



Accidental Mafia Witness

(Small Town Mafia #2)

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Category: LGBT+

Description: Omega Trey Barker is a famous writer of western murder mysteries, and he's hit a wall. While researching his latest book, he landed in Gilded Lake, Montana where he crossed paths with a sexy alpha named Walt. Now, Trey can't get Walt out of his mind and it's interfering with his writing. He's tried everything to forget about the alpha, but when he can't, he heads back to Gilded Lake to see if spending more time there will help break the spell.

Alpha Walt Francesco has been working as head of security at the Gilded Lake Resort for years. As cousin to the head of the family, Luca Francesco, he works closely with Luca to keep the town and its guests in line. But that handsome author who passed through his town last fall is staying at the hotel again.

Walt does his best to ignore the sweet omega, but when Walt's crew tries to dump a body in the lake one night, the one person he would do anything to shield from his lifestyle has become an accidental witness.

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TREY

I stared at the blank screen and sighed.

It had been three days since I arrived in Gilded Lake, and I hadn't typed a single word of my next book yet. The book that was now several months overdue. Ignoring frantic calls from my agent was my new pastime. If "send to voicemail" could be a manuscript, I'd have written it by now.

The timer on my phone beeped, and I closed my laptop. The white screen had taunted me for a full hour before I slapped the lid shut and almost threw it across the room. An entire writing session of nothingness. According to my watch, it was eight am on the dot.

Time for breakfast.

Even in Gilded Lake, two states away from my home, I was trying to stick to my routine. Routine was what helped the world make sense to me. Without it, I felt untethered. After putting on my shoes, I slipped my key card into my pocket and walked briskly to the staircase. At least I was getting my steps in during my stay at the mountain resort.

As I neared the hotel restaurant, my heart sped up. I never knew if I would run into him, Walt Francesco, the reason for my writer's block and my reason for being in Gilded Lake. Walt was manager of the resort and a cousin to the head of the biggest

mafia family in the region.

Walt Francesco was also one of the hottest men I'd ever seen in my life.

I quickly scanned the restaurant as I casually headed to the buffet. When I didn't see Walt, I felt both relieved and disappointed, but my stomach was rumbling and I knew a delicious plate of food would help.

Surprisingly, the food at Gilded Lake Resort was fantastic. The Francescos, the crime family who owned that property and dozens of others, were obviously foodies. Not every buffet knew how to serve eggs benedict with smoked salmon, but they did. And as soon as I found a table, I waved down a waiter to order a cappuccino.

Eating was my favorite pastime when I was stressed, and I had been plenty stressed lately.

My agent, Frannie, was constantly hounding me, which was bad enough. But the growing tightness of my pants was my greater concern. I'd never had an issue with controlling my weight, but my growing paunch told a different story. Unfortunately, my face remained pale and gaunt as I filled out in all the wrong places.

As I ate, I kept scanning the room to see if Walt might magically appear, but between bites, my distracted mind got lost in thought.

The problem with my book was my hero, Romero VanClaude. He just wasn't speaking to me anymore.

I'd written nineteen books in my series—The Slick Six—about the gunslinging alpha and his posse who "roamed the American West looking for justice...and finding trouble instead." That was the tagline of the series, and no matter how many times I read it, I couldn't find inspiration anymore.

I opened my phone and looked over the latest cover designs Frannie had sent me. One had Romero on a horse with his shirt unbuttoned and his cowboy hat tilted toward the sun. Another showed Romero reclining by a campfire with his arms wrapped around a hot omega. And the last one was of Romero standing in front of a sunset with one hand on his gun and a sizable package displayed in the silhouette of his tight chaps.

Ugh, they all looked good, and I wasn't in the mood to analyze images. Instead, I swiped the photos off my screen and opened my Kindle app. Sometimes reading would inspire me, so it was worth a shot.

I was partway through a steamy shifter story when I heard Walt's voice across the room. Slowly and as casually as I could muster, I turned my head and saw him talking to the host. Just like every time I caught a glimpse of the sexy man, my stomach fluttered.

He was wearing his usual black suit with a black button-down shirt and no tie. Business casual while still being sophisticated. His hair was impeccably neat and almost shone beneath the lights. Walt smiled and rested one hand on the host's stand, then his blue eyes roamed the dining room.

Before I had the chance to look away, his gaze reached me.

And just as I expected, he continued to scan the room because he didn't know I existed.

I breathed a sigh of relief and leaned back in the chair. I did my best not to stare at the poor man, but my heart ached as I watched him cross the hotel lobby in long strides. Was it possible to be in love with someone you'd never spoken to?

When the waiter came for my plate, I ordered another coffee and settled in to find out what was gonna happen to the cute little shifter in my book.

I had no idea how much time had passed when I became acutely aware of a person standing next to my table.

With my heart racing, I slowly peered over my phone and saw a pair of polished black oxfords.

Walt . My stomach and heart collided as I casually set my phone down and looked up. The alpha was staring directly at me with a curious expression on his face. Before I could decide what to do or say, he extended his hand to me. "Hi, I'm Walter Francesco. I don't believe I've had the pleasure." His voice was rich and smooth, even better without several feet separating us.

I reached out and shook his hand. "Uh, hi. I'm Trey. Trey Barker. It's my pleasure, really."

His grip was firm even though his skin was baby soft. I looked to the chair opposite me. "Would you like to chance?"

He tilted his head and smiled, squinting slightly. Oh my god, what did I just say? I knew it didn't sound right, but now I couldn't remember the words that had just come out of my mouth.

Walt let out a gentle laugh that I wanted to climb on top of and ride right outta here because I could feel my face turning red. But I was still holding his hand, so I quickly let go.

He pressed his lips together as if he felt sorry for me. I must have looked like a sad loner staring at his phone for hours in the middle of a workday.

I stood up and almost knocked my chair over. "I'm sorry. I don't know what I just said. You're Walt. Walter. Yes, I know who you are. It's very nice to meet you. I love

your hotel. Er, your family's hotel. But you manage it, right? That's cool. I'm staying here, actually. Did you know that? And I just had breakfast." I was babbling, but I didn't know how to stop.

The longer he stood there with his bemused expression, the more I felt the need to dig myself out of whatever hole I'd already created. I gestured to the table, about to describe my breakfast, when Walt placed his hand on my arm, effectively silencing me. "It's okay. I just wanted to meet you. I've seen you here for a few days, and I like to meet all our guests."

Of course. He was just being a good businessman. I smiled and nodded. "Thanks. It's nice to meet you."

He stepped around me and pulled my chair out, then expertly slipped it in beneath me as I sat down. A busboy was walking by, so Walt took the guy's water pitcher and filled my water glass for me. Without missing a beat, he handed the pitcher back to the busboy.

Walt slid my phone across the table and gave it a little tap. "Better get back to that steamy book." My cheeks burned when he winked at me before strolling away.

How long had he been standing next to my table before I noticed him? Long enough to see what I was reading, apparently. I opened my phone to see what part I'd been on and it was a super graphic sex scene. Of course.

My hands were still trembling as I picked up my newly full glass of water and took a sip. I overestimated how full it was and the ice rushed forward from the bottom of the cup, causing the entire thing to dump into my lap.

I jumped up, shocked by the cold and knocked my cup of coffee across the table. Several guests turned to see the cause of the racket. As usual, it was just me, standing

here with my crotch soaking wet and the sleeve of my shirt splattered in coffee. Instinctively, my eyes scanned the dining room and Walt wasn't around, thank god.

Before I made an even bigger fool of myself, I grabbed my sticky phone, wiped the coffee off it, and then hurried my ass out of there.

As soon as I was near the stairs, I ran up to my room and stripped off my wet clothes. Why did I have to always ruin everything? My first time talking to him could have been chill, but I managed to ramble his ear off.

Would you like to chance? That's what I asked him. Would you like to chance?? What the hell did that mean? I buried my face in my hands and groaned.

I came to Gilded Lake to try to get over Walt, but that was clearly not working.

For the past ten months, I hadn't been able to stop thinking about him. I'd hoped that if I met him and he had bad breath or an annoying voice or a horrible personality, it would be easier to forget about him. But so far, everything about him was the opposite of horrible.

He smelled good, his voice was amazing, and his eyes were intelligent and kind. Dammit, it looked like my writer's block wasn't going anywhere anytime soon.

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WALT

From the front desk, I watched Trey rush out of the dining room and up the stairs. He was cute but nervous. I turned to Jim, the concierge, and tapped his guestbook. "What do we know about the guest in room 317?" I kept my voice casual as if I was just noticing "the guest" for the first time. Not at all like I'd been studying him since he arrived three days ago.

Jim opened his book and flipped through it. "The guest in 317 is Trey Barker. He's a famous writer."

"Is he? He stayed here before, right?" I already knew the answer because I remembered Trey from earlier in the year. He was hard to forget, with his intense gray eyes and rippling, toned body. While I tried to get to know every guest as well as I could, some of them stood out more than others.

Jim was talking, but my mind was elsewhere. A writer... A writer? It was a perfect cover. He could investigate and interview, take notes and poke around, all in the name of writing.

"Wait, what kind of writer?"

Jim shrugged. "Uh...books."

"What kind of books?"

Jim was blushing as he turned his body toward the shelf behind him, obviously trying to hide something.

I reached around and grabbed the book in his hand that had a bookmark sticking out from the middle of it. There was a handsome cowboy on the cover, looking over his shoulder with his ass outlined in tight leather chaps. "Damn." I whistled softly to myself. "The Slick Six, huh?"

"Yeah, well, that's his most popular series. I'm reading it for research purposes. Get to know the guests, ya know."

"I'm sure you are." I handed the book to Jim and smiled. "Let me know how it is. Maybe I'll 'research' it after you."

As I walked away, I thought back to my brief interaction with him. Apparently, Trey Barker really was a writer. Then again, that didn't mean he wasn't also an agent. We'd been on fairly good terms with the feds since the big bust last year that took down one of the major crime families, but that didn't mean we didn't need to watch our backs.

This guy could be anyone. An independent investigator or paid by one of our competitors.

I didn't know, but I planned to find out. Truthfully, I really didn't mind keeping an eye on him. Trey was a cute little thing, but I couldn't let myself get distracted. Since the bust, we'd caught three of Costa's men snooping around in our towns. They knew better, but some people never learned.

The first guy got beat up pretty good. The second guy...let's just say he went home without all his favorite parts. And the third guy? Well, he never made it home. I was hoping the Costas had given up and moved on to other vendettas, but we were on

high alert for a while.

By the time I got to town to meet my cousin Luca for lunch and our weekly sit-down, I'd mostly pushed Trey Barker out of my mind. As the general manager for three of our properties, most of my time was spent at the resort, so I was usually the first to know when shit was going down.

If there was ever any trouble, it usually started or ended at the resort.

Luca was sitting in the back corner booth at our favorite diner when I walked in. He'd brought his baby, Henry, with him, and my mood immediately lightened.

