



Adrian (Southern Cross #1)

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Category: LGBT+

Description: Officer Adrian Cross wasn't expecting to find a mate anytime soon. He had a life, a job, and he had just wanted to help a young man who seemed sick and injured. He'd never expected to find his mate plastered to the concrete, but there he was, and it was clear he had suffered through a lot more than simple illness.

Omega Carter Goodwin had never met a kind person who didn't want to use him, abuse him, or both. After running from his abusive family pack, he stayed hidden, turning tricks to make what little money he could. Life quickly changed course, though, when a passing officer scooped him up off of the streets and showed him what kindness and love could feel like.

But Carter wouldn't be the only runaway omega discovered, and Officer Cross was about to find that the awaiting nightmare would be worse than he'd imagined.

Total Pages (Source): 11

Page 1

Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 7:18 am

~Carter~

“Can’t stand here. Move along.”

I would’ve argued, but simply I didn’t have the energy. Hell, I probably could’ve taken the human down, sick or not, but I also didn’t need the trouble. Ignoring the cop’s glare, I left the corner. There were other areas to find tricks. I hugged my tattered coat tighter around myself and fought back a cough. Every inhalation felt like shards of glass in my windpipe and lungs. Wolves didn’t get sick often, but this shit simply refused to go away.

I finally found another spot out of the cop’s sight and leaned against the building’s brick wall. Fuck, it was cold. The wind chilled me to the bone even through the coat. I quickly lost the battle with my lungs and coughed so much, I tasted blood. Shivering, I closed my eyes for just a moment. Sleep. All I wanted was sleep.

Sharp, excruciating pain shot through me a split second later, blinding and nauseating. Bile rose in my throat, and I rolled over to puke up the half doughnut I’d had earlier. It took a moment to dawn on me that I was on the cold sidewalk instead of standing. The world sort of swam in my peripheral vision. When something brushed my hair, I snarled and slapped at whatever it had been.

“Hey, easy. You’re hurt.”

I managed to look up at the person. My vision was hazy, but the unmistakable scents of chocolate and red wine filled my head, wrapping around my sleep-deprived brain. I tried to speak, but it took more energy than I had left. Another coughing fit took

hold, and I spit out blood. Then strong hands were lifting me. I wanted to protest, but my body and voice didn't obey. Unable to do a damn thing, I shivered and gave in, closing my eyes.

Sometime later, bright light woke me once more. I blinked my eyes open and stared up at a white tiled ceiling. I thought I heard beeping, and it took another moment before I realized where I was. Gasping, I tried to sit up, but the room spun, forcing me back down. A man approached the bed, and all I could smell were the addictive scents from earlier.

"Shh... you're safe."

I licked my lips to wet them. When a cup pressed to my mouth, I had little choice but to sip what I discovered was water. The man set the cup down and sat in the chair by the bed. I closed my eyes again to block the brightness.

"Where am I?"

"Jackson Memorial Hospital," the man said. The light dimmed a bit. "You fell and hit your head on the sidewalk."

"Who are you?"

"Adrian Cross. What's your name?"

"Carter Goodwin." I opened my eyes again and looked over. An enigmatic, light blue gaze met mine. "Why did you bring me here? I can't afford this."

"It's covered. What's important is that you're safe and getting treated. In addition to the fall injury, you have a rather nasty bout of pneumonia."

I had the feeling that was the case. It still didn't help the fact that I had absolutely no way to pay a fucking hospital bill. I lifted my right arm where the IV tubing was taped down. A blood pressure cuff was on my left bicep. I sighed.

"I can pay you—or whoever—back. Name your price: cash or sex."

A low, almost possessive growl snapped my attention back to Adrian. What the fuck?

"Absolutely not. Those days are over."

I scowled at him. "Who the—"

Adrian leaned closer, eyes narrowed. "I'm going to make this as clear as I can. You will be going home with me, and there will be no more sex with anyone else."

"Excuse me?" I tried to sit up again, determined to ignore the queasiness that lingered. "Who the fuck do you think you are?"

Adrian drew something from his pocket and flipped it open, revealing a badge. Fuck.

"So you're arresting me?"

"No." Adrian slipped the badge back into his pocket. "You're a wolf. You know damn well what I meant."

I swallowed and looked away. It explained the scents swirling in my head and overwhelming my senses. I'd heard stories all my life about mates, but that didn't mean I had to admit a fucking thing. "I don't know who you are, dude."

Before Adrian could reply, the curtain slid open.

“Ah, you’re awake,” the doctor said as he stepped into the room. “I’m Dr. Cross.” He extended a hand, which I shook. “How are you feeling?”

Dutifully ignoring the surly cop by the bed, I focused on the smiling doctor. “Like crap, to be honest.”

The doctor had me sit up a little to listen to my lungs and look at my head. Apparently, he was satisfied and removed the bandage completely. “I imagine so. The wound has healed nicely. As for the pneumonia, we started you on IV antibiotics. I’m going to write you a script for more to take home.” He glanced at Adrian, then back to me. “What pharmacy do you use?”

“Eastside Drugs,” Adrian said before I could utter a word.

The doctor raised one eyebrow, and something weird seemed to pass between him and the cop. Then the doctor nodded. “All right. Well, I’m going to have the nurse come in and remove the IV, and we’ll get you on your way.”

When he left, I finally looked at Adrian. “What the fuck?”

“We’ll discuss it later.”

I glared at him, a snarl building in my throat. I didn’t dare let it go. Cop or no, Adrian was an alpha. “How about you—”

A nurse knocked on the doorframe before coming into the room. Oblivious to the tension, she smiled. “Let’s get you unhooked and remove that IV. I’m sure your mate is more than ready to get out of here.”

Adrian stood. “I need to make a phone call. I’ll be back in a moment.”

I watched him leave and wondered if I could slip away before he returned. The man was fucking gorgeous, but being around him had my hackles up and my mind in turmoil. I kept my mouth shut, though, as the nurse took out the IV and handed me the discharge papers. I glanced at the notes and blinked. I'd been in here for five fucking hours?

“Damn. I was out that long?”

She nodded. “Yep. Your mate never left your side. Wish all partners were that devoted. You got a good one, honey.”

I wasn't so sure about that but managed to bite back a retort. “Yeah...”

Page 2

Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 7:18 am

~Adrian~

“Seriously?”

I crossed my arms and glared at my brother. “Yes.”

Colton shook his head. “Adrian—”

“There’s no fucking way I’m letting him walk away, Colt.”

“No, I imagine not, but he sure doesn’t seem to feel the same. You can’t just chain him to your bed until he’s on the same page.”

“I’m fully aware of that, asshole. I’m taking him home so he can recover. It will give us a chance to talk in private, too.”

“And if he wants to leave?” Colton asked, one eyebrow raised.

“Then I’ll take him wherever he wants to go. He’s not a prisoner.”

Colton sighed. “All right. I need to get back to my other patients. I’ve sent the script to the pharmacy. Keep me updated?”

“Of course.”

“Mom’s going to freak out. You know that, right? You’re the first to find a true mate. I think she was afraid we’d all grow old as bachelors and she’d never get grandkids.”

I couldn't help but smirk. "One step at a time."

Colton patted my shoulder and left for another patient's room. I closed my eyes and took a deep, calming breath. Maybe I had been a bit... abrasive and demanding. Carter was my mate, not a perp I had to chase down. Steeling myself for another round of vehement protests, I returned to the room. Carter had finished dressing and was on the bed, slipping on his battered shoes, when I walked in. The omega scowled at me. This whole scenario had been far easier in my head.

"Come on. Let's go get your prescription. We can talk."

"I should fucking leave. Cops are trouble, especially the assholes."

I figured I deserved that. "I'm sorry."

The apology seemed to surprise Carter, and the omega just stared at me. Then the thin shoulders slumped, and he let out a defeated, resigned sigh. "Let's just go."

I led Carter out of the hospital and to my car parked in the ER visitors' lot. When I opened the passenger door, Carter eyed me with distrust.

