



# Mated into the Mob: MM Mpreg Shifter Mafia Romance

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**Category:** LGBT+

**Description:** I thought revenge would taste sweet... but it's not revenge I keep wrapping my lips around.

Bartending is far from my career goal, but I'm not at La Luna Noir to pad my 401k. Heck, I'm not even here to pay my bills. I took this job for one reason and one reason only: answers. If only it were that easy. This place might be filled with secrets, but all I've been discovering is new cocktail recipes... until today.

The office is left open and now's my chance. All I have to do is go in, find what I need, and get out. Easy peasy. Right?

Wrong.

Now I'm a prisoner in the mob boss's basement, struggling for my life, and hating how hot I think he is. Oh yeah, and he bit me for no reason... who does that? And why did I like it?

**Total Pages (Source):** 29

# Page 1

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

“Your dirty martini, sir.”

I placed the glass on a coaster, always protective of the luxurious marble-topped bar that I babied, worried something would stain it.

The guy lifted the glass, his glazed eyes paired with broken blood vessels and puffy cheeks told a story every bartender could read.

“I hope it’s very dirty.” He took a sip and ate the first of three olives.

I pushed snacks toward him. Not the nuts or chips he’d be given in some dive. Nope, La Luna Noir prided itself on offering plump kimchi dumplings and miso chicken wings. But he grabbed the dish, and his fingers brushed over mine, his come-hither gaze hinting at him wanting more than bar snacks.

Damn. I plastered a smile on my face and prepared an excuse.

“What time do you get off?” he slurred and squinted at my tag. “Tony.”

“Very late.”

From the corner of my eye, I noted the bar manager tapping his watch. Time for my break. Getting involved with club patrons wasn’t just frowned upon; it was forbidden. I wouldn’t allow this guy to get me fired. I’d taken this job for one purpose, and no drunk was going to ruin it.

“If you need anything else, sir, Todd will assist you.”

After passing the problem to my colleague, I left the bar and skirted the dance floor, heading to the staff bathroom, squirreled away in a labyrinth at the back of the club. The cavernous space where guests gathered in La Luna Noir was about the same square footage as the back rooms—based on the building’s footprint—with their winding corridors and dimly lit rooms. Not that I had access to many of them.

But as I approached the bathroom, Arnie, an elderly guy whose brow was furrowed with decades of wavy lines, raced out of his office, wedged between a store room and the bathroom. He didn’t have a designated role in the nightclub, or if he did, it hadn’t been shared with me.

He rarely interacted with the staff, except when complaining about his computer. He was a short, skinny guy with a bald head and a slight stoop who wore cheap suits, his appearance contrasting with the opulent club interior. Maybe he’d worked for the current owner’s father and he was a pity hire, or more likely, a holdover.

My eyes flicked toward the circular stairs, located in a corner, leading to the mezzanine floor. It was roped off, and an impeccably dressed security guard, wearing a discreet earpiece, moved on any guests if they lingered.

That was the boss’s domain, overlooking La Luna Noir. I’d been working here for three months and had never laid eyes on him. But the word was he was coming in early tonight, and there was a frisson of excitement—or was it fear?—in the air.

Every night when I emptied the trash in the alley out back, I’d study the exterior of the building which was a testament to minimalism, with its understated black exterior of concrete and sleek metal cladding. There was an entrance, barely visible in the unassuming facade, that led directly onto the alley, and I suspected that was the boss’s entry and exit.

“Hey, wake up, Tony. You’re on break.” Bobbie, one of my fellow bartenders,

slapped me on the back, his wide grin showing off pearly white teeth.

“Right.” I’d been standing near the bathroom entrance but had my eye on the door, open a tad, to Arnie’s office. I had been in there once when he insisted his computer had died. He hadn’t turned on the monitor, and when the screen lit up, he shooed me out, mumbling he’d get in trouble for allowing me in the space.

During those brief moments, I’d noted the peeling paint, exposed brick work, scuffed baseboards, and almost empty shelves. The dreariness was at odds with the public-facing parts of the club, with its lavish furnishings of velvet, leather, marble, and crystal. But there was a framed print of a woodland scene on the wall. My mind made a giant leap, and instead of Arnie trying to make the bleak office more welcoming, I reckoned there was a safe behind the faded print.

Each night, Arnie would emerge from the office, a memory stick dangling from a keyring clip hooked on his belt loop, and he’d head into the rabbit warren of rooms further back, labeled, “Private! No Entrance!” Apart from not having seen a computer that could accommodate a memory stick in a while, I was curious as to what it contained.

I swung around and shouted, “Get your hands off me.”

The dirty martini customer! I peered over the heads of people dancing. Security had hefted the guy off the stool and were about to eject him, but he took a swing at them.