As soon as Henry saw me, he reached up for me.

Luca laughed and held Henry out for me. "You want your Uncle Walt?"

I scooped Henry into my arms and bounced him up and down, blowing a raspberry on his chubby neck rolls. "How's my big guy?"

He giggled and a line of drool spilled off his bottom lip.

I sat down across from Luca and grabbed Henry's teething ring. "Teething, I see?"

Luca smiled as he watched me help Henry wrap his chubby fist around the ring. "Yeah, the drooling is non-stop. I barely slept at all last night."

Despite being sleep-deprived, Luca looked fantastic. Married life and fatherhood suited him. As the head of our family for several years, he'd always looked tense and stressed out. But once Knox came into his life, he was a completely different man. Finding his omega, his husband, seemed to soothe his soul in every way.

"So you take the night shift, huh? Let Knox sleep."

Luca shrugged. "Yeah, Knox has to drive all over the state for his job. I don't want him to be tired on the road. And now I get to take a nap with Henry twice a day. It's not a bad gig."

I laughed. "Yeah, sounds like it."

The waitress came by and took our orders as Henry began wriggling around. Luca handed me a bottle, and I tried to feed him. But Henry grabbed the bottle and did it himself, holding it with both hands and both feet as I cradled him in my lap.

Luca and I fell into our normal weekly check-in, and I gave him a rundown of the numbers for the hotel, the casino, and the restaurant. I debated telling him about Trey when he asked about anything unusual, but I held off. Trey did seem somewhat unusual, and normally, I would share that we had a famous person staying with us, but I didn't want to burden Luca with my theories until I had more information. I still wasn't sure if Trey was telling the entire truth about who he was and why he was in town, but it was my job to know what was going on. As soon as I did, I'd fill in Luca. Until then, I didn't see any point in dragging him into it.

Henry was dozing off and my arm was falling asleep, so I transferred him into the stroller so he could sleep in peace. He was a cute little guy and almost made me wish I had a family of my own.

After we finished lunch, the waitress brought two coffees. Luca shook a sugar packet in his hand and glanced around the restaurant in a way that I knew meant something sensitive was coming. I leaned in closer so he could keep his voice down. "What's up?"

"We got word there's a Costa insider staying at the resort."

" What? " Was it possible I'd missed a Costa coming into town, much less staying at the resort? Then Trey Barker's gray eyes flashed across my mind.

Luca nodded as he poured sugar into his coffee. "You haven't noticed anyone suspicious, have you?"

I slowly shook my head, still reluctant to tell Luca about Trey. "I'll go over the books with Jim today and make sure. Where'd you hear this, anyway?"

Luca glanced around again then his voice fell to a whisper. "Someone in the Bureau mentioned it to Knox."

My stomach lurched at that. Luca's husband still worked for the FBI and had access to classified information. He wasn't undercover anymore, but if he was given information about our town, it was pretty reliable. "Well, that seems like pretty solid intel. Do you know if any feds are staying at the resort right now?"

"Nah. We have an agreement with them, so we'd know if they were."

My stomach tightened. If Trey wasn't a fed, was there any way he could be with the Costas? He didn't seem hard enough, but then again, what was a famous writer doing in our sleepy town anyway?

After Luca and I said good-bye, I walked past a little bookstore and paused before heading inside. Trey's books were front and center on their own display shelf. Before I could talk myself out of it, I grabbed the first book in the Slick Six series.

"You're gonna love it." The clerk slid my change and the book across the counter toward me with a swoony expression. "It's so good."

"So I've heard." I smiled and turned the book over.

Trey's haunted eyes flashed up at me as I ran my thumb across his face. I'll figure you out, mystery man. Your secrets will be mine.

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TREY

Once I recovered from my embarrassment of soaking myself in the restaurant, I turned back to my laptop and stared uselessly at the blank screen. Frannie called, but I sent her to voicemail. Of course, she called back, and I sent her to voicemail again. Then I felt guilty about avoiding her, so I picked up my phone and called her.

"You're alive." Her voice was flat and unamused, as usual.

I sighed loudly into the phone. "Yeah."

She sighed too, but for a different reason. "Trey..."

"Frannie..."

"What do you need? Sex? Caviar? Shopping? Do you need another trip to Italy?"

Silence.

"Just say the word, Trey. Just tell me what you need to get. This. Book. Done." She hammered the words at me as if I'd forgotten how behind I was.

"Well, I don't need this, Fran."

"What do you mean 'this'? Me calling you to make sure you're okay? Me doing my

job as your agent? Do you know how many people I'm fending off daily on your behalf so you can find your muse or whatever you're doing out there?"

I rolled my eyes and tried not to sound so annoyed when I finally responded. "See, this is why I don't pick up when you call."

She was silent for a long moment. "I know. Sorry."

"It's okay." It wasn't okay, but she wasn't wrong. As one of my only true friends, I was putting her in a bad position. "It's my fault. I get it."

"Just help me understand what's going on, Trey. We're six months past due at this point. I can't keep rescheduling tours and canceling readings. It's not a good look."

"I know, I knooooow . It's just..." My voice fell to a whisper. "Fuck, I don't know what's wrong with me." I flopped down on the bed and covered my eyes with my forearm. There were people digging ditches for eight hours every day, and I couldn't muster the strength to press buttons on a laptop.

"Are you sick?" Her tone changed to that of a concerned parent, which was nice but not warranted.

I paused. "Not really." I couldn't tell Frannie that the real reason for my career-ending writer's block was an infatuation with a resort manager. I could barely admit that to myself.

"Okay, now I'm actually worried about you. I'll book a ticket and be there tomorrow."

"No, no." That was the last thing I needed. "I'm fine . The book is almost done. I'm sorry it's taken so long, but it's coming. I promise."

Frannie sighed, and I could sense she was relieved. "Are you sure you don't need some company? I can start reading it while you button it up."

"No! I mean, no, thank you. I need to be alone for a bit longer."

It took some more acting, but by the time we hung up, I was fairly certain she'd back off for a few more days, a week if I was lucky.

After the call, I didn't have motivation to do anything but pull a blanket over myself and fall asleep on the bed.

I slept for a long time, and when I woke up, the light outside my window had dipped into the amber yellows of deep afternoon. I was annoyed that I'd slept the day away, so I changed into my workout clothes and headed down to the pool. Swimming was a great outlet for releasing tension and clearing my head, so I swam hard for an hour before climbing out of the heated pool.

When I got back to my room, I ordered room service for dinner and hopped into the shower. Normally, I liked eating in the restaurant so I wasn't alone, but I was still too embarrassed to risk seeing Walt after the scene I'd made at breakfast.

While I ate by myself, I decided to throw Frannie a bone and choose a cover. They all looked pretty good, but the one with Romero sitting on a fence with his shirt unbuttoned, gazing off into the sunset, kept grabbing my attention. His pistol lay in the grass at his feet, and behind him, blue mountains rose up with storm clouds in the distance. They looked a little like the mountains around Gilded Lake.

Yep, that was the one.

I hit send and closed my laptop, knowing Frannie would be thrilled that I had given her something to work with.

Something about the combination of taking a nap, exercising, and inhaling a good meal made me feel better than I had in days. So good that I needed some air. I put on a sweater and my sneakers for a nighttime walk around the lake.

At least I wouldn't run into Walt out there.

The resort sat right on the shimmering Gilded Lake, and the paved path that went all the way around was gorgeous. During my stay, I'd gotten in the habit of walking it every night. It was usually when I got my best ideas, but I was still waiting for that to happen.

It was a little chilly, so I slipped my hands into my pockets as I passed some other guests heading back toward the resort. I heard my name whispered behind me, but since they didn't stop to chat, I didn't either.

Being recognized in public usually made me feel both embarrassed and a little proud, but lately, I just wanted to fade into the background.

As I got farther along the path, my mind began to wander, but my thoughts didn't get far before settling on Walt.

While I'd had my share of crushes in my life, nobody ever had this kind of effect on me. It was unsettling. I liked to be in control. I liked my routines. I hated that Walt had such a tight grip on my mind that I couldn't focus on my work.

After I first saw Walt all those months ago, I returned home and became ill. My doctors couldn't figure out what was wrong with me. I couldn't eat, had trouble sleeping, and became lethargic and depressed. It was way beyond a simple crush or infatuation. It was like my body didn't want to exist without him.

I even went to Italy, to where Walt's family came from, in the hopes I might

somehow understand what was happening to me. It was nonsensical, but I didn't know what else to do. Coming back to see Walt didn't seem like the right thing. The man was a detriment to my writing career. Finally, I'd had no choice but to return to Gilded Lake and face this thing head-on.

I'd reached the far end of the lake and stopped at the spot under a tree I liked. Watching the moonlight on the water was so peaceful despite the loneliness. That was something else I hadn't felt before I met Walt. I was a bit of a loner by nature, but now I was constantly aware of an empty space beside me. Almost instinctively, I reached over into the empty space and groped for the hand I knew wasn't there.

I heard a car approaching, which seemed odd considering the late hour. Sinking deeper into the shadows beneath my tree, I watched as a van came rumbling through the woods and backed up to the lake. Two men got out of the cab, walked around to the back, and began pulling garbage bags out.

Horried, I couldn't look away as they lugged the heavy bags to the lake and threw them in.

Even if I wasn't so worried about the environment, what they were doing would piss me off because this was Walt's lake. I mean, it felt like his lake to me. Suddenly angry on his behalf, I stood up and stormed from the shadows, trying to look as imposing as possible.

"Hey! What do you think you're doing? You can't dump trash here!"

As soon as I got near the van, I regretted my decision. Caught off guard by my presence, one of the men dropped his bag and a human foot spilled out. My jaw dropped to the ground as my heart started to race.

"That's...that's..." I wanted to point out the obvious, but my own perilous situation

became crystal clear. “Nothing. I didn’t see anything. I was never here.”

My legs kicked into gear, and I took off at a sprint, heading back toward the resort where I could get help.

But I wasn’t fast enough. I heard the movement behind me before I felt something pierce my skin and take me down. My feet were suddenly a thousand pounds and nothing else on my body worked either. Without a single sound leaving my body, I dropped to the ground, and the world went black.

4

WALT

I pulled up to the crematory and lit a cigarette. So much for quitting the damn things. Maybe someday when the stress of my job wasn't so intense. Before I got halfway through it, headlights swept the parking lot and a familiar green van pulled in beside me.

After putting out the smoke against my boot, I got out and motioned for the driver to back up to the open doors. Damn idiots. I didn't know what I was more mad about—that they tried to dump a body in the lake or that they were caught by a guest.

I went inside ahead of the van and waited as the back doors opened, and Rick climbed out. Two bodies were in the back of the van. One was zipped into a body bag, and the other was sitting with a bag over his head and zip ties around his wrists and ankles.

"Jesus, Rick. I thought you said you knocked the guy out?"

Our captive seemed to be listening intently with one knee bouncing up and down.

