



Claimed by the Boss: M/M Omegaverse Mpreg Billionaire Romance

Author: *Sophie O'Dare*

Category: LGBT+

Description: He's the Alpha real estate tycoon everyone wants. I'm just one of the Omegas who works in his club.

There's no reason for Nolan Rockford to notice me, a masked stranger scraping the bottom of the barrel to survive. Left with a debt not my own, and one missed payment away from death, watching the powerful Alpha is the only light in my days. And the only fantasy that helps me through the nights.

Then a persistent customer goes too far, landing me at Nolan's feet, and my world turns upside down. Three nights. One Heat. Enough happiness to last a lifetime. At least, that's how it's supposed to go.

But Nolan has other ideas. He's used to getting what he wants, and my body is the next property he intends to own, whether or not I agree.

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First released on Kindle Vella as Claimed by His Boss Episodes 1-27.

Total Pages (Source): 21

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Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 7:38 am

The scent of Alpha pheromones seeps past the edges of my mask as I weave between the tables at Velvet Oasis, a tray of drinks balanced on one hand.

A flush creeps up my neck, despite the suppressants I took before starting my shift. Pushing out pheromones in public spaces is illegal, since it affects two-thirds of the world's population, but there's no way to stop what naturally leaks out.

With the poor ventilation in this place and how long it's been open, pheromones saturate every surface from the grimy carpet to the cracked plastic booths, to the peeling wallpaper.

Stupid Tony only gives his waitstaff cheap paper masks and only allots one mask per shift before we have to pay out of pocket. By the third hour, the moisture from my breath nearly cancels out its effectiveness, but anything is better than breathing the pheromones directly.

Despite the dancer on stage doing his best to hold customers' attention, hands still reach out to grab and grope me as I pass. I grit my teeth and keep walking, mindful of the full drinks on my tray. If they tip over, refilling them comes out of my pocket.

Just get through this shift, I chant in my head as I lock my eyes on the table near the stage that my drinks belong to. The tips are shit, but I need the money.

A sharp slap on my ass nearly makes me drop everything before I set the tray safely on the table.

The hand on my ass moves, fingers digging into my crease. "When are you going to

stop waiting tables and come be my boy, Leo? I'll give you everything you need."

Richard Ballcrest. VIP member of Velvet Oasis and one of Tony's highest-paying customers. He's also a giant asshole, and the dancers call him Dick behind his back, but never to his face. He throws around too much money to risk losing him as a customer.

"Not tonight, sir." Glad that the mask hides my disgust, I shift away from his touch. "Please excuse me while I deliver this order."

Before my hand can touch the tray, he grabs my wrist, yanking me close.

His thick, sandalwood cologne mingles with the blast of pheromones he sends at me, potent even through my mask.

Rich was already here when I clocked in for my shift, and hours of drinking have left his bulbous nose red and his inhibitions low.

"Don't play coy, boy." He massages my ass. "You're just working here until you can find a wealthy Alpha to pay your way and breed you. I'm offering to do that."

The loud music in the club prevents the people at the surrounding tables from hearing the conversation, but they have to know what's happening just from our body position.

When I glance around, though, no one meets my eyes. I'm on my own.

Stomach tight, I turn back to Rich. "Please let go."

"Or what?" His thick lips curl into a sneer. "Gonna run and beg Tony to help you? Who do you think he'll side with? A little bitch like you? Or the man who bankrolls

this place?”

Frustrated helplessness floods through me. Tony takes care of his staff, but he won't risk upsetting Rich unless the Alpha pushes things too far. And a little groping isn't too far in a place like this.

I try to pull away, but Rich's grip tightens like a vise while his hand on my ass presses my slacks against my entrance. “Have you ever had an Alpha take proper care of you here? You feel tight. I'll pay extra if I'm the first to break this seal.”

Panic rises in my chest, and I reach back to push his hand away, but the man's strength overpowers me.

“Is there a problem here?”

My heart leaps as Nolan's familiar voice cuts through the noise in the club. Finally, someone to save me from this brute. Tony may let Rich do what he wants, but Nolan owns this place, so his word is law.

I peek up through my lashes, taking in Nolan's tall, broad form as he approaches. The crisp lines of his tailored suit stand out in contrast to the dingy decor of the club, and the clean lines of his jaw look like he just shaved, despite it creeping up on nine o'clock at night.

Cold, green eyes land on Rich's hand on my ass, and Nolan's nostrils flare. “What do you think you're doing?”

“Just having a little fun.” Rich squeezes my ass for emphasis, and I wince in pain.

“Waitstaff are not entertainers in this club.” Steel hardens Nolan's voice. “Let. Him. Go.”

Rich scoffs, but releases me.

I rub my wrist, a bloom of red in the shape of his fingers marring my pale skin.

Nolan's gaze sweeps over me, sending a flush of awareness through my body. "Are you injured?"

I duck my head, my pulse pounding at his concern. "No, sir."

"Good." He turns on the heel of his polished dress shoe. "My table has waited long enough for our drinks. Get moving."

My heart plummets, and I hastily gather up the tray to trail after him.

Of course, someone like Nolan Rockford would never look at me as anything other than a server. He's never touched any of the boys who work here, and I know more than one has given him their card to call after hours. He never takes them up on their offers.

For a real estate tycoon who owns an entire chain of strip clubs, he's a complete gentleman. And I'm just one in a sea of masked, nameless Omegas who work for him.

The bruise on my wrist aches beneath the weight of the tray as I stop next to Nolan's table, but my hand is steady as I set a double shot of whiskey over ice in front of Nolan.

"Is that a common occurrence here?" Nolan's fingers drum against the table. "Customers trying to force themselves on the waitstaff?"

Startled, I glance up, but his focus is fixed on the man who sits across the table from

him.

Tony laughs and waves a hand. “Don’t worry about it. Rich was just having some fun, right Leo?”

I drop my head, my blond hair falling forward to hide my eyes as I slide a frothy beer in front of my boss. “Right, sir.”

Unlike the man who owns the place, Tony looks like he belongs here in his greasy Hawaiian shirt, left open down the center to reveal a stained, white tank top beneath. The stretchy material strains across his belly, and brown curls poke out of the neck, where a thick gold chain nestles amid all the hair.

“Is that true?” Nolan snaps his fingers, and my eyes jerk up to find his gaze now on me. “Leo, is it just in good fun?”

Beneath the table, Tony pinches my thigh, and I flinch from the sharp burst of pain. “That’s right, sir. Rich never takes it too far.”

Nolan’s steady gaze makes me squirm with the need to spill all my secrets, to admit to the times that Rich has cornered me in the back halls, or all the times he’s tried to pressure me for more.

Luckily, Tony comes to my rescue before I blurt out anything that will get me fired.

“Our customers know the rules, and if they forget, I remind them.” Tony pats my arm. “Get back to work, Leo. I see empty glasses that need refills.”

“Yes, sir.” Clutching the tray to my chest, I scurry away, my treacherous heart quickening once more.

Ruthlessly, I tell it to be quiet. Nolan doesn't care what happens to me. His only concern is protecting his investment. If someone reported Velvet Oasis's many code violations, this place would be shut down, and that would hurt Nolan's bottom line.

If I make trouble here, that will also affect his bottom line, and I need this job.

For the next several hours, I bust my ass delivering drinks and bringing refills. Rich stays until nearly midnight before wobbling out to his car, and Nolan takes off soon after.

When I go to clear Rich's table, I find my tip stuffed into his untouched water glass. Annoyed, I fish it out and shake off the five-dollar bill.

Cheap asshole was here for over eight hours, and that's all he leaves?

I shove the soggy bill into my apron, frustrated that I'll have to split even that meager amount with the bartender.

At the end of my shift, Tony corners me at the bar, his eyes gleaming in the low light. "Rich asked about you again. Don't think you can turn tricks outside of my club. If you want to sell yourself, you'll do it in the back rooms with the other boys."

Nausea churns in my stomach, and I shake my head vehemently. "We're not meeting outside of work, sir. I'm happy with my current position here."

"You know, the back-room boys make as much in a night as you make in a month, right?" Tony reaches out to tug down my mask. "With your blond hair and angelic face, customers would eat up that innocent look. Hell, let Rich pop your cherry, and he'll pay off that debt your brother left you with."

I flinch from the onslaught of pheromones, stale booze, and cigarettes that flood my

sensitive nose and yank my mask into place. Tony really needs to replace the filters in the fans, but as a Beta, he doesn't see the point in spending the money.

"I appreciate the offer, but no thank you, sir." Taking my share of the tips from the bartender, I pocket them. "I'm happy as a server."

"Well, it's no skin off my teeth if you want to live hand to mouth." He scratches at the hair that pokes out of the top of his tank top and straightens. "But let me know if you ever get tired of just scraping by and want to make real money."

I swallow down the bile that threatens to rise. My wages as a server may be shit, but I'm paying down the debt while maintaining some small shred of my pride.

If I start selling my body, then I'll have nothing left.

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My stomach growls as I walk home, the chill night air seeping past my threadbare jacket. I keep my hand clenched around the pepper spray in my pocket and my eyes straight ahead, my steps fast like I have somewhere to be, and maybe even someone expecting me to be there.

After I was forced to give up university to work full time, I had to move, and it took time to get used to my new neighborhood. But so long as I don't make myself look like a target, people mostly leave me alone.

It helps that at three in the morning, even the lowlives in the area are hunkering down for the night.

The bills in my pocket from my tips always make me feel vulnerable until I can reach the Quick Mart on the corner next to my apartment complex. Cash can be stolen easier than the bi-weekly deposits that go directly to my bank account.

My steps quicken as I near the bright lights of the Quick Mart, the tension in my shoulders easing. My phone vibrates in my pocket, but I ignore it until I get inside. No way will I show myself as being distracted while out in the open.

Warm air rushes over the top of my head as I step through the doors and head for the pre-made sandwiches.

If I'm lucky, they'll have one on discount at this time of the night, and I'll have enough for a cup of coffee, too.

The suspicious eyes of the night clerk follow me through the store from behind the

safety of the thick plate of glass that boxes in the checkout counter.

Used to it, I ignore him and pull out my phone to check the notification.

My stomach sinks at the reminder from my Heat app that my cycle is coming up. The next three-day break in my work schedule isn't for two more weeks.

Checking my surroundings first, I pull my pill pack from the front inner pocket of my jacket. When I open it, I discover that the blister sheet tucked inside is empty.

Did I take an extra dose while at work and not remember? I could have sworn I had enough to make it to Friday.

A knot forms in my stomach as I check how much cash I have, hoping I missed some bills that are stuck together. But no. If I want to make rent on Friday, I can't afford to replace my suppressants until after I get paid.

Frustrated and angry at my situation, I abandon the case of wilted, soggy sandwiches and walk to the small aisle of canned goods. I grab the cheapest can of beans they stock and head to the cash register.

I drop the can of beans into the drawer in the glass, and the cashier pulls it through to the other side. "No sandwich today?"

"No." My stomach gurgles with displeasure as I scan the prices of the medications behind the counter. "Can I get two doses of the six-hour suppressant, too?"

"Cheaper to buy by the box," the man grunts as he scans my beans.

No shit. I wouldn't be buying them by the pill if I could afford the full box. But I keep those thoughts to myself. "Just the two doses, please."

As he turns away to tear off the two measly foil squares, I carefully count out the bills, then double count the rest to make sure I still have enough for my rent fund.

Hopefully, tomorrow will bring better tips, and I can refill my supply.

Paying for my meager items, I tuck them into the safety of my jacket and hurry the rest of the way toward home.

By the time I reach the run-down building I call home, exhaustion has settled into my bones.

Shadows cover the exterior walkways, the building sitting between streetlights. Boards cover half the windows, and bars cover the rest.

I trudge up the creaking stairs to my floor and fumble with the lock, desperate to collapse into bed.

On the fourth floor, I walk to the last door on the end and unlock it, the hinges groaning in protest.

The single room I rent is barely bigger than a closet, with peeling wallpaper, a lumpy mattress on the floor, and a toilet that only sometimes flushes. No matter how much I try to clean it, the smell of mold, rust, and decay never goes away.

I sigh, kicking off my shoes, then shrug out of my coat. I toss it over the stack of plastic crates that hold my uniforms from work and the threadbare shirts and socks, all the possessions I have to my name.

Exhaustion from the day urges me to fall on the pile of blankets and sleep. Instead, I force myself to stand over the sink in the tiny kitchen and eat the beans cold from the can.

Only once I wash the stink of the club from my body do I allow myself to lie down, but sleep eludes me.

Wide awake now, I stare up at the large stain in the ceiling over my mattress.

How did this become my life?

I'm so tired of this existence, tired of struggling and scraping by with nothing to show for it.

I want more. I want security, warmth, proper nutrition, and rest. I want to feel safe and protected, to have someone care for me the way I never could for myself.

Most of all, I want Nolan.

Just thinking of him sends a spike of heat through my body, easing the gnawing emptiness inside.

What would it be like to be held by him? Would he be a gentle lover? Or rough?

I close my eyes and picture the strength in his broad shoulders, the coldness in his green eyes when they swept over me. He would be possessive. All-consuming.

I slip a hand under my thin T-shirt, tracing my hand up my stomach, my fingers bumping over the notches of my ribcage from too many nights spent without dinner. As I find my nipple, pinching and squeezing it, a gasp escapes my lips.

My other hand slides into my pajama bottoms to palm my semi-hard dick, stroking hard like I imagine Nolan would. Desire curls in my hips, and warmth seeps from my ass, slick coating my entrance, to ease the way for my Alpha.

Would he be big? I curl a knee up and drop my hand lower, to the needy pucker just past my taint. I circle the tight ring of muscles, slick coating my fingers.

What would it feel like to be filled by Nolan?

I push my fingers inside, and my back arches with pleasure at being filled, but it's not what I need. Not deep enough, not thick enough. Just. Not. Enough.

My other hand moves up to my nape guard, my fingers slipping beneath to scratch the sensitive place on the back of my neck where I want Nolan's teeth.

I leave my needy entrance to return to my dick, stroking fast and hard, the wet sounds joining my moans in the dingy apartment as I picture a different room, something that would suit Nolan.

Nolan on top of me. Nolan's hands replacing mine.

I come into my fist, shivers shaking my body, but it's not enough.

My eyes open, and I stare at the mold spots in the corners of my room. This will never be enough.

I wake with a start, disoriented from too little sleep.

For a moment, I can't remember where I am. Then I feel the lumps in the mattress beneath me and the damp, musty smell in the air. My apartment.

Blearily, I look toward the window, where dawn turns the sky a dingy gray. I had fallen asleep less than an hour ago.

What woke me?

I vaguely remember a pounding sound. Are my neighbors fighting?

The pound comes again, and I realize with a jolt that it's coming from my front door.

Heart in my throat, I scramble for the baseball bat I keep next to my bed.

"Open up, Leo!" The angry shout sounds like the man stands in the room with me, the thin wood of the door a flimsy barrier to hold him out. "I know you're in there!"

My pulse spikes as I recognize Gino's voice, and I hastily tuck the bat out of view. Greeting the loan shark with a weapon would be the height of stupidity.

My legs shake as I crawl from the bed and hurry to open the door a crack.

Gino stands on the other side, his cheeks red from the early morning chill. He wears a baseball cap pushed back on his head, and a hoodie under a brown leather jacket.

I hover in the narrow opening, worried that he woke my neighbors. "Gino, what are you doing here?"

He flashes a gold-toothed smile. "I'm here to pick up what you owe me."

Anxiety curdles my insides. "It's not the fifteenth yet."

"Are you talking back to me?" Gino shoves a large hand against the door, sending me stumbling backward.

My heels catch on the mattress, and I fall onto it.

He strolls into my apartment, his lip curled with disgust. "God, you live like a rat in this trash pile."

Shame heats my cheeks. “It’s all I can afford.”

He stomps to my freezer and opens it. When he finds nothing but an ice tray inside, he grabs the can of coffee that sits on top and dumps the precious grounds into the sink in search of stashed cash.

Annoyed, he turns to stare down at me. “Where are you hiding your cash? If you make me search the whole place for it, I won’t be happy.”

“I don’t have any stashes.” I push myself back to my feet. “Everything I have goes to you and rent.”

His eyes gleam. “That means you have something for rent. Where is it?”

My hands clench in helpless fear. “It’s not the fifteen?—”

The blow catches me on the side of the head, pain exploding through my skull. I crash back to the mattress, my ears ringing.

Gino crouches next to me. “Since you seem to have forgotten, let me give you a reminder. You owe me money, which means anything you have is mine. Understand?”

Cupping my throbbing head, I point to the large flashlight in the plastic crate with my work uniforms, where I stash my cash until I pay rent.

“That’s more like it.” Gino grabs it and untwists the battery cap.

He pulls out the roll of bills, counts them, and grunts with dissatisfaction. “This all of it?”

Tears sting my eyes. “Yeah.”

Not believing me, he grabs my jacket and searches the pockets. He finds my wallet first, tossing the few cards I own onto the floor and checking all the pockets where cash could be hidden before throwing it onto the bed beside me.

He pulls my pill case out of my jacket next, pops it open, and takes the two doses of suppressants inside. “Guess I can get a few bucks for these.”

“But I need?—”

I cut off when he raises his hand in threat.

He pockets the cash and the pills before throwing my jacket at me. “You’re lucky this isn’t worth selling, too.”

I clutch the thin material to my chest as he stomps to the door.

“See you on the fifteenth, Leo.” With a wave, he stomps out the door, leaving it open.

On trembling hands and knees, I crawl across the mattress and reach out to shut it. Only once the lock slides into place do the tears fall.

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My face throbs and my stomach aches with hunger when I trudge into the Velvet Oasis that night. The spoonful of peanut butter I choked down before heading out to work did nothing to appease the ache of too little food.

The smell of the club makes my gritty eyes burn worse than usual with a combination of body oil, smoke, booze, and pheromones. Without a suppressant, today will be rough.

“Damn,” hisses one of the new hires as I shove my coat into my locker. “What happened to your face?”

He goes by Phoenix Storm on stage, but I don’t know his real name. Most of the dancers are like that.

I close the door with more force than necessary. “I fell.”

“Sure you did.” His eyes sweep over my face. “And I’m a natural blond.”

The dark roots at his hairline say otherwise, but I just grunt.

“The mask won’t cover that.” Phoenix grabs my hand and tugs me over to one of the vanities against the wall on the other side of the employee room. “Sit.”

With no energy to resist, I collapse onto the chair.

He rummages around in an open makeup bag on the counter, muttering about my lack of a tan.

Finally, he pulls out a compact and clicks it open. “The light’s shitty on the floor, so this should be good enough.”

I wince as he taps a sponge over my temple and under my eye, where a bruise had slowly blossomed during the day.

Phoenix’s gaze catches mine. “You should dump him.”

My brow creases with confusion. “What?”

“The reason you fell.” He snaps the compact closed. “Once they start swinging, they don’t stop. So get out now.”

If only it were that easy. I lean toward the mirror to peer at his handiwork.

Under the bright lights of the vanity bulbs, the makeup over the left side of my face turns my skin sallow yellow, but it’s better than the black and blue hue that I walked in with. Maybe I should ask him to do something about the shadows under my brown eyes, too.

“Thanks.” I bite my lip and glance at him through the mirror.

Servers and entertainers don’t interact much, but Phoenix seems nice enough.

I turn to face him. “Hey, do you have a suppressant to spare? I can pay you for it when I get tipped out tonight.”

He freezes, eyes darting toward the door. Without looking at me, he selects an eyeliner and leans toward the mirror. His voice drops to barely above a whisper. “You should have called in sick if you didn’t have any.”

“I can’t afford to miss work.” Nausea roils through me as I stand. “I thought I had more doses than I did.”

He skillfully outlines his right eye. “You keep them in your locker?”

A sour ball forms in my stomach, and the lock on the metal door no longer feels so secure. “Yeah.”

“Don’t do that.” He tosses his eyeliner into the makeup bag, glances toward the door, then pulls out a lipstick tube.

When he opens it, though, instead of lipstick, he taps out two blue and red pills.

He quickly hands them to me. “They’re only good for six hours. Stash yours better next time.”

“Thank you.” I toss them into my mouth and swallow them dry. “I’ll pay you back.”

“Don’t worry about it.” He tosses the lipstick tube back into his bag. “Just make sure you’re quick to refill the drinks of the guys next to the stage when I’m up there.”

“Deal.” An awkward silence follows, and I take the hint, shuffling out of the room.

At the server station, I collect my apron and single mask for the night. As soon as I slip the elastic bands over my ears, the stench of the club fades, though it doesn’t completely vanish.

Maybe I should have waited a few hours for when my mask loses effectiveness before I took the suppressants. But it’s too late now.

My gaze sweeps over the club as I tie on my apron, and my stomach sinks at all the

bare tables. I need tips tonight if I have any hope of buying more suppressants. I don't even want to think of what I'll do for rent.

Straightening my spine, I kick my mind into customer service mode and head for the first table, ready to chat up our clients for all I'm worth.

The club fills as the evening wears on, customers packing into the tables near the stage.

My feet ache from running orders all night, and the lack of food leaves me lightheaded. The headache that started this morning now pounds at my temples, making it harder to focus.

Then the door opens, and my heart stutters as Nolan steps inside.

His piercing green eyes take in the floor, and concern pushes back the misery of my day for the moment.

While his suit looks impeccable as always, his steps drag as he strides for the table reserved for him off to the right of the stage. When I first started here, he hadn't come into Velvet Oasis every night, but lately, he's always here, watching the floor or meeting with Tony.

That much constant work has to be exhausting even for a strong Alpha like him.

I head for the bar. "Double whiskey on the rocks. The good stuff. And a cup of coffee from the fresh pot."

The bartender nods and turns toward the back wall, where the liquor bottles sit on a display shelf.

As I wait, Rich swaggers through the entrance, scanning the room until his gaze lands on me.

I will the bartender to hurry, but he doesn't move fast enough for me to make an escape.

A predatory grin spreads across Rich's face as he swaggers up to me. "There's my favorite little Omega."

"Good evening, Rich." I force politeness into my tone. "If you want to find a seat, I'll be right over to take your order."

He wraps an arm around my waist. "Why so formal?"

I stiffen at his touch, bile rising in my throat. "Please take your hands off me."

"Don't be like that, sugar." His fingers dig into my sides. "I'm going to buy you one of these days. A pretty little thing like you belongs on my arm."

If I cause a scene, Tony will be furious, but I can't stand Rich's hands on me for another second.

I wrench out of his grasp. "As I've said, I'm not for sale."

Anger flashes in Rich's eyes. "You'll change your tune soon enough. An Omega like you can't survive without an Alpha."

"I don't need your protection," I say, but his words hit too close to home. I'm barely surviving as it is, with no one else offering to help.

"You think you're too good for me, bitch?" Rich snarls.

“Here’s your order, Leo.” The bartender slides a double whiskey and mug of coffee onto the bar in front of me, and I move them to my tray before making my escape.

My heart pounds as I put distance between us while narrowing the gap between me and Nolan.

God, I’m stupid, but I just can’t help the draw of attraction toward the Alpha. If he were the one offering to buy me, I’m not sure I’d be strong enough to say no.