No more dirty martinis for him!

After washing my hands, I emerged from the bathroom to the persistent flashing laser lights on the dance floor and the accompanying thump of the music. Most nights on my break, I’d get out of the building and away from the noise, overpowering cologne, and heady atmosphere of money mingling with a dark undercurrent of power. The

concrete parking lot and the distant hum of traffic on the highway was more pleasurable than staying inside. Even inhaling my colleagues' cigarette smoke out back was preferable to the patrons' voices competing with the pounding music.

I wanted to get into Arnie's office, but I hesitated. If I got caught, what then? Losing my job was a given, but I'd get another job tending bar. Being arrested was a possibility, but that wouldn't happen, not in a bar owned by a mobster. The alternative might be worse, though.

Goosebumps prickled over my skin as my overactive imagination flashed images of the punishments the boss or Emilio, the boss's right-hand man, might mete out. Emilio was a shadowy figure, always clad in black, who rarely spoke to the staff. He communicated in head jerks or snapping of fingers, and I shivered when I thought of him breaking my wrist.

I was overreacting. This was the twentieth-first century, and my mind was dredging up images from cop shows and mob movies. But I had to have an excuse ready in case Arnie or anyone else caught me. If it was the former, I had nada. Another employee? I could fudge an excuse and race out, but I'd have to keep running and never return.

But the seconds were ticking by. As I stood, my feet frozen, I came up with a list of excuses why I shouldn't barge in there.

The computer would be password protected.

The device was off, and as it was so old, it'd take ages to boot up.

If I did gain access, there'd be nothing to see. The information I was looking for was over twenty years old. Clunky as Arnie's computer was, it was doubtful it stored ancient employment records.

And most likely, the incident that changed my life wouldn't have been recorded, assuming my theory was correct.

It's now or never.

After glancing around, I sidled into the office. My palms were sweating buckets, and fear prickled over my skin.

The old computer hummed, its blue screen flickering slightly. The screen was littered with files, the names mostly reams of numbers and letters. There was a tattered notebook beside the computer with the same numbers and corresponding scrawl in Arnie's unintelligible handwriting, but I couldn't decipher it.

Rubbing my sweaty palms together, I sat in Arnie's chair, the only modern piece of equipment in the office. I clicked on a couple of files but they contained columns of figures.

During the long nights when I lay awake and puzzled over how to find what I was looking for, or alternatively, exact revenge, I wondered why Arnie used an outdated computer system, one that wasn't connected to the internet. The obvious answer was that he didn't want anyone hacking into the computer. The price of computer security and the ease of storage on the cloud versus what? An almost unhackable system.

Except when Arnie was distracted and an unscrupulous employee snuck in. Me!

My fingers danced over the keyboard, but I paused, because if I got caught, Arnie would also be punished. I cringed, thinking of the consequences. Arnie had been careless, but that didn't necessitate someone breaking his knuckles.

There was my vivid imagination again. He'd get chewed out by the boss or more likely Emilio, nothing more. I convinced myself that was the worst that could happen.

Arnie was a sweet guy. No one would hurt him. Me, on the other hand...

Damn! I should have brought in an old memory stick currently buried in the bottom of my drawer and copied the data. Frustrated, I gave up on the computer and scanned the few paper files, some covered in layers of dust which spiraled into the air, and I plugged my nose, holding back a sneeze. I refused to allow my spying to be undone by damn dirt.

But it was the picture on the wall where my gaze rested. Peek behind it or ignore it? I was no safe cracker, but I had to know if my intuition was correct. And why would there be a safe in this office? Surely secrets would be in the boss's domain, a storage facility or an office building the family owned.

I lifted one corner of the old frame, flakes of fake gold leaf speckling my hands. There was nothing there, just smudges of dust. My sinuses convulsed, and I let go of the frame and barely registered when it banged on the wall. I squatted, covering my nose, begging my body not to betray me with a sneeze.

When I was satisfied I'd stifled it, I stood and moved the chair to its original position. As I made sure the room was as Arnie had left it, an ominous click punctuated the silence. I clenched my teeth, adrenaline coursing through my veins while an excuse was on the tip of my tongue.

But something cold was shoved on the back of my neck, a metal something. I gulped, because while I'd never handled a gun, I was pretty sure that was what was pressed on my flesh.

"You've just made the worst mistake of your life, kid."

## Page 2

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

Most of my office was cloaked in darkness, just as I liked it, apart from two lamps behind me.

The grainy light filtered over my sanctuary while I leaned back in my chair, the squeak as I twisted left and right a reminder I needed a new one, while I stared, unseeing, at a column of figures on my laptop.