"I'm not going to hurt you."

Carter finally got in, and I shut the door with a sigh. I wasn't too proud to admit I deserved anything and everything Carter dished out. I honestly had no idea how to fix this, though. I slid behind the wheel and buckled before starting the car. We swung by the pharmacy's drive-thru a few minutes later. Thankfully, Chase was working the window this evening. When he gave me a questioning look, I just shook my head.

"Date of birth?" Chase asked.

“January 3rd,” Carter muttered.

I glanced back at Chase. He just rolled his eyes.

“Name?”

“Carter Goodwin,” I said.

Chase retrieved the meds, and I pulled out my credit card to pay for them. When he sent the receipt and prescriptions back through the little drawer, there was a handwritten note tucked beneath my card.

There’s a hell of a story here. Talk later?

I nodded and put my card back in my wallet before handing Carter the meds. “See you later.”

Carter didn’t speak until we left the drive-thru. “You know him?”

“Chase is my youngest brother,” I replied. I glanced at him briefly. “Dr. Colton Cross is the oldest.”

“How many brothers do you have?”

“Four. Colton, then me. Hayden and Ian are twins, and Chase is the youngest.” I looked over at him before refocusing on the road. “You?”

Out of the corner of my eye, I saw him shrug. He continued staring out the window. “I, uh, don’t know at this point. I left my family pack several years ago, but I had two back then. Now I have no clue. Maybe more, maybe not.”

I wanted to ask if that's why he was working the streets, but I'd already put my foot in my mouth and let my temper get the better of me. The last thing I needed was to scare my mate off. Before I could open my mouth, though, he sighed.

"I started offering myself up a few years ago. Always used a rubber, though. Can't get knocked up."

It took a considerable amount of effort to squash the surge of anger. I wasn't pissed off at him, just the circumstances. "How are you feeling?"

"A little better, to be honest. The meds they gave me in the ER helped."

I nodded and turned down the road that led to our family's ranch. Technically, it was more like a compound since there were several buildings. The main house, though, was where we all lived. Carter whistled low when I pulled up in my usual spot to the side of the circular driveway.

"Damn."

"We—my brothers and I—live here with our mother. We each have our own section, though. I love my family, but they can be insanely annoying."

I got out and went around to open his door before he could. He gave me a wary, confused look. Car locked, meds in his hand, I led him to the front door. It opened just as we neared it. I groaned and steeled myself for the inevitable.

"Uh..." Hayden blinked. "Adrian?"

"Yeah," I said, raking a hand through my hair. "Carter, this is Hayden." I pointed to the taller of the twins. "And that's Ian. Guys, this is Carter."

He shook their hands. “Um, nice to meet you both,” he muttered.

Hayden smirked and shook his head. “I’d love to be a fly on the wall for this, but I have to get going. I’m already running late.”

Ian twirled his keys around his finger. “You gotta tell me how it goes. I’m out, dude.”

We watched the twins leave, and then we went inside. With Chase at the pharmacy and Colt still at the hospital, it left us with just Mom to contend with. She wasn’t strict or demanding, but she wasn’t a push-over either. I dealt with all manner of criminals—human and not—on a daily basis, but introducing my true mate to Estell Cross was a daunting prospect.

“Who...?”

I’d barely had the chance to shut the front door before turning to face our mother. “Mom—”

“No, no,” she said, holding up one hand like she did when one of her sons had a serious talking-to coming. “Young man, what’s your name?”

Carter cleared his throat. “Carter Goodwin, ma’am.”

She nodded. “Well, it is wonderful to meet you, Carter. Please call me Estell. Make yourself at home.” She gestured to the large sitting room where she’d been. “I need to speak with Adrian for a moment. Have a seat, get comfortable. We will be right back.”

She didn’t say another word as we watched Carter walk into the sitting room. Then she turned to me, her expression unreadable. She crossed her arms over her chest, one eyebrow raised. Even at my age, that look made me shiver.

“Start talking.”

I sighed and leaned against the wall. “I was leaving the bar and found him on the sidewalk. He’d passed out and hit his head. I took him to the ER. Colt said he had pneumonia. Well, and a head wound, but that’s healed.”

“So your brother met your mate before I did?”

“I wasn’t going to bring him here until he got checked out, Mom. He’s here now.”

“Colt texted me,” she said. Before I could reply, she raised a hand again. “He only wanted to give me a heads up, so don’t get pissed off at him.”

“He had no—”

She stepped closer, eyes narrowed. “Are you arguing with me?”

I swallowed and shook my head. “No, ma’am.”

“Good. Now I want to meet your mate properly.” She motioned toward the sitting room. “After you, Officer Cross.”

Page 3

Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 7:18 am

~Carter~

I'd met many intimidating people throughout my life, on and off the streets, but the Cross matriarch put them all to shame. She exuded friendliness, even caring, but there was also a strong, no-nonsense air about her. She looked much like her sons, though shorter. She was closer to my own height of five-six, while her sons were much taller. Her dark brown hair was sprinkled with a bit of gray here and there, but her eyes weren't blue like Adrian's. They were a rich honey brown, warm and welcoming.

She walked into the room, Adrian behind her. She took a seat in a high-backed chair by the couch. "Now for proper introductions," she said, her expression daring Adrian to ignore the obvious order.

Adrian sat on the couch beside me. "Carter, meet Estell Cross. Mom, meet my mate, Carter Goodwin."

Estell smiled and reached out one hand. I shook it. "Welcome to Southern Cross, Carter."

"Southern Cross?"

She waved a hand in the air, as if indicating the entire room—or maybe their land in general. "At one time, our family raised all manner of animals here on the ranch. Now we just rescue dogs. Tell me about yourself."

I wasn't sure how to answer. "Uh..."

“Mom—”

Estell ignored Adrian’s protest and gave me a soft smile. “It’s all right, Carter. No one is perfect—including myself. Before I met Edmund, my late husband and mate, I made my living on the streets after my own family pack dissolved.”

“What happened?”

“My grandfather was the alpha, and when he died, two of my uncles fought for control. The pack fractured completely. Everyone went their separate ways, and I found it difficult to survive as a single, unmated female. I used my feminine wiles to make money, mostly from human men who wanted to experience sex with a female of our kind.”

That was more information than I’d expected. I cleared my throat and took a deep breath. If she could be so open about it, then I could, too.

“My pack has its collective claws firmly entrenched in the babyfarming industry.” I tore my gaze from hers and stared down at my hands. It took a considerable amount of effort to stave off the shaking. “I got away when I was fourteen, right before they could use me in their farming.”

A touch of nausea swept through me at the memories. Getting away had been almost impossible, and I’d yet to shake the fear of them finding me again. A strong hand rested on my right thigh, reassuring despite our initial hiccups upon meeting just a few hours ago. A gentle touch lifted my head until I met Estell’s sympathetic gaze.

“Don’t ever feel ashamed of your past. You had no control over their despicable practices. You escaped, though, and you survived the best way you knew how. There’s no shame in that.”

“Thank you,” I whispered.

Estell smiled and sat back. Her gaze shifted to Adrian. “Take care of him as you all have taken care of Chase.”

“Omegas are to be protected at all costs,” Adrian replied. “Ethan says it’s a mantra the Silverthornes live by.”

“A very good one, too,” she said with a nod. “Now then, Carter. Are you hungry?”

“I am, actually. I don’t know when I last... had anything except half a doughnut.”

There was no pity, no cooing over how sorry she was or how sad my situation had been. She simply stood and offered a hand. I took it and stood as well.

“Let’s go get you something to eat, and then I’m sure you could use some rest.”

She didn’t let go and led me across the entryway into a cavernous kitchen. It was the biggest one I’d ever seen. She steered me to a stool at the island.

“We have a bit of roast and vegetables from last night. Would you like some?”

“Yes, please. Thank you.”