Gary came around from the driver's side of the van and gave me a sheepish look. "Sorry, boss. He was lurking around in the bushes."

"Seriously, what the hell were you thinking? In the lake?"

Gary and Rick exchanged glances and seemed to be waiting for the other to fess up. They both knew the protocol was to bring bodies here to burn them up. It was clean, discreet, and the way we'd been doing things for years. Now this hotel guest knew too much, which meant we were gonna be burning two bodies tonight instead of one.

I motioned toward the captive. "Bring him out."

Gary and Rick began pulling on the body bag.

"No, you idiots! The live one. Obviously, he's the priority."

All I knew about "the live one" was that he was hanging around the dark side of the lake, and in the van ride over, he said he knew Luca. Gary and Rick didn't recognize him, which meant he didn't work for us, but if he knew to mention Luca's name when a body was being dumped, he was trouble.

Luca wasn't just our boss and head of the family, he was also the mayor of Gilded Lake and its most prominent businessman. Protecting his identity and reputation was always a priority.

The guy needed help to stand because his ankles were bound, but as soon as he was stable, I pulled the bag off his head and gasped. It was Trey Barker. The author who was conveniently in all the wrong places at all the wrong times.

His presence only confirmed my suspicions about him.

Trey looked at me and...grinned. That was not the reaction I was expecting, and I felt a little flutter in my chest when he smiled. "I'm so sorry. I realize this looks bad, but if you can just call Luca, he'll explain?—"

"Luca? I'm not calling Luca. Why would he be able to explain this?"

Rick and Gary chuckled but quickly shut up when I glared at them.

Needing something to do with my hands, I pulled a cigarette from my coat and lit it, then paced between the men as they watched in silence. Trey Barker. Trey Barker. Trey Barker . What was the deal with this guy?

His inquisitive gray eyes watched me as I considered my next move. I didn't want anything bad to happen to him, but I couldn't just let him go, not after what he'd seen. I sucked on my smoke and paced some more.

Finally, I pulled a knife from my pocket and cut the ties from Trey's wrists and ankles, then looked him dead in the eye. "Don't. Run."

Trey nodded, and a little smile crept into the corners of his mouth. "Okay."

I turned to Rick and Gary then nodded to the incinerator. "Get the bag in the oven."

While they handled the stiff, I took Trey into the small office. We sat on two chairs that faced each other, and Trey's smile had grown into a grin again. He seemed oddly excited considering how close to death he'd just been. Did he not understand what was happening?

Trey craned his head back to watch Rick and Gary as they fired up the oven. "So they're gonna burn that guy, huh? Expensive, but effective."

My brow furrowed. "Say more."

Trey looked surprised then shrugged. "Well, you know more than me. More than I. Me? Anyway, I just mean burning is a good way to destroy evidence. What do you do with the ashes? Mix them in with legit customers? That's not a bad idea..." He patted his pants pockets and withdrew a small notepad and pen. As I stood there staring at

him, he began scribbling on the paper.

"What the hell are you doing? Don't take notes. Do you realize the situation we're in?"

"What?" Trey looked up then slipped his notepad into his pocket. "We're, uh... We have to burn a body, right?"

"We? We? Trey, there is no we. I have to burn a body, and I have to make sure you don't squeal to anyone." It was the first time I'd called him by name, and I couldn't ignore the sparks that flew in the air when I said it out loud.

Trey's eyes grew wide, and he cocked his head like he didn't understand my concern. "Oh, you don't have to worry about me. I know all about what you guys do. I mean, I was surprised to see a body being dumped in the lake. That just seemed so...gauche. But this makes much more sense." He gestured to the oven without any judgment at all.

"How do you know all about what we do? What are you, a fed?"

Trey's mouth fell open, and after a moment of stunned silence, he began to laugh. "Me? A fed? God, I wish. That'd be so cool."

Was he high? He didn't seem like a user, but he also didn't seem to be fully lucid. "If you're not a fed, what are you doing here in Gilded Lake? And how do you know so much about burning bodies?"

"Oh. Right. Sorry, I'm not used to people not knowing what I do. It's refreshing, really." He cleared his throat and leaned back in the chair with one leg casually crossed over the other. "So, I'm a writer. I write mysteries with lots of murder, and I'm here researching my next novel."

“A novel?” Did he expect me to believe that? Did I believe that?

He began to blush and then looked down at the floor. “Uh, yeah.”

"You said you know Luca. How?" His blush was adorable, but I did my best to ignore the fact that my heart sped up as I studied him.

"I do know Luca and Knox. We met in Italy."

My blood pressure was starting to drop as I calmed down. At least that was something I could verify pretty easily. But I still had a problem. Trey was famous, and we couldn't kill a famous person. There would be news crews all over this town, and we didn't need that kind of attention.

With a deep breath, I stepped in front of him with clasped hands. "Look, I'm in a bit of a bind. I can't really let you go because you're a witness to something you shouldn't have seen. But I also don't want to kill you."

The color drained from Trey's face as reality finally set in. “Kill me?”

He really was clueless. "Okay, here's what we're gonna do. You're gonna stay in Gilded Lake for the time being. My family will be keeping a close eye on you. If we get any wind, and I mean any, that you're talking about what you saw tonight, well..." I cocked my head toward the oven. “It won’t end well.”

Trey swallowed hard and looked at me with a completely different expression. One I hadn’t seen before and definitely didn’t like. "Yeah, I get it, Walt. I mean, Mr. Francesco. I'll stay here as long as you need me to."

I stared at him as the room filled with silence.

When things got awkward, Trey craned his neck to see how the oven was coming along. He swayed from side to side as he tried to get a better look.

His curiosity was pretty cute, and I trusted that he'd keep his mouth shut. "Do you want to go see?"

"Can I?" He popped up from the chair and was almost giddy. "I can feel the heat from here."

Fuck, this boy had no sense of self-preservation. Maybe no sense at all.

I gestured toward the door of the office and just shook my head. "After you."

We walked to the oven as Rick and Gary were loading in the body.

I cleared my throat, not sure how to explain what I was allowing. "Guys, uh, this is Trey. He'd like to watch."

Rick and Gary stilled for a moment and then looked between me and Trey before they stepped out of the way.

The omega stepped up to the small window and watched the bright orange flames eat up the body. Trey's eyes widened as he peered inside with fascination clearly etched on his cute face.

The flickering light danced across his skin as I thought about how I needed to keep a close eye on him for the next several months. Then I smiled.

5

TREY

The next morning, I woke up wondering if my evening with Walt had actually happened. I mean, it wasn't exactly romantic in the traditional sense of the word, and yet, it sorta was. Watching a body burn with him beside me was like witnessing a private moment that very few people knew about.

For the first time in my life, I was privy to the inner circle.

When he dropped me off at the hotel, we sat in his car for several long minutes before either of us said a word. I could practically hear the electricity crackle before the air got too heavy and I had to say good night and go up to my room.

It took a while for me to fall asleep because I was yearning for Walt to the point of feeling sick to my stomach.

But in the morning, the bright Gilded Lake sunshine streamed in through my curtains, and I felt energized with hope and inspiration. I sat at my desk and opened my laptop, like I did every day. But this time, my fingers flew across the keyboard, and I busted out the first three chapters of my book without even stopping to self-edit.

I was back, baby.

When I finally hit a natural breaking point, I threw on my running gear and headed out for a run around the lake. My heart and lungs pounded in the clear mountain air as

my legs carried me at a quick pace. For the next hour, I was in the zone, coated in sweat with my burning muscles. Before going back to my room, I stopped at the front desk for a cold bottle of water.

Jim smiled when he saw me. "How's the writing going, Mr. Barker?"

"It's actually really good. Took me a while to find my rhythm, but I think I'm there." I opened the water bottle as I turned right into Walt. Of course. Before I could catch it, the bottle tumbled from my hand and sprayed across his black suit. "Oh my god. I'm so sorry." On instinct, I started brushing off the drops from the front of his jacket.

He gently grasped my wrist and held it away from his body. "It's okay, Trey." He pulled a handkerchief from his pocket and dabbed at the water, which did absolutely nothing to dry him. "It's fine."

Mortified, I looked down and tried to shrink into the floor.

Apparently, Walt looked down, too. "Nice shorts, by the way."

My shorts were definitely short but probably a little too short to be around someone I was so attracted to. Self-consciously, I pulled on them as I started to walk away. "Um, thanks."

Walt had a playful smile on his lips. "No, thank you."

"I, uh, should go shower." I didn't want to leave him, but I was consumed by embarrassment and lust in equal amounts. Walt's hand was still holding onto my wrist when he gently tugged me back to him.

"Trey..."

I took a stuttering breath. "Yes?"

"I'm gonna take you to dinner tonight. We should talk about what happened. Get clear on our...arrangement." His face and eyes were serious, but all I could focus on was how good he smelled.

"Okay." I didn't know whether to feel excited or scared. Or both.

"I'll meet you in the lobby at seven." He released my wrist, but I could feel his eyes boring into the back of my short shorts as I walked away.

The evening couldn't come fast enough.

By six forty-five, I was in the lobby. I didn't know where we were going, so I dressed up, but not too much. Seven o'clock came and went, then seven fifteen. I began to pace, glancing at my phone every few minutes. Had he forgotten? Or maybe he was back at the crematorium? Not to mention that he probably had a long list of more interesting people to spend time with than me.

At seven thirty, I turned to go back to my room, feeling foolish for waiting so long only to be stood up, then I heard footsteps running across the lobby.

"Trey, wait up." It was Walt. "I'm so sorry. I got held up and couldn't call." He held out his hand for me, and I took it without hesitation. "Thank you." He tucked my arm into his and walked me to a waiting car out front.

We both climbed into the back seat, and then Walt tapped on his window for the driver to go.

"No problem. I know you're busy." This felt more like a date than a business discussion and that made me smile.

Walt looked at me with a serious expression, then his eyes traveled down the length of my body and back to my face. "You look great."

My ears burned from the compliment. "Thanks. You too."

He cocked his head and leaned back in the seat. "Do you like Italian food?"

"Of course. Who doesn't like Italian food?"

He shrugged and then gazed out the window, his fingers tapping on his knee. Okay, maybe this wasn't a date. Maybe he was still thinking I was a fed and this was some kind of intimidation tactic.

With a sigh, I stared out my own window, watching the landscape roll by to distract myself from the disappointment building in my chest.

The driver let us out in front of a nondescript building, and Walt led me inside an unmarked door.

My heart began to beat faster because I feared he had changed his mind about me and wanted to get rid of me. Maybe he talked to Luca and they'd decided I was a risk not worth taking. My knees felt like they might buckle at any moment as I followed Walt through the next door.

As soon as he opened it, the most delicious aromas overwhelmed me. We were suddenly inside some kind of secret restaurant. There were only six tables in the space and each one was full.

An older woman came up to Walt and kissed both his cheeks, then gestured for him to sit at the open table. "It's been too long, mio caro."

“I’m sorry, Zietta.” Walt turned and pointed at me. "This is my friend, Trey."