Damn, this was a good month at La Luna Noir, or so Emilio told me. I should have been celebrating, but there was an issue, one only I could deal with. More twisting and squeaking as I planted my perfectly shod feet on the soft carpet and slammed the laptop closed, not gaining any satisfaction from the monthly profits.

La Luna Noir. How many times had people said the name was grammatically incorrect? Too many to count. I'd shrug, not caring to offer an explanation.

My grandfather had named the club, because unlike most of the shifters in our pack, he had a father and a mother, instead of alpha and omega dads. They'd arrived in this country from different places. La luna was for her. The moon, bright, shimmering, and stalwart because her mate and son adored her. Noir was for his father, dark and threatening.

My office perched above the club, and the soundproofed walls blocked out the pulsing music from the floor below. Occasionally, I'd wander down via the discrete staircase located at the back of the club, greet the staff, and chat to patrons in the private areas, roped off from the rest of the clientele, or the VIP rooms. Deals were made and signed, not in blood, but verbally for sensitive matters, on paper for the more mundane such as a property sale.



I drummed my fingers on the gleaming desk. Emilio would be here in a minute with the guy. There'd be words, the man, whoever he was, would offer an explanation, beg, cry, and bargain, hoping to avoid his fate. I'd pretend to listen and deliver his punishment. The end.

Emilio was my right-hand man or Beta, though he was never referred to by that name. My people understood his role and the power he wielded, but he answered to me.

Tapping my fingers on the mahogany desk my grandfather bought forty years ago, I wondered why Emilio wasn't here. I checked my phone, the coded seven-word message of I've got a kid to show you on the screen, telling me whoever it was had made a mistake. An employee? Or a patron? I'd heard someone got outta control, but that had been dealt with.

Had this kid been planted by a rival? Was he an undercover cop? Whatever, I'd discover his real identity. Emilio called everyone under forty a kid, so him using the expression gave me no indication of how old he was. Not that his age mattered. He was old enough to know better.

But I suspected the person Emilio was bringing me was a club patron because we did extensive background checks on prospective employees. In the days when my father and grandfather ran the club, employees were family or close associates, but as our business empire expanded—La Luna Noir was one small part—we'd had to look beyond the boundaries of our kin. But the newcomers had low-level jobs, never entering the inner circle.

Shifters controlled the crime syndicates in the city, though the other packs dealt in nickel-and-dime stuff like extortion and loan-sharking. Over the decades those pack Alphas tried to muscle in on our territory, resulting in bloodshed and grief for my family. But I'd put an end to their efforts—for now.

In ancient times, we'd been the fixers for wealthy humans who didn't want to get their hands dirty, but as the centuries passed, knowledge of our shifter abilities slid from humans' memories. But our position in society hadn't changed; humans were still happy to pay us to do their dirty work, thinking we were just like them and naming us "the mafia."

And we preferred to keep our true identities a secret. Humans didn't know we were so good at our job because of our wolves. We went from being middlemen to exercising power with strict rules to punish insubordination.

That was the part of the job I didn't enjoy. It was necessary to keep us safe and because none of my men would pledge their loyalty if I let someone off with a warning or even if Emilio delivered the bruising "treatment" he'd perfected over the years.

Do you want me to deal with him?my wolf asked.

He always offered in these situations, but the instinct buried in his DNA over millennia was to hunt other animals for food, not destroy my enemies. If I asked him to, he would. His loyalty to me was unmatched. No one would ever understand or care about me as my beast did.

Needing something to occupy me, I glanced around the room. I took pleasure in the shelves lined with leather-bound first editions, each one valued at more than the average person's annual salary. A liquor cabinet in one corner was stocked with spirits, because I'd developed a taste for the finer things in life. And yet I rarely touched the stuff. It was for show, though Emilio was one of the few people allowed into my private domain. Also, I needed to be alert and focused. I couldn't afford to make a mistake because alcohol made me warm and fuzzy.

My hand went to the pocket watch, bequeathed to me by my grandfather. I was rarely

without it and rubbing my fingers over the metal, dented in places, reassured me that no matter what happened, I would survive, even if I too was “dented.” And I was. The early years of my time as Alpha scarred me, in my body and mind.

Moving from the desk, I slumped onto the plush sofa and ran my hand over the fabric. Again, no one ever sat here but me. Emilio would never dare, but surrounding myself with luxury eased the emptiness inside me. Being the boss ensured I was rolling in money. I owned expensive cars, a large house, and a country estate—all of which were too much for one person—I ate in the finest restaurants and had food flown in from all over the world.

But in exchange, I forfeited holidays ‘cause I needed to keep constant tabs on the business and any rivals. My friends were from childhood, as I couldn’t trust a newcomer trying to barge into my tight circle, because my alpha father and grandfather died violent deaths.