I slide the drinks onto Nolan’s table and clutch the empty tray to my chest. “Would you like any snacks, sir?”

Heat rises in my cheeks, and I wonder if he knows the effect his presence has on me. If my Omega pheromones give me away. We’ve barely spoken a dozen words to each other, but I crave his attention. Need it more than my pride.

“Not right now.” He reaches for the whiskey, then pauses when he sees the steaming cup of coffee beside it. “What’s this?”

“You looked like you needed a little something extra tonight.”

He hesitates before reaching for the mug. “Thank you. I appreciate it.”

“You’re here all the time, lately,” I venture, wanting to draw out the moment. “Don’t you take days off?”

“Not when I have a business to run.” His eyes flick up to me and away in dismissal.

I swallow my disappointment, though I don’t know what I had hoped for.

Then his eyes snap back to my face and narrow. “Who did that?”

I clutch the tray tighter. “Sir?”

“Your face.” His nostrils flare. “Who hit you?”

My hand flutters toward my eye without touching it, afraid to smudge the makeup. “It’s nothing, sir. I just fell.”

“Bullshit.” I flinch at his sharp tone. “Was it Dick? Did he hurt you?”

Confused, I follow his gaze to the table where Rich has taken up residence.

Worried he’ll think I’m causing trouble for his business, I turn back to Nolan. “No, sir. It happened outside of work. I’ll do better?—”

“Who?” His hand tightens around his glass until his knuckles turn white. “Do you have a man at home?”

“N-no, sir.” Flustered by his attention, I take a step back and spot Tony watching us from the back. “I have other tables to serve. Please enjoy your drink.”

Turning on my heel, I hurry to a table with empty glasses and clear them. Heat suffuses my body, and hunger and exhaustion make my body heavy.

As I walk toward the bar to fetch their refills, my feet tangle together, and I trip. The empty glasses spill off my tray and crash to the ground, shattering.

Horried, I stare at the broken glass, and anxiety twists through me.

Tony’s hand wraps around my bicep and yanks me to my feet. “That’s coming out of your tips.”

“I need my tips tonight.” The blood drains from my face, and I sway within his hold. “Can I just come in an hour earlier tomorrow to work it off?”

“No.” His hold tightens painfully. “If you want extra money, you can work in the back.”

My breaths quicken with panic, the pheromones in the club invading my lungs. “Please, Tony...”

He releases me. “Cash out and go home.”

The panic increases. “But I still have two hours.”

“You’re done for tonight.” He waves at the bartender. “Count out Leo’s tips. He’s leaving.”

The man’s brows lift, but he pops open the register and pulls out a handful of cash.

Tony takes them and flips through them before handing me a five-dollar bill.

I stare at it, my hand trembling. I busted my ass and got some good tips tonight. The glasses couldn’t have cost that much. I’ve seen the same ones at the Dollar Store.

But when I look back up at Tony, I know there’s no use arguing.

Tony tucks the rest of my tips into his pocket. “Have a good night, Leo. I hope you come to work tomorrow with a clearer head.”

Defeated, I pull off my apron and check it back in before heading to the employee room to grab my coat from my locker and toss my soggy mask into the trash next to the exit.

The heavy door resists as I shove my shoulder against it before opening with a groan, and I step out into the chilly night.

Police sirens scream in the distance, and only one functioning streetlight illuminates the back parking lot.

I stuff my hand into my pocket for my pepper spray, but come up empty.

Steps slowing, I search my other pockets. I know I put it back in there after Gino emptied my jacket this morning. Great. Apparently, someone from the club stole that as well as my suppressants. I don't go anywhere without it in this neighborhood.

Footsteps scuff behind me, and the hairs on the back of my neck rise as familiar pheromones tickle my nose.

Rich.

He must have followed me out of the club.

Before I can bolt, hard hands land on my shoulders. "Finally, we're alone."

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My heart jumps into my throat, and I stiffen within Rich's hold.

"Hey, Mr. Ballcrest." The words come out as a croak, and I swallow hard as I struggle to find my customer service voice. "Are you heading home early for the night, too?"

"I saw Tony being hard on you." He massages my shoulders. "Poor, Leo. Accidents happen. I can talk to him for you. Get him to treat you nicer."

"I appreciate that, sir, but I'll be okay." I try to turn toward him, but his hands tighten, and pain shoots through my shoulders. "Mr. Ballcrest?"

He yanks me backward, and I lose my balance, falling against his large body. Stale cigarette smoke clings to him and pheromones fill my nostrils.

"Why?" Hot breath fills my ear. "You think someone like Nolan Rockford is going to make you a better offer?"

"What? No, I?—"

His hands move to my throat, cutting me off. "You think I don't see the way you're throwing yourself at him? You think you're too good for me, is that it?"

I scrabble at his hold, my sweaty palms sliding against his skin.

He drags me toward the dumpster against the back wall. "You're going to give me what I want, you little bitch."

Terror shoots through me, and I struggle against his hold, my thoughts going fuzzy.

“Don’t worry, you won’t fight it for long.” He releases me and spins me to face him. “Soon, you’re going to be begging me for it.”

I gasp in desperate breaths, the stench from the dumpster and his pheromones filling my lungs, musk and rot making me lightheaded and nauseous.

His scent surrounds me, seeping into my pores, and my body betrays me.

“I knew it.” He smirks as I sag against the concrete wall. “You bitches all look the same when you’re going into Heat.”

I shake my head, trying to clear my senses, to stop the flood of fever rushing through my veins. “N-no, please...”

The concrete walls and the side of the dumpster surround us, with his large body blocking the only possible escape. He pins me against the cold concrete, his body heat enveloping me. Thick fingers trail down my cheek, tracing the line of my jaw before cupping my face gently, while his other hand moves lower, brushing against my stomach.

A shudder of revulsion and desire runs through me at his touch.

“You’re so beautiful.” His lips graze my earlobe, sending waves of pleasure coursing through my body. “I should have broken you in sooner, instead of letting you lead me on. You’re just a little cock tease, aren’t you? Well, we’ll take care of that.”

My cheap nape guard comes off easily, and he tosses it to the ground.

His scent grows stronger, and my resistance weakens. My brain fogs over, and all I

can think about is being touched by an Alpha, of the need to be bred. My Heat slicks my entrance, preparing my body for him.

I don't want this, but my body is going to betray me.

Then the Alpha's touch vanishes, and cold air sweeps into the space he filled only seconds ago.

My legs collapse beneath me, my blood rushing in my ears. Through the haze clouding my mind, I watch Nolan throw Rich against the wall, his large fist smashing into the other man's mouth.

A copper scent joins all the others, but past that, I smell my Alpha. The one I need with a desperation that sends me crawling toward them on hands and knees, dirt and debris biting into my palms.

I need him. "Nolan."

His fist slams into Rich's gut before he looks down at me, and his gaze lands on my neck, taking in the red marks left by Rich's grasp.

With a growl, he turns back to the other man and knees him hard between the legs. Rich screams and falls to the ground, and Nolan kicks him in the stomach.

I reach them and grasp Nolan's pant leg, dragging myself up his body. "Nolan."

He kicks Rich again, a fierce growl rising from his chest. "That fucker shouldn't have put his hands on you."

Heat suffuses my body, my pulse pounding with desire. Despite everything that just happened, I want to be held. Need to be held.

I stumble to my feet and press my body against his side.

The growl shifts to a gentle rumble, and one muscular arm comes around me. “Are you okay, Leo?”

Concern fills the question, but that’s not what I need. Stretching onto my toes, I wrap my arms around his neck. “Nolan, please.”

His nostrils flare as he takes in my pheromones, and he cups the back of my neck. “Oh, look at you.”

His touch sends an electric shock through me, and my eyes close as I whimper with need.

He leans down closer, his warm breath brushing my ear. “You want me to take care of you, Leo?”

This is dangerous territory, but I nod without thinking twice. Even if it’s only for three days, I want to be in Nolan’s arms. To experience the real thing instead of my fantasies.

“I’m going to take you somewhere else,” he says, his tone gravelly, “where we can be alone.”

My heart races as he lifts me into his arms, and I clutch his shoulders, burying my nose against his neck. Against my flushed face, his skin burns with a fever of his own. His long strides take us to the street, where a parked car sits near the entrance.

He opens the back door and lays me on the seat. The scent of leather and cologne permeate the car, but above all, Nolan’s intoxicating pheromones fill my nose, making my head spin with desire.

Nolan climbs in after me and shuts the door.

The car engine rumbles to life, and a voice comes from the front seat. “Where to, sir?”

I flinch at the sound of someone else’s voice, and my head jerks toward him.

“It’s okay, just focus on me.” Nolan grips my jaw, turning my face back to him. “Take us to the townhouse.”

The car jolts forward, and I grip Nolan’s powerful arms.

He looks down at me with a fierce intensity in his eyes, his body hovering over mine. His pheromones fill the car, and I soon forget about the other person, my world narrowing to the Alpha on top of me.

My body shakes as he peels me out of my clothes, then rolls me onto my back to kneel between my thighs. Rough calluses cover his hands, his touch gentle but firm as he pushes my knees up toward my chest, exposing my slick entrance.

“So pretty,” he growls, and the sound of a lowering zipper fills the car.

My eyes drop to the enormous cock that springs free, and I tense with fear. Despite my body’s demand to be filled, I’ve never done this before, and Nolan’s size scares me.

“Eyes on mine.” The Command brings my gaze back to his. “Trust me to take care of you, Leo.”

With a moan, I let go of my reservations and give myself over to Nolan.

His large body covers mine, one knee shoved between my hip and the seat while his other foot braces against the floor. Hot lips cover mine, his tongue thrusting into my mouth, tasting of whiskey.

Reaching between our bodies, he grips his shaft and positions his cock at my entrance. With one powerful snap of his hips, he thrusts into my body, splitting me open.

A whine of protest escapes me, and I push at his shoulders.

“It’s okay.” He kisses over my cheek to my ear. “You can take me. Our bodies were made for this.”

He presses forward, and the burn of invasion wars with the joy of being taken by my Alpha. His cock sinks deeper and deeper, nudging against my stomach before he finally stops.

His heavy breaths fill my ear. “You’re so tight. You feel so good wrapped around me.”

My inner muscles clench and release, molding to his thick shape, and restless desire fills me. He’s not moving, and I need him to. More slick pours from my body, and I encircle his waist with my legs, lifting my hips.

Stretching up, I lick and suck the strong column of his neck. “Alpha, please.”

He rises above me, his hard green eyes catching mine. “Who’s claiming you? Say my name.”

“Nolan.” I rock my hips against him, my hard dick rubbing the front of his dress shirt. “Nolan. Nolan. Nolan.”

“Good boy.” He leans down to kiss me once more.

No longer restraining himself, he pulls out, his cock hot and heavy as it leaves my body until his tip rests at my entrance. Then he drives into me again, moving within my channel in powerful thrusts.

Every inch of him is solid and hot, stretching me wider than I ever could with my fingers. His cock rubs against my prostate, sending shivers down my spine, and the discomfort gives way to pure pleasure. Nothing has ever felt so good in my life. My body melts beneath him, craving more contact, more friction.

His hand slips between us to stroke my dick in time with his thrusts, sending me spiraling into a haze of pleasure.

“More,” I moan, needing him to go deeper.

Without hesitation, he pulls out, then slams back in with more force, and my body welcomes him as if I was made just for him. The wet sound of our bodies joining mingles with my needy whimpers. My fingernails scrape down the back of his suit jacket, desperate to hold on to something.

His name falls from my lips in a desperate chant as pleasure builds inside.

Then different words fall from my lips, begging to be filled with his seed, for him to put a baby in me.

With a growl, Nolan rears back, his cock dragging from my body, and he flips me onto my stomach. Instinct lifts my ass, and I press my hands against the car door, bracing myself as Nolan thrusts into me once more.

His weight comes down on top of me, and I arch the back of my neck toward him.

His teeth clamp down on my nape, sinking deep, and pleasure rushes through me. My dicks pulses, cum splashing the seat beneath me.

Nolan bites down harder, pinning me down as his body stiffens on top of mine, and hot cum floods my channel.

Shivers of release wrack my body, but the fever of my Heat still burns.

Slowly, he releases my nape to lick the wound, ensuring his DNA gets into my system, Marking me as his Omega.

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The sound of water splashing against a tiled wall draws me from sleep.

I blink, taking in the unfamiliar surroundings of a luxurious bedroom. The silky sheets beneath my bare skin probably cost more than my rent, and the mattress hugs my body. Every muscle aches from being used, and when I lift a hand to touch the back of my neck, my fingers find a delicate ring of scabs in the shape of a bite mark.

My heart races as the events of the last several nights flood my mind. Nolan Rockford, the Alpha I've admired from afar, had taken care of me during my Heat.

My stomach twists with mortification as I remember throwing myself at him, using my pheromones to trigger his Alpha instincts. I had done to him what Rich tried to do to me.

That I was out of my mind with need by that point doesn't make it okay. What I did to him is why no one wants to hire Omegas.

I can't face him after forcing myself on him. I need to get out of here before he steps out of the bathroom and sees me lying naked on the bed, my body still tingling from his touch.

With effort, I crawl out of the bed. My legs quiver like jelly as I stand, and cool air touches my bare skin. My heart hammers as I frantically search the room and find my clothes in a large, walk-in closet. Someone had washed and ironed them before hanging my club uniform next to Nolan's thousand-dollar suits.

I hurry to pull them on, the splash of water from the bathroom driving me on. My

worn jeans and ratty jacket are out of place amidst the opulence of the room, pounding home how much I don't belong here.

With an apologetic glance at the closed bathroom door, I slip out of the room.

What I see of the rest of the house matches the bedroom in extravagance as I hurry down the stairs to the foyer. From somewhere in the back comes the clink of dishes, and panic shoots through me that I'll be caught and forced to stay to face Nolan.

I fumble with the gold handle on the front door, a whine sticking in my throat when it refuses to open. The electric lock isn't something I'm familiar with. Chest heaving, I abandon it to rush to the window beside it and unlatch it before shoving it open.

A quiet ping fills the air, and too late, I realize that someone like Nolan would have an alarm system.

Steps sound in the hall as I scramble through the window, then race past a black, club car parked in the driveway. Humiliation floods me when I remember how wantonly I had begged for Nolan to breed me in front of his driver.

The neighborhood that surrounds me is nothing like the one I call home. Manicured lawns and fancy cars line the streets, a stark contrast to the cracked sidewalks and graffiti-covered buildings I'm used to.

I keep running until my legs can't take it anymore. When I look around for anything familiar, I have no idea where I am.

Leaning against the wall of a boutique dress shop to catch my breath, I fumble my phone from my pocket only to find the battery dead, leaving me with no means to check my location. Panic bubbles in my chest as I start walking, trying to ignore the stares I receive from passersby who recognize that I don't belong here.

Several blocks later, relief washes over me when I spot a bus stop with a map posted on the side. I hurry toward it and trace my finger along the lines and stops until I find the one closest to my apartment. I'm farther from my neighborhood than I thought, but at least I have a way to get back home now.

As I wait for the bus, I can't help but replay the events of the last few nights in my mind.

What will happen when Nolan realizes I'm gone? Will he be relieved he doesn't have to kick me out? Or angry that I used him and left? I should have stayed to apologize and beg him not to fire me.

Oh, God, he's going to tell Tony to fire me.

Panic rises, and I pinch my thigh, the sting of pain helping me to focus. First, I need to get home. Then I can figure out what to do next.

Drained and disoriented, I step off the second bus. My ass throbs from sitting for too long, and it takes everything I have not to collapse right there on the sidewalk.

The fading sunlight casts long shadows across the pavement, and my stomach knots with hunger, though not as much as expected. Hazy memories surface of Nolan coaxing me to eat and drink between lulls of my Heat, and I regret not being able to remember what the food tasted like. I bet it was just as expensive as his home.

I fix my eyes on my feet, forcing myself to take one step after another. My apartment is just a few more blocks away.

Somehow, I make it to the building, then up the rusty stairs that lead up to my floor, and down the shaky walkway to my apartment at the end.

As I unlock the door and make my way inside, I can't help but compare this cramped room to the one I woke up in. The moldy odor and the thin comforter on the bare mattress fill me with despair. I work my ass off to cling to this shithole because the next step down is the street, and that terrifies me.

I close the door behind me, lock it, and crawl across my mattress to plug in my phone.

When the screen comes to life, a message from Tony pops up.

Leo, you're fired. Don't bother coming into work tonight.

My heart drops, and for a moment, I can't breathe. Did Nolan call him as soon as he found me missing? But no, when I check the time that the message arrived, it came in on the second night into my Heat. So, he fired me for not showing up for my shift.

Panic rises within me, clawing at my throat and making it hard to think. I need that job more than anything, even if it means facing Tony again.

I'm not the first employee not to show up. Heats aren't always predictable, and most of the people who work at Velvet Oasis are Omegas. The only non-Omegas are security and the bartenders.

If I go in and beg for my job like other Omegas have, Tony will change his mind. He just wants to scare me.

Desperation fueling my steps, I unplug my phone and head back out the door. I have to try. I can't just sit here and accept my fate without a fight.

The walk to the club passes in a haze, and before I know it, I stand in the employee room of Velvet Oasis. The familiar sights and sounds of the club wash over me. My

hell and my salvation rolled into one.

“Leo?” Phoenix stands from the vanity across the room, his eyes wide with surprise. “What are you doing here?”

I hurry toward the door. “I need to talk to Tony.”

“Hey, wait a second.” Phoenix pulls out his phone. “You’re not supposed to be here.”

Afraid he’ll stop me, I hurry to push through the door to the main floor. It takes a moment for my eyes to adjust to the dim lighting, the haze of cigarette smoke stinging my eyes. The scent of pheromones that cling to the club pricks at my senses, still raw from my Heat. I take shallow breaths as I search the floor for Tony and spot him at the bar.

Tony turns to me, his expression unreadable. “Well, look what the cat dragged in. You have some nerve showing up here after the scene you caused.”

So it’s not about no-showing. Rich must have reported what happened.

“Please, Tony.” I force the words past the lump in my throat. “You know I need this job.”

“Even if I wanted to, I can’t have you on the floor after what you did to Rich.” Tony shakes his head in disbelief. “What were you thinking, kid? He practically bankrolls this place.”

“What I did?” Disbelief fills me.

He can’t possibly think I’m strong enough to beat Rich up. Unless the Alpha spun a different story to save his pride.

“See that kid?” Tony points one thick finger toward the floor, and I peer over my shoulder, spotting an unfamiliar Omega carrying a serving tray. “That’s your replacement.”

Feeling like I’m drowning, I turn back to Tony. “Please, I need this job. I’ll do anything.”

“Anything, huh?” His eyes narrow as he studies me, a hard glint in his eyes. “Your server position has already been filled. But there’s still another position available. One that pays better. A lot better.”

Tears sting my eyes. “You’re talking about the back rooms.”

“It’s all I’ve got for you, kid, and better than you deserve. The only reason I’m willing to offer it is because Rich isn’t pressing charges for what happened.” Tony watches my reaction. “This will be a good move for you, Leo. With the kind of money you’ll make, you can pay off your debts, eat well, and maybe even find a nicer place to live.”

He reaches out to grip my shoulder. “I’ll even make sure your first client’s a good one. Nice and gentle.”

His words echo in my head, and I take a deep breath, steeling myself against the fear that threatens to consume me. This is my chance to escape the crushing weight of my brother’s debt, to claw myself out of the hole of misery I live in.

Clammy sweat coats my palms, and cotton fills my mouth. The thought of becoming a back-room boy terrifies me, but what other choice do I have? Rent is due, and Gino will be pounding on my door on the fifteenth. If I don’t have his payment...

My mind balks at what he’ll do. It will be worse than what Tony’s offering.

“Alright.” My voice cracks on the word. “I’ll do it.”

Tony smirks, his eyes gleaming with satisfaction. “That’s what I like to hear, Leo. But let me make one thing clear. You belong to me now, so I expect nothing less than total obedience, understand?”

I nod slowly, swallowing hard as I force myself to meet his gaze. “Yes, sir.”

“Good.” He nods toward the back hall. “Go get yourself ready.”

I jerk back a step. “Tonight?”

His brow arches. “Are you disobeying me?”

I drop my head. “No, sir.”

“Good.” He makes a shooing motion. “Get going before I change my mind.”

Steps heavy, I turn and head for the hall that leads to the back rooms.

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The bright lights cast the changing area in stark relief, leaving no way to hide what this part of the club is used for.

I clutch the delicate, white lace lingerie that had been thrust at me by the madam who oversees the boys who work in this part of the club. The material feels foreign against my skin. I've never worn anything like this before, and my heart races at the thought of what's to come.

Anxiety churns in my stomach, while deep down, I know I shouldn't be doing this. But I need the money. Even if I could find a new job right away, my first paycheck wouldn't come in time.

"Hey," says a soft voice from behind me.

I turn to see another Omega, a petite redhead with a kind smile.

"Take this." He holds out a small white pill. "Trust me, it'll help take the edge off."

I hesitate, staring at the tiny white tablet in his hand. Addiction destroyed my family, so I've always been wary of drugs. But I can't deny that I could use something to calm my nerves right now.

Swallowing hard, I reach out and take the pill from him, pressing it against my tongue with a shaky breath.

I force a weak smile. "Thank you."

“The first time is always the hardest.” He pats my shoulder gently before leaving me alone once more.

With trembling hands, I change into the scrap of fabric, which does nothing to protect me from the chill in the room.

As I glance around at the other boys getting ready for the night, I catch sight of myself in the mirror. A stranger stares back, his slender form adorned in seductive clothing, his light brown eyes wide with fear.

I barely recognize myself, and anxiety claws at my chest. The weight of the situation presses down on me with suffocating intensity. My eyes close, and I take steady breaths, willing the drugs to kick in faster.

This will only be a one-time thing. I just need enough money to pay off Gino, then I can find a new job. After tonight, I’ll never have to do this again. The thought provides little comfort, but it gives me something to cling to as the minutes tick by.

“Leo?” the madam calls out, jolting me from my thoughts. “You’re up.”

“W-Who’s my customer?” I stammer, trying to quell the tremors in my voice.

“Richard Ballcrest.” Her foot taps against the laminate floor with impatience. “He specifically requested you for tonight.”

My heart plummets into the pit of my stomach, and acid rises in my throat. I’m going to be sick. After what happened in the parking lot, the mere thought of being alone with Rich in one of those back rooms sends waves of terror crashing through me.

“No.” I shake my head, backing away. “No, I can’t... I won’t go with him.”

“Excuse me?” Her penciled-on eyebrows lift, and a hush falls over the room.

“I can’t do it.” I hold up my hands as she advances. “Please, anyone else. Just not him.”

“Listen, Leo.” She marches toward me, her voice cold and unsympathetic. “You don’t get to choose your customers around here. If Rich wants you, he gets you. Understand?”

“Please...no.” Tears prick at the corners of my eyes.

The drug I took earlier starts to take effect, making my limbs heavy and my thoughts hazy, but it does nothing to dull the sharp edge of panic slicing through me.