“Oh, such a handsome young man.” The woman grabbed my face and kissed each of my cheeks. “You are welcome here anytime. With or without your ‘friend.’ ”

“Um, thank you.” I grinned as waves of relief washed over me. Maybe he wasn't gonna kill me after all. And if he did, at least I’d probably die with a full stomach. “It’s nice to meet you.”

At our table, Walt pulled my chair out for me, and I sat down. A waiter brought us two glasses of water then poured wine into our glasses while we looked at our menus.

Walt tapped the top of his menu as if he could sense my nerves. "Just relax, Trey. You'll like this place. You just have to go with it." Then he raised his glass of wine. "To new friends."

I clinked my glass to his and nodded. "To new friends."

The wine was smooth and rich and made me think of Sardinia. I’d only had a few sips before the waiter placed an antipasto plate on the table between us.

Walt slid off his jacket and unbuttoned the top of his shirt as if he needed to get comfortable before digging in. “I have a technique.” Then he expertly assembled a cracker with cheese, prosciutto, and an olive. "Open up."

In slow motion, my jaw loosened, and he slid the appetizer into my mouth. My lips closed, but he held his fingers on my lips. Our eyes were locked as I let my tongue lightly graze the tip of his finger before I pulled back and smiled.

“Good?”

With my gaze still on him, I chewed his offering and nodded.

This thing between us was for sure not in my head.

For the first time since I saw Walt eight months ago, my body relaxed. I hadn't realized just how much tension I'd been holding, waiting to see if he might feel an inkling of what I felt for him. I took a slow sip of wine and smirked. "You're hard to read, Walter Francesco."

"I know." He wagged his eyebrows playfully. "That's intentional."

I picked up an olive and sucked on it as Walt watched my every move. "So what is this? A date?"

Walt looked down at his lap and smoothed his napkin. "I don't really date."

"Oh." Of course. I tried to keep the disappointment out of my voice as I nodded. "Yeah, me neither."

"I just mean...it doesn't really make sense in my line of work."

Well, if he was always thirty minutes late, I could understand why that was true. "I see. So, why did you bring me here tonight?" I wasn't a heavy drinker, so even half a glass of wine was making me feel emboldened. I took another sip and then the waiter came over and topped us off.

Walt sat up straighter, as if he suddenly remembered we weren't on a date after all. "I, um, well, I wanted to talk to you about last night. Want to make sure we're clear here."

He was definitely blushing as he looked down and arranged meats and cheese on his

plate. Maybe Walt didn't go on many dates, but that didn't mean this wasn't one.

I thought about what Romero would say in one of my books and tried to channel some of that courage. "Okay, then let's get clear. I already know all about your family. I know what the Francescos are capable of. I'm not stupid."

"Yeah, see, that doesn't make me feel better." He shook his head with a dry chuckle, like he was physically pained. "Because having someone out in the world know so much about us isn't safe for my family."

"I understand that. Believe me, I do." I glanced around the restaurant and realized everyone in here was either part of the Francesco family or a very, very good friend of theirs. I caught the eye of the woman who had greeted us when we walked in, and I motioned for her to come over.

Once she reached the table, I stood up. "Signora, questo vino è eccellente."

Her face lit up as I told her, in Italian, that the wine was excellent.

Walt's surprised expression made me light up too. "L'uva è Cannonau di Sardegna?"

She grinned and nodded at my correct identification of the rare Sardinian grape.

Walt shook his head and laughed. "What the hell is happening right now?"

The woman and I continued our conversation in Italian, and I told her about my time in Sardinia, the village the Francesco family came from.

Tears sprang into her eyes as I described the beaches and the restaurants. She said she hadn't been back since she was a little girl, and I urged her to go. I told her I would take her sometime, and she laughed.

Other people in the restaurant began to tune in to our conversation, and they also urged her to go to Sardinia.

" Allegra, vai in Italia! " Strangers came over to toast us, and Walt had no choice but to stand and toast as well.

I stepped closer to Walt while the guests were all chatting and clinked my glass to his. "I'm not a threat, Walt. I promise."

We let Allegra get back to work after she made me promise to have coffee with her the next day. More courses arrived, and we ate one amazing dish after another.

Walt was surprised by my knowledge of Sardinian food. He eyed me suspiciously as I dug roe out of a sea urchin. "It's really, really suspicious that you know so much about my family and our culture."

"You were raised to be suspicious." I fed him a bite of the orange roe. "Maybe I just love...your culture. Maybe I even love your family."

His brows furrowed, and I worried I'd gone too far. "Why would you care about my family? What about your own family?"

"Never mind." I shook my head and tried to backpedal. "I'm not a stalker or anything. I'm just...curious. It's the writer in me. I come from a very different kind of family, so yours just...fascinates me."

His concerned demeanor dropped and turned to one of pity. "I'm sorry if things were rough for you."

"It's okay, really." I shrugged and twirled the stem of my glass between my fingers to avoid eye contact with the man that seemed to stare right through me. "I'm over it."

But when I'm around big, loving families, it just makes me so happy."

We were quiet for a bit and then lightened the topics of conversation as we finished several glasses of wine. And that was before the waiter brought over some limoncello. Somebody turned up the music, and before I knew it, Allegra and I were dancing.

Tables were pushed to the sides of the room as we stomped and twirled as other people joined in. I couldn't remember the last time I'd had so much fun.

Before the song was over, another man cut in and took Allegra from me.

I turned away from them, laughing in joy as I stumbled into Walt. He slid one arm around my waist and took my other hand in his. Another button on his shirt was undone, and he'd rolled his sleeves to his elbows as he grinned. "Let's dance."

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6

WALT

I pulled Trey close to me and felt my cock stiffen as soon as his warm body pressed against me. I didn't know if he could feel me getting hard, but I didn't care. All around us, people were laughing and dancing like it was a joyous occasion instead of a random night out.

I hadn't seen Allegra's get this riled up in ages. "You have quite an effect on this place, little omega."

He leaned close enough that his mouth was next to my ear, and I could hear the lust in his voice. "It's mutual."

His cock stirred against my leg, and I understood what he was saying.

My hand slid against the small of his back and pulled him closer to me. We swayed in our corner of the room with our faces close together. It wasn't easy to fight the sudden urge to kiss him. My family was undoubtedly surprised to see me with someone, but if I kissed him...

I pulled him even tighter against me.

Trey's breath was warm across my ear. "You know what's funny?"

I shook my head as I inhaled his delicious scent. "What?"

"I kinda thought you were planning to kill me tonight."

I laughed, then drew my head back to look at his face and caress his cheek with my thumb. "I like you alive." I looked around the room, suddenly self-conscious of how intimate we were. "We should get out of here."

Trey nodded with blown pupils, obviously as worked up as I was. We got our coats, then slipped out unnoticed. The night air felt cool and refreshing, but as soon as we were outside, an awkwardness filled the space between us. We walked back to the car in silence.

I opened Trey's door and helped him in before going around to my side. My driver was holding my door open as I climbed in. "Home, sir?"

I hesitated as I considered our options.

As much as I wanted to bring Trey to my home and into my bed, I had to consider my whole family. Trey knew so much about us, and I still didn't know very much about him. If things didn't work out between us, I would be expected to get rid of a vengeful ex who held so much knowledge. Which meant I had to be smart. "No, to the hotel."

I slid into the backseat next to Trey and could only resist for about ten seconds before I pulled him into my arms and began kissing him.

He opened his mouth and moaned a sigh of relief as he kissed me back with desperate urgency.

My palms cradled his face then slid into his hair as I practically devoured the omega. "Fuck, Trey. You don't know how badly I want you."

A shudder passed through Trey as he nipped my chin. "Tell me."

I kissed the corner of his mouth and then along his jaw until I reached his earlobe. "I shouldn't, but fuck, omega. You make me think about things I shouldn't."

Trey turned to capture my lips with his, and for the rest of the drive, we made out like my tongue in his mouth could put a baby in him. When we finally arrived at the hotel, Trey pulled back to catch his breath. "Maybe you should." He smoothed his hair back and looked at me questioningly.

"Not tonight, sweetheart." I wouldn't be spending the night with him, as much as I wanted to.

Trey looked disappointed as he leaned in for one last kiss. "Thank you for a lovely night, alpha."

"Good night." The unfamiliar feelings at war inside me were overwhelming as I watched him walk into the hotel. My heart was racing as though I'd just run a mile, and my lips were still tingling from his kisses.

My sleep was broken as images of Trey filled my head, leading to dreams of us naked in my bed and him calling out to me as I bred him. When I woke up, my sheets were drenched with sweat and my dick was painfully hard. A quick shower usually helped to take the edge off, but even after coming hard against my tiled wall, it still wasn't enough. My body was itching for a certain omega, and it was only a matter of time before I gave in to the need.

Concentrating on anything at work was practically impossible; by lunch, I was beyond frustrated. This all-consuming attraction had never happened to me before, and I wasn't sure what to do about it.

I desperately tried to avoid thinking of the sweet and sexy omega, but that proved to be impossible because he slipped into every thought. I kept picking up my phone,

wanting to send him a text to see how he was doing, but then I'd come to my senses and set it down again.

Later that afternoon, my phone dinged. My heart lurched at the sound, but it was Knox asking what they could bring tonight. I'd forgotten he and Luca were coming over for dinner, and I still hadn't planned the meal. That was all the excuse I needed to leave work early.

After a quick trip to the market, I headed home and whipped up one of my nonna's recipes. The guys arrived right at six, and I immediately took Henry from Luca so I could do what I did best. Spoil him rotten like a good uncle should.

While I was pretending to chew on chubby little toes, Knox gasped by my coffee table, holding a book. "Trey Barker? Are you reading this?"

Fuck. I meant to put that away before they arrived. "Yeah, well, I bought it yesterday but haven't started it." I stopped myself, not sure if I should mention that he was staying at the hotel.

Knox set the book down and narrowed his eyes at me. "Did you know he's staying at the hotel?"

I fought to keep my expression casual as I handed Henry back to Luca and walked to the kitchen. "Um, yeah, I did know that. That's why I bought the book actually. Wanted to see what the guy's about." I stared down at the chopping board, hoping they wouldn't follow me and continue with the Trey interrogation.

"We know him, actually." Luca appeared behind me. "Good guy."

I looked up at that. "You do? How?"

“Smells good.” Luca lifted a lid on the marinara sauce I was making and inhaled dramatically. “It’s a funny story. We actually met him in Sardinia.”

I brought the platter of antipasto to the table and tried to hide my surprise that Trey had been telling the truth about that.

Luca laughed. “You look like I told you I met my dead great-grandmother over there.”

“Oh, sorry, but what was he doing in Sardinia? I mean, don't you think that's weird?”

Knox glanced at Luca and then nodded to his husband before turning back to me. “Actually, he was there researching our family.”

My stomach churned as I let that news settle in. Why was Trey obsessed with my family? “And you weren’t concerned?”

