Congratulations, Ms. Sullivan! You are the one-millionth guest to dine at The Onyx Room. Please accept this gift of a lifetime membership and a complimentary, unlimited expense account, as a token of our esteem. Sincerely, David Price.'

The one-millionth guest.

A laugh, a real one this time, bubbled up and escaped my lips. It was the most clumsy, ridiculous, and transparently false excuse I had ever heard. It was also, in a strange way, incredibly thoughtful. He hadn't just thrown money at me. He had created a fiction, a flimsy shield to protect my pride, so I could accept his help without feeling like a charity case.

A warmth spread through my chest, a feeling so foreign after the icy grip of the past day that it almost hurt.

Before I could even process the gesture, the doors to the strategy department swung open. A team of waiters in crisp, white uniforms marched in, pushing a rolling cart laden with silver-domed platters.

They stopped in the center of our open-plan office, and the lead waiter announced to the stunned silence, "Breakfast delivery for Ms. Audriana Sullivan."

My entire team, who had just been starting to trickle in, froze. Heads popped up over cubicle walls. Jaws dropped. The waiters, with practiced efficiency, began arranging a feast on the conference table next to my glass-walled office. There was fresh orange juice, pastries, eggs Benedict, smoked salmon, fruit platters—enough food to feed the entire floor.

I was mortified. My face burned. This was the opposite of subtle. This was a statement. A public declaration of... something.

I stood up and walked out of my office, forcing a calm I didn't feel. "Thank you," I said to the waiters, my voice tight. "That will be all."

They bowed and departed as silently as they had arrived, leaving me to

face the sea of curious, speculative eyes of my colleagues.

Caden POV:

The water from the shower sluiced over my body, washing away the sweat from my morning workout but doing nothing to cool the restless energy thrumming under my skin. I stepped out of the steam-filled bathroom, wrapping a towel around my waist.

Ian was waiting in the living area of my penthouse, a tablet in his hand.

"The breakfast and the card were delivered, sir," he reported. "My contact in the strategy department confirms Ms. Sullivan accepted them. She did not send them back."

I paused in the act of drying my hair. A slow, satisfied smile spread across my face. Good.

The private elevator that opened directly into my apartment chimed, and the doors slid open. Rhys Montgomery and Julian Carlisle, two of my oldest friends and the Alphas of their own powerful packs, strode in. Their faces were a mixture of disbelief and concern.

"Caden, what the hell is going on?" Rhys demanded, slapping a data slate down on my granite bar. He didn't bother with a greeting. "Word is spreading through the upper circles. You rejected Juliana Beaumont—publicly—and then five minutes later, you registered a binding with some unknown Omega from the Blackwater Pack. The Beaumonts are furious, and a few of the old families are starting to whisper. I need to know what you're playing at."

Julian, ever the diplomat, chimed in, "I've heard similar rumblings. Nothing public yet, but it won't stay contained for long. Who is this woman, Caden?"

I ignored them, walking to the bar and pouring myself a glass of ice water. I took a long, slow drink, letting the cold seep into me, banking the fire of my irritation.

I had told Audriana the binding would remain between us. But someone had talked—perhaps the registry clerk, perhaps one of Juliana's people. The leak annoyed me, but it was done. Now I needed to control the narrative.

I turned, setting the glass down with a sharp click. I let a fraction of my

true power, the power of the Lycan King bleed into the room.

The air grew heavy, charged with ozone. The pressure dropped. Rhys and Julian, both powerful Alphas in their own right, flinched. Their wolves, recognizing a superior predator, whimpered and submitted. Rhys took an involuntary step back, his face paling.

"Audriana Sullivan," I said, my voice a low, dangerous growl that was more Lycan than man, "is not 'some Omega.' She is my mate. My Luna. And the next person who refers to her as anything less will have their tongue ripped from their throat. Are we clear?"

Rhys swallowed hard, the sound loud in the sudden silence. "Crystal," he croaked.

Julian, ever the pragmatist, tried a different angle. "Caden, be reasonable. We know you've been under pressure to choose a mate. But this woman... her family is minor league, her pack is a joke, and she was just rejected. In our world, she'll be eaten alive."

A cold, feral smile touched my lips. "Let them try."


I looked at them, my two oldest friends, and I knew they wouldn't understand. Not yet. They couldn't feel the pull of the bond, the certainty that settled in your soul.

"She is mine to protect," I said, the words a vow. "And I will tolerate no disrespect towards her, from anyone. Including my friends."

I turned away from them, my decision made. The breakfast was a good start. The card was a necessity. But it wasn't enough.

"Ian," I called out, striding towards my bedroom to dress. "Get the car ready. I'm going to see her."



 SPIN 999 BONUS! 100% chance of winning!

Check