My omega dad now lived a quiet life outside the city, rarely giving up the peace of the countryside to visit me in town. So, every Sunday I’d trek to his place, eating lunch with him, my great-uncle, and my two younger brothers.

And relationships? They didn’t figure into my life. A quick fuck? Sure. I’d pay someone and we’d meet in a motel, no names exchanged, and never the same person twice, but they were always well compensated.

Mating wasn’t an option unless I met the one fate placed in my path. That was unlikely, and I refused to mate just so my dad could call himself a grandfather. A mate would have to be in lockstep with my lifestyle; always working, rarely playing.

The phone beeped, but it was the club manager asking for a meeting. I put him off, saying I was busy.

I studied my leather shoes and wondered about the animal who gave its life so my feet could be comfortably clad in the soft supple material. The gun sheathed in the holster that never left my side pressed against me, reminding me of my responsibility.

Sensing movement outside the door, I got up and stood in front of the desk, arms clasped behind me. But in the seconds before the door opened, my nose detected a unique scent, unfamiliar to me.

My wolf raised his hackles and bared his teeth, a snarl on his lips.

Stay where you are, I commanded, wanting to keep my skin. While my wolf preferred killing prey, he would protect me by ripping through my skin. Humans would faint or possibly their heart would stop on sighting my beast, whereas another shifter would pause, understanding the power behind freeing my wolf indoors.

The scent wasn't from a shifter, and no human was my equal; an alpha wolf shifter, one who headed a huge conglomerate mafia clan and was also the pack Alpha.

I gripped the edge of the desk to steady myself, the scent creeping under the door so intoxicating it stung my eyes, and I rubbed them, wanting to see clearly as the door opened. Goosebumps crawled over my skin, a sign of both anticipation and dread. It wasn't often I was anxious when in human form or wolf.

I liked to think confidence oozed from my pores and that my narrowed gaze would make a mere mortal quake in his boots. But my body swayed as the scent permeated the room, my thoughts tangled, bringing with them an element of fear. I didn't like being caught off guard, and I undid my jacket, my hand grasping my gun, giving me comfort.

The scent put me off balance, and for a moment, I forgot the camera outside the door. I eyed Emilio struggling with a guy in the club's gray uniform before the muted

knock at the door.

I unlocked the door with another app and dropped the phone on the couch. My senses heightened as I anticipated the person Emilio was bringing.

“Come.”

The door swung open, a cacophony of sounds from downstairs preceding the two men, one holding a gun, the other in front of him, walking unsteadily as Emilio flung him onto the floor.

The scent assaulted my nose and hugged my skin, like soft kisses.

Do you know who he is?my wolf asked.

Not his name or his crime, but I know what he is.

## Page 3

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

“You’ve just made the worst mistake of your life, kid.”

Sheesh! I froze, and my life flashed before me as I imagined my less-than-pretty fate. If only I’d waited until later or another day or... but I messed up by being too eager to find out the boss’s secrets.

“Snooping around is frowned upon here.” Emilio shoved me against a wall, my cheeks flattened on the cold brick, probably with indentations from the mortar. He twisted one arm behind my back, and I winced, my teeth splitting my lower lip and the metallic taste of blood flooding my mouth. “The boss will want to see you.”

He shoved me along the dark corridor at the back of the club, the loud music from the dance floor muffled by the thick walls.

To avoid considering the fate that awaited me and in an effort to stop my body trembling, I allowed my mind to drift, but Emilio smacked me over the ear, pain shooting through me before he hit my nose with his elbow. Blood spurted onto my uniform as a crunch was followed by agonizing pain and my body sagged, but he yanked me to my feet.

He sniffed. “This is nothing compared to what the boss is going to do to you.” He grinned as though he was enjoying the image.

Pain ricocheted around my head, and I wished it would shoot out the other side. But the word “shoot” had my knees trembling and spiky-headed goosebumps frog-marching over my skin.

“Why’d you do it, kid?” Emilio grabbed my chin and twisted my head one way and the other, maybe admiring his handiwork as more blood dribbled over my jaw and onto my chest. “I heard you were a hard worker. You coulda had a great future here. Risen up the ranks.” His warm breath, laced with the bitterness of coffee, roiled my belly.

There was nothing that would get me out of this, including falling to my knees and begging for my life. Was that what this was? A death march? I’d survive a missing finger, even an ear, but not a bullet to the heart. Emilio was packing a weapon, as did the unobtrusive security guards, dressed in suits that probably cost more than my salary, whose gaze swept over the crowds each night.

The patrons who sat in the private section of the club or who disappeared into the VIP rooms carried guns, along with their bodyguards, burly men who stood in the shadows, saying nothing, their eyes scanning the crowd.