“Get yourself together.” She grabs my wrist, her patience worn thin. “You’re going in there whether you like it or not.”

Her sharp nails dig into my flesh as she drags me out into the hall, my chest tightening with each step. If I go through with this, there will be no turning back, and that knowledge terrifies me more than anything else ever has.

My bare heels slide helplessly against the floor as I strain to escape. “No, no, no. Please, I changed my mind.”

Gasps leave my lips, my panic attack growing stronger, making it hard to breathe. I feel like a helpless animal being dragged to slaughter.

“Enough!” She looks at me with a mixture of disgust and annoyance, as if my terror is nothing more than an inconvenience to her. “You’re going into that room, and you’re going to do your damn job. If you don’t, I’ll make sure you’re on your back for the next three days. You can take all the customers who come in.”

I try to take a deep breath, but the tightness in my chest refuses to let air into my lungs. Sweat trickles down my spine, and my legs tremble beneath me. How am I supposed to go through with this when every fiber of my being screams for me to run?

“Please, don’t do this,” I beg, tears streaming down my face.

“Shut up.” Her palm cracks against the side of my face.

Pain blazes through my skull, and my vision swims, my body shaking so hard I would collapse without the madam’s hold.

A cold voice cuts through the chaos. “What the hell is going on here?”

Through the blur of tears, I see Nolan striding toward us, his green eyes blazing with anger as they land on us. I’ve never seen him look so fierce before, and the sight sends a shiver down my spine. Tony hovers behind him, his face pale.

“Mr. Rockford,” the woman stammers, releasing my arm as if burned, and I slump against the wall. “I’m sorry, sir. One of the new boys just has cold feet, but we’ll get him broken in.”

“Broken in?” Ice drips from Nolan’s tone as he turns back to fix his angry gaze on Tony. “Is this how you run my club? By forcing Omegas to work back here?”

“Of course not, sir.” Tony’s face reddens. “Leo volunteered for this job, but you know how it is. He’ll be fine once he gets started.”

“Really?” Nolan’s gaze shifts to me, his expression inscrutable. “Did you ask to work back here?”

I open my mouth to respond, but no words come out. While I didn't ask for this job, I did agree to it, and shame floods through me.

Behind Nolan's back, Tony catches my eyes, his expression promising retribution if I do anything but back up his statement.

My lips part, but the words won't come out, and tears leak down my cheeks.

Nolan turns back to Tony, his voice low and dangerous. "Did you even check to see if he's Marked?"

Caught off guard by the question, Tony blanches under his stare. "Marked? No, I didn't... Why would he be Marked?"

"All Omegas who work back here are supposed to go through health screenings before every shift," Nolan growls through clenched teeth. "Did you do that?"

Tony's eyes dart to the madam, who pales before grabbing for me. The hall spins and dips as she turns me to inspect my nape, where Nolan's Mark stands out as a vibrant red ring against my pale skin.

Tony's curses fill the hall. "I swear, I didn't know. If I did, I never would have let him back here."

"You should have known!" Nolan roars, his anger crashing like waves around me. "What would have happened if his Alpha found out about this? Are you trying to get me sued?"

The waves continue to crash through my body, and a strange, prickling warmth fills my limbs, intensifying with each passing second.

Why is Nolan pretending he's not the one who Marked me? Does he not remember doing it? Were the last three days just a fever fantasy brought on by my Heat?

Panic shoots through me. No, that was real. Wasn't it?

My breathing turns shallow and uneven, vision blurring at the edges, and my legs fold beneath me.

Strong arms catch me, and a familiar, welcome scent fills my lungs.

"Leo?" Nolan grips my jaw, lifting my face to his. Concern fills his face, followed swiftly by rage as he looks back at the madam. "Did you give him drugs?"

Their voices fade in and out with the rush of waves in my ears, and distantly, I realize it's my pulse beating so fast that my heart feels ready to explode.

My feet float off the ground... No, wait, that's Nolan picking me up and cradling me in his arms. My head lands heavily on his chest, the thunder of his heartbeat melding with the crash of blood in my veins.

A sense of safety envelops me. Despite my current state, nothing bad will happen to me as long as Nolan is here.

My eyes close, blocking out the world, and I focus on the heartbeat beneath my cheek.

A sense of motion flows past me, and I force my eyes open, catching sight of the employee room and Phoenix's worried expression before my lashes flutter down.

A shock of cold follows, then the smell of leather and Nolan's pheromones.

Warm hands grip my shoulders, and Nolan shakes me. “Leo, look at me.”

I try, but my eyelids refuse to open again.

“Look at me.” The Command in his voice demands a response, and my lashes flutter, his face swimming in and out of focus.

We’re in his car.

My head lolls to the side, and I stare at the back of the driver’s head. “Is he going to watch us again?”

Nolan grips my chin, drawing my attention back to him. “Leo, I need you to tell me what drug you took.”

I struggle to focus. “You fucked me in front of your driver.”

“Yes, I did,” he says without a hint of shame. “And that’s why I need to know what drug you took. It could affect the baby.”

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“Baby?” My hand drops to my stomach, and unfamiliar lace slides beneath my palm.

A whine of distress leaves me, and my eyes dart to the driver as I try to cover myself. I don’t want strangers to see me like this. It’s already bad enough that Nolan has witnessed me at my worst after I snuck out on him this morning.

Shame rises in me, and tears fall down my cheeks as I cross my arms over myself. “Why did you pretend you didn’t Mark me? Is it because I work in your strip club? Or because I’m dirty?”

His expression turns fierce. “Never say that again.”

“But I made you...” I pull my legs up onto the seat and cross my ankles, trying to hide myself. “And I was going to?—”

A sob cuts me off, and my shoulders shake.

“It’s okay, sweet boy.” He shrugs out of his suit jacket and wraps it around my body, his scent enveloping me. “You didn’t make me do anything.”

“I didn’t want to work in the back rooms, but I was going to do it.” Shivers run through me, and I pull the jacket tighter around myself. “I need the money— Oh, god, Tony’s going to fire me. I need to?—”

Outside the car windows, the city rushes by.

When did we leave the club? I can’t remember, and panic sets in. How long have I

already been gone?

If I don't go back to Velvet Oasis, that's it for me. There's no way Tony will give me a third chance. I need to go back.

Lunging forward, I grab the back of the driver's seat. "Please, turn around. I need to?—"

"You're not going back there." Firm, gentle hands draw me onto Nolan's lap, and the pheromones that flood from his body help to calm my panic. "Didn't I say I would take care of you?"

Straddling his powerful thighs, I clutch the front of his shirt. "You don't understand. Without this job, I?—"

More sobs drown out the rest of my words.

"It will be okay. Everything will be okay." He wipes the tears from my eyes and cradles my face in his hands. "Now, tell me what drugs you took. And is this the first time? Or is this an ongoing addiction? Who supplied you?"

"Ongoing..." I stare at him blankly. "I can't afford drugs. I can't even afford suppressants right now."

"Good, that makes things easier." His thumbs sweep over my wet cheeks. "Do you know what you took? And who supplies it?"

"I don't know. One of the boys gave it to me. He said it would help make things easier..." My face crumples. "It didn't make things easier. Tony was going to give me to Rich. I didn't want to go."

Rage twists his features before his expression gentles. “It’s okay. Come here. Everything will be okay.”

His hands move to my back, and he draws me forward until our chests rest flush against each other. Then his palm on the back of my head urges it down to rest against his shoulder, near the spot behind his ear that smells the sweetest.

A low rumble vibrates from his chest, traveling through me, and I melt against him. My hold on his shirt relaxes, and my arms wrap around him, needing his warmth to anchor me so I don’t spiral back into anxious panic.

Nolan will make everything okay.

Distantly, his voice fills the car, but the gentle sweep of his hand over my back tells me I don’t need to pay attention. All I need to do is breathe him in and let the rest of the world fade to nothing.

“He should recover, but he needs nutrients,” a voice murmurs, drawing me up from unconsciousness. “He’s extremely malnourished. If he’s pregnant, he needs to take better care of himself, or he won’t be healthy enough to carry to term.”

Nolan’s voice joins the other one. “When will we know for sure?”

“The earliest is ten days after the end of his last Heat.” A metallic snap fills the room. “I can return at the end of next week. Until then, make sure he eats.”

“I will.” Footsteps sound, and Nolan’s voice grows distant. “Thank you for coming on such short notice, Dr. Wallace.”

“Of course. The Rockford family has done a lot for my organization. We’re in your debt.”

A door closes, followed by the return of only one set of feet. A moment later, the bed I lie on dips, and a callused hand smooths back my hair. “Leo, are you awake?”

I groan and crack open my lids. My eyes feel gritty and swollen from crying, and it takes a second for the room to swim into view. When it does, it’s not the modern bedroom I woke up in this morning. Instead, antique, dark-wood furniture fills the space, with a built-in wardrobe directly across from me and an archway that leads to what looks like a sitting room.

Confused, I search the room for a hint of familiarity. “Where am I?”

One corner of his lips quirks up. “Since you found my townhouse so objectionable that you crawled out a window to escape, I brought you to my family home instead. You’ll find that the buses don’t come to this neighborhood.”

My gaze jerks up to meet his. “I’m so sorry, I?—”

He presses a finger over my lips. “Hold that thought.”

Rising from the bed, he strides into the sitting room and returns with a tray. He carries it to the bed and sets it on the nightstand.

The smell of savory food drifts out from under a silver dome, and my stomach lets out a hungry rumble.

“Here, let me help you sit up.” Nolan turns to me and peels back the covers before I can protest.

I stare down in confusion at the large nightshirt I wear as he helps me into an upright position. He stacks pillows between my back and the large, wooden headboard before draping the comforter over my legs.

Once I'm settled, he grabs the tray and places it on my lap, lifting away the lid. "I wasn't sure of your preferences, so if you don't like this, I can order you something else from the kitchen."

A large sweet potato takes up half the plate, the center swimming with brown sugar, butter, and pecans. Next to it, a delicate filet of salmon with pinwheels of lemon and dill garnishes rests next to vibrant green broccoli.

I stare down at the plate. There's not a speck of mold or any sign that the food is near its expiration. No stale bread or canned beans. My mind yells that this is too good for me, that I don't deserve it, and tears burn my eyes.

"Do you hate salmon?" Nolan sits on the edge of the bed. "Or do you prefer mashed potatoes?"

I lift my eyes from the treasure trove of food in front of me, and the tears spill over. "Mr. Rockford, this is too much."

He lifts a cloth napkin from my tray and dabs my cheeks. "What happened to calling me Nolan?"

My mouth works, but words escape me as the memory of all the times I said his name ring in my ears. Me crying out in pleasure. Me begging for him to put a baby in my belly. Me clinging to him.

It's all too humiliating.

He picks up the fork and presses it into my fingers. "Eat. You need your strength."

The words trigger more memories of when I was drugged, my thoughts hazy, but one word sticks out. Baby. I may be carrying a baby.

Nolan's baby.

We hadn't used protection during my Heat, and I hadn't even considered the consequences of that when I agreed to become one of Tony's whores. I took drugs, for god's sake.

What if I hurt the small life growing inside me? I don't deserve this kindness from Nolan. Trash like me should never have touched him, let alone been allowed inside his family home.

My hand shakes, and the fork clatters against the plate.

"Here." Nolan takes the utensil, scoops up some of the soft sweet potato, and holds it to my lips. "Open for me."

My lips part automatically, and the savory sweet morsel slides into my mouth, tasting like the life I lost when Gino showed up at my door, and I realized I no longer had control of what happened to me.

A lump forms in my throat, and I struggle to swallow past it. "I shouldn't be here. I need to leave."

Nolan breaks off a piece of flaky pink salmon. "No."

"What—" The fork sliding past my lips stops me, and the salmon melts on my tongue.

"You seem to keep forgetting, so now that your mind is clear from the drugs and the fever, I'll say it again." Nolan spears a piece of broccoli and stuffs it into my mouth. "I'm taking care of you now. Which means you're not leaving."

All I can do is stare at him in confusion. What does that even mean?

He sets the fork down and stands. “Eat the rest of your food. I have business to attend to, but I’ll be back in a few hours. You have free rein of our suite, so use whatever you like. You can leave the tray on the nightstand when you’re done.”

Eyes wide, I watch him head for the sitting room before his words fully sink in. I choke down the bite of broccoli and move the tray onto the nightstand before flinging back the covers.

My legs shake when I climb out of bed, and the nightshirt only reaches to mid-thigh. The carpet sinks beneath my bare feet as I hurry after him. “Mr. Rockford, wait.”

I reach the sitting room just as the bedroom door closes, and the snick of a lock pierces the air.

Disbelief washes through me as I rush to the door and jiggle the handle, but it refuses to open.

I just went from being one of Nolan’s employees to being his prisoner, and the only people who care if I disappear are my landlord and my loan shark.

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The snick of the lock pulls me from the half-sleep I fell into on the couch after an exhaustive search of my new prison.

Nolan steps into the room, relocks the door, and takes off his shoes before turning to me. “You should be in bed resting.”

Despite the words, he carries a tray with two drinks in one hand and a large shopping bag in the other.

My gaze darts around the room as I sit up. “Do you have cameras in here?”

“Yes.” He walks closer, the long lines of his body drawing my attention. The suit he wears looks rumpled, with the top button missing. “They can be turned off when needed. I’ll show you, but for security reasons, please only deactivate them when it’s necessary.”

“Right.” I pull the lap blanket over my legs and swing my feet to the floor. “Security.”

Of course, Nolan has bodyguards. Velvet Oasis is only one of his many businesses. If I was ever confused about how rich Nolan Rockford is, it only took a stroll around the gorgeous suite he locked me in to confirm that he’s way out of my league.

In addition to the enormous bedroom and sitting room, I discovered a luxurious bathroom bigger than my entire apartment, and a home office with shelves stuffed full of books.

No other exits aside from the front door, though. And the windows are shuttered, so I can't even gauge where we are, or the size of the house. All I know is that the main door leads to a hall instead of outside.

"Don't worry, you're safe here." Nolan sets the bag down beside the coffee table. "I went back and collected your personal effects from your locker."

A glance down reveals the arm of my threadbare jacket poking out the top. "Oh, thank you."

"Tomorrow, we can order you some things to wear." He holds out the drink tray. "Do you prefer strawberry-banana or pineapple-coconut?"

Without really thinking about it, I take the pink drink and notice the logo for Smooth Grooves Coffee and Smoothies before my gaze jerks up to his. "I have clothes at my apartment. There's no need to buy me new ones."

He takes the pineapple-coconut shake and sets the empty drink carrier on the table. "What if I want to?"

"What if I don't want you to?" My focus drops to the cold cup cradled in my lap. "I already took advantage of you and put us in a delicate situation. It wasn't my intention, and I don't plan to use it to extort money from you."

Being left alone gave me a lot of time to dwell on the whole pregnancy issue, and how someone of Nolan's status would be prey to people after his wealth. Omegas getting knocked up during a Heat cycle is an age-old trick of gold diggers.

Afraid now that he misunderstood, I set the drink on the table and lunge to my feet, the blanket falling to the floor. "I don't want anything from you, Mr. Rockford. If I'm pregnant, I won't put your name on the birth certificate. No one needs to know who

the father is, and I'll sign anything you want to release you from any obligation?—”

A finger on my lips cuts off the tide of words. “I know you didn't plan any of what happened, Leo. If anyone should apologize, it's me.”

I pull back, my tongue sweeping out to taste the heat of his skin. “What do you have to be sorry for? You were just caught up in the pheromones when you saved me.”

“Did you think I was so far gone that I couldn't have had my driver take you home?” He traces the line of my jaw. “Don't mistake me for a kind man. I saw a way to get what I wanted and took it.”

A shiver goes through me. “You...wanted a baby?”

“I wanted you.” His green eyes sweep over my face. “You fat with my child just makes it sweeter.”

Pulse quickening, I swallow hard. “You wanted...me?”

“Is it so shocking?” His thumb caresses my bottom lip. “It's bad practice to proposition employees, but I wouldn't be a good businessman if I didn't snap up an opportunity when it literally falls at my feet.” His eyes crinkle in amusement.

“But why...” My eyes drop, then widen in shock. “What happened to your hand?”

With a step back, I cradle his palm, staring at his bruised, bloody knuckles. “Did you get into a fight?”

“It's nothing.” He pulls his hand out of my hold. “I just removed some trash that was...putting my interests at risk.”

Stomach swooping, I turn and hurry to the bathroom. From the linen closet I discovered earlier, I grab one of the monogrammed hand towels and run it under the faucet, then wring it out and return to where Nolan stands, sipping his smoothie.

“Sit down.” I point to the settee.

“It’s really nothing.” Setting his drink down, Nolan shrugs out of his suit jacket and drapes it across the back of the couch before he rolls up his sleeves and settles on the cushion I abandoned.

I kneel on the floor in front of him and take one large hand in mine, dabbing at the abrasion.

He stays quiet, allowing me to play nursemaid without complaint.

With a wince, I press the towel over the largest split on his knuckle. “Was it Rich?”

His hand curls into a fist, then relaxes. “He shouldn’t have touched you.”

“How badly did you hurt him?” Based on the condition of Nolan’s knuckles, Rich has to be in the hospital. “Will he press charges against you? I don’t want you to get in trouble because of me.”

“Let’s just say, he won’t be bothering you again.” His free hand smooths back my hair. “He’ll never attack another Omega.”

“Did you kill him?” The question escapes as a whisper, and I expect Nolan to pretend he didn’t hear.

His sharp gaze studies my face. “Would it bother you if I did?”

Does it make me a horrible person if the idea of Rich no longer out there, preying on people, fills me with relief? Or that the thought of Nolan protecting me like that sends a thrill through me?

I look away from him before he sees what a bad person I am. “I don’t want you to go to jail because of me.”

“He should have heeded my first warning.” Tension fills Nolan’s body. “But he had the balls to come back and try to buy you.”

“It wasn’t the first time.” Head down, I lift the cloth and blow on the wound. “It was just the first time I was for sale.”

His hand curls around the back of my neck. “Never again, Leo.”

I stay focused on his wounds. “Then you can’t buy me anything.”

His fingers circle the Mark he left on my nape. “That’s different.”

Stubborn about this point, I remain silent.

“Fine.” His foot nudges against my calf. “We can go collect your clothes tomorrow. But when you grow out of them, I will buy you new ones.”

Warmth rushes through me at the reminder of how pregnancy will change my body, followed by uncertainty. “Am I a prisoner here?”

He tickles the fine hairs on the back of my neck. “Do you want to leave?”

My breath catches, and I resist the urge to arch into his touch.

When I finally settled on the couch earlier, I realized there was no reason to escape my luxurious prison. I'd be a damn fool to give this up and return to the mold-infested single room I rent with the grimy mattress on the floor.

Staying here also means I'm out of Gino's reach, which gives me time to find a new job and come up with the money I owe him.

If Nolan lets me stay here that long.

I take his other hand to clean those wounds and dab his bruised, scraped knuckles with the damp towel. "What happens after the baby's born?"

A rumble comes from him, vibrating through the room and echoing in my chest. He takes the cloth from me to set it aside. The scent of his cologne surrounds me, a mix of spice and wood, leaving a trail of warmth in its wake.

My empty hands drop to my lap, fidgeting with the hem of the oversized nightshirt I wear, the fabric fine and more expensive than anything I've ever owned. "What if it turns out I'm not pregnant?"

The pink smoothie appears in front of me. "Drink."

Confused but obedient, I dip my chin and catch the straw between my lips. With a light suck, strawberry-banana sweetness bursts on my tongue. It melted while sitting on the coffee table, turning more into a juice than a slushie, but it still tastes good, and I take a bigger sip.

Approval rumbles from him, reminding me of all the times that sound traveled through my body as Nolan pinned me down in bed, my senses flooded with pleasure.

Heat spreads in my hips, making me squirm, and I tug my shirt forward to hide my

growing erection. He hasn't even touched me, but need slicks my channel. I want to be back under him, our bare skin sliding against each other, his body buried deep inside mine.

Desire quickens my pulse, and my hands cover his around the cup, my gaze lifting to meet his as I suck on the straw.

His pupils dilate, and his nostrils flare as he takes in my scent. "Are you trying to seduce me, sweet boy?"

Embarrassed that I was so transparent, I look away. "No, I..."

A finger under my chin pulls my focus back to him. "You can seduce me, Leo."

My pulse races beneath the intensity of his stare. "How?"

Leaning past me, he sets the smoothie on the table. Warmth radiates from his body, his arm brushing against mine, and his voice fills my ear. "You want me to teach you?"

Breath catching, I nod.

His lips skim across my cheek. "Open your mouth, and let me taste the strawberries on your tongue."

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My pulse races as Nolan's lips claim mine, his tongue sweeping in, sending tingles through my body.

I lean into the embrace, reveling in the pineapple-coconut flavor that lingers in his mouth, the way the short bristles of his five o'clock shadow chafe my skin, and the heady scent of his pheromones rising to surround me.

Desire curls in my stomach, and I press a hand over the front of my nightshirt to ease the ache of my erection. It's too embarrassing for a simple kiss to bring me this much pleasure, but everything about Nolan overwhelms me, turning me into a puddle of want at his feet.

"Mmm, sweet." He straightens and leans against the couch, spreading his arms across the back. "It's too bad you want nothing from me when I'm in such a generous mood right now."

Panting, I stare up at him in confusion. "I don't... I thought you..."

"This is when you tell me what you want me to do to you, Leo." He spreads his knees wide, making the bulge in the front of his slacks obvious. "Be brave. Ask for anything, and I'll do it."

Hands trembling, I hesitate before placing them on his thighs. "I want to touch you."

At his rumble of encouragement, my palms slide higher. Strong muscles bunch beneath the material, and his eyelids drop to half-mast as he watches me.

There's so much about the time we spent together during my Heat that I don't remember. So many gaps I want to fill. What Nolan's face looks like when he's lost to pleasure. How he sounds when he comes. The fever stole those memories from me, and I want them back.

Swallowing hard, I reach for his belt and fumble to open it, struggling with the thick leather strap. The buckle isn't normal, with no obvious latch, and a whine of frustration rises in my throat.

"Do you want help?" Nolan purrs, the offer stroking over me like a touch.

Embarrassed to have already failed, I drop my hands to my lap and nod.

"No, not like that." His fingers brush my lips, then push inside to stroke my tongue. "You have to ask."

My eyes close with pleasure, and I catch his wrist, my eyes closing as I take his long digits deeper. Rough calluses and the faint trace of salt flood my senses, and a sliver of memory rises to the surface of something thicker and hotter filling my mouth.

He pulls away, and my lashes flutter up to find his burning gaze on me. "Do you want something else to suck on?"

My eyes drop to the front of his pants. "Yes."

"Ask."

Blood rushes to my cheeks. "Please open your slacks."

"Good boy. Pay attention, so you remember how to do this next time." Nolan reaches for his buckle and pinches the sides, releasing the small locks to flip back the flat

silver front, and the leather slides free with ease.

He doesn't stop there, though. With deft fingers, he flicks the button at the top of his fly and drags down the zipper.

Black boxers tent out of the opening, and he hooks his thumbs in the waistband. "These, too? Or would you prefer the pleasure?"