Estell set about warming up the food. I settled on the stool, and Adrian sat beside me. I had so many questions but no clue where to start. Estell started chatting as she worked, detailing their family’s history, the ranch, everything. I couldn’t help but smile. She clearly adored her sons and their home. A few minutes later, she turned and set down a plate overflowing with the most amazing food I’d ever seen. The rich aromas filled me almost as much as Adrian’s scent.

“Eat up and rest,” Estell said after washing her hands. “I need to make some phone calls, but Adrian knows where to find me if needed. When you’ve had some time to settle in, I’d love to give you a full tour.”

“Thank you,” I said before taking a bite of roast. The moan slipped free, and Estell chuckled. “It’s so good.”

“Thank you.” She pointed at Adrian. “Let him rest before you do anything.”

Adrian snorted but nodded. “Yes, ma’am.”

Estell left the kitchen, and the silence stretched between myself and Adrian as I finished eating. He got up and grabbed a bottle of water from the fridge. After setting it in front of me, he leaned on the island counter, facing me. When I was done, he put the dishes in the dishwasher.

“I know we kind of got off on the wrong foot. For that, I’m sorry. I can be a bit abrasive.”

I took a drink and contemplated how to answer. I decided the truth was best. “You’re an asshole.” He nodded and stared down at the countertop. “But thank you.”

“You’re welcome,” he said, looking back up at me. “How about some rest?”

“I could use a nap that doesn’t involve a hospital bed.”

He chuckled softly, and the sound made me shiver the slightest bit. I was attracted to him, no doubt about it, but this wasn’t some minor crush. Chocolate and red wine filled my head, the scents making it crystal clear that we were mates.

I followed him upstairs and down a hall. He unlocked a door and opened it, revealing

a large living room. To the side, I saw the bedroom through another open door. Adrian locked the outer door and motioned toward the bedroom. When we entered, he led me over to the bed. Then he whisked my T-shirt over my head before tossing it to the side. My breath caught when he started on my tattered jeans.

“You need rest,” he said. I held onto his shoulders and let him finish undressing me. He left my underwear on, though. Then he pulled back the blanket and top sheet on the bed. “I want you. God, I do. But you need time to get over the pneumonia first.”

I lay down, surprised when he undressed and did the same. Rolling onto my side, I shivered when his taller, muscular body pressed against me. I’d never actually slept with anyone without having sex, and, even then, I’d certainly never fallen asleep beside someone. One strong arm draped over me and held me tight.

“What do I smell like to you?” I whispered after a few moments of silence.

“I knew who you were to me the second I smelled honey and vanilla.”

Page 4

Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 7:18 am

~Adrian~

At some point, we'd changed positions, and Carter wound up curled around me. His head rested in the crook of my left arm, and his was draped over my torso. God, he smelled amazing. Every breath I took drew in the sweet honey and vanilla that had hit me the second I'd found him on the sidewalk. I hadn't intended on any of this. All I'd meant to do was help a young man when he needed it. Now I had a true mate.

A knock sounded on the outer door, and I bit back a grumble. I managed to get out of bed without waking Carter, tugged on my jeans, and went to the front room. I opened the door and stepped aside.

"So...?"

I gestured toward the bedroom. "He's still asleep, but, yes, he's my mate."

Chase sat on the couch and waited until I settled into the recliner. "What happened? When you two came by the pharmacy, he didn't seem too happy."

Raking my fingers through my hair, I sighed. "Long story."

I spent the next ten minutes telling him how I'd seen Carter hit the pavement, how I'd rushed over to help only to discover exactly who Carter was to me. Chase's smile was a bit wistful as he listened. I wanted to reassure him that he'd find his own alpha one of these days, but I think he was close to giving up hope.

"I'm assuming you haven't claimed him yet."

“No. The cut on his head has healed, but he has pneumonia. There’s no way in hell I’m going to put him through that until he’s stronger.”

“Ah, that explains the antibiotic you picked up earlier. Being a wolf, though, he’ll get rid of it fairly quickly.”

I nodded. “I thought Colt was going to ream me out at the ER.”

Chase chuckled. “What about Mom?”

“She chastised me for hearing about Carter from Colt before me.”

“He seriously told her?”

“Yeah. I thought about having a talk with him when he gets home, but it’s water under the bridge. Mom went into, well, den mother mode and fed Carter when we got here. She even told him about her own past before she met Dad.”

Chase’s eyes widened. “Wow...”

“I think it was mainly to help Carter relax. He, uh, had much the same kind of past.”

“I wondered about that,” Chase said. “How is he doing?”

“Still unsure, and, to be honest, it’s mostly my fault. I might’ve verbally staked my claim a bit... assertively.”

Chase sort of glared at me. “You fucking know better than that. I’d walk away from any alpha who tried to pull that shit.”

Sighing, I rubbed my hands down my face. “I know, I know,” I grumbled. “I

apologized—a few times, actually.”

“Adrian, you can’t just barge in and expect an omega—true mate or no—to fall at your feet. We don’t work that way, and you know it. Give him some time. Let him come to you. You’re mates, so he will, but it has to be at his pace. Any idea of his heat cycle?”

“Not yet. We haven’t done much but casual chit-chat. Hell, I haven’t even kissed him.”

“Like I said, let Carter come to you.”

Before I could reply, there was movement at the bedroom door. I twisted around and saw Carter standing in the doorway. I extended a hand, and, after a moment, he took it and rounded the recliner. He sat somewhat stiffly on my lap.

“Carter, this is Chase, our youngest brother. Chase, this is Carter, my mate.”

Chase smiled and held out his hand. “It’s nice to meet you in person and not behind a pane of bulletproof glass.”

Carter shook Chase’s hand. “Thank you, and likewise. You’re an omega?”

“I am,” Chase said. “Unmated, though. At this point, I’m fairly sure that won’t ever change. My brothers think I’m too picky.”

“I think you’ll find your alpha,” Carter replied. “You never really know what Fate has in store.”

Chase chuckled. “True, very true.” He stood, as did we. “I’d love to stay and chat, but it’s been a long day. I’d be more than happy to talk more, Carter. My rooms are right

across the hall.”

Carter nodded. “Thanks.”

“Anytime.”

I waited until the door shut before turning to him. Hands shoved into his jeans pockets, Carter studied me, his expression unreadable. I’d be able to discern his thoughts and emotions much better once I claimed him, but, for now, I was stumped.

“In answer to Chase’s question, my heat is about a week away.” He pulled his hands from his pockets and closed the distance between us. He had to tilt his head to look up at me. This close, his scent made me dizzy and ache. His smile made it clear he knew what effect he had on me. Omegas might not be able to shift, but they sure as fuck weren’t helpless. They were far more powerful in the grand scheme of things than most folks understood.

“I think—”

He went up on his tiptoes and pressed a soft, chaste kiss to my mouth, silencing me. His breath warmed my lips, and I breathed in the intoxicating honey-and-vanilla scent.

“If you don’t mind, I’m going to grab a shower.”

I watched him walk back into the bedroom and had to adjust myself when my jeans got too tight. From the waist up, he was naked, and my hands itched to map every single inch of his body.

Carter paused in the bathroom doorway to flash me a teasing smile before shutting the door. I struggled with whether or not to follow. His expression had been inviting,

teasing, but I knew I'd never be able to resist the urge to sink my teeth into his shoulder. Claiming took a lot out of an omega, and I wasn't sure he was ready for it.

The shower started, and I imagined him stepping into the water. Visions of it raining down onto his lithe body tormented me to the point my knees went weak. I dropped into the recliner and growled. My heart pounded, and my wolf was right at the edge of my psyche, snarling and pacing. I stood abruptly and raked a hand through my hair. The ache—the need—to take him, fill him, and knot him was almost too much.

Before I could come to a decision, though, he reappeared in the bedroom doorway, long wet hair clinging to his bare chest and a towel wrapped around his hips. He smirked at me and shook his head. Then the towel hit the floor.

“Please tell me you don't miss clues this much when you're working.”