Luca shrugged. “He’s harmless. If you read his books, you’ll know he likes to really get into his characters, so I think it’s just his method of researching his work. I don’t think he’s an issue.”

My agreement with Trey came to mind, but I changed the subject and finished up dinner.

After we ate and laughed and shared stories about guests at the casino and the hotel, Luca took Henry inside to change him while Knox and I sat on the patio with our drinks.

Knox swirled the ice in his glass and grinned. “You look different.”

I shrugged and glanced back at the house. Luca was my family, but he was also my

boss, so I didn't always tell him everything.

Knox had become a good friend, and I felt I could confide in him more easily. "I met someone."

His mouth dropped open as he leaned forward, ready for the tea. "Can you tell me about him?"

I sucked in a deep breath, and all of my favorite parts of Trey came to my mind. "There's not much to tell yet. It's basically a crush, but...I kinda like him."

Knox shook his head as he smiled. "You know I'm gonna want to meet him if it becomes serious."

I grinned because he'd met him long before I did. "Yeah, I'll keep that in mind."

After they went home, I cleaned up and got ready for bed. Trey's book called out to me from the coffee table, so I turned it over to look at the author's photo. Those gray eyes stared back at me, deep and searching. "Okay, Trey Barker, let's see what all the hype's about." I took the book to bed and figured I'd get a chapter or two in before passing out.

Next thing I knew, it was two in the morning, and I was speed-reading to get to the end and find out what happened. I wasn't much of a reader, but even I could tell that Trey's writing was great. There were sexy scenes all throughout the book, and I'd been stroking my cock the whole time, hearing Trey's voice read the words to me in my mind. Toward the end of the book, the main characters finally made love, and I imagined taking Trey for the first time in the same way.

Warm seed dripped down the sides of my hand after finding yet another release. I stroked myself through the waves of pleasure then grabbed the pillow next to me and

hugged it close, imagining it was Trey beside me.

TREY

I had hoped Walt would text after our hot makeout session in the back of his car, but after two days of hearing nothing, I was starting to doubt myself. At the time, I was absolutely sure it had been a date, but maybe I was wrong. Maybe he was just being nice to the pathetic omega who didn't have any other friends.

I didn't want to force myself on him if he didn't want to see me, so I stayed close to the hotel when I wasn't in my room. My routine consisted of a rotation of exercising, writing, eating, dreaming of Walt, and then I repeated it all over again. The overwhelming weight of missing him was causing me to feel feverish and unsettled, but I just spent more time thinking about Walt.

After a few more days, I realized the problem had to be me. Maybe I was a bad kisser. But I didn't have a lot of time to dwell on my inadequacies because my time with Walt had awoken something in me, and my writing was on fire.

If I kept it up, my manuscript would be in Frannie's inbox by the end of the month.

I poured my feelings for Walt into my book. I had been hung up on the love story, unsure of where Romero would go after his boyfriend died in a tragic cattle accident in the last book. Fortunately, I was able to channel all my months of longing for Walt into Romero's grief. And then, just when he didn't think he would ever recover, he met Bobby, a lonely ranch hand.

I gave Bobby Walt's face, his blue eyes, his curly black hair, and his shy smile that flickered around the corners of his mouth. Bobby also had Walt's ability to listen so deeply it felt like my soul was falling into him. The more I wrote, the harder I fell for Walt, like the words on paper were more than just fantasies in my head.

My longing for the alpha was almost physical as I became more uncomfortable as the days went on.

At night, I tossed and turned, longing to feel his arms around me. My hopes of ever having him in my bed were dwindling by the hour. When another day came and went with no contact, I began to wonder if there was something wrong with my phone.

I texted Frannie as a subtle check. Book is coming along great. You should get it by the end of this month.

I paced my room as I waited. Finally, the phone dinged with a text from Frannie. Instead of words, she sent her signature emojis. Hearts, cowboys, and dollar signs. Apparently, my phone was working, but had I even given Walt my number?

He could have gotten it from my registration details, but maybe he was waiting for me to reach out to him.

I couldn't stand sitting around anymore, so I decided to grab a drink at the hotel bar to calm my nerves. It was past five o'clock, so it'd be easy to blend in with the happy hour crowd. I got dressed and slicked my hair back, feeling a bit like myself as I headed out the door.

I went down to the bar and quickly realized it wasn't a great idea. What I had been building up in my fantasies as a meaningful night between me and a powerful alpha was probably just another test to see if I was a threat to his family. Maybe even worth taking home.

Obviously, I didn't make the cut.

I ordered a vodka soda and checked out the bar. If it were any other man I was feeling this way about, I might consider finding someone to take back to my room for a bit of fun. But that wouldn't work this time. Walt had ruined me for other alphas, and the only way I'd find relief was through him.

I sipped my drink and contemplated if it was time for me to leave Gilded Lake. My muse was back, which was the primary goal of this trip, and I was clearly overstaying my welcome.

Suddenly, a hand rested on my back for a moment, and I froze. Then it slid up to my shoulder and a finger gently stroked behind my ear.

I closed my eyes and inhaled deeply, seeking out the manly scent that had been haunting my dreams. The person sat on the stool beside me, and I opened my eyes. Walt stared at me, and my heart started hammering in my chest. I clenched my drink on the counter like it might try to escape.

Before I crushed it, Walt reached over and his strong hand encircled mine. He traced the spaces between my fingers with his for a moment then gently slid my hand away from my glass and picked it up. He sucked on the cocktail straw and took a drink. "Mmmm, yummy."

I smiled, feeling my body get warm and tingly at the sight of his sucking lips. "Where did you go?" I tried not to sound desperate or needy but the words just tumbled out.

"I needed some time. To cool off." He flashed me a mischievous grin, and sweet relief flooded my body. Maybe he'd been feeling this thing between us too.

I turned to fully face him. "Honestly, I haven't been able to stop thinking about you.

It's like I'm obsessed, and I'm not used to feeling this way. I mean, I'm kinda used to feeling this way about you, but usually, I'm the one people get obsessed over. And it weirds me out and freaks me out when it happens, so I really, really don't want to freak you out."

I was aware I was talking a lot, but I couldn't seem to shut myself up. "I mean, I know I'm delusional and you're just trying to keep your family safe. But—"

Walt put his finger to my lips to stop my rambling. "Shhhh. Let's get outta here. I don't really like to have my dates where I work."

Date? "Okay." I quickly slid off the stool and grabbed my coat, ready to follow him anywhere.

Walt helped me put it on then guided me outside to a waiting car. My heart began to sing at the possibility that he had planned to take me out.

As soon as he was settled on the other side of the car and had closed his door, we immediately began kissing. Any shyness or insecurity I had been feeling from the other night was gone. We were familiar with each other's mouths now, and our hands were eager to get involved. I took a chance and explored Walt's hard muscles through his clothes. His chest and abs, his arms and shoulders.

He slid his hand down the front of my shirt and then up underneath it before he pinched my nipple.

I groaned from all the extreme sensations flowing through me. I'd never felt this kind of pull to another person before, and it was almost scary how intense it was. The car stopped, and Walt pulled away and straightened his clothes.

I tucked my shirt in and peered out the window to catch my breath. "Where are we?"

Walt got out, and I knew he'd want me to wait so he could open my door for me. I was expecting to go to his house, but we were at a strip mall.

My door opened, and I stepped out. "Bowling?"

"Mm-hm." Walt laughed and offered me his arm, then we walked into a normal bowling alley that looked like it hadn't been updated since the eighties. He asked for my shoe size, then we went to an empty lane and sat at the table to put on our shoes. Walt flagged the server over and ordered a couple beers and burgers.

I shook my head as I slipped into the stiff shoes. "I haven't been bowling since I was in high school."

He grinned. "You'll love it."

And I did.

Walt was really good and he stood behind me while he guided my hand and gave me pointers. After the first few frames, I started to pretend to be worse than I was so he had to help me more.

We sat down to eat when our burgers arrived, and I smiled at him before I took my first bite. "This is really fun."

"Good. I thought you would like it."

I inhaled through my nose and glanced up at him. "You know, when you came to the bar tonight, I was actually thinking it was time to leave Gilded Lake."

Walt's face grew serious. "Why would you think that?"

I shrugged and looked away. "I felt stupid for hanging on to a hope that was unrealistic. You didn't text me or reach out after our dinner, so I figured you were waiting for me to leave."

Walt looked down at the table while he took a sip of beer, and I couldn't read his expression. Finally, he looked up at me. "Trey, you can't leave."

I was equally stunned and thrilled and confused by his admission as I searched his face. "You mean you don't want me to leave?"

He reached across the table and took my hands in his. "No, I don't want you to leave, but we have an arrangement, remember? I meant what I said at the crematorium. You know too much about my family, about what goes on here, and I can't let you leave yet."

I did remember the conversation when Walt had insinuated that he'd put me in the crematorium if I told anyone what I saw at the lake.

My heart broke even as it pounded faster in my chest. "Oh. Right."

Walt gazed into my eyes, and I could see some sadness there too. "I'm sorry, Trey. I really do like you, but we need to figure out a few things first."

I didn't know what to say, so I just looked down at my plate, no longer hungry.

Walt's eyes were on me, but I couldn't look at him. I thought he truly wanted me there, but he was just trying not to kill me if I tried to leave? It was too much to wrap my head around, so I pushed back in my chair and stood up. "I'd like to go back to the hotel now."

Walt's expression changed to one of concern as he stood up too. "No, please. That's

not what I want."

"I don't understand what we're doing, Walt. I really like you, but you're still planning to kill me. Doesn't that seem fucked up to you?"

He stepped forward and pulled me into his arms. "I'm not gonna hurt you, omega. Just stay with me. Please let me get to know you. Don't you understand that if it were anybody else, I would have gotten rid of them the other night?"

I shook my head as tears burned behind my eyelids. "I don't understand anything. The only thing I know is that I haven't been able to stop thinking about you for ten months."

There, I said it. I admitted my long-standing infatuation with the alpha who dominated my world.

Walt tilted my head up and softly kissed my lips. "I still remember the first time I saw you. You were standing at the roulette table in your blue suit. I watched you win three times in a row."

"Um, that wasn't me. I haven't won at your roulette table." Mortification filled me as I realized he was confusing me with someone else.

Walt smiled and ran his thumb over my waist. "Not this time."

I pulled back, unsure if I understood what he was saying. "Wait, you remember me from ten months ago?"

He nodded. "I was so happy when you came back. Granted, I would have preferred you didn't also see my moronic guys trying to dump a body in the lake, because that complicated everything. But in a way, maybe it's better that you saw it because now

you can't leave. I don't want you to leave."

My head was spinning with so many confusing thoughts. Before I could fully sort them out, Walt started kissing me. With my hand over his heart, I could feel it beating through his shirt.

He put his hand on top of mine and pressed it into his chest as he pulled me closer. "Come home with me, omega." His breathing was fast and heavy.

I nodded, no longer able or willing to talk myself out of it.