Desire fills me to unwrap that present myself, and my hands lift on instinct before I freeze.

With a knowing smile, he leaves his briefs in place as he returns his arms to the back of the couch and watches me.

A shiver goes down my spine, and I glance up at him through my lashes. When he stays still, I rise onto my knees and reach for the elastic at his waist.

Breath held, I peel them down, revealing his thick, long length. It stands proudly, the plump head flushed dusky pink with veins standing out along his shaft.

Uncertain if I can handle his size, I peek up at him once more.

"It's okay, you can take it. I've already come in every part of you." He cups my chin, drawing me forward. "Trust your body to remember my shape."

I shift, the plush carpet cushioning my knees, and my pulse flutters with excitement and worry. Nolan is a powerful, wealthy man who could have anyone. Certainly someone with more experience in how to please a man.

What if I mess this up?

As if sensing my hesitation, he gently tilts my face up to meet his piercing green eyes. “We don’t have to do anything you’re not comfortable with.”

“No, I want to.” My gaze fixes on his hard cock. “I want you.”

The words hold the weight of all those nights alone, longing for something impossible. Now that my fantasies are real, I’m not letting self-doubt stop me from doing something I’ve wanted since the first day I saw Nolan walk into Velvet Oasis.

Trembling, I lean forward, parting my lips to take him in. Salty and clean, the velvety heat of him strokes across my tongue. My hands shake as they settle on his thighs, the muscles like steel under my touch.

The bright lights of the room fall away as my eyes close, blocking out everything except the scent of his skin, a mix of expensive cologne and his pheromones.

“Fuck, it feels amazing to be back in your mouth.” He cups the back of my head, urging me to take more of him.

I slide my mouth down him as far as I can, my lips stretched taut around his thick shaft, his tip at the back of my tongue. When his hand in my hair tightens, I suction my cheeks as he pulls me up, his pre-cum an award for my efforts.

My body melts, desire spiraling through me, and I give myself over to Nolan as he sets a demanding but considerate pace. He works himself deeper and eases back when my throat constricts, waiting until I remember how to relax, how to accept his full length.

Then he fucks my mouth, his cock moving in hot, thick surges. His breath hitches, letting me know I’m doing well, that I’m giving him pleasure, and warmth unfurls inside me.

I lick the vein on the underside of his shaft, swirl over the sensitive bundle of nerves at the base of his head, and flick his slit, finding the right rhythm and pressure to draw the most intoxicating sounds from deep within his chest. Every moan, every twitch of his hips, praises me.

“Keep going. I want to fill your pretty mouth,” he groans, his voice strained with restraint.

A thrill of excitement coils in my stomach, and I gaze up at him through my lashes, our eyes locking, memorizing the sight of him tipping over the edge.

In this moment, Nolan belongs to me.

The hand in my hair tightens, holding me in place as his cock pulses, and hot cum floods across my tongue. I swallow around his shaft, greedy to claim even more of this powerful man.

My pleasure spikes, knowing that I’m the cause. That I brought him to release.

Nolan pulls my head up, his semi-hard length slapping against his stomach.

Dazed, I stare up at him, gasping for breath.

“Damn, you’re beautiful with your lips swollen and red from taking me.” He wipes the spit from my mouth. “Did you enjoy yourself?”

“Yes.” The word comes out raspy from my abused throat.

His gaze drops to the front of my nightshirt. “Show me.”

Drunk on pleasure, without a hint of embarrassment, I reach down to lift the hem,

showing Nolan my hard dick and thighs shiny with the slick leaking from my ass.

A low rumble rises from him, and I shudder in response, cum dripping from my slit.

He leans down, inhaling behind my ear. “Do you want me to take you to bed now?”

Legs shaking with need, I nod.

He nuzzles the side of my throat. “Yes?”

“Yes,” I gasp out. “Please take me to bed.”

“Good boy.” Nolan tugs on the loose collar of my nightshirt. “Strip.”

I kneel before him, trembling with a combination of nerves and anticipation, as he sits back to watch with the same commanding gaze he used to survey Velvet Oasis every time he came into the shop.

He strokes his semi-hard cock, still wet from my mouth. “Go ahead. Let me see everything.”

Breath hitching, I rise unsteadily to my feet and reach for the hem of the silky fabric, pulling it over my head and letting it fall to the floor.

It leaves me exposed while he remains fully clothed, but instead of vulnerability or weakness, Nolan’s heavy-lidded stare fills me with a sense of power as his desire for me pushes thick pheromones into the air, saturating the room with hunger and need.

“Look how lovely you are.” He reaches out to stroke my quivering thighs and leans forward to press a kiss to my stomach.

My heart races, and my arms wrap around his shoulders as my knees weaken.

Callused hands grip my waist, lifting me as if I weigh nothing. The world tilts, and I tighten my hold on him, burying my face against his neck where his pulse thunders as he carries me to the bed.

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Nolan lays me down on the plush bed with a gentleness belied by his size.

Eyes fixed on me, he strips out of his clothes, revealing a body toned with muscle. With no hair on his chest, I have an unobstructed view of the black tattoo that covers his left pec.

It's some kind of gear design, but before I get a better look at it, the mattress dips as he crawls over my body, his warmth enveloping me, and all other thoughts melt away.

Nolan slides an arm under my shoulders, and his knee pushes between mine. I curl toward him, craving the burn of his skin. I rut against his hard abs, craving friction against my cock, and a whimper escapes as I clutch at his biceps.

My Alpha.

If possible, I want him more now than when my Heat took control and demanded I mate.

Stretching up, I catch his lips, licking and sucking until he growls and thrusts his tongue into my mouth, consuming me. And I want to be devoured.

I rock our hips together, tingles rushing through my body as his cock hardens.

A hungry rumble vibrates through me, and his kisses drift down to my throat. "I'm going to feed you strawberries every night, so you always taste this sweet."

He grabs my hand and shifts it between our bodies, wrapping my fist around our hard lengths and pumping both of us at the same time. Pleasure curls my toes as his velvet heat rubs against mine, and my moan fills the room.

My hand moves on its own, stroking us, my gasps and moans muffled by his strong shoulder.

“Yeah, keep doing that.” He leaves me to jack us and reaches down to grip my ass, sliding into my crease to rub at my entrance. “You’re so wet. Will this place remember my shape, too?”

Pulse racing, I hook my leg over his hip, opening myself to him. “Remind me.”

Long fingers push inside my body, and I release our hard lengths to clutch at his shoulders as pleasure rocks through me.

“So warm, and you’re still soft from your Heat.” Muscles flexing, he rolls me fully beneath his body and grasps my other knee, lifting it to his waist, curving my hips upward to put me into position.

The blunt head of his cock presses against my entrance, and my body tenses with the memory of pain from our first time together.

“It’s okay.” The tendons in his neck stand out from self-restraint as he strokes down my center and wraps his large hand around my dick. “Your sweet ass remembers my shape, right?”

A few tugs on my length send tingles through me, my concerns about his size melting away, and when his mouth coaxes my lips to part for a deep kiss, I forget everything else.

The sharp burn of pleasure rushes through me as his cock works me open, and with a moan, I reach down to grab his firm ass, urging him deeper.

“Greedy.” Desire flushes his face, and he releases my dick to grasp my hip. “You want all of me?”

I nod, and then before he can prompt me for words, I gasp, “Need you inside.”

The muscles under my hands flex, and Nolan’s body bows over mine, weight supported on the arm beneath my shoulders as he thrusts forward, his thick breadth stretching me wide. Pleasure rushes up my spine, and my fingernails dig in, my back arching as I come.

He kisses my slack lips, his tongue far sweeter than the strawberries he promised to feed me every night. “You feel so perfect, squeezing me in your tight little hole.”

A shudder rocks through me, and my legs tighten around his waist. The scent of sex and sweat fill the air, making my head spin with our combined arousal.

He leans down to growl in my ear, “Such a good boy.”

The praise travels straight through me, and despite my cum still warm on my stomach, I rock my hips against his, needing his hard cock stirring inside me.

With a groan, his body moves over mine, his thick shaft driving in and out of my clenching channel.

I moan and cling to him, dirty pleas falling from my lips, writhing beneath his weight. He gives me everything I beg for, praising and wrecking me at the same time.

The wet sound of our bodies coming together and the creak of the bed join our gasps,

sweat slicking our skin. He grips me with possessive strength, lifting me to meet his thrusts, taking total control, until I come again screaming his name.

His breathing turns ragged, his restraint snapping, and he pounds into my body, the arm under my shoulders the only thing that keeps me anchored beneath him. I lick and suck at his shoulder and throat, salt and musk on my tongue.

The hand on my hip tightens, holding me in place as he drives into me hard, his pelvis tight against my ass. The muscles on his back form ridges, and his cock pulses within me, filling my channel with hot cum.

Panting, he rolls onto his back, taking me with him so that I rest across his broad chest.

Regret fills me as he slips from my body, followed by a warm trickle, and I reach back to push his seed back inside.

A callused hand covers mine. “You want to keep it all, don’t you, sweet boy?”

I shiver with pleasure. “Don’t want to let it go yet.”

An arm wraps around my waist and drags me higher. “Do you not want to let me go?”

My fingers splay over his tattoo as I search his face. Do I have the right to claim this powerful Alpha?

At my hesitation, he rakes back my hair. “Are you going to run away again?”

Heart pounding, I shake my head.

“Good.” He squeezes my hip. “Because you belong to me now.”

Eyes locked with his, I lean down to brush our lips together. “More.”

His Alpha rumble rises from beneath me. “Greedy little thing.”

“Make me yours.” My knees curl on either side of his hips. “Fill me until I can’t move without you dripping out of me.”

With a hungry growl, he rolls me back under his body. “I knew you were made for me to claim.”

Gripping my chin, his mouth covers mine.

Later, lying entwined together, our needs temporarily satisfied, I realize that Nolan never directly answered my question about Rich.

Does it change how I feel about Nolan if he killed Rich? No, and I don’t care if that makes me a bad person, as long as he wants me.

The driver parks in front of my apartment complex, and Nolan stares at the broken-down building. “This is where you’ve been living?”

“It’s the cheapest place I could find within walking distance of the club.” Embarrassed that Nolan is seeing any of this, I pop open the car door. “I’ll be right back. Shouldn’t take more than five minutes to pack a bag.”

The sound of the other door opening pulls me around, and I stare at Nolan in horror. “Where are you going?”

“With you.” Before I can protest, he slides out and shuts the door.

Scrambling out onto the sidewalk, I spin around.

The luxury sedan looks out of place at the curb amid the broken down, rusty vehicles that line the street alongside the graffiti-covered buildings. Only drug dealers have nice rides in this neighborhood.

If it was nighttime, I'd worry about getting hijacked.

I look at Nolan, who wears a pair of charcoal-gray slacks and a soft, designer black sweater. "You should stay with your driver. I promise I won't run away."

"No." Stern eyes meet mine. "You're not going up there alone."

The desire to protest rolls down my tongue, but I swallow it. Nothing I can do short of sliding back into the car will stop Nolan from tagging along and seeing the shithole he rescued me from by taking me home with him.

Will having the stark differences in social position shoved in his face change his mind about keeping me? I wouldn't blame him if it did. Someone like Nolan should have models on his arm, not me.

The stairs creak as I walk up ahead of him, and I pull my threadbare jacket closer against the chill in the air.

After waking up to breakfast in bed and Nolan pampering me by washing my hair, coming here crashes me back to reality. The server uniform I put on after my shower felt like putting on a stranger's clothes, the cheap material abrasive where beard burns pepper my body.

I suddenly empathize with Cinderella after she returns from the ball to become a servant again.

At my floor, I turn left onto the exterior walkway, my footsteps light so as not to wake my neighbors. Then the click of dress shoes joins me, and Nolan's warm hand touches my back, reminding me that my prince came home with me.

Everything about this situation feels surreal.

At my apartment, I hesitate, but Nolan isn't going to change his mind about coming in with me.

With a deep breath, I pull the key from my pocket and jiggle it in the lock before pushing the door open, letting out the musky scent of water damage and mold. "Watch your step. And try not to touch anything."

I avoid looking at Nolan as I kneel on the mattress on the floor and grab my pillow, dumping it out of the case to use as a bag. Shame fills me as I stuff my meager clothing inside, along with a couple of personal items from my makeshift dresser.

Setting it by the door, I shuffle around Nolan to the bathroom to collect my toiletries.

The light from the kitchen dims, and I peek at Nolan from the corner of my eye.

He leans against the bathroom entrance. "Put the toothbrush back in the cup, Leo. You already have a new one."

I glance down at the broken bristles and drop it into the trash instead before gripping the edge of the sink. "You think I'm being stupid, don't you?"

"If having your own possessions helps settle you faster, then I can have my people pack up the rest of your belongings and bring them to you."

Surprised, my head jerks toward him. "Why would you do that?"

He reaches out to brush the bangs off my forehead. “Because you’re not coming back here again.”

“But...” Anxiety fills me, and I squeeze the bottle of watered-down shampoo in my hand. “What if I’m not pregnant? If there’s no obligation for you to keep me close... This apartment is rent-controlled.”

His eyes harden. “You doubt me when I say you’re mine.”

I swallow down my nerves. “We don’t know each other, Nolan. Even if there is a baby, you could lose interest in me. All I have is a high school degree. And I have nothing to bring to this relationship besides my body, which...”

Unable to hold his intense stare, I drop my eyes to his chin. “I worked with strippers. I know I’m nothing special.”

The muscle in his jaw ticks before he lets out a slow breath. “I won’t force you to give up your home right away.”

“It’s not that I doubt you.” I curl in on myself. “But I don’t understand why you’d choose me except for an unplanned pregnancy.”

His tone gentles, and his touch moves to the Mark on my nape. “Keep your apartment if it makes you feel better. But never question that I desire everything you are, Leo, with or without a baby.”

A fist pounds at my front door, making me flinch, and the shampoo bottle slips from my hand as fear spikes through me.

No, not Gino. Not while Nolan is here.

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I jump as a fist slams on the door again, and Nolan scowls, turning toward the sound. “What the hell?”

“No, it’s okay.” I push past him. “Just... Can you stay in the bathroom while I check?”

Without waiting for him to answer, I hop over the corner of the mattress and grasp the handle, cracking the door open.

Relief floods me when I find the property manager standing on the other side instead of my loan shark.

With a glance back at Nolan, I squeeze through the crack and step outside. “Hey, Mr. Bugrov, about the payment that was due yesterday?—”

“You’re late on rent again.” He scratches the stained, white tank top that stretches over his stomach. “This is your third time.”

“Yes, but I’ll pay the fine when I get paid?—”

“Three missed payments, and you’re out. Them’s the rules.” His gaze drops to my neck, where kiss marks stand out on my pale skin, and his tongue swipes over his bottom lip. “Are you finally taking on customers? We’re not supposed to allow that on the premise, but I could look the other way if?—”

The door yanks open, and Nolan steps out, a small gun pointed at the apartment manager’s head. “He’s not a sex worker.”

Alarm shoots through me, along with a rush of warmth at his protectiveness. I place a hand on Nolan's tense arm. "It's okay. He's not going to touch me."

Paling, Mr. Bugrov raises his hand. "Sorry for the misunderstanding. When someone like you comes to a place like this, it's only for one reason."

"Nolan, please." I cast a furtive look around. "Mr. Bugrov was just reminding me that rent was due yesterday."

The muscle in Nolan's jaw ticks before he shoves his gun into his waistband.

"It was a misunderstanding. I'm Leo's boss." Nolan takes out his wallet and hands Mr. Bugrov a sleek black card with Velvet Oasis written in hot pink on the back. "Come down sometime, on the house."

Mr. Bugrov's hand shakes slightly as he reads the name. "No shit?"

"No shit." Nolan pulls out a stack of bills and holds it out. "This should cover Leo's rent and any fines."

Eyes wide, I snatch the cash before Mr. Bugrov can take it. "That's way too much. Aren't you supposed to be a businessman?"

I quickly count out the right amount, add fifty for the fine, and slap it against Mr. Bugrov's chest. "Please enjoy your evening at Velvet Oasis."

Grabbing the leather billfold from Nolan, I shove the rest of the money back inside and push him into the apartment, slamming the door.

"Dammit." I thrust the wallet back at Nolan. "I'll pay you back."

He tucks it back into his pocket. “Velvet Oasis owes you a final paycheck.”

“That was more than what was owed to me.” Tears burn my eyes. “I’ll figure out a way to make up the difference.”

I look around at what remains in my apartment. Nothing in here is worth selling, but it’s everything I have in life.

Instead of telling me not to bother, Nolan nods in acceptance. “I’ll help you find another job.”

Surprised, I rub the sleeve of my jacket over my eyes. “At one of your other clubs?”

“No.” The sharp word comes with a sense of finality.

My eyes drop to the gun in his waistband. “Where were you hiding that?”

He lifts his sweater to reveal a holster between his shoulder blades. In one smooth, practiced move, he sheathes the gun and drops his sweater.

A slight bump under the soft material gives away its location, but if I didn’t know it was there, I never would have suspected. “Do you always carry that?”

“Not specifically this one, but yes.” He cups my cheek. “Are you afraid?”

“A little.” I shift and adjust myself in my pants. “But not in a bad way.”

Nostrils flaring, he shoves me against the door, his mouth claiming mine in an all-consuming kiss that leaves my knees shaky and my dick hard.

Pulling back, he kisses my forehead. “Let’s get out of here.”

“Yeah, sure, get me worked up then tell me to walk.” Chest heaving, I adjust myself again and grab my stuffed pillowcase.

With a self-satisfied smirk, he opens the door and gestures me back out onto the landing. “Do you want to pick up something to eat on the way home?”

I accept the change of topic for now and follow him outside, locking up my apartment. “We just ate a big breakfast. Are you hungry already?”

His gaze sweeps over me. “It can’t hurt to grab a snack.”

Suspicious, I struggle to walk with my heavy pillowcase off to one side so my legs don’t smack into it with every step. “Only stop if you want something. I’m still full and will only have tea.”

In a deft move, he trades sides of the walkway with me, putting me closer to the building, and takes my belongings, swinging them over one shoulder with ease. “I’ll have Milton swing through Smooth Grooves before we take you home.”

Warmth rushes through me as I think about the strawberry smoothie from last night. It makes me want to order one on the off-chance that Nolan will want to kiss me afterward.

Then the rest of what he said registers. “You’re not staying with me?”

I hate how needy I sound, but I’m greedy for Nolan’s company for as long as I have the right to demand it.

His hand grasps mine, twining our fingers together. “I have some work to do, but I’ll be back by dinnertime.”

I squint up at the sun, obscured by gray clouds. “Isn’t it too early in the day for your business?”

One corner of his lips quirks. “I own more than nightclubs. My other properties operate during regular hours.”

“Oh.” Logically, his fortune couldn’t all come from pole dancers and sex workers, but I know nothing else about him.

He must hear my thoughts, because he squeezes my hand. “We have time to learn more about each other. We can play twenty questions over dinner.”

“What should I do while you’re gone?” He has maids, and all the books in the office are non-fiction.

Am I supposed to sit around doing nothing all day?

We reach the street, and Nolan opens the car door for me. “What would you do if you didn’t have to work?”

Uncertain of my answer, I settle into the plush leather seat as Nolan hands my bag to the chauffeur and walks to the other side to climb in.

Before my life fell apart, I was planning to major in business. It was a safe degree that could be useful in any number of jobs. If possible, I’d like to go back to college and complete my courses.

But I doubt that’s the response Nolan wants. He probably expects me to have loftier dreams, like traveling the world or doing something artistic.

What would be a proper hobby for the husband of a real estate tycoon? Not that

Nolan has asked me to marry him. Even if I'm only his boy toy, though, I should still pick something that would befit someone like him.

But what would that be? There are the stereotypical charities or yacht clubs, but what do people do for that?

Silence fills the car as we head out of the bad neighborhood, Nolan content to let me consider his question.

I barely register when we swing through the coffee stand, but I sip on the strawberry-banana smoothie when it appears in my hand.

Light fingers caress the back of my neck, and I glance over to find Nolan watching me.

I search his green eyes. "Tennis?"

His lips twitch. "Is that really what you want to do?"

I hunch my shoulders. "No."

He leans closer to nuzzle my ear. "Tell me what you want, Leo."

My breath hitches, and I blurt out, "I want to go back to school."

A proud smile spreads over his face. "Then you'll need to come up with a plan on how to make it happen." One brow arches in challenge. "Unless I can pay for it?"

"No." I try to put as much authority behind the word as Nolan does. "I'll come up with a plan."

“I look forward to hearing it.” He nudges the straw toward my mouth. “Now, I want you to take a sip and then kiss me until we’re home. I better be tasting strawberries throughout my boring meetings.”

Blood rushes to my cheeks, and my eyes dart to the back of the driver’s head. “Is this some kind of fetish of yours?”

His large hand cups my thigh. “You don’t want to?”

Face on fire, I suck down my smoothie, then climb into Nolan’s lap.

Nolan’s hand absently strokes my hair. “Should we get a bigger couch?”

I pause my job-hunting to gaze up at him from his lap. “Why?”

He tickles under my chin. “Because you’re the only one small enough to lie down on this one comfortably.”

“True. Your decorator was shortsighted.” I sit up and move the tablet I was using to the coffee table. “How much time do you usually spend here?”

“Not much.” His shoulders lift, and I admire the way his bathrobe perfectly frames his chest. He finished his shower an hour ago but seems in no hurry to dress for the day. “It’s farther from my businesses, so I stay in town most of the time.”

Over the last week, Nolan and I have spent more time getting to know each other, and I’ve learned that, besides the nightclubs, he also owns several apartment complexes, buildings with business rental space, and two hotels.

I pull my knees up onto the couch and wrap my arms around them, my bare toes wiggling between the cushions. “We could move to the townhouse.”

His cool green eyes study me. “The family estate has more security. I like knowing you’re safe when I’m gone.”

My eyes drop. I have no desire to run away from Nolan again, and the more distance from Gino, the better. But I also want Nolan to trust me, and I hate that I’m impeding his work. “I would stay inside.”

A finger under my chin draws my gaze back to his. “There are some things I’m dealing with right now. Once they’re resolved, we’ll move to the townhouse.”

My focus shifts to his knuckles, where fresh scabs and bruises add layers to the ones healing from when he took care of Rich. On more than one night, I pretend not to notice that he comes home with bloodstains on his clothes.

“Have you found anything interesting?” He leans forward to grab the tablet and peruse the job listings.

He’s been helping me search for online jobs with project-oriented income instead of hours worked. The Rockford name appears on several of the applications he points me toward, which is another thing I pretend not to notice.

“There are a few data entry positions I qualify for.” I scoot closer, and his arm encircles me. “The pay is enough to cover my university courses and books.”

His thumb strokes my hip. “You’re good with data.”

My cheeks warm at the praise. In addition to car sex, I discovered Nolan’s passion for detailed spreadsheets when I gave him my first presentation on how I plan to return to school without leaving home or taking money from him.

Those pie charts had him tossing me on his desk with my legs wrapped around his

shoulders. Since then, I've been working on a new presentation that I hope will be equally satisfying.