Page 5

Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 7:18 am

~Carter~

In two long strides, he was so close, I could feel the warmth of his breath. Fingers speared through my hair, and I opened to a kiss that sent shockwaves through me. Adrian wasn't the least bit hesitant and took over, tongue thrusting into my mouth to toy with my own. He tasted faintly of coffee, and my head swam with the overwhelming scents of wine and chocolate. It was so much stronger now, intensified by arousal and what I realized was his impending rut.

Adrian growled and swept me up into his arms before carrying me to his bed. He put me down on it, then knelt between my legs. I tipped my head as he kissed a path along my neck. A part of me prayed for a bite, but he didn't do it. Instead, he rose up and stripped. I licked my lips as I took in the sight. God, he was gorgeous. Muscles, light dusting of dark blonde hair, and a thick cock with a bead of precome at the tip.

Adrian grabbed lube from the bedside table drawer, and I noticed a rubber package in his hand as well. Before he could open it, though, I stopped him.

“Carter—”

“We're mates,” I said. “That means you won't run off. Besides, I think your mother would skin you alive if you did.”

He chuckled and tossed the square package back into the drawer. “Yes, she would.”

Adrian slicked two fingers and stroked them over my hole. I grabbed my legs and held them up, angling my hips in an effort to get him inside. Smirking, he thrust both

fingers deep into me, and I groaned, eyes rolling back a little. He worked my ass open, twisting, turning, spreading his fingers apart. Fuck, it felt beyond amazing, but I was impatient and growled at him. Adrian's gaze went white-hot, and then the fingers were gone. A moment later, his thick cock filled me, the burn of the stretch absolutely fucking perfect.

“Fuck...”

He braced himself on his hands, withdrew a bit, then slammed into me over and over. Every single one took my breath away—almost as much as the look in his eyes. I never thought I'd find my mate, but here he was, hot breath panting across my lips, down my jaw to my neck. I tipped my head, aching to feel his bite.

“Please...”

Growling, Adrian grabbed my hands and pinned them to the bed. I locked my legs around his waist, the angle allowing him to nail my prostate. Shouting, I bucked as I shot. A heartbeat later, he shifted. I cried out as the cock buried in my ass thickened to twice its original size. Adrian tightened his grip on my hands and bit.

Pleasure I never thought possible flashed through me, and I struggled against his hold. Adrian thrust in hard and strengthened the bite. Heat filled my ass, and the knot formed to lock it inside. It sent me barreling over the edge again and left me breathless.

Panting, I closed my eyes and licked my lips. Adrian returned to his human form and kissed me softly, far gentler than I ever thought he could be.

“It will take a few minutes for the knot to shrink,” he murmured. Then he rolled us until I was on top. I draped over him, head resting on his broad chest. “Are you all right?”

I nodded. “I am now.”

His chuckle rumbled through me. “Good to know.” He sighed and rubbed both hands along my back. “I’m sorry.”

I lifted my head to look at him. “Why?”

“We started off on the wrong foot. My brothers—and Mom—tell me I can be an asshole. At work, it serves me well sometimes, but you don’t deserve it.”

Smiling, I folded my hands on his chest and rested my chin on them. “Well, you are an asshole, but you’re also nicer than I think you give yourself credit for. I mean, you swooped in when I needed help on the street. You knew what I did to make money, but you still wanted me as your mate.”

“About that... the money-making bit,” Adrian said. “I want you to stop.”

“Can’t say I’m surprised,” I said. “Okay.”

Adrian studied me in silence for a moment. “Okay...? No argument or anything?”

“Nope. I didn’t like doing it, Adrian. It was just the quickest and easiest way to make money. I don’t have any kind of ID, so getting employed anywhere was out of the question.”

“No ID at all?”

I shook my head. “Omegas weren’t allowed to have one in my family pack.”

Adrian sighed and wrapped his arms around me. He kissed the top of my head. “We need to fix that. You need an ID.”

I felt the knot shrinking and wanted to beg for it again. I'd never allowed an alpha to knot me before. It always seemed too... intimate. With Adrian, though, it felt perfect. He rolled us again and kissed me before pulling out. Before I could get up to find something to wipe off with, though, he put a hand on my belly.

“Stay put.”

Nodding, I watched him head to the bathroom. I heard water running, and then he was back with a wet cloth. I moaned softly as he cleaned me off, his touch gentle when he wiped the last of his semen and my slick from my ass. I closed my eyes so he couldn't see the shock I knew was in them. I'd never had anyone do that for me, and I wasn't entirely sure how to feel about it. He tossed the cloth in the direction of the bathroom and bent down for another kiss. It seemed like he couldn't get enough, but, then again, neither could I.

“How about we get a nap? Then I'm sure Mom would love to give you the grand tour.”

“How many buildings are there, anyway? The house is huge, but I saw other structures.”

“We have four other buildings, mostly for storage, to be honest. When Dad passed, my brothers and I moved back home. The bulk of our belongings are stored. Those buildings once housed other pack members, but with Dad's death, the pack kind of... dissolved. Most folks moved out of town, some decided to go the lone route, and a few joined other packs.”

I nodded and waited until he was settled before resting my head on his chest. “I was too scared to join another one after I left my old one.”

“What pack was it?”

Sighing, I figured I might as well be honest. “Ironcrest.”

Adrian stilled from where he’d been petting me. “Seriously?”

“Yes.” I tipped my head to see his face. “You’re not angry, are you?”

“Why would I be?”

“I knew they were causing trouble with a local pack, but I didn’t realize it was the Cross family until I caught wind of rumors on the streets.”

“Yeah, we’ve had a few run-ins,” Adrian said. “Mostly just troublemakers either at the bar or perps I’ve encountered. Can I ask you something?”

“Of course.”

“Are all the alphas involved in the babyfarming scheme?”

I swallowed the lump in my throat and nodded. “Yes. I had no one to turn to. It’s why I ran.”

Adrian hugged me tighter. “You’re safe now. I swear no one will ever touch you, Carter.”

“I never thought I’d find my mate.”

He chuckled. “Likewise.”

Page 6

Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 7:18 am

~Adrian~

“Are you fucking serious?”

I nodded and took a sip of beer. Colton looked as disgusted as I’d felt upon learning about my mate’s former pack. “Unfortunately.”

My brother sat back in the dining chair and shook his head. He and Chase were the most gentle out of the five of us, but right now, Colton appeared to be contemplating ripping someone to shreds. I didn’t blame him. My hackles were still up.

“I can’t fathom how someone could do that to their own flesh and blood. I mean... the thought of something like that happening to Chase makes me physically ill.”

“I get it,” I said. Thankfully, that would never be a possibility. Chase had four older brothers who would kill for him. We’d been protecting him since we’d found out, when he hit age ten, that he was an omega.

Colton sighed and took a drink of his Coke. While the rest of us loved the taste of alcohol, he didn’t. Hell, the man didn’t even smoke. “How is Carter doing?”

“Much better. Thank you. I think the pneumonia is almost gone. He hasn’t coughed at all since he started the antibiotic. His head is completely healed, and he took his evening meds before Mom kidnapped him for a tour.”

“A tour,” Colton said, one eyebrow raised. “You mean she’s going to regale him with every embarrassing story from your childhood.”

I chuckled and polished off my beer. “Among other things, I imagine.” At Colton’s confused expression, I smirked. “I’ve claimed him, and he insisted on going bare.”

Colton laughed and just rolled his eyes. “When do you want to bet the baby stuff will start arriving?”

“I’m thinking probably a week. I mean, she has to order it first. Then there’s shipping time.” I toyed with the label on the empty bottle and contemplated telling him about Carter’s background. Ironcrest had moved into the area not long ago, but since this was the closest city, it made sense why Carter ended up here.

“What is it?” Colton asked me.

I stared down at the bottle. “He escaped his family pack a few years ago when the whole babyfarming shit started.”

“Yeah...”

“Ironcrest.”

When I looked up, Colton was scowling.

“Why am I not surprised to hear they are the ones behind it? Do they know where he is? From everything I’ve heard, Ironcrest wolves aren’t the type to just let an omega—especially one capable of carrying a pup—walk away like that.”