8

WALT

On the ride back to my house, I kept my eyes closed and held tightly to Trey's hand in the backseat. I wanted to make out again, but I needed to give him some space to process what I'd shared.

It wasn't easy, but I was determined to stay in control.

Trey's effect on me was like nothing I'd experienced before. There was lust and desire, but also something more. Something I wasn't familiar with. A rapidly growing need to be with him was building inside me, and it scared the hell out of me.

I wasn't used to needing anyone.

We got to my house, and the driver opened my door. I gave Trey's hand a squeeze and then went around to open his door, surprised by how nervous I was.

With Trey's hand securely in mine, I led him inside. He looked around, and I felt a bit self-conscious.

Interior design had always been a hobby for me, and Trey admired my stuff and named the designers.

"Impressive." He came back to me and slid his arms around my waist. "This makes me want to take you to my home. I think you'd really like it."

He leaned in to kiss me, but I pulled back, teasing him. "Drinks?"

Trey narrowed his eyes at me. "Okay..."

I poured two glasses of amaro and sat beside Trey on the couch. We clinked glasses and took a sip, eyeing each other over the rims.

Trey licked his lips. "Mmm, this is good."

"Glad you like it."

He tilted his head toward the coffee table and raised his eyebrows questioningly.

My cheeks understood and started to flush before my brain caught up. I forgot that I'd gone out and bought a copy of every one of his books, and they were all stacked on the table.

I set my drink down and put my face in my hands. "Okay, it's not what you think."

Trey laughed and picked one of them up. "Oh, this is exactly what I think. You, Walter Francesco, are a fan !"

I moaned and peeked through my fingers. "Guilty. I read the first book and was hooked." I emerged from behind my hands and gave him a genuine smile. "Trey, you're really good!"

"Well, thank you. It means a lot to hear you say that."

He thumbed through a few books and then set them down. "So, this is gonna sound crazy, but you've inspired me to write my next book."

I didn't know what to say. I was flattered but also a bit scared. That seemed like a really big deal. "Really? How do you mean?"

Trey shrugged. "Just that...well, I was so turned on after our date the other night, it opened a floodgate in me, and I've been writing nonstop ever since." He blushed and looked away.

I knew exactly how he was feeling, but I couldn't show it. I had to keep my head about me because I needed to keep Trey off Luca's radar. That meant keeping a close but distant eye on him until I was really sure he wasn't a threat.

I reached out and stroked his cheek. "I've felt inspired, too."

He looked up, his gray eyes penetrating mine. "You do?"

I nodded then leaned in to kiss him. His lips were soft but tentative. I think he also sensed how different things felt now that we were alone in my house and anything could happen.

"Come with me." I stood up and held out my hand to him.

Trey took it without hesitation and followed me down the dimly lit hallway to my bedroom. We stopped next to the bed, and I unbuttoned his shirt.

My heart was beating so fast I wondered if it was audible.

"Hold on." I pulled my phone from my pocket and put some music on the sound system.

Trey smiled appreciatively. "Nice."

I laughed and returned to unbuttoning his shirt. "This might sound shallow, but I like that you appreciate the finer things."

Trey reached over and began to undo the buttons on my shirt. "Same."

His shirt slid off his shoulders and then I pulled his t-shirt off until only the rippling muscles across his abdomen were in my view.

My mouth fell open. "Fuck, Trey. You're gorgeous."

He chuckled softly. "I like to exercise."

I helped him pull my shirt off and then we just took a moment to really look at each other. My muscles were bigger than his but much less defined. Fortunately, Trey didn't seem to mind.

He ran his fingers over my chest and abdomen and let out a soft sigh. "You don't know how many times I've pictured you without your shirt on."

I undid my belt then reached over to undo his. My breath caught when I felt his fingertips on my skin. Sliding my hand down the front of Trey's open pants made my control slip even further. Trey's cock was throbbing and hard. He needed me, and I wasn't going to leave him wanting.

"Up you go." I picked him up and threw him onto the bed.

Trey giggled. "Oh my."

I grinned and slid his pants off, quickly followed by his boxers. Seeing him splayed across my bed, glistening and perfect in the soft moonlight, made a low growl erupt from my throat. This boy was mine. Slowly, I lowered my body over his and kissed

him.

Trey's hands circled around me and grabbed my ass, firmly squeezing and pulling me against him.

Anxious to be naked, I quickly removed the rest of my own clothes until we were both fully bare and on display for each other. I flipped onto my back and pulled him on top of me.

Trey's breath hitched, and he grinned down at me. "I like this Walt. I haven't met him before."

My hand squeezed between his legs, and I caressed his balls, using his own slick to lube his velvety skin. "Get up here so I can taste you, omega."

The scent of his slick filled the room, making my dick even harder as he scooted forward until I could take his length into my mouth. At least, as much as I could. My omega was huge.

For several minutes, I forgot about everything else and fully focused on sucking and nibbling while Trey groaned and writhed above me.

His hands dug into the pillows on either side of my head as he slowly fucked my face. As the moments passed, his slick flowed heavier and his movements became more erratic and desperate. "I need you, alpha."

I pulled off and licked along his groin, teasing him until he was quivering under my tongue. "Are you going into heat, baby?"

His breath caught and he went completely still above me. "Am I?"

I grabbed his hips and rolled him over until I was on top of him so I could see into his eyes. "I have condoms. If you are, I don't want to take things to a place we can't come back from."

Trey didn't break his stare as he shook his head. "No condom. I'm already ruined for any other man. I won't come back from this either way, so...breed me, alpha. Make me yours."

"Fuck." My tongue plunged into his mouth as my fingers slipped into his ass, testing his readiness. I was still in control, but barely. As my fingers worked to stretch and coax him open, I pushed my cock through his slick, lubing myself in the most efficient way possible.

"Hurry." Trey writhed beneath me, his breath coming in short gasps as his scent changed. The warmth radiating from his bare skin made us both sweat. His legs wrapped around my waist, drawing me closer. "I need your alpha cock, Walt. Please."

"Ready?" I knew he was but wanted him to be sure. Once I pressed inside him, he was mine.

His pupils were dark with need, but he was quick to answer. "So ready. So damn ready for my alpha."

Every time I heard him call me alpha, I felt even more possessive of the man. "Deep breaths."

Positioning myself at his entrance, I paused for a moment before pushing through the tightness of his slick channel. The weight of his heat was like a blanket over us both, pushing us closer together as I slid all the way into him. When my balls hit his smooth skin, I almost blew my knot right then.

A low moan escaped Trey as soon as I started to move within him. Each stroke went deeper in and faster out as I got in a quick rhythm. Finally feeling him in every way was intoxicating. I was finally claiming my omega in ways words never could. Our bodies spoke a language of their own, making promises neither of us had articulated out loud.

"Mine!" I growled against his skin as I got closer to climax.

"Yes, alpha," Trey cried out as his hands clutched my biceps. His nails scraped across my skin as he rode my cock harder. "Give me your knot. Make me yours."

I increased my pace, driving through the slick channel that enveloped me.

Trey met each of my thrusts with a desperation that drove me to the edge of reason. This wasn't just sex. It was the first of many joinings that would change our lives forever.

Trey's body tensed as his inner muscles fluttered around my shaft.

My own climax built up in the pit of my stomach as my balls drew in tight.

"Come for me, omega." My voice was nothing more than a low rumble that vibrated through both of us.

With a cry that echoed off the walls, Trey's body convulsed in waves of pleasure that milked the seed from my cock. Without a barrier between us, I shot thick cream into him as I marked him in the most intimate way possible. "Fuck, Trey."

He sighed as he shook a few more times then wrapped his arms tightly around me. "I've never had a knot before."

As he spoke, my knot expanded and sealed my release inside him, practically guaranteeing a pregnancy.

As our breathing slowed, that thought settled into my mind. I knew I could trust Trey and didn't plan to actually force him to stay with me. But even after this, would he want to leave? My grip on him didn't lessen as we waited for my knot to go down. "Does it hurt?"

He shook his head and then looked up at me, dragging his fingertips across my jaw. "Not physically."

"Then how?" I almost didn't want to hear his answer. But I needed to. If I had any hope of keeping him, I needed to know how he really felt. "Please talk to me, Trey."

TREY

He wanted me to talk to him. While his dick was still locked inside me. It was almost comical, but I knew we had to have some real conversations. Especially since there was a real possibility I was in the process of conceiving his child.

My lips twitched into a smile as I thought about that. I hadn't really expected to ever have kids, but now that the possibility was real, I wanted it so damn bad.

"What are you grinning about?" Walt tickled my side, making me flinch and smile wider.

"Just thinking about you. This." I took a deep breath and drummed up the courage to look him in the eye. "Us."

"Us is a pretty good thought." His fingers trailed up my side and stopped at my neck. "I've been thinking about us too."

"What about us?" It was a silly question, and there was a risk we'd be talking in circles all night, but I didn't want to miss this chance.

Just as Walt opened his mouth to speak, his knot shrank enough that his dick slipped out of me. I immediately missed the connection and was eager to get him back inside me. Soon. After we talked.

The scent of our mingled sweat and spunk still hung in the air. My heart raced as I realized this was more than a fleeting moment for him too. Gilded Lake and the Francesco family had lured me like the pages of a good book, but nothing could have prepared me for how it would feel to be the recipient of Walt's touch.

As a powerful alpha in this family, his presence commanded attention with just a look. But he could bring me to my knees with just the brush of his fingertip or his warm breath against my ear. "I want you to stay. I want tonight to be the beginning of us. But that doesn't mean it won't be complicated."

Complicated didn't begin to cover what we were stepping into, but as I lay there with Walt's chest still pressed against me, I couldn't deny the pull deep within me. "I'm a writer. I love complicated."

He chuckled. "But this is life and death. Real life. Not just words on paper. But actual blood and bones and...babies." His breath was hot against my neck as he nuzzled into me.

"I can handle all those things." I rubbed up his back and then down. "I want all those things, Walt. That's why I'm here. That's why I came back and couldn't force myself to leave when I thought you were avoiding me."

In most circumstances, I was conservative and not a risk taker. And for anyone else, I would have hesitated. Taken a beat to consider the risks involved with joining a mafia family. But I was safe with Walt. He'd already proven that I was in no danger with him, despite the danger that literally lurked just outside our doors.

I trusted him implicitly.

"If you want to leave, you can. I'm not going to force you to stay with me." He took a deep breath then slowly blew it out. "But fuck, Trey. I want you to stay so damn bad.

I want a life with you. I don't deserve you, and there will always be an element of danger with me...but I'm not above begging. I want you to stay, and I hope that you will."

"I'm in this, Walt. With you." It was true. My heart had made its choice, and Walt was it. Our hearts would beat in tandem from this day forward. "For as long as you want me."

"You want to be us. Even if it's a little...messy sometimes?" His eyes were vulnerable but sincere.

"I want us more than anything, alpha." My hand intertwined with Walt's, and our fingers knit together. "More than I've ever wanted anything before."