As he reads a job requirement, my gaze shifts to his bare chest, inches from my face as I nestle under his arm, and his tattoo catches my eye. Though I've seen it up close several times now, it still captivates me.

I nudge his bathrobe aside to admire the clock with gears design. Its sharp black lines resemble a company logo, but not the one for Rockford Holdings. "Does this have a meaning?"

He glances down at me and smiles. "It's a metaphor, of sorts, about being part of a whole. Clocks need all types of pieces to work."

I trace the minute hand. "Did it hurt?"

"Yes, but don't tell my brothers." He tosses the tablet back on the coffee table. "It was a rite of passage. Very manly."

He's told me about growing up with extended relatives. He has two older brothers, but with his cousins added in, it's more like he has five older brothers, with two younger brothers. I can't imagine having such a large family.

I flatten my hand over his pec and feel his steady heartbeat. "Does everyone have the same tattoo?"

"Everyone in the core family." The alarm on his cell phone vibrates, and he sighs. "I need to leave. While I'm gone, your homework is to find a couch that we can lie on together."

Worry fills me as I take in the expensive furniture in the room. "Is there a catalog I

should choose from?”

He kisses the top of my head. “Just pick something you like.”

After he dresses and kisses me goodbye, he leaves, taking a piece of me with him.

The more I relax into my new life, the deeper my feelings for Nolan grow, and it scares me. No matter how often I repeat that this could all be temporary, my stupid heart won’t listen.

Ready to bury myself in my new project until Nolan returns, I pad into the office.

I’ve only just dived into my files, though, when the sound of the lock clicking breaks the silence.

Pulse skipping, I hurry back to the entrance. “Did you forget...”

I trail off at the sight of the stranger standing in my sitting room. An impressive, muscular body fills out the polo shirt and khaki pants he wears, and his brown hair glints with strands of gold.

The man turns to give me a friendly smile that doesn’t quite reach his hazel eyes. “I think it’s time we have a conversation, Leo Daniels.”

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I try not to fidget under the piercing gazes of the men who sit around the large dining table and lean against the walls.

Though they're strangers, I've spent countless hours gazing into Nolan's eyes. Which means I recognize their match in the imposing man across from me, making him Nolan's oldest brother, and the one standing at his back Nolan's middle brother.

The identical twins to my left must be the cousins he mentioned. Everyone in the room bears enough resemblance to be related.

My little interview apparently warranted gathering the entire Rockford clan.

China clatters as an older woman bustles in and sets a tray of drinks down. "It's so nice to have all my boys home, but why the serious faces? We have a guest."

Cold green eyes shift from me to her and warm a fraction. "Thank you, Mrs. Bustly. That will be all."

"Tut." A gentle hand lands on my shoulder, making me jump. "Would you like a snack, young man? I'll make you a spinach salad with avocado and eggs."

Surprised, I look up at her. "Ah, no thank you. The avocado toast and eggs this morning were quite filling."

"Humph." She gives me a critical once over. "There's not enough meat on your bones."

That makes me smile. “Nolan says the same thing.”

She glares at the man across from me. “Be kind to this one.”

“Thank you, Mrs. Bustly. You may leave,” he repeats coldly.

“Don’t you take that tone with me, Aaiden Rockford. I wiped your butt when you were still screaming for a tit and shitting in a diaper.” Head held high, she sweeps from the room.

“Oh, someone’s getting cold coffee and burnt toast tomorrow morning,” the man who brought me to this meeting teases, drawing chuckles from the others.

“Quiet, Gabe.” Aaiden folds his hands on the table and pins me in place with his stare. “You’ve outstayed your welcome in our house. A week of mooching off our brother is more than enough vacation. It’s time for you to leave.”

“The lock on Nolan’s suite only opens from the outside.” My eyes dart to Gabe, who gives me a wink. “I’ve had no option but to mooch.”

“We are aware of the circumstances of your arrival and your subsequent imprisonment,” growls a muscular man with short-cropped hair that can’t hide the glints of red. “So you should be happy to be free.”

A shiver crawls through my body, and I tuck my bare foot up under my leg to warm my toes. “No, thank you.”

“Don’t you want to go back to your normal life?” The man behind Aaiden crosses his arms over his chest. “There must be people missing you.”

“No.” Since no one else is passing out the drinks Mrs. Bustly brought in, I reach out

and take one of the delicate cups.

I sip the mildly sweet, minty amber liquid, pretending it's coffee and not another pregnancy concoction. Nolan is a bit baby-obsessed, which is cute but also going to lead to a fight if I don't get some cheat days.

Grimacing, I set the cup down. "I promised Nolan I wouldn't run away, and I won't break my word."

The muscle in Aaiden's jaw ticks. "How does fifty sound?"

I drop my hands to my lap to hide the anxious tremor. "Fifty what?"

"Fifty thousand dollars." He holds out a hand, and the hazel-eyed man who sits beside him passes over a leather folder. "It's more than you'd make in a year."

The tea in my stomach curdles. "To walk away from Nolan?"

"You'd have to sign a contract, of course, never to approach him again." He flips open the folder to reveal a sheet of checks. "And an NDA about the kidnapping."

A scoff comes from one of the twins, but I ignore him, my focus on the man in front of me.

"Is that what you think your brother is worth?" Longing for the blanket on the settee upstairs, I fold my other leg beneath me. "Fifty thousand?"

He uncaps his pen and holds it poised over the check at the top. "What do you think he's worth?"

I consider how much I want to stay with Nolan. "Eighty."

Disgust twists Aaiden's features. "Fine. Raphael has the documents for you to sign. We'll have a car take you home."

A man with golden-brown hair places a briefcase on the table at my elbow.

Ignoring him, I lift my cup and breathe in the fragrant steam. "Eighty years."

Aaiden's head lifts. "Excuse me?"

"Nolan is worth eighty years, so that's what I want. Eighty years by his side, devoting my life to his happiness." A smile spreads over my face before reality sets in. "But you don't have the authority to give me that. Nolan's future is his to decide."

Aaiden's brow furrows, as if unsure he heard me right.

"Now, I need to return to our suite." I push back my chair and stand. "Nolan will worry if he comes home and thinks I've run away."

Raphael shifts to block me at the same time Aaiden stands.

"Sit down." The Command rolls right over me, Nolan's Mark offering protection from other Alphas for as long as it remains on my nape.

But with a cautious look at Raphael, I resume my seat, fully aware that if these men want me to stay, I stay.

Raphael places a slim folder from his briefcase in front of me.

Opening it, he reveals my employee file from Velvet Oasis. A flick of his finger slides the top sheet across the table, exposing my brother's arrest records and my mother's charges for drunken disorderliness.

My stomach twists, but I'm not shocked that they investigated me. Which means all the talk about people missing me earlier was pure lip service. They know I'm alone in life and desperate.

A quick look reveals my high school diploma, university withdrawal form, residency history, and a bank statement displaying a negative balance. Nothing about Gino, though.

I peer up at Raphael. "Should I feel threatened?"

"You've fallen on hard times, Leo. Don't fool yourself into thinking you've found a sugar daddy. Once the honeymoon glow wears off, you'll be back on the streets with nothing to show for it." He drops an NDA and another contract on top of my personal documents. "Take the bribe before we rescind the offer."

"That would be a convincing speech if I were here for the money." I close the folder. "No thank you."

Aaiden taps his pen against his checkbook. "Just tell us what you want."

"A cheeseburger," I say honestly.

He stares at me, nonplussed. "What?"

While I appreciate all the avocados, lean proteins, and fruits, I'm getting tired of eating for my potential pregnancy. "A good cheeseburger. No whole grain bun and ground turkey bullshit. I want greasy beef and cheese dripping down my wrists."

I drool at the thought. With consistent access to food waking up my stomach, cravings have been roaring to life. "Don't skimp on the French fries, either. Oh, and a slice of chocolate cake with vanilla cream filling. Fried chicken, too. And pepperoni

pizza?—”

A hand covers my mouth, and Nolan’s familiar scent envelops me. “That’s enough, my greedy boy.”

My eyes close, and I breathe him in, my anxiety calming with his arrival.

“I must have missed the family meeting invite.” Nolan pulls out my chair, picks me up to take my place, and settles me on his lap. “Luckily, my personal alarm alerted me to turn around. Sorry, I’m late.”

When he presses a cup from Smooth Grooves into my hand, it’s orange instead of the usual pink. “What flavor is this?”

“Mango-peach.” He kisses the side of my head. “They were out of strawberries.”

“With how much you spend on these, you could have bought a blender.” I frown at him. “Stop wasting so much money.”

He smiles. “Just try your smoothie.”

Dutifully, I sip on the straw and hum with happiness.

A pleased rumble comes from him. “You like?”

“Yeah.” Without thinking, I lift my face to Nolan’s, and his mouth covers mine.

His hand cradles the back of my head as he deepens the kiss, his tongue sweeping in for a taste. Desire pools in my hips, and I wiggle on his lap, feeling his cock harden under my thigh. His pheromones thicken, making me melt against him.

A throat clearing jars me back to reality with the reminder that we're not alone. Heat sweeps up my neck and into my cheeks as I pull back.

"Sweet, but strawberry is better." Nolan swipes his thumb over my damp lips. "Are you okay? Did they threaten you?"

"They tried to pay me off to leave you." I glance at Aaiden. "They low-balled me at fifty thousand."

"Really, brother?" Nolan gasps in mock offense. "My net worth is in the billions. At least offer six-figures."

Aaiden closes the checkbook. "Always bid low and go up from there."

"Do you want fifty thousand?" Nolan rubs my thigh. "Say the word, and I'll deposit it in your bank account today."

My elbow bounces off his hard abs. "Stop wasting money."

"Damn, he's a cutie," whispers one of the cousins. "Maybe I should go check out the Omegas at Nolan's nightclubs."

A slap sounds, followed by an, "Ouch."

Nolan's arms tighten possessively around me. "Are you done with the grandstanding now? Leo's the real deal, and I'm not letting him go."

"We can't be too careful after the disaster Ezra brought home." Aaiden meets my eyes. "Betray my brother, and no one will find your body. And that's not an idle threat."

Pretty sure that he's serious, I gulp and raise my smoothie cup, taking another long sip.

Nolan nuzzles my cheek. "So, what's this about demanding a cheeseburger? Weren't you working on an entire presentation about this? I've really been looking forward to being stimulated by your nutritional charts."

Blood rushes to my cheeks, and I choke on a mouthful of mango-peach.

As Nolan helpfully pats my back, Mrs. Bustly returns and proudly sets a basketball-sized bowl of dark-green leaves in front of me with a mountain of avocado, boiled eggs, and salmon piled on top. "Here you are, dear. Put some meat on those bones of yours."

Dismayed, I stare down at the enormous salad. "Wow. This looks just as delicious as the one from two nights ago."

A snort of laughter comes from somewhere in the room.

Nolan nudges me. "Go on. Eat your lunch."

"Cheeseburger," I whimper as I shift on Nolan's lap to sit facing forward and pick up the heavy silver fork. "Pepperoni pizza."

Nolan's hand spreads over my stomach. "You can give me your presentation later to convince me."

"Wait, are you seriously denying him a cheeseburger?" One of the twins gestures at me. "He could blow away in a stiff breeze! Feed him some red meat."

My wide eyes meet his, hope for fast food blooming inside me.

He blinks several times, and pink stains his cheeks. “Wow, that look is very...” He shifts in his seat. “Very convincing.”

“Should I order you a pizza, sweetheart?” the other twin offers.

“This is why I didn’t want to introduce him to you guys.” Nolan stands, lifting me with him and saving me from death by spinach. “You didn’t even make sure he had socks on. What if he catches a cold?”

Eight pairs of eyes stare at Nolan in disbelief before Aaiden’s lips twitch. Then he breaks out in a full-body laugh, and the rest join in.

“Shush, the lot of you!” Mrs. Bustly’s hands move to her hips. “Omegas are delicate in their first trimester. For shame.”

The laughter abruptly cuts off, and Aaiden stands. “What did you say, Mrs. Bustly?”

“Little Leo here is pregnant.” She rolls her eyes. “Why else would I be buying so many lean meats and veggies when you steak-eating cavemen wouldn’t touch a sprig of asparagus if a gun were held to your head?”

Aaiden points at the chair we just abandoned. “Sit back down. You both have some explaining to do.”

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I slump onto the settee, exhausted after an hour of brutal grilling from Nolan's brothers and cousins.

They pulled no punches, and everything had come out about Rich, Tony, my lack of sexual history before Nolan, the details of my Heat, the drugs, and my medical records.

It almost made me regret not taking the money and running.

"I'm sorry they put you through that." Nolan settles on the couch beside me and strokes my hair. "I knew they'd be like this, which is why I wanted to keep you locked away from them. But I overestimated how long they were willing to look the other way."

"No, it's okay." I cuddle against his side. "They're just looking out for you. It's admirable that they care so much."

"It doesn't help that I'm one of the babies of the group." His arm wraps around me. "They always jump in to fix things for me, even though I'm almost thirty."

I take his hand and focus on playing with his fingers. "If it helps, I'll sign an NDA and a contract that acknowledges I have no claim on your wealth."

His intense gaze raises goose bumps all over my body. "That's not necessary."

Turning his hand, I trace the healing scabs on his knuckles. "With my family history, I wouldn't hold it against you. You've run your own background check on me,

right?”

“Every employee at Velvet Oasis undergoes a background check prior to being hired.” A long sigh leaves him. “I was waiting for you to trust me more before I asked, but it’s time for us to be honest with each other.”

With a kiss on top of my head, he stands and walks to his office.

Cold air rushes into the empty spot where he had sat, and the anxiety from earlier rushes back. I pull my knees up to my chest, hugging them to stop the shivers that make me want to hide. The bubble of happiness I lived in with Nolan couldn’t last forever, but I had hoped to have a few more days.

When he returns, he carries the laptop, and nausea rolls in my stomach, threatening to send the salad I ate back up.

He sits, then pulls me onto his lap, the warmth of his body and pheromones helping to settle my nerves, but they don’t dispel them.

With the computer balanced on my thighs, he opens it and types in the password for his profile, then selects a file simply labeled Leo.

“I have the same report that you saw earlier, so yes, I’m aware of the environment you grew up in, and the only thing I worry about on that front is their ability to hurt you.” He rubs his cheek against the side of my head. “The family I was born into cares deeply about each other, and I will be the first to admit that I was lucky. You can’t choose your blood, but you can cut out toxic relations.”

Eyes stinging, I swallow down the lump forming in my throat. “It’s not always easy to cut them out.”

“You tried, though.” He clicks on a file. “Emancipation at sixteen, scholarships to a private high school for your senior year and then university... You’re intelligent, determined, and a survivor.”

My throat tightens as I see everything I lost spread out before me. “Why do you have that?”

“Several months ago, I noticed a higher-than-average turnover rate of the back-room boys at Velvet Oasis.” He opens another document, this one with names, and hire and departure dates. “There’s usually a trial period to make sure employees are comfortable with the job before they’re put under a five-year contract.”

The blood drains from my face. “Tony never mentioned that.”

“If someone is going to leave, it’s within the trial period.” He scrolls down the list to the records for the last year. “The consequences for breaking a contract are not kind.”

I noticed a pattern of people leaving mid-contract right before I started working there. “Tony didn’t tell me any of this when he talked me into switching to the back rooms.”

“He also never filed the proper paperwork or sent you for a health screen and training.” Anger thrums through the words. “You’re not the first one rushed through the vetting process. Once I started investigating, I discovered that Tony has been making a lot of unapproved changes, but I didn’t know to what extent until recently.”

He clicks on another file. “Do you recognize this?”

“It’s an employment agreement for Velvet Oasis.” I reach out to scroll to the bottom and frown in confusion. “My server contract?”

His eyes burn in me. “How much is your hourly wage?”

“Ten dollars an hour, plus a split of tips.” Resentment burns with the words. “Tony promised that the tips would make it more like nineteen an hour, but they never were. I had to take as many shifts as he would offer to make ends meet.”

Tension vibrates through Nolan’s body as he zooms in on a section of legalese. “The starting pay for all servers is twenty dollars an hour, plus tips, full health coverage, and access to both daily and emergency suppressants to make sure you’re safe among Alphas.”

Shock jolts through me. “No, the employment agreement I signed was for ten, and we were responsible for our own healthcare. The only thing provided was one face mask per shift.”

“Tony has been doctoring the contracts, pocketing the difference, and transferring the benefits budget into his personal account.” Nolan closes the laptop. “Once that was discovered, I ordered a deeper dive into all of the employees at Velvet Oasis to find out how long it had been going on and who was affected. That’s why I have the paperwork about your emancipation and scholarships.”

With an arm around me, he leans forward to set the computer on the coffee table, then settles back to hold me close. “Your background stuck out compared to the other employees. Someone like you shouldn’t be working at my nightclub. It made me take notice of you, and then once I started watching you, my interest grew. After I dealt with the issues at Velvet Oasis, I planned to come up with an excuse to approach you.”

A laugh escapes me. “You didn’t need an excuse. My crush was really obvious.”

“It was adorable.” He nuzzles my neck. “It took all my self-restraint not to just snap

you up.”

Warmth fills me, but I force myself to stay on topic. “If you’ve already figured out that Tony is skimming money from you, why is he still running Velvet Oasis?”

“If it were just that, I would have taken care of Tony months ago, but my bigger concern is what’s been happening to the back-room boys who quit mid-contract.” He hugs me close. “They’ve gone missing. And each time one vanishes, it aligns with a large deposit in Tony’s bank account.”

Alarm flashes through me. “He’s been selling them?”

“That’s what I believe.” He rubs my arms. “I haven’t figured out if he has a partner or if he’s working alone, though, so I’ve been playing dumb and waiting for him to slip up.”

A chill runs down my spine. “Was he planning to sell me to Rich?”

“I put a stop to it before negotiations reached that point. All Rich admitted to was that he had asked Tony to force your hand into switching to the back rooms.” His chin rests on my shoulder. “A better businessman would have let things play out and put you under watch to catch the handoff in action. But I don’t have a level head where you’re concerned.”

Pulse racing at how close I came to being sold, I turn in Nolan’s lap to wrap my arms around him and bury my face in his neck. “Thank you for saving me.”

“You’re mine.” He pulls me closer. “No one touches you but me.”

My grip tightens on Nolan’s powerful frame, needing the warmth and solidity of his body. The steady beat of his heart echoes in my chest as I press myself against him,

seeking comfort and reassurance.

The desire to confess my love and promise my life to him rises, but I swallow it down. As much as I believe Nolan wants me, it all started with my Heat and an accidental pregnancy that may not even be real. I don't have enough confidence that he'd still be with me without the possibility of a baby.

Needing to show my love in a different way, I brush my lips across his skin, savoring the salty hint of sweat mixed with the subtle sweetness of his cologne. I long to taste him, to linger on the warmth of his mouth against mine, and I kiss my way up to his jaw.

But when I reach for his lips, he pulls back.

Gently but firmly, he moves me off his lap, leaving me bereft. "The puzzle piece of this entire operation that continues to not fit is your presence at Velvet Oasis. You had a scholarship that covered a dorm room at the university, a meal card, and all of your books. A hair sample confirmed that you're not a drug user, and a review of your checking account showed no history of a gambling problem."

Sweat breaks out under my arms, and I shrink beneath his penetrating stare.

"You were on a good trajectory to break the cycle of crime and alcoholism you grew up in." An expression I can't read flickers across his face. "So why did you suddenly decide to step off that path to take a job at my club?"

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Panic rushes through me, and I reach out to take his hand. “Please believe that I never aimed to entrap you.”

His stern expression cracks, and he lifts my hand to kiss my knuckles. “I know that, sweet boy. You don’t have the acting skills to pull off a seduction, and you never once approached me at the club with anything but professionalism.”

Offended, I purse my lips. “I can be seductive.”

“I look forward to your efforts later.” The amusement fades from his face. “No changing the subject. Answer my question.”

I knew my past wouldn’t stay hidden forever, but I had allowed myself to hope. As long as I was locked up in this room, away from the real world, Gino was no longer a threat to my life.

It’s why I haven’t fought my confinement, why I so readily embraced doing everything online with my next job and returning to university.

Right now, Nolan sees me as a victim that he saved from Rich. Once he finds out that my presence by his side puts him in danger from Gino’s gang, what will he do?

What if Gino someday tries to use me to extort money from him? I could become a problem for his business.

At the realization that I could bring harm to Leo and his family, my eyes sting, and my nose burns. I take a shaky breath, trying to let Nolan’s pheromones calm me, but

the tears spill over, anyway. I want nothing more than to crawl back into Nolan's lap, but he pushed me away.

He wants to hear what I have to say without his interference, and he deserves that.

I wipe my cheeks with my sleeves. "I owe money to some bad people. They introduced me to Tony to make money and start paying them back, but the hours I had to work affected my ability to keep my grades up. I lost my scholarship and had to move out of the dorms. Tony helped me find my apartment. After that, everything just kept getting worse."

His eyes narrow. "What did you need a loan for? Your family?"

A bitter laugh escapes me. "You could say that. My brother co-signed me as a guarantor and then left town with the money, leaving me to pay it back."

Nolan shifts to sit sideways on the couch and rests his elbow on the back. "Were you aware he was using your name?"

"No." I sniffle and wipe my cheeks again. "Foley is seven years older than I am. Our mom cut him off the first time he went to jail for car theft. I haven't seen him since I was eight. I don't know where he lived after he served his time, but I heard he immediately returned to stealing things to buy drugs. Then the rumors stopped, and part of me suspected he died."

Shame fills me that I never looked into it more, but my brother represented everything I hated. "Sometimes, I forgot Foley even existed. I was going through my own issues at home, cycling in and out of foster care every time my mom landed in county lockup or was forced into rehab. She'd come back sober and promise to change, and then fall back down the bottle."

I curl up on my cushion. “Between my mom and my brother, I never wanted to touch drugs or alcohol, which was easy to uphold when my life was heading in a good direction. But hitting rock bottom really put a new perspective on things.”

Understanding softens his features. “How did you get to the point of agreeing to move to the back rooms?”

“With the tips and hourly pay combined, I was just barely able to afford rent and the bi-weekly payments to the gang Foley borrowed money from.” I hug one of the throw pillows to have something to hold on to. “Some nights, it was a choice of whether to buy suppressants or food.”

“Why didn’t you go to the Omega Outreach Program in the beginning?” His brow knits. “They would have helped.”

“They require an address, and I don’t think the apartment I rent is legal for occupancy. I couldn’t risk losing that room. As ugly as it was, it was all that I could afford and better than the streets.” The reason sounds flimsy now, surrounded by luxury, but living on the street scared me more than not having suppressants.

“The day before my Heat started, my loan collector, Gino, made a surprise visit. He did it sometimes, to make sure I wasn’t spending unnecessary money that should go toward paying my debt.” Tears threaten again, and I dig my nails into my palm to stop them. “He took my suppressants and what I had saved for rent.”

Nolan’s hand curls into a fist. “Is that how you got the bruise on your face?”

“Yes.” My hand lifts to my cheek, but the tenderness has faded. “I had nothing left to buy new suppressants, but Phoenix, one of the strippers, was nice and gave me a couple of pills. They were only the six-hour ones, though, and wore off before the end of my shift.”