“I don’t know,” I said. “Neither does he. He’s kept a fairly low profile and was really picky about his johns.”

Colton grimaced and took a sip of Coke. I could tell there was something else on his mind, but I didn’t say anything. After a moment, he sighed. “We had a patient come

in this afternoon. EMTs found him walking along the roadside, bloodied and delirious. Fever, vomiting, excruciating pain.”

“Fuck. What the hell?”

“Miscarriage,” Colton said, meeting my gaze. “He almost bled out as a result.”

“Ironcrest?”

“Not sure. He was in and out of it from infection when I got off work. He was admitted, though, so he’s still there.”

I blew out a breath. “You think he’s up to talking? Maybe tomorrow?”

Colton shrugged. “You can try. I’m not sure if he’ll be very forthcoming. He wasn’t with the EMTs or anyone at the hospital. I didn’t get a chance to see him myself, though.”

The knowledge that Carter could’ve wound up the same way made me sick to my stomach. “We have to do something about the Ironcrest wolves.”

“What?”

“They’ve been causing trouble left and right,” I said. “Minor shit, but who’s to say it won’t escalate? Especially now that they’ve lost two omegas.”

Colton seemed to think about it and surprised me with a nod. He wasn’t the type to run in, guns blazing. He preferred to stay in the background and make sure others were safe and healthy. We all knew how to fight, though, thanks to our father.

“Believe it or not, I agree. I just don’t know how .”

“Leave that to me.”

Colton groaned. “Adrian—”

“Don’t worry. I’m not going into this half-cocked, Colt. Ironcrest has more wolves than we can handle on our own. I need to talk to the guys at work first.”

“Don’t do anything stupid,” Colton said. “You’re no doubt going to be a father in a few months.”

“Speaking of Carter, I need to get him an ID. He said omegas weren’t allowed to have any kind of identification.”

Colton nodded. “The one who came in today didn’t either. All he could do was tell us his name and date of birth.”

“Text me his info. I’ll see what I can do about getting him an ID as well.”

The front door shut, and then Carter and Mom walked into the kitchen. I held out a hand, and Carter sat on my lap sideways. Mom dropped onto the chair beside Colton. She looked tired but happy.

“This place is so much bigger than I thought,” Carter said. “There’s a lot more land than what’s visible from the front.”

“Well, we did run a full farm at one point,” I replied before nuzzling the bend of his neck. I breathed in deep, pulling his intoxicating scent of honey and vanilla into my lungs. “I have to go into work tonight, but you’ll be safe here. If you have any troubles, Colton and Mom are here. Chase is, too, but he tends to keep to himself.”

“I’ll be fine,” Carter said, smiling.

Mom cleared her throat. “Let’s get some dinner before you go then.”

“I can help,” Carter said.

Much to my and Colt’s surprise, Mom didn’t argue. Carter got up and joined her on the other side of the island. They chatted like they’d known one another for decades. Colt and I exchanged glances, and he smiled and shook his head. When he stood, he patted my shoulder.

“I need to get out of these clothes and grab a shower. It was a long damn night.”

I nodded, and he left the kitchen. I sat back in the chair and watched Mom and Carter work on dinner. Mom laughed at something Carter said and gave him a hug. I’d never seen her so relaxed with anyone. At one point, my mate flashed me a smile that made me want to drag him back to our room.

It was going to be a long night at work.

Page 7

Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 7:18 am

~Carter~

After we finished dinner, I offered to load up the dishwasher. Estell kissed my cheek and thanked me before heading to her office. I had no idea what she actually did in there, but I figured it had something to do with their dog rescue. We'd visited the pups on our tour, and I'd fallen head over heels for one in particular. Her name was Casey, and she was an adorable mix of what looked like a Pomeranian and a beagle. Estell had called her a PomBee. All of the dogs were cute, but something about Casey just had my heart in knots.

I'd just put the last dish in the dishwasher when the youngest Cross brother walked into the kitchen. Chase yawned and stretched before grabbing a couple of Cokes from the fridge. He handed one to me and motioned toward the living room.

"Join me?"

"Sure."

I followed him and settled on the couch while he dropped into one of the recliners. He leaned his head back and closed his eyes, giving me a chance to study him. He was closer to my age, I think, but I wasn't sure.

"Can I ask you something?"

"Of course."

"How old are you? You don't look any older than about thirty or so."

He smiled and rolled his head a little to look over at me. “Forty-six. What about you?”

“Thirty-eight. Nobody ever believes me when I tell them.”

Chase chuckled and nodded before taking a sip of Coke. “I get it. All my coworkers are humans, and any time we get a new person, they think everybody’s joking when my age comes up.”

I could believe that. Chase looked like he was in his late twenties like me, but the man had a PhD, I’d found out. He wasn’t a pharmacy tech; he was the actual pharmacist.

“Colt’s pushing ninety,” he said. “Adrian is eighty-six. Hayden and Ian are fifty-three, though Hayden will try to convince you he’s the older one. Only by five minutes, I might add.”

“What’s it like having so many brothers?”

Chase sighed and stared up at the ceiling. “Frustrating but good. When the family found out I had a uterus forming at age ten, my brothers decided I needed to be coddled and protected. I blame Adrian for it, to be honest. His best friend is Ethan Levy. Ethan and his mate Taylor recently joined the Silverthorne pack, and they have this motto: ‘omegas are to be protected at all costs.’”

“Not a bad motto.”

“True.” He glanced over at me. “What’s your story anyway?”

“I, uh, fled my family pack a few years ago. They wanted to use me in their babyfarming scheme.”

Chase scowled. “Seriously? That’s barbaric.”

“Yeah. I couldn’t get a regular job, though, so I resorted to... other methods of making money.”

He nodded. “So did Mom before she met our dad. She’ll be the first to tell you not to be ashamed.”

“She already did,” I said with a smile.

Chase sighed and closed his eyes once more. After a few moments of silence, he asked, “what is it like?”

“What do you mean?”

“Having an alpha mate. I’ve met many guys, have had quite a few lovers, but none of them ever felt right. I used to believe my true mate was out there, but I haven’t met him yet.”

“It’s... well, I’d say it was awesome finally meeting mine, but we didn’t exactly get started out on the right foot.”

Chase snorted. “Color me surprised. Adrian can be an ass. I think it’s probably due to his job, to be honest. He has to take a hard stance sometimes, and it’s kind of jaded his outlook.”

That made sense. I thought about things he had to deal with as a cop and couldn’t really fault him for being abrasive.

“He’s not so bad in private. Hell, I think he’s going to be a great dad.” I caught Chase’s gaze when he looked over at me. “I think you all will be when the times

come.”

Chase smiled. “I like to think so. Our dad was awesome. I hope to be even a fraction of what he had been.”

“What happened to him? Your mom didn’t really go into detail.”

“Rival pack,” Chase said. “Ironcrest has been a thorn in our sides for a very long time. There were quite a few clashes even before I was born. I was six when Dad faced off against one of the Ironcrest wolves. Not the pack leader, mind you, but it was a fairly big fight. Dad took the asshole down, but he died from sepsis. We think the Ironcrest wolf used poison.”

I swallowed and tore my gaze from Chase’s. “Knowing them, most likely.” When he didn’t reply, I looked back over at Chase and sighed. “I am—well, was —an Ironcrest.”

“Then I’m really glad you got away,” Chase said. “If they keep giving us grief and trying to encroach on our territory, it’s not going to end well.”

“If I can help, I will. I want them gone—permanently.”

“Understood completely.”

“Question... what happens to the dogs your family rescues?”

“We adopt them out. Obviously, we vet the people who want them. The dogs we take in were either abandoned, strays, or were abused. We’re the ones who rehab them whenever the cops have to remove them from bad situations.” He smiled at me, the expression one of knowing. “So which one?”

I laughed and shook my head. “Am I that obvious?”

Chase shrugged. “The pups are adorable. I don’t blame you.”

“Casey,” I said. “Fairly sure she and I bonded.”