Sorry, Dad and Derek. Guilt overwhelmed fear as I contemplated the grief my dad and stepdad would experience when they identified my body, or parts of it, in the morgue. Unless my remains were fed to the fish and they’d never know what happened to me.

I tried to get my thoughts in order. What did police look for when trying to identify a killer? DNA under the victim’s fingernails. I had to scratch Emilio or the boss, which might result in me missing a few fingers.

Emilio made a phone call, the crackly voice on the other end indistinct, but Emilio was asking if the boss was in his office. Seemed we had to wait, as he hadn’t arrived.

I breathed through my mouth, convinced my nose was broken, and my companion checked his messages, grumbling about the trash not being collected. Would the garbage collectors find my body tomorrow? Maybe, and then the police would barge

into the club, demanding to know where everyone was last night. Unless they were on the boss's payroll and they'd enjoy a drink with him and bemoan how lousy their football team played last Sunday.

Emilio shoved me into an empty office and threatened me that if I yelled or tried to escape, he'd shoot. For one of the city's premiere nightclubs, it sure had a lot of shitty offices. The current owner was Flint Durand. He was the grandson of the man who'd built the original club, Florian Durand. Florian and his son had both met grisly deaths—at different times—according to what I'd read online.

But my research showed there wasn't a whiff of anything illegal around La Luna Noir, nor Flint himself, and his father and grandfather were never convicted of a crime. But before they were eliminated, people around them had disappeared over the decades. I shivered, wondering if many were buried six feet under.

Emilio interrupted my thoughts. "Tell me why you were in Arnie's office." I cringed at his dry, flaky lips so close to my face. Gross! There was lip balm in my locker if he'd let me get it.

"There was something wrong with the door, and it didn't lock. I was trying to fix it."

He snorted, and his nostrils flared. "By checking behind the picture?" His brows shot up. "Stop the lying, kid. It won't help."

I should have known someone would notice me slipping into Arnie's office. There were cameras in every section of the club. And worse, my sniffing around might have put Derek and my dad in danger. I'd never even hinted at my plan because they would have forbidden it. Thinking back, what had I hoped to achieve against a man who had money, power, and a team of lackeys to do his bidding?

Emilio's phone buzzed, and he sent a text. Was he posting on social media, Going in



for the kill, before dragging me up the circular stairs to the boss's office? I sent a "Help me" look to the security guy, but he ignored it. Having been told the boss rarely came into the club itself, preferring to work upstairs from his private domain, I wondered what a mob boss considered "work." Perhaps ending a nosy employee's life might count, and he could tick that off his to-do list and call it a day.

I banged my leg on the stairs, but what was a bruised knee when I might be missing a kneecap by the end of the night?

My underarms leaked sweat, the pungent aroma a reminder I'd fucked up, and my heart was hammering so hard my ribs ached as we reached the top of the stairs. He knocked on the door, and it opened.

"Come."

Despite my fear and the urgent need to pee, my body reacted to the voice. It reminded me of caramel sauce swirling through the air when poured on vanilla ice cream, the tawny brown a contrast to the stark white slipping and sliding into the bowl.

Emilio shoved me inside, the thick carpet cushioning my feet despite the threadbare soles of my shoes, and I almost toppled over. The dark room was anything but inviting, the shadows on the walls a reminder that this room held secrets. But I smelled money, just like in the club itself, but the air in here was rarified, as if few entered the space. Lucky me!

"Found him looking through Arnie's computer, boss." Emilio kicked me in the ass, and just before I fell on my face, I caught sight of a tall man with dark hair and a tattoo on his wrist. The carpet threads tickled my nose and it twitched. I didn't have the energy to get up, and if my last moments were right here, there was no point struggling to stand.

But there was a fragrance in the room, and despite my broken body and whatever fate awaited me, I reacted to it, or parts of me did.

“Get out!” The harsh voice echoed and bounced around the room.

But I’d come here to die, and he was telling me to leave? Did he have a prior appointment or were there other rule-breakers in front of me? Maybe I was supposed to take a number and await my turn.

“Boss?” Emilio knew as much as I did.

“Leave us, Emilio.”

“Yes, boss.”

I closed my eyes, awaiting a kick in the ribs or worse. But a whispered word reached me before the pain in my body, combined with the tension, shut my eyes.

“Mate!”

Huh? Now he wanted to be friends? I raised my head, one eye swollen shut, the other blinking rapidly. He towered over me, a finger resting on his lips. The snake tattoo was now visible as it curled around his wrist. I gulped, hoping he wasn’t going to put me out of my misery by introducing me to his pet python or rattlesnake.