Rage flashes through Nolan's eyes. "Making you susceptible when Rich attacked you."

"Yes." Nausea rises at the memory. "Rich brought a lot of money to the club, so losing him as a client would hurt Tony. And then I missed work for multiple days during my Heat without calling in."

I rock on the cushion. "When I came back, Tony had already replaced me. Rent was coming due, and Gino was going to return expecting his regular payment. Tony offered to move me to the back rooms again, promising I'd make more in one night than I'd been making in an entire month."

Sympathy and anger war on Nolan's face. "And you were desperate."

I look away from him. "I was facing eviction, and if I didn't make my loan payment, Gino would force me into prostitution, or worse. At least at Velvet Oasis, the clients are vetted and there's a daily limit on the number of customers serviced. I thought I'd do it once, make my payments, and start looking for a different job."

I drop my head to my knees. "Tony didn't even have me sign a new employment contract. He just sent me straight to the madam as soon as I agreed." My pant legs muffle my laugh. "God, he could have refused to pay me. There was nothing in writing."

My head lifts. "Was Rich charged?"

Nolan's expression turns grim.

"No..." Tears fall down my cheeks. "Tony planned to give me as a freebie to the man who tried to rape me?"

“Oh, my sweet boy.” Nolan opens his arms. “Come here.”

I scramble across the cushions into his embrace, clutching the front of his shirt as I sob on his shoulder. The woody scent of his cologne and pheromones fill my lungs, offering a second layer of comfort while the warmth of his body sinks into me, easing the hurt inside.

“You’ve been through so much. Handling everything alone.” He strokes my back. “No more, though. Let me take care of you, okay? I’ll keep you safe from all the bad people.”

“Gino will come after me,” I choke out. “I don’t want you to get caught up in it.”

His fingers push into my hair. “I’ll deal with Gino.”

My hold on him tightens. “He’s dangerous.”

“I’m dangerous.” Lips graze my temple. “I’ll put him in the same hole I dropped Rich into.”

A shudder goes through me knowing Rich’s fate for sure. If I were a better person, knowing that Nolan got rid of Rich for me would be terrifying. Instead, knowing that this powerful Alpha has already killed for me fills me with a rush of desire.

With a gasp, I turn my head to catch his mouth with mine, and our tongues tangle together. The fabric of his shirt crinkles beneath my hands before I flatten my palms to explore the hard ridges of his chest. My heart flutters, erratic and quick, like it wants to escape my body and go into Nolan’s.

Shifting, I straddle his thighs and reach between us to wrap my hand around his cock, stroking him to full hardness.

“Leo,” he moans against my lips, his voice a low thrum that vibrates through me.

He cups my waist and rocks his hips into my touch.

Our mouths meet again, urgency driving me in a clash of lips and breath. For once, Nolan lets me take the lead, accepting my tongue into his mouth and allowing my hands to explore him without taking control.

With every burning kiss, the harsh reality of my life blurs, the stress I’ve lived with since Gino showed up at my dorm slipping away.

Releasing his hard cock, I work on the buttons on his dress shirt, needing to feel his skin against mine. His grip tightens on my waist before he stills, tension humming through his body.

Breaths quick, I lean back to meet his green eyes, the softness there sending a jolt through me. Despite the power his status affords him, both as an Alpha and a Rockford, he’s willing to let me take what I want.

Need tingles through me, and I reach for his belt, working it open with a skill he taught me.

As I go for his zipper, a playful knock sounds on the door.

I flinch and look toward the entrance. In the entire time I’ve been here, no one has ever knocked on that door. Even when our meals arrive, Nolan receives some silent notification to go out into the hall and bring in our tray.

“Ignore it, and they’ll go away.” Nolan pulls my head back around, his lips red and enticing. “You’re seducing me right now, remember?”

My body clenches, and my hands return to his waist, popping the button on his slacks.

Then the click of the lock opening pierces the air, and the door cracks open.

One of the twins sticks his head inside, dark brown eyes sparkling with amusement as they land on us on the couch. “Oh, am I interrupting something? This looks fun.”

“Dammit, Caleb!” Nolan growls. “Get the hell out of our room.”

“But I brought a welcome to the family gift.” The door swings farther open, and he holds an extra-large pizza box aloft. “I thought we could have a little party and get to know each other better. Don’t you have a meeting starting in an hour that you need to leave for?”

The scent of pepperoni reaches me, and drool floods my mouth.

Caleb smiles at my expression and walks inside, tilting the box from side-to-side enticingly. “Smell something you want, sweetie?”

Focus on the pizza, I lick my lips.

With a growl, Nolan dumps me off his lap and strides across the room, shoving a laughing Caleb and his pizza back out into the hall.

Slamming the door, he turns back to me. “Pack your clothes. We’re moving to the townhouse.”

My eyes dart from the closed door to his half-open pants. “Right now?”

“Move that sweet ass, Leo,” Nolan barks. “If you’re not packed in the next five

minutes, I'm buying you a brand-new wardrobe.”

I jump from the settee and run for my drawers in the dresser to grab my meager belongings.

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“Here we are.” Nolan’s hand on my back guides me into the townhouse. “Make yourself at home, Leo.”

On my first visit here, all I saw was the bedroom upstairs. When I ran away, I didn’t stop to take in my surroundings. As I do so now, I can’t help but be overwhelmed by the sheer opulence.

“Wow, this is so...” My eyes dart around, drinking in the furnishings and the beautiful artwork that adorns the walls. “Lavish.”

And here I thought Nolan’s rooms at his family’s estate were opulent. I’ve never been in a place this grand before, and he expects us to live here?

A twinkle fills his eyes as he watches me take it all in. “You hate it.”

I hug my elbows, afraid to touch anything. “No, it’s great.”

“The designer I hired to decorate it ran with the budget, which I now see was a mistake. After our experience with that tiny couch at the suite, I realize aesthetics over comfort isn’t what’s best for us.” He gestures to the front room. “You have free rein to make this place comfortable, since we’ll be spending most of our time here rather than at the family house.”

Anxiety shivers through me. “I don’t know. My style isn’t billionaire chic. If you want to redecorate, hire a professional.”

“A professional did this.” He pulls me close, his arms encircling me. “I want you to

make this your home, too, Leo. You're going to be waddling around, swollen with our baby, filling these rooms with happiness and building a life for us."

His words send a shiver down my spine, a mixture of excitement and fear.

He's so sure that I'm pregnant, that his vision is a guarantee. But what if there's no baby? What will happen if Nolan no longer has an obligation to keep me by his side?

Nolan told me to believe in him, but the part of me that's had my dreams crushed too many times won't allow me to just focus on the warmth of his embrace and the promise of a shared future.

It's why I've held off on sending in my employment applications or signing up for the next semester at university. There are three days until the doctor returns, three days until we find out if a child will forever bind our lives together.

Whatever the outcome, my heart will always belong to Nolan. But we've never exchanged words of love. It's too soon to expect it, but it leaves me so uncertain of where I stand.

Nolan nuzzles my hair. "Hey, what are you thinking about so seriously?"

"Just trying to wrap my mind around remodeling an entire house." The sun casts a warm glow through the floor-to-ceiling windows in the front room, illuminating the cream-colored walls and the ornate furniture that looks more decorative than user-friendly.

Among such luxury, I feel out of place, like an intruder in someone else's home.

Which I am.

“Leo?” Nolan tips my head up, his green eyes searching mine. “Are you okay?”

I force a teasing note into my voice. “Just wondering if you screwed all the windows shut.”

His eyebrow arches. “Do I need to?”

“Might make for an interesting conversation the next time your family wants to threaten me.” The words come out harsher than I intended, and I offer him a strained smile. “Sorry, that was a poor joke.”

“No, you have every right to be upset.” He caresses my cheek. “Meeting them was a lot, and now I’m throwing house plans at you. You’re overwhelmed.”

“Yeah, a little.” My voice cracks, and I drop my gaze.

“I promise they’re not so bad when they’re not in overprotective mode. Just give them time.” He hefts my bag higher on his shoulder. “You’ve had a long day. We can talk about ideas for our home in a few days.”

A few days? I stiffen. Is he pushing it off until after the doctor’s appointment because he has reservations?

He studies me for a moment before gesturing toward the stairs. “Let’s get you unpacked. You can pick which side of the closet you want.”

I try to sound lighthearted as I follow him up to the second level. “Are you sure there’s room for me with all your suits?”

He reaches back to grip my waist. “Tease me now, but just wait until your pregnancy outfits push my clothes into the guest room next door.”

I tense, and a heavy sigh leaves him.

In the bedroom, he drops my bag and draws me over to the bed, sitting me down on the edge.

He kneels in front of me and takes my hands. “Hey, it’s okay to be anxious.”

I lean forward to rest my head on his shoulder, trying to tamp down the fears gnawing at me. “I haven’t shown any signs.”

He strokes my back. “It’s too early for that.”

“I’m craving junk food.” I roll my face into his neck. “Could that be a sign?”

“That I’m feeding you too many healthy meals? Yes, and I hear you regarding the restricted diet.” He cups the back of my head. “The cook only comes twice a week, and she’s not expected for two more days, so we can order your pizza.”

I nibble on his throat. “Extra pepperoni and cheese?”

A rumble rises from his chest. “Whatever you want.”

I bite his ear. “With a side of chicken wings?”

His hand fists in my blond strands, and he lifts my face to his. “Keep doing that, and you’ll be on your back with your legs wrapped around me until morning.”

I strain toward his lips. “Pizza is the breakfast of champions.”

His grip on my hair tightens. “You’re pushing it.”

“We can search the kitchen for a blender and buy frozen strawberries and bananas.” I hook a finger into the top button of his dress shirt and pop it open. “It will balance out the grease.”

With a hand on my chest, he pushes me back and crawls onto the mattress. “Was that in your presentation?”

I wrap my legs around his waist. “Are you asking for a sneak peek at my spreadsheets?”

“I’ll order groceries later.” Hunger in his eyes, he leans down, his mouth covering mine.

Hours later, I wake up to moonlight shining through the window and Nolan missing from the bed.

Confused, I sit up and rub my eyes. Did he get called out for work?

I check for the note he usually leaves if he needs to go somewhere while I’m asleep, but don’t see one.

What woke me up?

I reach across the mattress to touch the rumpled sheets left by Nolan’s body and find them still warm. He hasn’t been gone for long, and his phone is missing from the nightstand.

Maybe he got a call, and that’s what jarred me from sleep.

Awake now, I slip out from under the covers. A delicious ache rises from my hips, and I rub my lower back as I shuffle to the closet to pull one of Nolan’s shirts from a

hanger. My bag of clothes still lies on the floor where Nolan dropped it. We never got around to unpacking or ordering groceries.

The soft material slips over my head, and I lift the collar to breathe in the clean scent of his fabric softener. I can't wait for everything of mine to smell like him.

Despite the satiation that filled my body when I passed out in Nolan's arms, my dick twitches with interest, and a smile spreads over my face. If Nolan just got up, then he's still in the house for me to go find.

On silent feet, I pad out of the bedroom and down the hall. I remember seeing an office on our way through the house. That's where he'll most likely be, which means there's a desktop to break in.

As I near the stairs, my steps slow at the sound of Nolan's deep rumble. "I told you not to come here, Jade."

"I wouldn't have to if you came to meet me as planned."

I recognize Phoenix's voice, whose real name must be Jade. He was nice to me, but now the familiarity in his tone makes my stomach twist with unease.

"You know why I couldn't make our appointment."

Dropping to the floor, I creep to the top of the railing and peer through the rungs.

Below, Nolan and the stripper formerly known as Phoenix stand close together in the foyer, their bodies relaxed in a way that reveals how comfortable they are with each other.

When working as a server, I never saw Nolan even give this Jade a passing glance, so

why do they look like they're more than boss and employee?

Jade flips his long hair over his shoulder. "How long before you know if you knocked him up?"

Bile rises in my throat. Why does Jade know I might be pregnant? Why would Nolan talk to him about our situation? Then I remember how my suppressants went missing from my locker. Did Jade have something to do with that? No, he tried to help me. Didn't he?

"The doctor will be here in two days." Nolan grips Jade's arm and propels him toward the door. "You need to leave."

"Why?" Jade wiggles free. "Afraid Leo will catch us?"

Nolan's hands clench. "Yes."

"Then you should have left him at the family house." Jade straightens his form-fitting jacket, which I now notice is far nicer than what he wears to the club. "How long do you plan to keep this a secret from him? He's going to find out about us, eventually."

Nolan leans past him to yank the door open. "Get out."

"Fine, but I expect you to come see me in the morning." Jade wags a finger at him as he strolls out onto the porch. "No more neglecting me while you play house with Leo."

"Goodnight, Jade."

"Goodnight, Nolan." The pretty stripper blows him a kiss. "Love you."

Nolan hesitates in the process of closing the door. “Love you, too.”

I slap my hand over my mouth to muffle my gasp and scramble back to the bedroom. My body trembles as I shrug out of Nolan’s shirt and kick it under the bed to hide it before diving back beneath the covers.

Tears trickle down my cheeks as an empty ache opens in my chest, threatening to consume me.

Nolan always said I belonged to him, but he never said he belonged to me, and now I know why.

Someone else already owns his heart.

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Agentle brush of fingers through my hair draws me from a fitful sleep. My lashes flutter up to find Nolan dressed in a suit and crouched on the floor by my head.

His brow creases with concern. “Hey, I didn’t want to disturb you, but I need to go out on some business.”

I rub my puffy eyes. “Why not just leave a note like usual?”

“You were tossing and turning all night.” He sweeps back my bangs. “I didn’t want you to wake up alone in a new place.”

Too late for that. Pain knifes through my chest, and I catch his hand. “Can’t you stay?”

Regret fills his eyes. “If only I could, sweet boy. But I already put this meeting off once.”

His rendezvous with his lover, Jade.

Desperation roils within me, and my hold on him tightens. “But what about our plans for pizza and ordering groceries?”

“Why don’t you take it easy and try to get more sleep.” He leans forward to kiss my temple. “If I’m not back before you get up, order what you like with the cash and credit card I left on the kitchen island.”

As he stands, anxious panic brings me half out of bed. “Wait!”

Nolan turns back. “Is there something wrong?”

The need to beg him to stay burns through me, but if not now, he’ll just go to Jade another time.

I swallow down my desire to keep him here and pull the blanket over my bare body. “The front door. How do I unlock it? Or am I supposed to accept deliveries through the window?”

“That would certainly get people gossiping. I’ll leave the password on the island, too.” He urges me to lie back down. “Try to get some more sleep. You look like you didn’t get a wink.”

“Yes, master.” I tug the covers over my head. “Have fun at your meeting.”

His hand touches the soft down over my head in a last caress, and then the bedroom door clicks shut behind him.

A few seconds later, the front door opens and closes. I push the blanket down and grab my clothing bag. In the bathroom, I take a long shower, pressing a washcloth to my eyes to ease the burn of too much crying.

It was hard to stifle my tears and pretend to sleep when Nolan returned to bed. I kept expecting him to notice something was wrong, but he never did. It helped that he had no reason to suspect I was awake.

Once I dress, I head downstairs, where I find the laptop in the office. I load up a grocery cart online but force myself to wait a full hour before I place the order for delivery.

Nolan will get an alert for the purchase, and I don’t want him to know I didn’t even

try to go back to sleep. With the arrival window set for two hours out, I spend the time applying for jobs not connected to Rockford Holdings.

No matter how things turn out, I still need an income, but a connection to Nolan's family no longer sounds like such a good idea.

My stomach twists, and I press a hand over it. What am I going to do? There's no way I can stay by Nolan's side when he and Jade are in love. I'm just the inconvenient accident in the way of them being together.

Tears threaten, but I swallow them down. No more crying. I always knew this could be temporary, so why is it so shocking to be proven right?

The ringing doorbell comes as a welcome break from the threatening spiral, and I race from the office to open the front door.

The delivery person is already sliding back into their car, so I snatch the paper sack off the stoop.

Instead of heading to the kitchen, I walk straight to the powder room next to the garage and shut myself inside.

My hands tremble as I upend the bag over the sink, and boxes of pregnancy tests spill out. Cold sweat breaks out down my back, and my chest tightens, making it hard to breathe. I grip the sides of the counter and lean forward, gasping in air.

The doctor will be here tomorrow to do the test, but I can't wait that long. I need to consider my options without Nolan here, distracting me with everything I want that isn't mine. When he's near, I can't think clearly. If he looked at me with those green eyes and told me I'd only ever be a side piece, I don't think I'd be strong enough to say no.

Even now, I consider just waiting. If I pretend I never overheard him and Jade together, then this bubble might never burst, and I can continue letting Nolan take me to bed, to make me his.

It would be easy to keep living in this fairy tale until Nolan tells me it's over and deal with picking up the pieces then.

With a deep breath, I lift my head to meet my red-rimmed eyes in the mirror and see a man already heartbroken.

No, I can't pretend. It was fine when it would only hurt me, but now that my eyes have been opened, I can't go back to the lies.

Hands shaking, I grab the first box and rip it open.

Cool air stings my cheeks as I step off the bus and heft my bag of clothes onto my shoulder.

The fifty dollars that Nolan left burns a guilty hole in my pocket, but he intended for it to buy me food, and that's still the plan. It just won't be going toward expensive delivery pizza as intended.

If I budget, it will cover groceries for the next month, providing I can dodge Gino for that long.

My steps slow as I near my apartment complex.

Maybe I was a little too preemptive when I ran away from Nolan's townhouse. I hadn't been thinking clearly after the fifth negative pregnancy test. Grief and disappointment drove me out the door and to the nearest bus stop before I was conscious of what I was doing.

Nolan had mentioned the Omega Outreach Program. Is there a chance they could help me? I'm older than the Omegas they usually take in, but it's worth a shot.

I reach into my pocket to pull out my cell phone, only to find it dead. Since Nolan saved me from selling myself and took me to his family house, I haven't felt a need to check it.

Okay, new plan. Get to my apartment, charge my phone, then look up the information for the Omega Outreach Program and see if they can save me. Or at least give me a reprieve from this nightmare.

God, I hope Nolan isn't angry when he returns home and finds the bathroom of negative tests and the hastily scrawled note absolving him of any further obligation and wishing him happiness with Jade.

That might have been a little snide, but it tells him I know about his lover, and there's no longer a need for pretense. We're two men who had some fun and now we're going back to our regular lives. Which doesn't include each other.

The ache in my chest threatens to swallow me, and I stop at the stairs, clutching the rusty railing for support. When did breathing become so hard?

A hand grips my arm. "Leo, are you okay?"

With a frightened shout, I whip around.

"Whoa, there. Didn't mean to startle you." Mr. Bugrov raises his hands. "You looked like you were having a panic attack."

"No, I'm fine." I will my racing heart to slow. "Just a little out of breath from the walk."

“No Mr. Rockford today?” He gives me an ingratiating smile. “I was hoping to thank him personally for my visit to Velvet Oasis.”

“I’ll pass along your message.” With a nod, I head up the stairs.

Mr. Bugrov trails after me. “If you’d told me you were friends with someone like Mr. Rockford, I would have given you a nicer room.”

“Can we discuss this another time, Mr. Bugrov?” At the sound of his footsteps behind me, I glance back. “I’m in a bit of a hurry right now?—”

“In a hurry to go where, Leo?”

Fear ices my veins as I turn to see Gino walking down from my apartment floor.

The bag falls from my shoulder, and I back down a step. “Gino, what are you doing here?”

His mean eyes fix on me. “A little birdy told me it looked like you were planning to fly the coop before you paid me back.”

Mr. Bugrov grabs hold of my arm. “Sorry, kid. It’s nothing personal.”

With a shout, I shove him hard against the side of the railing, and he releases me as he flails to catch his balance.

Spinning, I race down the stairs.

Gino’s footsteps pound after me. “Where are you running off to, Leo? I just want to talk!”

My heartbeat thunders in my ears as I reach the sidewalk. I glance back to see how much of a lead I have on Gino when strong arms wrap around me from behind.

The scent of stale cigarettes and alcohol fill my nose, familiar and stomach churning. “Not so fast, Leo.”

As my feet leave the ground, I kick my feet. “No, Tony! Let me go!”

“No can do.” Gino joins us, his face flushed. “You’re suddenly worth a lot more money to us.”

Shouting, I swing my foot into his gut.

He grunts, and anger twists his features. A slap cracks against my cheek, and pain explodes in my head.

“Hey, careful,” Tony protests. “Don’t ruin his pretty face.”

“I doubt it’s his face that has Mr. Rockford’s interest.” Hard fingers grab my chin. “How much do you think Nolan will pay to get you back?”

“Help!” I scream, fighting Tony’s hold. “Call the police!”

“Quit making so much noise!” someone shouts, followed by the slam of a window.

“No one’s going to rush to your aid here, Leo. It’s not that kind of neighborhood.” Mr. Bugrov hurries to a black sedan parked at the curb. “Get him in the car.”

“No!” My heels beat against Tony’s shins and knees. “Let me go!”

He grunts as he shoves me kicking and screaming into the trunk.

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Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 7:38 am

I groan as the world swims back into focus, and I blink away the haze clouding my vision.

The throbbing in my head makes it hard to think, and panic surges through me as I remember being kidnapped.

They had driven for a while before stopping to open the trunk. The blinding return of light had disoriented me long enough for them to cover my nose and mouth with a bitter-smelling cloth.

After that, everything went dark.

When I try to lift a hand to my aching head, my arm refuses to move, and I realize rough ropes bind my wrists to a wooden chair.

Fear spikes through me, and my heart hammers, each beat echoing in my ears.

“Wha... Where am I?” I squint at my surroundings.

The dimly lit warehouse comes into focus. A metal grate in the floor sits under me, and bile rises as I consider why that would be necessary.

I look away from it to take in the rows of crates stacked along the walls and the grimy windows near the ceiling that let in daylight. I wasn't out for long. My nose itches, decay hanging in the damp air. The mustiness clings to my lungs with every frantic breath.

Terror tightens its icy grip on my throat.

What do they want from me? Why did they bring me here?

Panic and adrenaline shoot through me, and I struggle against the ropes to break free. My wrists burn, raw and red, as I twist them frantically, trying to loosen the tight knots. The chair creaks beneath me, but the legs are wedged into the grate, sticking it in place.

“Look who’s awake,” a voice drawls from somewhere behind me.

Gino emerges from the shadows, his bulky figure lumbering closer with each heavy step. The dim light illuminates his crooked nose and the cruel glint in his eyes, making him appear even more menacing than usual.

“Wh-what do you want?” My body trembles with fear. “My payment isn’t due until the fifteenth. Why did you bring me here?”

“We are so far past your measly payments, kid.” He stops in front of where I sit, towering over my smaller form. “We’re on to bigger fish now.”

“I promise I wasn’t planning to run, Gino.” My tongue sweeps over my dry lips, tasting chemicals from the knockout drug. “I’ll get you your money. Just let me go.”

Cruel amusement twists his features. “There was never any loan, Leo. Fuck, kids like you are so gullible.”