“Tell Mom then. The only reason why the dogs stay in kennels is because she would never be able to rehome any of them. She’d get too attached.”

“I need to talk to Adrian, too. Hell, I’ve never had a pet of any kind.”

“Casey is his favorite,” Chase said with a grin. “For now, though, I’m going to grab me something to eat and then crash. It’s been a long damn day.”

“I don’t blame you.”

We sat there in comfortable silence for another few minutes before Chase finally got up. He wished me goodnight and left the living room. I closed my eyes and leaned my head back against the couch. It felt weird not worrying about whether or not I’d be mugged... or worse. For the first time in my life, I truly felt safe .

Page 8

Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 7:18 am

~Adrian~

“Come in.”

I poked my head in the doorway and held up my badge. “Good evening, Mr. Nolan,” I said as I walked into the room. “I’m Officer Adrian Cross. How are you feeling?”

The omega, Anthony, yawned and shrugged. “Better than I was.”

I pulled up a chair and sat by the bed. “Good to hear. I was hoping you could give me a bit more info.”

“I’ll tell you what I can, but I honestly don’t know how much help I can be.”

I took out a small notebook and pen. “It’s quite understandable given the circumstances. I was told you were found on the road by EMTs. What happened?”

Anthony sighed and stared out the window of his fourth-floor room. “I imagine you’ve heard the name Ironcrest.”

“Unfortunately, yes. Is that your family pack?”

“Yeah. They’ve started pushing their way into the babyfarming market. I was supposed to be part of it. We omegas are held under guard, but I managed to slip away because the beta guarding me was an idiot. I knew I had a miscarriage before I left. So did the pack doc. He ordered me beaten as a result.”

I somehow managed to tamp down the ungodly surge of disgust and anger and focused instead on taking notes. If it were up to me, I'd destroy the entire fucking pack. "They beat omegas for miscarriages?"

He nodded. "The doc—and the pack leaders—claim we make them happen so we won't be pregnant anymore." He rested a hand over his lower belly. "I always wanted kids, Officer Cross. I would never do anything like that."

"No, I totally believe you. I know this is a difficult topic, but, if you can, I need to know anything and everything you can tell me about Ironcrest leadership and inner workings."

"If it means they pay for the abuse I and other omegas have dealt with, I'll do whatever you ask."

For the next half hour, we talked. He gave me details on every aspect of the Ironcrest pack he could possibly think of, including things we hadn't known. The info was beyond invaluable. I finally closed the notebook and smiled at him.

"You have been more helpful than you can possibly imagine. Thank you, Mr. Nolan."

"Please call me Tony, and you're welcome. I don't know where I'll go once I get out of here, but I'll try to swing by the police station if I can think of anything else."

I thought about it for a moment before replying. I knew Mom would be fine with the idea, especially since we had more than enough room. "Actually... I have a suggestion. Don't feel like you have to agree, but our family pack has a lot of space—in the main house and in a couple of other buildings. You're more than welcome."

He stared at me for a few seconds, uncertainty clear on his face. "I..." He sighed.

“Can I think about it?”

“Of course.” I handed him my business card. “My work number is on there, but so is my personal cell phone. Call or text me anytime.”

“Thank you, Officer Cross.”

“Call me Adrian,” I said, smiling as I stood. “I need to get back to the station, but I’m here if you need anything.”

“Okay.”

I left the hospital and headed out to my cruiser. Thanks to the information he’d given me, I could start formulating a rough plan on how to handle the Ironcrest pack. With no humans being involved, it left us to tackle this issue alone. That’s precisely what we wanted, too. Human politics and red tape got in the way more often than not. Now that two omegas had fled Ironcrest, I had the feeling their pack would amp up the troublemaking. I just hoped it didn’t wind up like the messes the Silverthornes had to wade into—not once, but twice.

My phone chimed with a text message when I got into the car. I couldn’t help but laugh when I pulled up Carter’s text, complete with a picture of him snuggling with one of the rescue pups. A part of me wasn’t surprised to see it was my own fave, Casey.

“I see. Have I been replaced so quickly?”

He sent the eyeroll emoji. “Chase said Casey is your favorite, too.”

“Yep. We need to dog-proof our rooms, but I’d love to take her in. Does she need anything? Mom and Ian are the ones who handle the bulk of the rescue work since the

rest of us have outside jobs.”

“Nope, but there is something I need.”

“Anything,” I typed.

“A pregnancy test.”

I stared at those words, an indescribable feeling filling me. Smiling, I replied, “will do. I’ll see you in a few hours.”

“Sounds good.”

I set my phone in its dashboard holder and started the car. I was going to be a dad.

* * *

“Need anything else before I head out, Chief?”

“Nah. Any update on the Ironcrest crap?”

I handed him my notes. “Tony Nolan was quite helpful, actually.”

Chief read the notes and nodded before handing the notebook back. “How’s he doing?”

“Better. I invited him to our place for now. He doesn’t have anywhere else to go.”

“I’ll never understand how people who are supposed to be family can treat omegas like that.”

“Ditto. I’m just glad Carter never hit that point. His circumstances might not have been much better, but at least he’d taken control of that choice.”

Chief smirked at me. “When’s the due date?”

I laughed and shut down my computer. “I gotta pick up a test, but we’re looking at the usual three months.”

“Well, get on home to your mate then. I’ll see you in two days since you’re off tomorrow.”

“See you.”

I got up and pulled my keys from my pocket when my phone rang.

“Cross here.”

“Hi, it’s Tony.”

“Oh, how are you? Everything okay?”

“I’m being discharged. I want to take you up on the offer, but I don’t have a way to get there.”

“Say no more. I’m just leaving the station, so I’d be happy to swing by and pick you up. I’ll see you soon.”

“Thanks,” Tony said. “I’ll be waiting at the discharge area downstairs.”

I hung up and headed out. He was sitting on a bench, a small bag beside him, when I pulled up. The nurse with him helped him get in, and Tony sighed once the door was

shut.

“Thank you. I’ll try not to get in the way or anything.”

“Believe me, you’ll be just fine. I talked to our mom, and she’s looking forward to meeting you. At this hour, everyone’s home, so you’ll get to meet Carter and my brothers, too.”

Tony smiled over at me. “I’m nervous, but I’m looking forward to it.”

Page 9

Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 7:18 am

~Carter~

Something soft brushed my lips and woke me up. I opened my eyes and smiled up at Adrian. “Hey. What time is it?”

“Five in the morning. Just got home.”

He started to undress, but I caught his hand to stop him. I’d never had a thing for uniforms, but seeing him in his made me hard as stone within seconds. Or maybe it was just... him . Adrian smirked and left his shirt on but unbuttoned. He undid his pants, kicked off his shoes, and crawled onto the bed between my legs. Within seconds, my boxers were gone, and I moaned as two fingers pushed into my ass, slick easing the way.

“Adrian...”

“Fuck, you’re hot,” he murmured, leaning down to nip the claiming mark on my shoulder. I groaned and spread my legs more. “That’s it, baby. Ready for me?”

Without warning, he rolled us, putting me on top. It only took a shift of my hips, and then he was inside me. Hands on his chest, I rode him slow and easy, moaning with every stroke. He held onto my hips and guided me up and down, back and forth. Fuck, he felt amazing.

“Shift?”

I gasped when he did. Pitch black fur spread over his body, and the cock buried in my

ass thickened to twice its original size. The burn, the stretch...

“Fuck,” I panted. “Adrian.”

He growled and thrust in hard, pinning me to him as he filled my ass. I was right behind him, moaning his name again when I shot. The knot made me groan and sent a rush of insane pleasure bolting through me. Adrian rolled us again and bit down onto the mark. Shouting, I clutched his huge biceps and shivered when the pain and the knot sent me barreling over the edge again.

Adrian nuzzled my neck, warm breath puffing on my skin. “So fucking perfect,” he whispered.

I would’ve argued and said no one is perfect, but I didn’t have the energy to say a word. I closed my eyes and draped my arms around his neck. A few minutes later, the knot shrank, and Adrian returned to his human form. Kisses drifted along my jaw and finally to my mouth.