I'd come to Gilded Lake chasing a fantasy, but I ended up finding the heart of my story. The kind of love I wrote about but didn't believe would ever be a reality for me. My heart fully belonged to the man beside me.

I would stay with Walt because I loved him. I'd loved him from afar for a long time, and now I could love him up close. He was the only man who'd ever seen me as more than just an omega. He knew me as the writer and a dreamer and someone he could respect as his partner.

As we lay there with our soft breaths syncing, the outside world faded away. We were the only two people who existed for just a little while. Two souls stripped of jobs and families and drama so we could be raw and real with each other.

"I want you, omega. More than anything." His mouth covered mine in a heated but brief quick. "If you're willing to put up with me, I promise to do everything to keep you safe and happy until I take my last breath."

"Like characters in one of my books." I was teasing, but the flutter in my chest reminded me this wasn't a work of fiction. This was the narrative of our lives, no matter how unpredictable and dramatic it might be.

"I'm no Romero, but..." Walt waggled his eyebrows.

"You're so much better. Hotter." I wrapped my hand around his bicep. "Stronger."

"Okay, okay. Now I know you're lying." Walt chuckled, so I knew he wasn't upset.

"But I'll take it. I'll take anything as long as you're here with me."

10

TREY

I woke up and blinked, momentarily forgetting where I was. Warm weight was pressed behind me, and a huge smile spread over my face as I remembered the night before. I pulled on his arm that was draped over my side and snuggled in closer, feeling his strong arm tightening around me as we spooned. I'd found my new happy place.

As much as I wanted to wake him up with my mouth or my ass, I decided to let him sleep a little longer. He was so peaceful. I slipped out of bed, found a robe hanging in his closet, and made my way to the kitchen.

Walt and I had the same model espresso machine, so I made myself a cappuccino. The view from the back was breathtaking. There was a dusting of snow on all the trees and the river rocks, creating a beautiful scene.

"Trey?" Walt called me from his room so I poured a cup for him and went back up.

"Good morning." I sat down on the bed and smiled. "I made some coffee."

He pawed for a saucer, still groggy from our late night. Walt propped himself up on one elbow and took a few sips of my cappuccino. "Mmmm, that's perfect."

Smiling, I laid back down beside my alpha. "It's Sunday. Can we just snuggle right here and do nothing all day?" Even though I needed to finish my book, I couldn't

bring myself to care enough to leave his side.

“Nothing.” He palmed his dick and gave it a token stroke. “That seems like a wasted opportunity.”

“Oh, I don’t waste anything.” I kissed down his chest and drew his cock into my mouth, sucking it to the back of my throat and moaning around his shaft.

“Fuck, Trey. Give a guy some warning.” Walt curled his fingers into my hair but didn’t tug. He just held me as I moved up and down his dick. “You’re gonna spoil me.”

That was fine with me. I planned to have his cock inside me as often as possible, so getting him used to that seemed harmless enough. After just a few more minutes of sliding my tongue along his velvety skin and gently teasing his glans with my teeth, Walt bucked up into me and shot his load right down my throat. I had to pull back just to get some on my tongue so I could fully savor the taste.

He was delicious, and as soon as the unique cream hit my tastebuds, I was coming in my hand, making a mess of the bed.

After a while of just enjoying each other, we showered and Walt made us delicious omelets.

He studied my face while we ate. "I'm trying to decide what to do with you."

"I thought we already decided that. I’m staying. You’re stuck with me." I said it playfully even as a spike of insecurity shot through me. What if he’d changed his mind?

Walt just shook his head and grinned. "No. I mean, we have to be careful. There have

been some threats to me and the family. You watched one of them burn, but if any of our enemies find out that I care about you, it could get dangerous."

"I'm sure you care about lots of people." Just because I was in love with him didn't mean he loved me back. Not yet anyway.

Walt cocked his head and sighed before he put his fork down. "I do care about a lot of people, but you're not just people, Trey. You're mine. My omega. My lover. My...everything." He swallowed hard as if it was difficult for him to open up in this way. "I think I'm falling in love with you, and I'm not sure I could ever survive losing you."

"I love you too, Walt. I have since the first time I met you." Tears burned behind my eyes before they spilled over my lids. "I promise to be as discreet as you need me to be. I just want you in my life. In my bed."

Walt interrupted me by covering my hand with his. "In my house?"

My jaw dropped as I considered his words. "You want me to move in?"

He grinned. "Only at night. During the day, you can use your room at the resort as an office. That way, you'll always be close and I won't worry about you so much."

"That sounds amazing." Better than amazing. "But you don't have to worry about me. Unless someone has read my books, I blend into the background pretty easily."

Walt shook his head as he leaned back. "You definitely don't blend into any background, but it's not just about being seen. My family still has lots of enemies, and I don't want someone to even think about hurting you to get to me."

"Okay, I guess so." I shrugged as scenes and characters were already making

demands in my mind. “It actually sounds exciting to me. Maybe my next book will be about a mob boss getting caught with an enemy lover.”

A shadow passed over Walt's face. "It's not exciting, sweetheart. And you're not my enemy."

“I know I’m not.” I moved around the table and lowered myself onto his lap. “How could I be when we’re so perfectly right together?”

After spending the rest of the day lounging around with Walt between sweaty sex sessions, he took me back to the hotel to get my things. I didn’t cancel the room because having it as a private office was a dream come true.

And it meant I’d always be close to my alpha.

“I just got a text from Luca. He invited me to Allegra’s for dinner.”

I froze just as I was zipping up my suitcase. “Oh, okay. Do you want me to just stay here tonight then?”

He frowned as if I’d hurt his feelings. “Fuck no, I don’t. I want you to put on something nice and come with me to dinner. My cousins already love you as an author. Now they can love you as family.”

I almost burst into tears when he said that. A family who loved and appreciated me for me was something I desperately wanted. And something that drew me to the Francescos in the first place. “Give me two minutes to change.”

When we walked into Allegra’s, Luca and Knox stood up from a table and waved us over. Despite Walt’s big lecture about how scary and dangerous his family was, no one seemed the least bit surprised to see me with him.

My shoulders relaxed and a smile broke out across my face. "Hi, guys."

Walt put his arm around my waist. "Luca, Knox, I think you both know my Trey."

Knox reached out and warmly grasped my hand. "Of course we do. Wow! This is...amazing. Right, Luca? Isn't it amazing?"

Luca shook his head and smiled, then looked at Walt. "I knew it."

Walt just laughed. "You didn't know shit." He pulled me closer and kissed the top of my head. "Thank god Trey did. He came back for me."

It was time to come clean with the guys. "Look, when I met you in Sardinia, I was there because of Walt."

Knox gasped like he'd reached the juicy part of a steamy book. "No way!"

I explained everything to them but left out the night of the crematorium.

Walt squeezed my leg underneath the table when I skipped over that part.

Then I told Knox and Luca about seeing Walt ten months ago and having not just an instant attraction but a near-fatal attraction that I had to resolve.

The server came over and poured each of us a glass of red wine as I kept going.

"I know it sounds crazy, but I can't explain it." I looked into Walt's eyes and melted. "Walt just got to me in a way no one else ever has."

Knox seemed ready to jump right out of his chair in excitement for us. "We know." He leaned over and kissed Luca. "I think we understand better than you think. And

this makes meeting you in Italy so much more special."

I nodded. "Yeah, it is. And I promise I'm not some kind of stalker."

Luca cleared his throat and raised his glass. "This actually sounds romantic to me. And it's about time Walt got some action." He grinned at Walt as we all clinked our glasses.

We fell into an easy conversation about my next book, and that led me to telling them about my idea for my next series. No one was surprised when I said it would be mafia based.

Walt shifted in his chair and exchanged a glance with Luca.

"I mean, if that's okay with you guys. It wouldn't be based on the family or anything real. I mean, you've read my books, or at least one of them. They're fantasy."

Luca winked at me. "I'm sure we can figure something out."

Allegra brought our food over to us. She set the plates down and then gave Luca and Knox each a kiss on the head. "My boys! Where's the baby? You know I like to see him."

"He's with a sitter. Have you met Walt's omega, Trey?" Luca gestured to me at the same time that Walt groaned in his chair.

Allegra came over and gave me a playful smack. "Know him? Are you kidding, this is my new trainer!"

Walt raised his eyebrows at me, and I blushed. "It's true. I'm taking her out running."

Allegra flexed her bicep. "And stretching, and push-ups, and all kinds of stuff. Just wait, I'm gonna get my hourglass figure back."

Everyone joked around, teasing each other and laughing with abandon. I realized that it felt so natural to be included in Walt's family like this.

And maybe someday, we'd make that family even bigger.

11

WALT

The morning sun sliced through the curtains, casting a warm glow across the room. I stretched and felt for my omega. The sight of Trey in my bed, curled up under the sheets with his chest rising and falling always made waking up a joy. His presence in my life was not what I had expected, but it was certainly what I needed. And now that I had him, I was never letting him go.

Over the past few weeks since he moved in, I'd noticed some subtle changes in him. The morning light seemed to linger a bit longer on his pillow before he woke up. His scent had also changed. It was sweeter and...clean. Almost like a rainy day. It clung to the air, and I was sure I knew what it meant, but I wasn't sure if Trey was ready to acknowledge what he probably already knew too. All the signs of pregnancy were there, but we hadn't spoken the words aloud, afraid of jinxing it.

"Morning." Trey finally blinked awake and reached for me.

"Morning, love." I squeezed his fingers gently. "Did you sleep well?"

"Like a rock." His smile was sleepy but genuine. "What's on the agenda today?"

"Luca and I are heading out to go fishing. Thought we could enjoy a fresh dinner tonight, straight from the lake."

"Sounds great." Trey let go of my hand and stretched, his shirt riding up to reveal the

smooth skin of his still-flat belly. "Have fun and bring me a big one."

I laughed when he waggled his eyebrows at the innuendo. "I sure will."

Luca and I had a productive day on the water, but when I returned later, the pride of catching a massive trout was overshadowed by the concern for how Trey would react. Or more accurately, how his stomach would react.

"Look what we've got for dinner." I held up the fish in all its glory.

Trey's face started out happy but quickly went pale. Before I could reach out to steady him, he bolted for the bathroom. The sound of retching soon followed, and my heart clenched.

I set the trout down and hurried after him, knocking lightly on the door. "Babe, you okay in there?"

"Give me a sec." The toilet flushed and the sink turned on while he got himself cleaned up.

I leaned against the wall and waited as my heart beat fast. This was it—the undeniable sign we couldn't ignore any longer. Before he came out, I grabbed the pregnancy test I'd bought earlier in the week, I held it behind my back as the door creaked open.

"Sorry about that." Trey looked so tired as he stepped out. Maybe I'm coming down with something.

"Yeah, I think you are." I shoved the test at him and our eyes locked. "It's time we found out one way or the other."

His hands trembled slightly as he took it from me, but his gaze never wavered. "Yeah, you're right."