My mouth drops open, the fog in my brain making it hard to focus. “What? But the gang...”

“They don’t know you from the kid down the street.” He grins at me, revealing

blocky teeth stained brown. “We played you, and you fell for it.”

The revelation leaves me lightheaded. All those months of starving, living in that shithole, and it was all a scam. “But...why? Why me? We’ve never even met.”

“Are you sure about that?” Gino taps his chin. “Maybe you were an easy mark. One that’s about to pay off big time.”

“You’ve already taken all of my money.” I search his face. “What more could you want from me?”

“Cut the act.” Gino leans in close enough for the stale sweat on his clothes to reach me and waves my phone in front of my face. “We want Nolan Rockford’s contact information.”

Confusion fills me before I shake my head. “He’s just my boss at the club. I don’t have any way of reaching him outside of work.”

“Bullshit!” He throws my phone against my chest, and it bounces onto my lap. “You’ve been with him for over a week!”

Fear pulses through me. “I’m not lying. He never gave it to me. But Tony works for Mr. Rockford. Get the number from him.”

A bitter laugh comes from my right, and Tony steps around a stack of crates. “That pompous asshole only deals with his club managers through a middleman unless he’s actually at Velvet Oasis, and he’s not returning my calls.”

“Then you know how it is.” Desperation seeps into my voice. “I’m just a server. Why do you think I’d have a direct line to him when you don’t?”

“Too bad for you, then.” Gino crosses his arms over his chest. “We’ll just have to find another way to gain Nolan’s attention.”

“Please.” Tears prick at the corners of my eyes. “I mean nothing to Mr. Rockford.”

“Nice try.” Gino grips my chin, malice in his beady eyes. “Bugrov told us how protective he was about you.”

“After that, it wasn’t hard to figure out whose Mark is on your nape.” Tony rubs his hands together. “You’re carrying the next generation of Rockford children, aren’t you, Leo?”

The blood drains from my face. “No. I’m not pregnant.”

“Stop lying!” Gino backhands me across the face, the force of the blow rocking my head to the side and blurring my vision. “Someone like Nolan Rockford wouldn’t keep you close without a reason.”

“The reason no longer matters.” Desperation creeps into my voice and my eyes burn, but I refuse to cry. “We took a test today, and there’s no baby. Why else would I come back to that shitty apartment?”

Gino grabs my aching face, and his dark eyes bore into mine, searching for deceit.

“Please...” I choke out through the pain. “I’m telling the truth.”

“Fine, I believe you.” Gino releases me and strides away.

Tony casts me a pitying look before he follows, and the bang of a door closing echoes through the room.

I slump forward, coughing and struggling to catch my breath.

The room grows colder as the hours tick by and shivers wrack my body. Gino may accept that I'm not pregnant, but that doesn't change their plan. If it did, he wouldn't have left me tied up here. He still intends to use me somehow, and I can't allow that to happen.

Even if Nolan doesn't love me, he's a good man, and he might try to save me. I can't let him put himself in danger on my behalf. I need to find a way out of this nightmare.

My muscles strain as I test my restraints for any signs of weakness. The rough ropes bite into my skin, but I ignore the stinging pain as I twist and pull, hoping to loosen them. But all my efforts are in vain, and the knots remain tight.

"Dammit!" Tears trickle down my cheeks, and my frustration mounts.

I scan the room for something—anything—that could help me escape. The warehouse is filled with crates and boxes, but nothing is within reach, and my heart sinks.

A scream of anger rips from me, and I strain as hard as I can against my ropes. Blood pounds in my head, and my muscles shriek in protest.

As fast as it came, the burst of energy vanishes, and I sag, my body limp. As I do, the left armrest wiggles slightly, and my breath catches with excitement.

Leaning over, I examine it and spot where the top piece I'm bound to had separated a little from the dowel that attaches it to the seat. The glue that holds it together must have been weakened.

Hope unfurls in my chest, and I focus on rocking the armrest back and forth, slowly but surely loosening it.

“Come on, come on.” Sweat trickles down my temple, and my gaze jumps to where I last saw Gino and Tony.

Time is running out, but for the first time since my abduction, I allow myself to believe that escape is within my reach.

With every millimeter that the top piece separates from the dowel, my heart pounds harder. The joint continues to loosen, and my breaths come in rapid, shallow gasps. My skin breaks, blood slicking the wood, but I don’t let up.

“Almost there...” The last bit of resistance gives way, and the armrest lifts at the front.

With frantic wiggles, I inch my arm down, the restriction on my wrists lessening as the loops of my restraints slide off.

Finally, I shake my hand free of the rope, the coils falling to the cement floor, and get to work on the knot that binds my other wrist.

“Hey!” Gino’s voice booms across the warehouse, and cold fear shivers through me. He strides toward me, his face dark with fury. “What do you think you’re doing?”

Before I can react, his fist collides with my cheek, sending a sharp pain shooting through my head.

I cry out, lifting my free hand to my face. I was so focused on freeing myself that I didn’t hear them return.

“Be careful!” Tony snaps, stepping between us. “Omegas are fragile. If you keep smacking him around like that, you’re going to damage him.”

“That’s just bullshit propaganda spread to trick Alphas into taking better care of them. I’ve hit him harder, and he always bounces back.” Gino bends down and snatches the rope from the ground, then eyes the broken armrest. “Fucking cheap piece of crap.”

“It doesn’t matter.” Tony strides to one of the crates and sets a hard plastic case on top of it. “He won’t be on the chair for long, anyway.”

Gino’s eyes gleam. “No, he won’t.”

Nausea threatens to overwhelm me. “What are you planning to do?”

“You say you’re not pregnant, and if that’s true, you’re not worth much to the Rockford family.” Gino nods his head toward Tony. “So we’re going to ensure our investment.”

Fear knots in my stomach. “Wh-what do you mean?”

“Ever heard of Inductrus?” Tony lifts a small vial, and the rose-colored liquid inside gleams in the light. “It induces Heat in Omegas. Once we inject this into you, your body will beg for an Alpha to breed you.”

My eyes widen in horror. “You can’t do that! It’s dangerous!”

“Desperate times call for desperate measures, kid.” Tony preps the drug. “We’ll make sure you’re knocked up before we ransom you back to the Rockfords.”

“Please, don’t do this.” I claw at my bindings. “Nolan already knows I’m not pregnant. We took the test!”

“Sometimes tests give a false negative.” Tony approaches me with the syringe.

“You’re still close enough to your last Heat for this pregnancy to be believable.”

“No!” I swing wildly at Tony with my free arm.

He dodges backward with a scowl at Gino. “Restrain him. This has to go into the vein.”

Gino grabs my flailing hand. “Stop fighting, or we’ll knock you out, and you can come back to consciousness already being fucked.”

I buck against his hold, slamming my head into his jaw before lunging forward and clamping my teeth on his ear. A copper taste fills my mouth, and I shake my head from side-to-side.

Tony drops the syringe to help Gino, who shouts and yanks at my hair to free himself.

He stumbles back, blood trickling from the wound. “You’re going to regret that, you little bitch. You better hope the Rockford family pays your ransom, because if they don’t, I’m going to enjoy wringing that scrawny neck of yours.”

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My stomach churns with a mixture of dread and despair. There's no way I can fend off Tony and Gino, and the more I fight, the worse it will be in the end.

No matter what I do, I'm going to be drugged, impregnated, and used as leverage against Nolan.

"Please." Tears stream down my face. "Don't do this."

"Cry all you want." Gino wipes the blood off his neck as he stomps over to grab my arm once more, yanking it straight out to expose the larger veins at my inner elbow. "Soon you'll be crying for a different reason."

My heart pounds as Tony picks up the syringe, drowning out any hope I had left. Ringing fills my ears, and darkness threatens to swallow me whole.

"I'd prefer you not do that, Tony. Forced Heat is dangerous to Omegas."

Backlit by the sunlight spilling across the floor behind him, Nolan looks like an angel walking into my hell.

Am I hallucinating? Did I miss the sting of drugs? Am I already lost to the fever? Is this my mind's way of keeping me safe from what's about to happen?

Then Nolan's beautiful voice knocks me back to reality. "Don't make me repeat myself. Drop the syringe, Tony."

Tony spins around, the syringe raised in threat as he stares at his boss. "What the

fuck? How did you get here?"

"I've been having you followed for months." Nolan tsks with disappointment. "You're too unaware of your surroundings to succeed in this business."

Gino darts behind me, a revolver appearing in his hand that he presses against my temple. "Stay back!"

Nolan ignores him, his green eyes meeting mine as if we're the only ones in the room. "You promised not to run away again, Leo."

"I'm so sorry," I sob, unable to rein in my emotions now that Nolan is here. "I never meant for this to happen."

"You have some explaining to do once we get you out of here." His focus shifts to Gino, and his expression turns cold. "Let him go."

Authority snaps in his tone, but as Betas, Gino and Tony remain unaffected by his Alpha Command.

Gino lets out a scoffing laugh. "You Alphas always think you're top of the food chain, but you can't do shit to us."

"That's right." Tony waves the syringe toward me in threat. "Whereas a whiff of this bitch in Heat would bring you to your knees."

Shivers of fear go through me. Nolan's putting himself in danger, and I don't know if he can take on both Tony and Gino.

"You're not the one calling the shots here, Rockford." The revolver shoves harder against my temple. "The only way you're walking out of here with Leo is if you

deliver a suitcase of cold, hard cash to us.”

“Twenty million dollars, Rockford.” Tony puffs out his chest. “That’s what it’s gonna cost you to keep your precious Omega alive.”

My heart leaps into my throat as fear courses through me, followed by crushing guilt. There’s no reason for Nolan to give up so much for me when I’m not even carrying his child.

“Nolan, just go,” I plead, my voice barely audible. “I’m not pregnant, so I’m not worth that kind of investment.”

Gino yanks on my hair hard. “Shut up, bitch!”

Nolan’s fierce eyes remain locked on me. “Who do you belong to, Leo?”

“You,” I whisper.

“And I protect what’s mine.” The conviction behind his words pushes back my despair.

“That’s all very sweet, but confessions of love aren’t going to cut it.” Gino points the revolver at Nolan. “You have two hours to bring us the money, or you’ll be burying the Omega.”

“I have a counteroffer.” Nolan lifts a finger.

The window shatters, followed by a sharp crack that echoes in the warehouse. Gino screams, and the weapon clatters to the ground. He stumbles back, clutching his shoulder where blood gushes out.

As Nolan rushes forward, he pulls a gun from inside his jacket, firing at Tony.

The other man dives to the side, and the bullet misses as he scrambles behind a stack of crates.

Nolan shoots Gino again, this time in the head, and brains splatter over the concrete. Dropping beside me, he yanks a knife from his pocket and slices through the ropes that still bind me.

Eyes fixed on Gino's still body, I remain frozen in shock. No more torment and fear of scraping together enough money to pay him. No more choosing between food or being beaten. No more flinching every time someone knocks on my door.

It's finally over.

"Leo, come on." Nolan grabs my hand and pulls me toward the open door.

Before we reach it, return fire comes from where Tony had hidden. There must be guns in the boxes, and now bullets fly wildly past us.

I stumble, expecting the agony of a bullet in my back. My feet tangle together, and I fall. Nolan wraps an arm around me, lifting me and swinging me behind a metal rack.

"Stay down." Tension fills his voice. "Jade, what's the situation?"

Confused to hear Jade's name here, I glance up at Nolan and spot a black device in his ear, allowing him to communicate with the stripper.

But why would Jade be here?

After a moment, Nolan swears and turns to me. "When I say go, run in a crouch to

those crates by the door.”

I follow the line of his arm to a stack of three red, metal boxes near the door. It’s not much cover for two people, and I swallow hard.

Nolan’s fingers graze my cheek. “Don’t hesitate, just go. I’ll be right behind you.”

A tremor goes through my body, but I nod.

With a last look at me, Nolan raises his gun and starts firing. “Go!”

I force my feet to move, racing in a crouch across the open area, my eyes on the sunlight spilling through the door. At the crates, I fall to my knees, my pulse pounding in terror.

Nolan slides in beside me a moment later, his gaze sweeping over me in assessment.

“Rockford!” Tony’s angry voice taunts from somewhere in the warehouse. “You fucking asshole. You think you can just walk out of here?”

Instead of answering, Nolan leans out and fires.

A shout of pain follows, and Nolan shoves me toward the door. “Go, now. There’s a black SUV out front. Caleb is waiting there.”

Heart in my throat, I bolt for the door and race into the bright evening light. More gunfire cracks through the air, making my ears ring, and the acrid burn of gunpowder stings my nose.

I spot the vehicle, the back door open, and leap inside. Plush leather catches me, filled with Nolan’s pheromones. I scramble over to make room, and the seat bounces

as Nolan jumps in behind me, slamming the door shut.

Nolan reaches over to drag me close, checking for wounds. “Are you okay?”

“Yeah. Are you?” My hands run over him, fearing bullet holes, but he seems unscathed. “You shouldn’t have come. You’re such a bad businessman.”

“I certainly underestimated the volatility of my investment.” He pushes back my limp bangs to examine my face. “This is the last time I see bruises on your face. Understood?”

Done with being hit, I nod. “How did you even find me? They were still working out how to send the ransom threat.”

“I told you before that I had someone watching Tony.” His touch moves to my nape, caressing his Mark. “I’m sorry I didn’t come faster. We had to get our people in place.”

Behind the wheel, Caleb twists around to stare at us. “What’s taking Jade so long? Our cleanup people need to wipe the scene before the cops arrive.”

“He was under fire.” Nolan cocks his head, but the sound of the gunfight has stopped. “There was a third shooter.”

A sick feeling rises inside. “Mr. Bugrov.”

Nolan’s eyes lift to mine in surprise. “Your apartment manager?”

“He was in on it with Gino and Tony.” Now that we’re safe, tears threaten once more. “He’s the one who told them we’d gotten close.”

An icy chill fills Nolan's face. "I should have shot him the first time we met."

"Contemplate murder later," Caleb interrupts. "Is Jade alive?"

Nolan's lips part to answer just as the door on my other side yanks open, and Jade leaps in, a scoped rifle in one hand and blood oozing from his arm. "Go, go, go!"

Before Jade is even settled, Caleb slams on the gas, and the wheels squeal as the SUV shoots forward.

Jade drops the gun to the floorboards and wrestles his door shut, cursing with pain as the motion pulls on his wound.

"Shit." Caleb's eyes dart to the slender Omega in the rearview mirror. "How bad are you hurt?"

Jade leans his head back and closes his eyes. "Just get me to a doctor, and don't fucking tell Aaiden I got shot."

"Yeah, no, I'm not hiding that from the President. I like my balls attached to my body." Caleb yanks the wheel to the right, and we bounce over the curb, then out onto the street. "Take your lumps, brat."

Jade kicks the back of his seat with one heavy combat boot. "What do you think he's going to do to my shitty ass trainer, who let me get wounded while he hid in the car?"

Caleb speeds through a yellow light. "Did you at least kill the fucker?"

"He got away while I was bleeding," Jade grunts.

Caleb pounds the steering wheel. "This is why I keep telling you to work on being

ambidextrous.”

My eyes jump from Caleb to Jade, whose long, tightly braided hair emphasizes his beautiful features. Dressed completely in black from the neck down, he’s a far cry from the scantily-clad, sex-kitten stripper I’m used to seeing at Velvet Oasis, and the difference leaves me reeling.

I reach out to touch Jade’s tense arm. “Are you going to be okay?”

Pain-filled blue eyes meet mine, and he smiles at me. “Yes, sweetie, it’s just a graze. All the blood makes it look worse than it is.”

Relief floods me before I remember that I’m not the one who should be comforting Jade.

Awkwardly, I half stand in the confined space and try to move around Nolan. “Here, we can swap places.”

Large hands grip my waist, stopping me, and Nolan’s narrow gaze fixes on me. “What do you think you’re doing?”

Pain cuts through me, and I look away from him. “Jade needs you. He’s hurt.”

“Need Nolan? I’d rather be shot again.” Jade barks out a laugh. “I love you, Nolan, but if you touch me, I’ll kill you.”

Nolan gives me a stern stare. “This is why eavesdropping is bad.”

Angry that they’re mocking my broken heart, I glare at Nolan. “Assignations in the middle of the night are bad, too.”

He tugs my stiff body onto his lap. “You could have just asked.”

I flatten my hands on his chest to stop him from cuddling me close and overwhelming me with his pheromones. “Are you and Jade lovers?”

“No. Jade is Mrs. Bustly’s son and Caleb’s apprentice.” Nolan gently catches my forearms and pulls them to the side, collapsing me against his chest. “We grew up together, and he’s my inside man at Velvet Oasis.”

Jade grimaces with pain but smiles. “If you stick around after this, I’ll tell you all the family secrets. I know where the bodies are buried.”

Relief melts away everything else, and I turn my face into Nolan’s neck, breathing him in. “Thank god.”

“As punishment for breaking your word and running away, I was planning to tie you to our bed for the next week.” Nolan’s touch ghosts over my raw wrists, and a comforting rumble rises from his chest. “But I’ll have to come up with a different punishment.”

“I’m sorry.” My gaze drops to our hands. “It was stupid of me to leave like that.”

“Not stupid.” His fingers twine through mine. “But foolish, considering what’s going on.”

Jade pokes him in the cheek, leaving a bloody fingerprint behind. “If you hadn’t kept him in the dark, this wouldn’t have happened.”

“You’re right.” Nolan raises his voice. “Caleb, take us to the townhouse. The doctor can meet us there while I tell Leo everything.”

“You sure about that?” Caleb glances back at me before returning his focus to the road. “There’s no putting the secrets back in the box once it’s open.”

Nolan tips my chin up. “You’re going to stay with me forever, right?”

“But I’m not preg?—”

His finger on my lips stops the words. “Do you want to leave me?”

Tears sting my eyes, and I shake my head.

His expression softens. “So, you’ll stay with me forever?”

“Yes,” I whisper. “I’m yours.”

He pulls me close. “Then it’s time for you to know everything.”

Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 7:38 am

Dr. Wallace shines a small flashlight into my eyes. “Do you feel dizzy or nauseous?”

“No, just a headache.” I try not to flinch away from the bright light. “My face hurts.”

“You’re going to have some colorful bruising.” He gives me a sympathetic look. “Apply a cold compress for fifteen to twenty minutes today and tomorrow. It will help keep down the swelling.”

While waiting for my turn with the doctor, I had glanced in the bathroom mirror. The left side of my face appeared red and swollen, with a budding purple bruise on my cheekbone and broken blood vessels in the white of my eye, making the blue stand out vividly.

But at least I didn’t need stitches like Jade did.

“Your pupils dilate normally, so I don’t think you have a concussion.” Dr. Wallace tucks the flashlight into his pocket and straightens. “Keep the wrist wounds clean and dry. Wrap them in gauze, and if they become hot or seep pus, call me, and I’ll return.”

“Thank you. We will.” I glance down at the white bandages around my wrist. They throb in rhythm to the bruises on my face, making me want to lie down.

Dr. Wallace packs up his equipment. “I must say, aside from the new wounds, you’re looking much healthier than the last time I saw you.”

The observation brings a smile to my face. “Nolan’s been feeding me three meals a

day with healthy snacks.”

“That’s good.” His expression turns serious. “I need to ask if anything else happened. Did you get hit in your abdomen? It could endanger the health of your baby, if there is one.”

“All the blows were to my face, but it doesn’t matter, anyway.” Which may be a small blessing. Tony came so close to drugging me. Had I been pregnant, being forced into Heat would have caused a miscarriage. “I took a bunch of at-home tests this morning, and there’s no baby.”

“Those tests aren’t reliable until four weeks after the end of your last Heat. That’s why we had planned to do a blood test; it can detect pregnancy as early as ten days post-conception.” Dr. Wallace’s expression softens, and he places a comforting hand on my shoulder. “Would you like me to take a sample today and give you a more definitive answer?”

My heart stutters before beating faster.

Is there still a chance I’m carrying Nolan’s child? I realize I want this more than anything, but it also terrifies me. My parents were horrible role models, and I worry if I won’t be any better. But Nolan’s family is large and close-knit. With their support, our baby will be loved and cared for.

“Yes, please.” I push up my sleeve. “I want to know for sure.”

“Excellent.” Dr. Wallace prepares the necessary equipment, and as he takes my blood, he explains how it will work.

The blood draw barely stings, and smiley faces cover the band-aid he uses to hold down the cotton swab.

I watch him stow the filled vials. “Can we keep this between us for now? I don’t want to get Nolan’s hopes up again unless we’re certain.”

Dr. Wallace studies me for a moment, then nods solemnly. “Of course, Leo. Your privacy is important to me. I won’t mention it to Nolan until we have the results.”

Relief floods through me. “Thank you.”

Dr. Wallace makes sure I’ve memorized my wound care instructions, then hands me a bag of antibacterial solution and bandages before departing.

With a deep breath to steady myself, I make my way downstairs to join Nolan, Jade, and Caleb in the front room of the townhouse.

Caleb and Jade perch on one of the delicate love seats while Nolan paces, speaking intently into his phone.

When I enter, his green eyes flick to me, and he strides over to cup the uninjured side of my head and drop a kiss on my hair.

“Leo, come sit down. Your poor face must hurt so bad.” Jade waves his arm, where the white bandage wrapped around his bicep stands out beneath the shorn sleeve of his black shirt. “Look! We’re gauze buddies.”

As he breaks out in giggles, Caleb shakes his head with indulgence. “Ignore him. The doctor gave him drugs.”

My body throbs in time to my pulse as I take the accent chair next to Caleb. Dr. Wallace only administered an anti-inflammatory for me and left acetaminophen for if the pain worsens.

“Dammit!” Nolan rubs a hand through his dark brown hair, frustration clear on his face.

I lean toward Caleb, my voice low. “What’s going on?”

“He’s checking in with the clean-up team.” Jade leans across Caleb to get closer to me. “They’re responsible for dealing with the bodies and wiping the place clean of anything that can tie us to the crime scene. Tie...”

His eyes widen. “Nolan was going to tie you up.” He rears up, nearly head-butting Caleb in the chin. “Did you know Nolan was kinky?”

“Shut up, brat.” Caleb pushes him back on the couch.

Jade collapses against the armrest, falling silent as the ornate decorations on the ceiling distract him.

Caleb turns back to me. “How are you feeling?”

I touch my tender face. “I’m going to have some bruises for a couple of weeks, and the deeper wounds on my wrists may scar, but I’ll live.”

“Living is what matters.” Caleb’s fingers brush my bandages. “Take the scars as proof that you survived.”

A lump forms in my throat, and I nod.

“Alright, I understand.” Frustration laces Nolan’s voice. “Keep me informed.”

He hangs up and pockets his phone.

“Everything okay?” I ask, trying to stop fear from overtaking me.

At least one person was killed today. If the police had arrived before the warehouse was cleaned up...

Nolan’s expression softens as he looks at me. “Yes, there’s just been a minor complication. My shot didn’t kill Tony, and the rat got away.”

I stiffen. “Are you in danger?”