“How are you feeling?” he asked, slipping a hand between us to rub my semen over my lower belly.

“Much better now. How was work?”

“Uneventful, for the most part.” He eased out and kissed me one more time before getting up. I watched him go to the bathroom, and then he returned with a damp cloth. He cleaned my stomach and between my legs before tossing the washcloth to the side. “I did meet a young man and had an interesting chat. Does the name Anthony Nolan ring a bell?”

I shook my head. “No, but I also left years ago. Why?” It took a moment for me to realize why he was asking. “Oh, my God. Did he get away? How? Is he okay?”

“He’s fine now,” Adrian said. “He was found by EMTs on the road. He had a miscarriage. He gave me more info on Ironcrest, though.”

“Oh, thank God. Where is he?”

“In a guest room, actually. He didn’t have anywhere else to go, so I brought him here.”

“Did you tell him about me?”

“Yes, but he didn’t recognize your name either. I’m willing to bet Ironcrest brought him in after you left.”

“It wouldn’t surprise me. What did your mom have to say?”

“She’s over the moon, to be honest. She’s always been uber-protective of omegas—mainly because of Chase. Tony crashed as soon as we got here, but I imagine he’ll be up in a few hours. I’d like you to meet him and maybe be with him when he meets everyone else.”

“Of course.”

Adrian dropped another kiss to my lips, and I chuckled. “What?”

“You’re the first person I ever kissed.”

He stared down at me. “Really?”

“Yeah. I refused to kiss johns. It just seemed... more intimate than I was willing to allow. Same for knotting.”

“You’re not complaining now, I noticed,” Adrian said with a sly grin.

“Not at all.” I reached up and ran my fingers through his short, dark blonde hair.

“Thank you.”

“For?”

“For being in the right place at the right time. I hated that life, but I couldn’t see a way out of it.”

“You’re my mate,” Adrian said. He stroked his fingers over my cheek. “I’ll do anything for you, Carter.”

“How about feeding me then?”

He laughed. “Deal. Come on.”

When we got to the kitchen, I was surprised to see a young man sitting at the island, talking to Estell. The family’s matriarch smiled and motioned me over. Adrian kissed the top of my head and went to the fridge while I sat beside our newest addition.

“Carter, this is Tony Nolan,” Estell said. “Tony, this is Adrian’s mate, Carter Goodwin.”

Tony turned and held out a hand, which I shook. “Nice to meet you. You’re from Ironcrest, too?”

I nodded. “Yeah. I don’t recall you, but I left years ago. How are you doing?”

He shrugged and took a sip of Coke. “I’m better now. Still a bit achy, but it’s all…”

He grimaced and motioned toward his belly. “Gone, I guess? They made sure before

they discharged me.”

“Good thing, too,” Estell said. “If left, it would’ve led to infection—or worse. You’re safe now, though. That’s what matters.”

Tony smiled. “Thank you again, Officer... I mean, Adrian.”

Adrian chuckled and got things out to start cooking breakfast for all of us. “You’re quite welcome. Have you met my brothers yet?”

“Not yet,” Tony said.

As if on cue, Chase and Ian walked into the kitchen. Hayden and Colton were right behind them.

Estell grinned and clapped her hands together. “Now that all my boys are in one place, let’s do a run-down. Boys, this is Tony Nolan.” Then she proceeded to point out the others as she introduced them.

Tony shook each hand, though he seemed to pause when Colton stepped up to him to do the same. “Um... hi...”

Colton looked just as stunned and awestruck. He cleared his throat and smiled. “Hi there. I didn’t get the chance to see you in the hospital, but I’m glad you’re feeling better.”

I shot Adrian a curious look, but he and Estell already appeared to be of the same mind. Grinning, I twisted a little on the stool and watched as Tony struggled to pull his attention from the eldest Cross brother.

“So,” Adrian said with a smirk. “Anyone special in your life, Tony?”

Colton shot his brother a slight scowl. “Adrian.”

Tony’s gaze shifted from Adrian to Colton. “Not yet.”

Page 10

Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 7:18 am

~Adrian~

“What? I didn’t do anything!”

Colton growled, though there wasn’t much heat behind it. “He’s still recovering from a very traumatic experience. There’s no way in hell I’m going—”

“He’s your mate,” I interrupted.

My brother scowled but said, “yes, I acknowledge who he is to me, but, Adrian, he just had a fucking miscarriage after escaping those sadistic bastards. I am not going to do a damn thing until he’s ready.”

Carter dropped onto my lap. I loved that he was already comfortable around all of us—and that he forgave me for my lack of social graces when we’d first met. “Understandable, but he is an unmated omega. That makes him incredibly vulnerable.”

Colton sighed. “I know, I know. The doc in me wants to wait, but the rest?” He shook his head. “I’m hyper-aware of his presence, believe me. I knew before we stepped foot into the kitchen. All I could smell was lavender and peaches.”

“To the rest of us, he just smells like the lingering scents of a hospital and whatever shampoo he used this morning,” Carter replied.

“Talk to him,” I said. “Given how he grew up, I doubt he even knows what it all means.”

“Agreed,” Carter said. “It didn’t really connect in my head when I first smelled Adrian on the street. I mean, I’d heard about the mating scents, but that’s all it was: stories. It didn’t hit home until I was more coherent.”

Colton closed his eyes and rested his head back against the couch. “I don’t want him to think I’m swooping in to take advantage of him.”

“You’re not,” I said. “You’re doing what a real alpha does when he’s met his true mate: you’re protecting him.”

“I know,” Colton muttered. “Hell, I read the reports from the Silverthorne pack when Ethan sent them to you.”

“Then you know why it’s imperative that you talk to Tony.” I shook my head. “Colt, it’s clear he felt something when you two met in the kitchen.”

Carter elbowed me in the ribs and nodded discreetly toward the doorway. Before either of us could utter a word, though, Tony walked in.

“I didn’t mean to interrupt...”

“You’re not,” Colton said when he lifted his head to look over at Tony. Then he held out a hand. Tony hesitated for a moment before coming over. He settled on Colton’s lap and rested his head on Colt’s shoulder, eyes closing. Colton inhaled and closed his eyes. “Guys... mind if we speak in private?”

Smiling, I got up after Carter stood. “We’ll be out in the kennels if you need us. Casey will be moving in this afternoon once we finish dog-proofing.”

I led Carter out of the living room, his hand in mine. As soon as we stepped outside, the barking started up. I let him go, and he rushed over to the kennel gate that opened

onto the long patch of grass the dogs shared. He flicked the switch that controlled all the kennels, and, within seconds, he was swarmed by several very happy, enthusiastic pups. Laughing, he plopped onto the ground and petted each of them. I took my time getting over there. He was a natural with the dogs.

“Have you thought about maybe helping Mom and Ian with them?”

Carter peered up at me. “I have, actually. Do you think they would mind?”

I sat beside him and leaned against the fence. Casey ran over and climbed up onto my lap for kisses. “I think they’d love it,” I said while rubbing her short, floppy ears. “Mom refuses to hire anyone outside the family. She feels like nobody else would give the dogs the love and care they need.”

“It would be awesome,” Carter said. He leaned his head on my shoulder. “I think I will talk to her.”

We spent the next fifteen minutes watching the dogs play and lounge around in the growing sunlight. I’d worried about Carter acclimating to my weird hours, but he didn’t seem to mind at all.

“We should probably talk about names,” he said after a few minutes.

I kissed his head and nodded. “It’s going to go rather quickly, you know. Gestation is about three months, start to finish.”

“I know. I remember hearing about it before I got away.” He put a hand on his belly. “What do you think we’ll have?”

“No clue. As long as the baby is healthy, I don’t care. A part of me hopes we’ll have a girl, though. I know Mom has always wanted a girl in the family.”

“I gotta ask... how the hell did all damn five of you wind up gay?”

That surprised a laugh out of me. “Technically, we aren’t. Well, Colt and I are. Chase is pan. Hayden and Ian are bi.”