“I don’t tolerate snooping.” Despite my looming death, his voice billowed over me, similar to a warm breeze.

“Sorry, boss.” There was nothing else I could offer.

“I’m curious.” He stood in front of me, and I inspected his shoes. Not a scratch on

them. “What were you looking for?”

I had to come up with a story pronto. “I thought the other bartenders got paid more than me, and I was looking for a salary spreadsheet.” In my dazed state resulting from my injuries and what I guessed was the boss’s enticing cologne, it sounded like a reasonable excuse.

“I can’t let you get away with that. ”

Before I took my last breath, I should ask if his father or grandfather had murdered my biological alpha father. That was why I’d taken this job. What did I have to lose?

“You have to be punished!”

## Page 4

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

His scent was clogging my nostrils, and my wolf was ignoring my orders to stand down.

Do not take your fur. But my nails on one hand elongated until they were no longer fingernails but my beast's claws. Thank gods the guy was on the floor and couldn't see, so I shoved that hand in my pocket.

I had to get out of here before his scent made me do something stupid.

Mating?

No! I knew the rules. They'd been forged by my grandfather, a man with a craggy face, his rules as rough and rigid as his expression.

What about the human? my wolf asked.

He'll come with me. Leaving him here for Emilio to handle would not end well for the guy. But being surrounded by that tantalizing scent would push me close to the edge.

When I grabbed the phone from the sofa, I fumbled it, the sweat on my palms sliding over the metal. I texted my security detail, Take the rest of the night off. Being close to my mate clouded my judgment, but I'd take my chances that nobody would "off" me on the way home.

There were a few seconds between my message and their replies. Thanks, boss.

I'd made their night. Unlike Emilio who was probably pacing his office, wondering what had gotten into me and what he'd done to anger me. Sure, I'd snapped at him on occasion, but nothing like the searing force of my roar telling him to leave. In our business, pissing off the boss didn't result in a loss of pay, doing overtime, or getting fired, but rather losing an ear, finger, or their life.

Like me, Emilio was a wolf shifter and finding a mate should be a celebration, especially for the pack Alpha. An Alpha Omega would play a significant role in not only the pack but also the pack business, of which the club was a stellar performer.

But I was faced with two choices. The first was loyalty to my pack. That was paramount. Or second, leave everything my family had worked for to be with my one and only, my mate. Added to that, I'd be thrown out of the pack, a loner with no one to protect me. Not a predicament I'd wish on my worst enemy. And I had a few.

Deep down I knew my dad, my brothers who worked with me and my great-uncle would follow if I chose option 2. Knowing they loved me and had my back had given me confidence growing up and in the early days as Alpha when mafia pack wars raged.

"Don't move."

This man, my mate, a club employee, had trespassed. But he did it on whose orders? Because he wasn't a shifter, that ruled him out as being from a rival pack, though it wasn't unheard of for other Alphas to hire unsuspecting humans to spy on their competitors.

Or he was from law enforcement. My grandfather and father would have returned him to his bosses in pieces, no matter that their hearts were breaking. They put the pack and the business before everything else, and up until now, so did I.

“I’ll shoot if you make a wrong move.”

“How do I know the difference between a right and a wrong move?” He peered up at me, and I removed the gun from the holster.

What the fuck? He was mouthy, and if he’d been anyone else, I’d have shut him up permanently. But my wolf was amused and was enjoying our mate’s feistiness.

More like foolishness. But I had to admire him a little. No one spoke to me like that. It would have been refreshing except he’d broken the rules.

“Shut your mouth.” The inner turmoil, twisting my belly in knots, added a hardness to my voice, along with confusion as to what I was supposed to do with him.

Getting the guy down the stairs and into the car posed a problem. If he bellowed that I’d taken him prisoner, there might be a mass exodus from the club. While we didn’t let just anyone into La Luna Noir, patrons weren’t all shifters. I foresaw many frantic calls to 911, resulting in the police turning up.

I had many of the local police on my payroll, but there might be a good samaritan in uniform who’d sniff around. That would lead to questions and eyes on our business. While I could offer more bribes and favors, it was a hassle I’d rather avoid.

I smoothed my wool-and-cashmere suit, enjoying the soft fabric beneath my palm, and replaced the gun in the holster.

“If you try to escape or yell for help, I’ll shoot you.”

“Doubt it,” he jeered. “It’d draw too much attention.”

My stomach clenched, and I made a fist. Connecting it to his jaw might shut him up,

but I resisted. I'd never put up with anyone giving me lip, even my brothers when we were kids. But this guy? This human, who the universe told me was my mate? I'd earned respect as the Alpha, and this outsider threw it back in my face.

"Fine. I'll finish you off right here, right fucking now!" I was shrieking, and my hand shook. This guy showed nothing but contempt.