The minutes required to wait for the result felt like they stretched out for hours. But when the indicator showed a positive sign, Trey's gasp filled the room. "Oh my god. It's really real."

We looked at each other with shiny eyes as a mix of joy and disbelief passed between us.

"We're gonna be dads," I whispered, my voice thick with emotion.

"Can you believe it?" He laughed and stared at the test stick. "Us as parents."

"Names!" I blurted out as reality hit me in the face. "We need to think of names."

"Oh, um, okay." Trey leaned against me with his head on my shoulder. "None of my main characters, but something strong. Unique but not too unique."

I frowned. "We might need the internet for that." For some reason, not a single name came to mind. "Oh, and a nursery. We'll need to redecorate." I was suddenly obsessed with the idea of converting a guest room into a haven for our child. "Do you have any themes in mind?"

"Adventure, maybe? With maps and explorers?" Trey's voice was playful as his imagination kicked into gear. "I haven't actually had more than two seconds to consider it."

"Oh, what about literature? We can just fill it up with books and characters from stories." I grinned, thinking of how his novels would line the shelves as inspiration for our little one.

Trey laughed as he kissed my cheek. "Why choose? Our baby will have the world at their fingertips."

"The whole damn world!" I repeated his sentiment as I wrapped my arms around Trey. "And more love than they'll know what to do with."

"So much more." Trey sighed as he pressed my palms to his flat belly. "I can't believe our future is happening right now."

"It's only just beginning, love."

12

TREY

(SIX MONTHS LATER)

The display case in the bakery was looking a little bare, but I managed to scoop up a selection of snacks for me and Knox. They really needed to rebake the stuff they sold out of in the afternoon so I wouldn't always get stuck with the leftovers when we had our post-nap snacks.

Since I hit the second trimester, I felt like I was eating for ten. The doctor had confirmed on several occasions that I only had one little girl growing inside me, but I was sure there was an entire litter of goats that could eat their body weight by the hour because I was always hungry.

"Slim pickings, but they had a lemon bar."

"Ooh, thank you!" Knox reached for the lemon bar, and I sat down across from him with the rest of the muffins and cakes I'd snagged. Whatever we didn't eat would go home to our alphas.

Knox cradled Henry on his lap, cooing softly to the one-year-old who gurgled back with all the enthusiasm of a master communicator.

"I still can't believe it." I plucked off the top of a chocolate chip muffin and took a bite. "I really didn't think they'd buy it."

“Of course they’d want it.” Knox put a small piece of my muffin in Henry’s mouth. After that, the toddler reached for the rest of it and began to tear it into a million pieces. “It’s a great premise. They would have been crazy not to offer you a fat advance for the new series.”

"Yeah, it’s just too perfect." When Knox gave me a questioning look, I sighed. “My life. My friends. You. Luca. The rest of the family.” I inhaled deeply. “Walt. Everything is just so amazing. How do I get to have another book deal too? I’m just so grateful for it all.” I wiped a few tears away with the heel of my hand. I’d been so emotional that even a dew drop on a leaf could bring me to tears.

"You get to have it all because you deserve it." Knox was such a good friend. He gave me a lot more credit than I deserved, but I appreciated it.

Just then, my little soccer player decided to kick me. "Only six months along, and she's already making her presence known." I placed a hand over my rounded belly and tried to distinguish the body part I felt pressing against my hand. "This little girl's gonna take after Walt, for sure. She’s too much a brute to be like me."

Knox laughed. “Well, she needs to be tough to keep up with all her cousins.” He pulled a sippy cup of water out of his bag and handed it to Henry. “I’m sure this one will get her into all kinds of trouble.”

I had no doubt. “I’ll let Walt know he’s the official disciplinarian. I’m sure he’ll love that.”

“Yeah, right. Those alphas are all talk when it comes to their kids.” Knox leaned back, and Henry reclined against his chest. “You better learn how to use a deep voice because you’re gonna be the bad cop.”

“Probably.” I gave him a hopeful look. “Or maybe she’ll just be a sweet angel who

never gets into any kind of trouble.”

Knox shook his head. “Speaking of fantasies... Have you started writing this new mountain mafia series I’m dying to read?”

"It's going pretty good, actually. Better than good. I think she's fueling my creativity." I rubbed my belly and smiled. "I just want to get as much done before she arrives. Then I can take some time off to just be a dad for a bit."

"Best-laid plans, huh?" Knox shrugged. "Don't worry. I'll be happy to babysit when I can so you can get writing done. Now that I'm only working on special projects, my schedule is a lot more open."

"Thank you. I'll definitely take you up on that. Writing has never been as much fun as it is now. The words just seem to flow so much easier than when I was alone."

"Well, you have a whole new perspective to draw from now. New experiences and feelings." He wagged his eyebrows. "New positions you can reference..."

"Knox!" I looked around the bakery to make sure no one could hear him. "I never should have told you about the swing."

"Of course you had to tell me. If you didn't, then we wouldn't have gotten one too." He put his hands over Henry's ears to shield them from whatever inappropriate thing he was about to say to me. "And I never would have gotten to play the alpha."

My jaw dropped. "You mean...you...to Luca?"

He laughed. "Don't you dare tell Walt." After a moment of thinking about it, he changed his mind. "Actually, if it'll help you get a turn, then go ahead and tell him. I can even share some of my favorite ways to get it just right."

"Sounds like fodder for a bestseller to me." And I had to admit I was a bit curious. Maybe when Walt was in a particularly horny mood, I'd suggest it.

Knox was a kindred spirit, someone who understood the complexities of being an omega in this family and had been instrumental in helping me balance my place in it.

"Come on." Knox scooted back and then stood up. "Let's get you home before you start nesting in the booth."

I stood and stretched out the kinks from sitting too long. "And um, if you want to text over a few suggested positions, I wouldn't mind that."

"I knew you wouldn't be able to resist." He put the diaper bag strap over his shoulder and headed toward the door. "Take care, Trey. And tell Walt he can thank me in wine."

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 10:58 am

WALT

The weekend dragged on, with Trey slowly tidying up every nook and cranny of our home. He was a whirlwind of restless energy, but his swollen belly made it hard for him to do everything at the pace he wanted. He organized bookshelves and fluffed pillows for the umpteenth time before I finally had enough.

"Come on, babe." I held out my hand to him as he passed in front of me. Again. "You've been at it all day. Why don't you take a break? I loved that my omega, round with our child, was still finding ways to nest and fuss over our home, but he needed to rest.

Trey hesitated as his hands ran over the back of the couch like he was contemplating one last adjustment. Then the call of the cushions won out and he slowly lowered himself onto the couch beside me. His eyes fluttered shut almost immediately.

I held him to my side as his chest rose and fell from sheer exhaustion. Even the air around him seemed to sigh with relief.

I couldn't help but smile as I watched him. Lately, he was never so peaceful as he was when he was asleep. With the baby coming any day now, his body was stretched to its limits...and so was his patience.

I grabbed a throw blanket off the back of the couch and draped it over his legs. It wasn't cold, but a cozy blanket was always nice during a nap.

Only a few minutes passed before Trey winced and then he jerked upright. His hand

instinctively landed on his belly, and his fingers pressed against a hard spot. "Oh."

"Everything alright?" I kept my voice calm, not wanting to startle him from his half-sleep but also nervous about what was happening.

He nodded, but the discomfort showing on his face didn't go away. His breath hitched when he shifted in an attempt to find a better position. But it was no use. The cramps had a grip on him now, and when he doubled over again, I knew it was time to take control of the situation.

"Let me help you up." I stood up and pulled Trey into my arms. "We'll call the?—"

Before I could finish my sentence, the unmistakable sound of fluids hitting the floor shocked us both. There was no mistaking it now. Our daughter was on her way whether we were ready or not.

And for the record, I was not.

"Okay, babe. We've got this." My words were more to myself than to Trey. My pulse quickened with anticipation, and I wondered if I was strong enough to get Trey through this. He was the strong one. He was brave and curious and always ready to explore.

I could do this. I would do this. For Trey and our daughter. Without another thought, I scooped Trey up in my arms and took him straight out to the car.

The drive to the hospital took longer than it should have. Each traffic light seemed to be timed to turn red just as we approached. Didn't the universe know we were in a hurry?

Trey clutched at my hand, his grip fierce despite the waves of pain washing over him. "You've got this, babe. You're so strong. Just a little while longer and you'll have our

baby in your arms.”

He nodded and did some of the breathing exercises he’d learned in birthing class.

We didn't speak much so he could focus on bringing our baby safely into the world.

Before long, hospital corridors beckoned, while nurses moved around us efficiently, guiding us to the delivery room where Trey would bring our daughter out and into my arms. The nurses praised him for his calm demeanor and commented on the speed at which he progressed through labor.

Despite having absolutely nothing to do with the process, my heart swelled with pride at how amazing my omega was.

He pushed a few times when the doctor told him to, and before I could really stress out, she was here. Our baby girl came out crying and throwing fists as if she were just as pissed to be woken up from her nap as Trey was.

They placed her onto Trey's chest, and the pure joy painted across his face was beyond words. Her tiny fingers grasped at the air before finding purchase around his pinky, claiming her daddy just as quickly as I did.

"Look at her, Walt." Trey's voice was laced with awe and adoration. "She's perfect."

Indeed, she was. And as tiny as she was, there was a fierce spark already lighting up her eyes. She was ours, made from our love.

I stared down at her sweet little face until a name came to me. "Let's call her Danika."

"Danika." Trey tested the name against his lips and then nodded. "Yeah, it suits her."

That moment with the three of us together for the first time felt like the completion of

some cosmic puzzle. All the pieces of our lives clicked into place at once.

The secrets we kept for the sake of family and safety didn't even seem to matter anymore. All that mattered to me was the tiny sleeping girl and her daddy.

"Welcome to the world, Danika." My finger was encircled by her impossibly small hand.

I looked at my mate and my daughter and a sense of peace settled over me. This was right, this was us. A mafia alpha, an omega romance novelist, and our newborn baby girl. No, it wasn't the start of a dumb joke. It was the start of an amazing life. One I wouldn't ever take for granted.

"I love you, both. Forever," Trey murmured as if reading my thoughts.

"Forever," I agreed, sealing the promise with a kiss to each of their foreheads.

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Forced marriages usually aren't fated. Except for those that are...

As the eldest alpha in his family, Andro is expected to take over control of the family when his father retires as the patriarch. But before that can happen, tradition dictates that Andro must be mated. And not just mated, but married. Only problem is that Andro has zero interest in taking a mate...or husband.

Joseph is the youngest son of the Santoro family...and the only omega. He's treated like dirt but he dutifully manages the books and does what his father asks of him-- legal or otherwise.

When Andro gets the bright idea to kidnap the mistreated Joey Santoro and force him

to become his mate, he has no idea what that could possibly lead to. Both of their lives are changed forever...and their priorities quickly shift away from the families they were raised in to the family they are raising together.

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