“Still, talk about coincidence.”

“True, very true.”

We fell into a comfortable silence and watched the pups romp around before all six of them finally collapsed on the grass to rest. Casey was the middle one in terms of age, but even she seemed worn out. I shifted position a little, and Carter moved. Then he put his head on my lap, and I stroked my fingers through his long hair.

“That first night at the hospital, I wanted to hit you.”

I chuckled. “Can’t really say I’m surprised. A lot of folks have that reaction. Mom and my brothers—especially Colt—remind me on a regular basis.”

“I never expected to find a mate,” Carter said. His fingers caressed my calf, then up my thigh. “What will happen to the rest of the Ironcrest pack? I know they have other omegas.”

I sighed. “I don’t know yet, to be honest. Personally, I’d love to get them out and destroy the rest of the pack. I know it sounds harsh, but given what they do to their omegas, I think it’s deserved.”

Carter nodded. “I do, too. I wasn’t old enough to get anyone else away when I left. Sometimes, I still feel bad about it, about leaving them to fend for themselves.”

“You’re not to blame at all, Carter. You did what you had to do to survive. You were

too young to care for others, especially those who need more protection.”

“I wish omegas could shift. It would have made a lot of difference, I think.”

“I don’t doubt that.”

“I wonder if our baby will be one.”

I did, too, but a part of me prayed the baby wouldn’t be an omega. An omega’s life was not an easy one by any stretch of the imagination. Hell, Chase took a suppressant that masked his status and stopped his heat altogether.

“I’d be lying if I said I didn’t care either way. Do we need more omegas? Yes. That said, between Chase, you, and now Tony, I’m quite aware of the dangers you guys face on a daily basis.”

Carter nodded. “At least our baby would be safe.”

Smiling, I ran my fingers through his hair again. Carter hummed and stretched a bit. His hand, which had been still, began moving a bit higher. I bit back a groan when I felt his fingertips brush over my balls. My sweatpants were absolutely no barrier to his touch.

“Carter...”

He chuckled softly and rolled his head. A moment later, my hard cock was gliding over his tongue. I moaned and held his head, not too tight but putting just enough pressure on the back to keep him there. He whimpered and sucked a bit harder. It didn’t take long. Gasping, I thrust up into my mate’s warm mouth, shooting my load down his throat. Carter groaned and licked me clean before tucking me back into the pants.

“Fuck,” I muttered.

“Sounds like a plan. Take me to bed, mate.”

Page 11

Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 7:18 am

~Carter~

I barely made it to the bathroom before losing breakfast. A minute later, hands held my hair as I panted. Then I just sort of dropped onto the tiled floor and rested my head on the side of the bathtub. The chill felt insanely good after puking up every bite of food I'd had. Adrian helped me sit up and wiped my face gently with a cool, damp washcloth.

"Any better?"

"A little," I muttered. "I'm assuming it's morning sickness."

"Most likely. Do you want Colt to come check you out?"

"If he doesn't mind. I'm not worried, but it would help to know for sure."

"Okay." He kissed my head. "Come on. Let's get you back to bed first."

After I rinsed my mouth out with mouthwash, we went to the bedroom, and I collapsed onto the bed. Adrian tucked me in and kissed my forehead.

"I'll be right back."

I nodded and closed my eyes. My stomach was no longer in knots, thank God. A few minutes later, the door opened. I opened my eyes to see Adrian and Colt nearing the bed. Adrian got on the other side, and Colton sat on the edge. He put a hand on my forehead.

“No fever. Any other symptoms?”

“Just the nausea,” I said.

He was wearing a stethoscope and listened to my chest and belly. When he pressed my stomach, it felt weird but didn’t hurt. “Any pain?”

“Nope. It was achy earlier, but it stopped. Is it just morning sickness?”

Colton draped the scope around his neck and smiled. “Pretty sure. We need to get you set up with a midwife or doc. I mean, I could do it, but someone with more experience in birthing would be a much better option. I’ve got colleagues I can get the info for if that’s okay.”

“Sounds good. I guess we should start making plans for the birth.”

Colton patted my shoulder. “A very good idea. This is going to go fairly quickly. In the meantime, I’ll write you a script for prenatals. It’ll give you a start.”

“Thank you.”

He smiled and stood. “Anytime. I’m here if you need me.”

When he left, Adrian stretched out beside me and tugged me closer. I nestled against him, face buried in the bend of his neck. Every breath I took drew in chocolate and wine. Fuck, I loved the way he smelled.

“I’ll make some phone calls,” he said. “We’ll need to start buying baby stuff, too.”

“Can I ask you something?”

“Anything.”

I took a deep breath and rubbed my nose over his neck again. “Do... do you believe in love at first sight?”

Adrian was silent and still for a moment. Then his arms tightened around me, and he kissed my head. “Not until that night,” he murmured.

I smiled. Lifting my head, I met his gaze. “Same here.”

Adrian leaned in and kissed me, keeping it lazy and slow. There was heat behind it, but it was subdued. I moaned and pressed closer. I hadn’t been hard before, but the more he touched me, the more he kissed me, the more I needed. He got the hint and rolled us, putting me beneath him.

I tipped my head as he kissed a path along my jaw and down my neck. His teeth scraped the claiming mark, and sparks of pleasure skittered through my entire body. He slipped a hand between us and eased two fingers inside me. Slick seeped out in what felt like a steady stream, and, a moment later, his thick cock pushed inside.

“Adrian...”

I gasped as he rocked into me, over and over, kisses never stopping. Adrian growled low and shifted. My eyes rolled when the dick buried in my ass thickened. Panting, clutching his biceps, I barely had time to blink before I was coming. Adrian grunted and caught my hands, pinning them to the bed. Then he plunged in deep. Heat filled me, and the knot sent me into another orgasm.

“L-love you,” I gasped.

Adrian nodded and nipped the mark on my shoulder. “Love you, too, baby.”

* * *

Lunchtime, I learned, was a rather chaotic time in the Cross household. According to Adrian, it was rare that all the brothers had the same day off. We had decided to eat on the back porch, and the dogs were all running amok in the fenced yard. Casey was with them, though she would be moving into our rooms tonight.

“You sure you’re okay with helping us with these hooligans?” Estell asked, gesturing toward the dogs.

“Yep. I want to do something to help out here.”

She smiled. “It’s much appreciated, that’s for sure. Ian can show you the ropes then.”

Ian nodded. “Would love to. The dogs already adore you, so I think you’ll be perfect at it.”

Beside me, Adrian lounged in an Adirondack chair, his eyes closed. I got up and settled on his lap. He wrapped his arms around me and kissed my head when I rested it on his chest. I caught Tony’s gaze before he glanced at Colton. They hadn’t done anything, but it was crystal clear it was just a matter of time.

“Well, I don’t know about you guys, but I think maybe a trip to the club is in order,” Hayden announced. “When’s the last time we all went together?”

“It’s been quite a while,” Estell replied.

“What’s the club?” Tony asked.

“It’s called The Packhouse,” Estell said. “Not very original, I know. My husband’s father named it, and our family has owned it for decades. Hayden is the manager, and I handle the business side of things. I should probably look into hiring someone to help, though. It’s a pain in the ass to juggle it and the rescue.”

Tony looked pensive, then nodded. “What’s involved?”

Estell grinned at him. “Nothing I can’t teach...”

Colton chuckled. “I think you just found your protégée, Mom.”

Smiling, Tony leaned his head on Colton’s shoulder. “Count me in.”

“Then you’re hired,” Hayden said. He clapped Tony on the shoulder. “Welcome to the family, kiddo!”

I tipped my head to look up at Adrian and mouthed, “love you.”

Adrian kissed me softly. “Love you, too, mate. Very much.”

I settled back down and couldn’t help but smile. All around me, pups barked and played, while my new family—my pack —laughed and acted as if Tony and I had always been part of it all. Maybe we had, and we just didn’t know it.

Either way, it felt... perfect. Like home.