"Don't, please!" He raised both hands. "I'll do as you ask."

My heart rate slowed. Why did this guy have to stumble into my life? I was fine before he arrived. Better than fine.

"Get up." I dragged him to his feet, noting he didn't weigh much, and I studied the bruises on his cheeks, the split lip, and bloody nose. His uniform was smattered with blood. Emilio knew better than to leave a mark.

Rather than leave with a gun to his back, I'd pretend we were old buddies. A guffaw, an elbow to the ribs, a "Remember when we were kids and..." had a better chance of not getting attention than me kidnapping him.

"You're my new best friend." I lifted my jacket, allowing him to see the gun in the holster. "One wrong move."

"I still?—"

Gods, I'd fallen into that trap. My wolf moved to the forefront of my gaze, and I stared at the guy, my mate, whose name was... I yanked him around to face me and read his tag. Tony.

His eyes widened, but he puffed out his chest before my beast fell back. I had to admire his courage. Maybe this human would surprise me, but it was for nothing.

There were rules for a reason. He'd broken one deliberately and the other just by being human.

Hauling him into my private bathroom, I shoved his head under the faucet and ignored his groans as I threw water on his face. When I yanked him up, we both stared into the mirror, and I compared my broad shoulders and chest to his small frame. But I avoided his gaze when I took a coat from the closet and made him put it on, though it didn't escape my notice that he sniffed at the fabric. If he snarked that it stank of wet dog, I'd lose it.

I slung an arm over his shoulder, and we strolled out. Or I did. He was limping.

"Why didn't you tell me you needed a job, you devil." I slapped his chest. The security guy stood to the side. "You and Emilio really fucked with my head tonight, pretending you were in trouble. Same old Tony. Always a practical joker."

I tightened my grip around his neck as we made our way along the corridor and out the private entrance to my car with darkened windows.

"I'm not getting in the trunk."

I had no intention of putting him in there because I wanted to have my eyes on him. Not only because he might try and draw attention to himself—he'd probably seen the same programs I had as a kid where anyone kidnapped and put in a trunk should cut the wires to the taillights. Instead, I shoved him in the front seat and got a pair of handcuffs from the glove compartment.

His brow shot up, illuminated by the dim light from inside the car, accompanied by a smirk. "It's like that, is it?"

I tried to process what he was saying, and then it hit me. He was insinuating I enjoyed



kink with my sex. My nostrils flared, and my wolf tempered my anger by repeating, He's our mate.

But we can't mate him. It's not allowed.

Tony clamped his mouth shut and held out his hands. I attached the handcuffs to his wrists, while noting the soft skin on his inner arm. With anyone else, on another day, another time, I'd have shoved him in the car and fucked him.

But while my wolf clamored to claim him, the Alpha in me, the boss who'd sworn in blood that anyone who defied me would suffer, was fighting against my beast, my heart, and the pack rules.

After attaching the handcuffs to the armrest, I slammed the door and got in the driver's seat. I preferred to drive myself rather than hiring a driver. More dangerous than if I was sitting in the back seat? Didn't really matter. Perhaps I was tempting fate. Grandpa and Papa were both murdered in their cars.

The alley was quiet, as it usually was late at night. I glanced at one of the security cameras, knowing Emilio was either looking at me, or if not, would have the CCTV officer rewind the tape in a few minutes.

He'd wonder why I was taking the kid away when he could have handled it, and I'd have to figure that out. Tomorrow. A quick glance at my companion and I reversed out and roared along the narrow space and onto the street.

We didn't speak during the journey. His scent was taunting me, and luckily it was late and there were few cars on the road. I gripped the steering wheel, wishing I could do what? Turn back time? Tell Emilio to rough him up before tossing him out?

"Who you working for?" I turned off the highway and headed for my country estate.

He snorted, and I slammed a hand on the wheel. What was with this guy? He was mocking me.

“You! I work for you!”

Taking a deep breath, I stared straight ahead, the car’s headlights picking out tall red oak trees and deer feeding in the undergrowth. On any other day or night, my beast would have been urging me to stop and let him hunt. He was close to the surface, just under my skin, and his squirming rippled over my body as he banged against my skeleton.

“You pretend to work for me. Who told you to sneak into Arnie’s office?” I flicked on the turn signal even though we were the only car on the road. My grandpa had instilled in me to always obey the road rules so cops had no reason to pull me over.

“Nope. I’m a student, doing a Master’s Degree, and I needed a job. I have student loans.” He tugged at the cuffs and winced. He’d probably rubbed off the skin. Served him right for being mouthy. But I pictured myself bathing his hands in warm water and patting them dry before applying ointment to soothe his wounds.