“No, nothing like that.” He catches my hand and tugs me up to take my chair, then pulls me onto his lap. “He and Bugrov on the run, but our people will catch up with him. In the meantime, we can look into the local gang’s involvement with your kidnapping. They’re already on our list to deal with, but if they’re targeting our family, we need to escalate things.”

“Actually, I don’t think the gang had anything to do with this. Gino and Tony were too disorganized. They didn’t even have a plan for how to send the ransom.” I take a deep breath, anger and shame warring within me. “Gino also admitted that my debt to the gang was all fake. He made the whole thing up. He and Tony were scamming me from the very beginning. My brother, Foley, never took out a loan.”

Nolan’s expression shifts from surprise to rage in an instant. “Then why did Gino target you?”

“When I asked the same thing, he implied that we’ve met before.” I pull Nolan’s arms around me. “I think Gino knew Foley, and he must have told him about me.”

“I’m so sorry. Gino’s confidence in coming after you probably means that your brother is dead, as you suspected.” Nolan takes my hand. “But we can find out for sure. At the very least, we’ll locate his body so you can lay him to rest.”

His words fill me with more worry than reassurance. Messing with the gangs is risky. If they're not aware of what's been going on, I don't want Nolan drawing their attention.

I meet his steady gaze. "Foley isn't a part of my life, and now Gino is dealt with. Finding out what happened to my brother isn't worth putting you or your family in danger."

"That's so sweet." Jade pats the side of Caleb's face. "Isn't he so sweet? I want to bubble wrap him so he never changes."

Caleb sighs and stands, hauling Jade up. "I'll leave you to handle this conversation. We need to report to the President."

"Mmm, yummy. Aaiden's so hot." Jade sways against Caleb. "I want to climb him like a tree."

A beat of silence follows before Caleb laughs. "Oh, damn, I'm so going to hold that over your head when the drugs wear off."

"Get him home safely." Nolan cuddles me closer, making no move to see them out. "And thank you for today."

"Anytime." Caleb drags Jade to the door. "That's what family is for."

Nolan lifts one of my wrists and kisses the bandage. "What did the doctor say?"

"I'll heal." Unexpected tears rise to my eyes, and a tremor goes through me. "He said I should ice my f-face..."

"Oh, my sweet boy." Nolan gingerly tucks me against his shoulder. "I'm so sorry you

went through this because of me.”

“I was so stupid to believe Gino,” I sob into his shirt. “And then I got myself kidnapped and put you in danger.”

“Shhh. You were scared.” He rubs my back. “You’ve been in survival mode for a long time. When I walked into that warehouse and saw you hurt, it terrified me, but I could also see that you fought like hell. You are so much stronger than you realize.”

“I’m not, though.” I sniffle and wipe my eyes. “If I hadn’t doubted you, I never would have been in that position.”

“Or they would have found a different way to get to you.” He tucks a lock of hair behind my ear. “If I was more transparent about my family, you would have known the risk being with me posed, but I was selfish. I didn’t want to scare you away. Once you’re in, it’s for life, though. No more offers of NDAs and payoffs. No more running away. This is for life. So you need to be sure this is what you want.”

Rather than instilling fear, the warning brings me comfort. When Nolan asked if I would be with him forever, it wasn’t mere words; it was a vow. “You killed Rich and Gino, and I’m still here. I’m not afraid of the blood on your hands. When I left, I thought it was for your happiness, because you loved Jade, but I’m not going to be a martyr again. You’re mine, and I’m yours.”

“That’s right, sweet boy. I’m yours, and so is my family.” He cups my uninjured cheek. “We’re not good people, but we have our own code that we live by. We have rules for what’s allowed in our territories, and when people cross those lines, we take care of them. Sometimes that involves doing things that others might consider extreme.”

“Like killing,” I say, the words a statement instead of a question.

“Yes.” He holds my eyes. “That doesn’t scare you?”

I shift on his lap to straddle him. “The only thing I’m afraid of is you being hurt.”

“I can’t promise to stay out of danger.” Nolan grips my hips. “But I will always come home to you, no matter the cost.”

“Then I won’t be afraid. I already had an idea that you were crossing the line of legality when I told your family I wanted to spend the rest of my life loving you, and I meant it.” I take his hand. “I want to know.”

Nolan searches my face, and when he doesn’t find any sign of hesitation there, he squeezes my fingers. “The Rockford family has been around for a long time. They started as landowners, buying property and businesses whenever they could. They used the money they made from that to smuggle guns but eventually moved into drugs and prostitution. They built a sizeable fortune, but my grandfather somehow managed to gamble it all away.

“Our father refilled the family coffers by returning to crime. He focused less on guns and drugs and moved into sex clubs and money laundering. The family already had a number of cash heavy businesses, so washing money was easy to integrate.”

“Your clubs?” I ask.

He nods. “One of several places where we make dirty money clean. We also run the docks, making sure the right officials are on duty when smugglers move their products.”

“Drugs?” He nods. “Gun trafficking?”

“Yes, although we’ve found more ways to make money and are moving away from

guns and drugs.” His thumb rubs over my fingers. “We’re getting heavily into imported cheeses, caviar, high-end fashion, art, etc. Whatever the market demands.”

“Slaves?” I whisper.

“No.” His firm tone reassures me. “As I said, we have a code. We don’t allow human trafficking. We don’t allow drug dealers to target children. We’re working to get rid of the gangs that terrorize neighborhoods like yours. We invest in affordable living and schools, too, implementing meal plan programs. Not everything we do is bad, but we do cross that line, and I won’t hide it from you.”

Drugs had stolen my brother from me, but I can’t blame Foley’s addiction on Nolan any more than I can blame him for my mother’s need for alcohol.

Nolan touches my cheek. “Leo?”

I place my palm over his heart. “Now that I know the family business, does this mean I get a tattoo like yours?”

Nolan’s gaze roves over my body. “You want one?”

I bite my lip. “Does it have to be as big as yours? I’m not very good with pain. Can I be a tiny cog?”

“You’re already a tiny cog.” He flattens his hand on my chest, his fingers spanning the length of my collarbone. “But if we’re talking about how big of a part you are to my family, your tattoo will need to cover your entire body. You’re going to be the man I come home to, and the papa of my children, after all.”

My throat tightens. “Are you disappointed about the negative tests?”

“A little. I was excited to see you round as a beach ball.” His hand moves down to my stomach. “But that also means we get to spend another Heat together trying again.”

He leans forward to kiss my neck. “And again.”

His lips move to my uninjured cheek. “And again.”

My pulse quickens, and I tip my head back. “That’s a lot of attempts you’re talking about. Maybe we should practice, so we get it right.”

His smile forms against my skin before he grabs my ass and stands. Gasping, I hold on tight as he heads for the stairs.

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Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 7:38 am

In our bedroom, Nolan lowers me to sit on the edge of our mattress.

I look at the solid wood headboard and smile. “Your plan to tie me to the bed never would have worked. We don’t have the right frame.”

“We’ll just have to remedy that when we remodel.” He kneels in front of me and takes off my socks, his large hands curling around my ankles. “Make sure you pick out a sturdy one.”

My stomach clenches in response. The thought of being bound and at Nolan’s mercy gives me more motivation to spend Nolan’s money on new furniture than anything else could have.

A soft chuckle leaves him as his gaze drops to the tent in my pants. “I see that excites you.”

Blood creeps up my cheeks. “I just want to make your wishes come true.”

“Is that what you want, sweet boy?” His warm hands caress my body as he gently undresses me, unbuttoning my pants and easing them down my hips, along with my underwear.

He carefully lifts my shirt over my head, his eyes never leaving mine, and every touch sends shivers down my spine. “How are you going to please me tonight?”

Pulse racing, I pull my feet up onto the mattress and spread my legs, exposing my desire.

His nostrils flare, and he pushes my thighs farther apart. “Look at how pretty you are.”

Heat fills the green eyes that sweep over my body. The bright bedroom lights leave no room to hide my too-skinny frame now mottled with bruises and bandages, but the way Nolan looks at me makes me feel like the most beautiful man in the world.

I shiver as his fingers brush down my inner thighs, raising goose bumps all over my sensitive skin. “What do you want me to do?”

The flush in my cheeks spreads down my chest, embarrassed and turned on in equal measure as I reach for my leaking dick. “Taste me.”

A rumble of approval fills the room. “Good boy.”

Pleasure shudders through me, and my toes curl at the praise. Then Nolan leans over me, his warm breath fanning over my length. His eyes meet mine, making me squirm with anticipation.

When the seconds lengthen, a whine of need escapes me, and I involuntarily thrust my dick toward his face.

“So greedy.” The words whisper over my glistening slit, then his lips part, and he takes me into his hot mouth.

I moan as his tongue swirls slow circles on my sensitive head, and his big hand grips my shaft, stroking me firmly. When my hips start rocking on their own, he releases my dick and swallows me deep enough that I feel his throat closing around my tip.

Tingles sweep through my body, and my balls pull tight to my stomach.

Sensing how close I am, he lifts off me and nips my head lightly. “Are you going to come in my mouth, greedy boy?”

Before I can respond, his wet heat envelops me again, his bobbing head and hollowed-cheeks suction more than I can handle. It’s too much, and I’m too far gone.

Unable to stop it, I call out his name as I come, my dick pulsing onto his waiting tongue.

Nolan swallows and sucks up my length, making sure he drinks down every drop. “So sweet.”

My cheeks warm with embarrassed pleasure, and I close my quivering legs.

“Where are you going?” His palms on my thighs push them back open. “I’m not done.”

Head dipping, he nuzzles my soft sack before moving lower, and lips graze my entrance.

I stiffen, and he caresses my shaking flanks. “Relax.”

His hands move to my ass to squeeze my slightly rounded globes, then spread them open for him to lap at my sensitive ring of muscles. A loud moan rises from my throat, and I melt beneath him.

When his long fingers thrust inside me, I gasp and reach down to fist his hair.

“That’s it,” he groans, adding another finger as he sucks on my hole. “You like that, don’t you?”

“Yes,” I whimper. “I love it.”

His growl vibrates through my body, making my hips lift in a silent plea for more. He finds my sweet spot and massages the sensitive bundle of nerves.

Pleasure explodes through me, my back arching off the mattress as I come with a strangled cry. Nolan continues to thrust against my prostate, drawing out the orgasm until I turn into a limp, gasping mess.

With a satisfied smile, he rises and strips, unveiling his magnificent form one article of clothing at a time. When he pushes down his slacks and boxers, revealing his hard cock, my ass clenches. Despite two releases, I still want to wrap my legs around him, to have him fill me.

He joins me naked on the bed and pulls me on top of him, his hot length nudging at my stomach. Gently, he moves me to sit upright, and I spread my hands on his pecs for support. He tugs my knees so I straddle him, putting me into the position he wants.

Licking his lips, he rubs his cock against my slick entrance. “Claim me.”

My breath hitches, and I lift onto my shaking legs, then reach back to wrap my hand around his shaft and guide him to my entrance.

Slowly, I ease his tip inside, reveling in the burning stretch. I moan and release him to brace my palms on his chest, rocking my hips to work him deeper.

“Nolan,” I pant, my nails digging into his skin. “Help me.”

“You’re so tight.” He grips my flanks and pulls me down as he thrusts upward, seating me on his cock.

White-hot pleasure rushes through me, and my head falls back.

He groans and flattens his hand on my stomach. “God, you’re so tiny. I can see myself inside you.”

I catch my bottom lip between my teeth as I lean back to grip his muscular thighs and lift back onto my knees. The thick slide of him against my entrance sends a shiver through my body, and I drop back down, marveling at how much he fills me.

Nolan’s heated gaze locks on where we join. “Damn, that’s beautiful, watching your tight little hole eat me up.”

Moaning, I repeat the motion, picking up speed until the slap of our bodies coming together echoes in the room. Our pheromones hang heavy around us, heightening my pleasure, and soon, tingles rush through me from head to toe.

Nolan grips my hips, taking control, thrusting deeper, harder, branding the shape of him deep inside.

I gasp as my ass clenches around on him, and my cum pumps onto his stomach.

A moment later, his cock pulses, and liquid heat floods my channel.

Afterward, we lay panting, our limbs tangled.

Nolan pulls me closer, nuzzling my neck. “I never thought I would find someone like you. You’re everything that I’ve needed in my life.”

Tears prick at my eyes. No one has ever said such kind words to me.

He shifts back, his green eyes searching mine. “I know these past two weeks have

been unexpected?—”

“Unexpected, but good,” I interrupt with a shaky smile. “I love you, Nolan. I don’t care if it’s too soon. I’ve been yours since the beginning.”

“Not too soon.” He lifts my hand and nibbles on my ring finger. “I want you to become my family.”

My breath hitches. “As in marriage?”

He smiles. “Yes, as in marriage. I love you and want to make you Leo Rockford.”

“Yes.” I cup his cheeks and rain kisses on his face. “Yes, please. I want that.”

“We’ll go pick out your ring once your bruises fade. Until then, I intend to keep you in bed, even if you’re not tied up as plan?—”

A quiet vibration comes from the nightstand, startling us both since it’s my cell phone and not Nolan’s.

He lifts onto his elbow to grab it, and his brow furrows as he passes it to me. “Why is Dr. Wallace calling you at this hour?”

Pulse quickening, I answer. “Hello, this is Leo.”

Warmth fills the line. “Leo, I have the results of your pregnancy test. Are you ready?”

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Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 7:38 am

Aloud whirl fills the kitchen as I pack the remaining frozen strawberries and bananas into the ice chest on the island. This will be the last smoothie made at the townhouse for the next six months, at least, so I'm bringing all of Leo's favorites.

The locks on the lid snap into place, and I pour the fruit mixture into a to-go cup. After a quick wash and dry, the blender goes into the box with the other items we're taking. I would have preferred to just buy duplicates of everything for our suite at the family house, but Leo's frugality got the better of me.

I raise my voice to carry upstairs. "Are you almost packed? Our appointment is in twenty minutes!"

"I just need a few more things!" Leo yells back, bringing a smile to my lips.

Over the three months we've been together, he's blossomed and gone from carrying all of his possessions in a pillowcase to needing actual luggage, thanks in no small part to my insistence on buying him new clothes.

My driver, O'Donnell, walks in from the garage to collect the ice chest. "We're about full, Mr. Rockford."

I pat the box with the blender. "This is the last one, aside from Leo's suitcases."

As he takes the food from our fridge out to the waiting car, a thunk from overhead sends my heart lurching.

I run from the kitchen to find my fiancé struggling to haul a suitcase nearly as big as

he is down the stairs. “Stop right there, unless you’re looking to get spanked.”

Silky blond hair falls over his blue eyes, and he blows it out of the way to glare at me. “There’s no reason for you to come upstairs to get it when I can just bring it down with me.”

“Not when you can’t see the steps past your belly.” I hurry up the stairs to take the heavy, hard-shelled case from him with one hand and kiss his flushed cheek. “You just concentrate on safely walking down.”

While Dr. Wallace assures me Leo is now up to a healthy weight, his frame remains delicate. At only three months, his swollen stomach sticks out farther than his feet. Which is why we’re moving back to the family house.

“You’re being ridiculous.” Leo grips the handrail and takes the stairs far faster than I like. “If you get any worse, I’m going to demand Aaiden give me a separate suite on the other side of the mansion from you.”

The threat makes me smirk. “You’d just come waddling back at night when you can’t sleep.”

“I don’t waddle,” he huffs as he reaches the ground floor and waddles after me.

“Sure you don’t.” The doctors have assured us there’s only one baby, but at the rate Leo’s growing, I question if there’s another one hiding in there.

“I’ll get one of those belly support pillows, so I won’t need you at night.” He sticks his little button nose in the air as he sweeps past me, the material of his lightweight coveralls fluttering. “We’ll see who comes crawling.”

With a growl, I snag the back of his bib and tug him into my arms, claiming those lush lips in a heated kiss. The first time I encountered him in the smoke-stained gray

of my club, it was like an angel had been cast into my den of sin. The mask that covered half his face drove me crazy with fantasies of what it hid.

When I finally saw his full, uncovered face, with his little pointed chin and mouth that looked like it was made to wrap around my cock, it had taken all my self-control not to throw him down on the nearest flat surface.

My patience paid off when the chance to claim him landed him in my lap, and I'm going to be miserable having him outside the city, where I lose an hour and a half every day with him because of travel.

But it will be worth it, knowing he's safe and surrounded by servants and my family who can come to his aid if something goes wrong with the pregnancy. Not to mention the fully equipped care facility in the fortified wing of the Rockford estate.

A whimper escapes his sweet lips, and slender arms wrap around my neck as he rises onto his toes, his belly pressing against my stomach.

"Fifteen minutes, Mr. Rockford," O'Donnell calls from out of sight in the kitchen.

With a groan, Leo pulls back, and his hand disappears into his coveralls to adjust himself. "You're horrible. Don't think you're getting lucky in the car. There's not enough time."

Suitcase in hand, I follow him. "Don't forget your smoothie from the island."

Leo veers away from the open door to grab the pink cup, raising the straw to wrap his lips around it. He hums happily, his long lashes fluttering and roses blooming in his cheeks. He looked just like that last night with his lips wrapped around my cock, and it makes my blood rush south.

When his blue eyes flick to me, I realize he's tempting me on purpose, the little minx.

With a growl, I chase him out to the garage and smack his little ass as he climbs into the back of the sedan. I pass O'Donnell the suitcase to stow in the back and climb in after Leo, intent on proving to him that fifteen minutes is more than enough time.

Ten minutes later, Leo tugs his coveralls back up as I rejoin him on the seat.

His chest rises with quick breaths and his hand trembles as he reaches for the smoothie in the cupholder. "I want my own car."

I lick the taste of him from my lips. "Do you? Because I'll buy you one and hire a driver for your use."

He slumps against my shoulder. "Don't you dare. That's an enormous waste of money when I work and go to school from home."

Leo had finally started university classes again and landed a data entry job at a company not owned by my family. When I broached buying it to Aaiden, he told me to let Leo have the independence, but if they don't treat him right, I'll crush them.

We drive past a row of dilapidated buildings, and Leo leans forward, his lips parting in surprise. "Stop the car!"

Thank god O'Donnell is well-trained and doesn't slam on the brakes. Instead, he slows and pulls over to the curb.

Leo crawls across my lap to stare at the gaping hole where his old apartment complex once stood. Now, it's just an empty lot, surrounded by a chain-link fence.

After a moment, Leo turns narrowed eyes on me. "You did this, didn't you?"

I lift a shoulder. "It was slum housing and a health risk to the inhabitants."

He slams me in the chest with the strength of a kitten. “I already let go of my lease and moved out of there. You didn’t have to knock it down to make sure I won’t run away again.”

“This was a business investment.” When his feathery blond brows arch, I add, “I’m also purchasing the buildings on either side.”

O’Donnell glances at me in the rearview mirror, and I nod for him to get back on the road. We have an appointment to make, after all.

Leo settles back in his seat. “What will you do with the lots?”

“Stores on the bottom and apartments on top. I’ve been in discussion with the Omega Outreach Program to bring a clinic to this area so that Omegas have access to free suppressants and healthcare.” I pull him closer against my side. “Employees at my clubs will receive subsidized living so that no one else will have to go through what you did.”

Tears well in his beautiful eyes, and he leans up to press his lips to my cheek. “I love you so much, Nolan Rockford.”

“Come here, sweet boy.” Warmth spreads through me, and I tug him in for another kiss.

I thought I had been caring for the Omegas in my employ, but Leo opened my eyes to how far I still have to go. And if it rolls more money into the family coffers, all the better.

“We’re here.” O’Donnell parks in a reserved space at the curb and climbs out to open my door.

I slide out and drag Leo after me so that he’s not getting out on the street side. We

haven't tracked down Tony and Bugrov yet, and I'm cautious of giving them another chance to snatch Leo.

Watchful for people showing us too much interest, I entwine our fingers and lead the way to the jewelry store, which had closed to the public for our appointment.

"Mr. Rockford, Mr. Daniels, welcome." The manager, who stands at the entrance, offers two champagne flutes. "Sparkling pear juice?"

"Thank you." Leo takes one and sips, then looks up at me. "It's sweet."

I accept mine, and we follow the man to an intimate sitting area. With a hand on Leo's elbow, I help him onto the padded cushion farthest from the windows, which earns me an exasperated look of affection.

Taking the seat on his other side, I drape my arm over the back of his chair.

The store manager opens a locked safe on the table and lifts out a small, dark wood ring box, setting it in front of Leo.

He leans forward to open it and gasps before twisting to stare at me. "This isn't the one I picked out."

No, when we came here two months ago to choose his engagement ring, he had been overwhelmed by the prices and had chosen a simple silver band, but I had seen where his heart lay. I had used the excuse of needing to size the one he chose to have a custom ring designed based on what he really liked.

"No, but it's the one you wanted." I caress the back of his neck, where the faint circle of my Mark lingers.

It's not a permanent one, since he hasn't gone into Heat again because of his

pregnancy, but it's a promise of what will come after he gives birth.

His hand trembles as he pulls the platinum ring from the box. Sapphires and black diamonds inset around the band give the impression of a waterfall. On the inside, in delicate script, are the words: To my heart, forever.

Leo's throat works as he swallows back tears and turns to me. "Will you put it on me?"

Chest tight, I slide it into place on his slender finger. The thick platinum band stops just below his first knuckle and sparkles as he moves his hand back and forth.

He snuffles. "It's beautiful, Nolan."

I cup his cheek. "Not as beautiful as you."

His bottom lip wobbles, making me want to pull him onto my lap and smother him in kisses.

Before I give in to the temptation of his lush lips, my phone buzzes in my pocket, and I take it out. "I'm sorry, but business calls. Why don't you pick out a chain while I take care of this?"

Leo's brow furrows. "Chain?"

I rub his belly. "For when you get too fat and the ring won't fit."

His indignant squawk fills my ear, and I dodge his swat. Laughing, I move off to the side to check the message from Sebastian.

It's a link to an article from an online gossip site that stalks the families of the elite, digging up sordid details about our lives to expose to the public. This specific

journalist latched onto us a year ago, and the articles he writes about the “Rockford Corruption” doubled the website’s income.

The newest one focuses on my new multi-use building venture, where he speculates what the exact purpose of the apartments will be, citing my nightclubs to titillate his readers with the scandal of sex workers taking over the city, which pisses me off from two fronts.

The first is that there’s nothing shameful about people who enjoy being sex workers. The second is that this is a passion project that grew from my love for Leo, and I refuse to have it tarnished by some gossip columnist disguising himself as a real news person spreading lies about our family.

Opening my texts, I shoot one off to Caleb: We have a problem I’d like you to deal with.

“Nolan, what do you think of this one?” Leo calls out.

I turn to see him holding up a chain from the cheaper side of the store.

Smiling, I tuck my phone away and stride toward him. “Be less frugal, sweet boy. We want to make sure it’s sturdy so you don’t lose the band.”

Suspicion fills his eyes, but he slides down to the pricier section.

At the glass counter, I cup his round waist. “Pick what you want. This is forever.”

He pulls my hand farther around to rest on his belly. “Say that again.”

I lean down to kiss the top of his head. “You and me, forever, Leo.”

From the moment I saw him, I knew he was mine, and I look forward to claiming him

for the rest of our lives.

The End.