He twisted his body toward me. “I have a question for you. Do you know the name Antonio Oakes?”

## Page 5

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

“Is that you?”

“No.”

The boss was taking me somewhere outside the city to dispose of me, yet another emotion mingled with the fear, and I felt strangely alive in his presence. Considering I was about to be dead and mangled, maybe it was me having one last hurrah.

My body tingled, something it did when I was anticipating something positive. Being knocked off by a mobster didn't fit that category. And sitting in the confined space with that scent, it was overwhelming, like nothing I'd encountered previously. I wanted to sniff him as I did to his coat.

I tugged on the cuffs a few times, and my wrists were red and sore. They must be too small, he should have bought a bigger size. I pondered why he had a pair of cuffs in the car, but maybe it was what every mobster needed? In his office, kitchen, the nightstand?

I could see the TV ad now. “Never be without your handcuffs! Wherever you are, they'll be there too. Your perfect companion!”

Some people got dizzy with expectation or desire. I was blocking out what was to come, and I was damned giddy, a giggle on my lips. I'd crash and burn soon enough after the adrenaline spiked and fell.

How had I gotten to this moment, being taken into the woods by a mob boss, or the mob boss if the rumors were true.

It had started out with me wanting to discover more about my birth dad. Other than the name Antonio—legally, mine was also Antonio, but I’d always been called Tony—I had nothing of his, because when my omega father married again, his new husband adopted me. Not that I was complaining.

Derek was a nice guy and a faithful husband, but I was kind of an afterthought. They loved me, but they preferred their life when I wasn’t around. The not-so-subtle sighs when I needed help with homework, the “Oh, someone has to take you to the dentist,” and “Can’t you play with your friends? We’re tired,” alerted me I was a burden. The best memories from my childhood were when we had a dance-off.

And while I always knew Derek wasn’t my birth dad, I’d been content with the tidbits Evan, my omega father, gave me about Antonio, plus the one photo of him in my bedroom.

“Who is it?”

His question brought me back to the present. I hadn’t planned for this, but I may as well blurt it out. “My father.” I clarified, “Birth father.”

He turned onto a small road, and I tensed, my calm mood evaporating. We’d traveled from city street to highway to rural road to private, according to the “Trespassers will be prosecuted” signs. The road narrowed like my options.

I could have flung myself down the stairs at the club, or wrested my arm out of his grip in the alley. Taken my luck that he was a lousy shot in the dark and run for my life—literally. Why didn’t I?

He didn’t respond, and I stared out the window as the trees grew closer together. I’d never liked being in the woods. Bad things happened to kids who wandered in the forest, or so I’d read.

How sad that Antonio and I, though I had no memories of him, should have followed the same path. It was eerie thinking maybe this was where his life ended, particularly if it was where the Durand family buried their problems.

“Why would I know him?” He slowed the car as it approached large metal gates, set in the middle of a huge fence, cameras atop each pillar.

I bit the inside of my lip, the pain reminding me I was on borrowed time. I’d survived this far, though with each mile, I’d expected him to stop and shoot me.

“Your family might have killed him.”

He slammed on the brakes, and his head swiveled toward me. He hissed, a sound so primeval it conjured up images of an animal, its back arched, ready to attack.

“Tread carefully, Tony.”

I couldn’t bring myself to use his name, though I knew it. Even boss seemed too personal now. For the moment, the man at my side was just “he.”

“You were caught spying. Now you’re accusing my loved ones of murder.” His fingers gripped the steering wheel, the gold signet ring shimmering in the moonlight, but they weren’t on the gun, so I hadn’t run out the clock just yet.

He tapped an app and the gates opened. I squinted ahead at the road lined by tall trees, lights at the base of each one and in the branches. He drove through the gates, but I yelped at a flickering movement to my right.

He shot me a glance. “Security.”

I hated that I’d shown how spooked I was. Up until now, I’d kept a mask over most

of my emotions, replacing terror with sass. I concentrated on why he'd brought me to a private estate, his presumably. Would I be facing the mafia council? It was a little over the top for a snooping offense, though I was pleased to have lived a few extra hours.

He drove up the long driveway, motion sensor lighting flicking on as we passed. With each flicker, it was like a spotlight on a stage, and we were the main attraction. Or was that just him and I was the sidekick? I peered out the window, picking out more security guards who almost blended into the undergrowth. Would they melt back into the bushes, similar to a wild animal, after we passed?

My thoughts were zigging and zagging as I attempted to think of anything but what lay waiting, so I kept my gaze straight ahead as we left the wooded area which was replaced by manicured lawns. A huge expanse of lush greenery ringed by the forest. The lawns were kept in place by trimmed hedges and bushes shaped like animals.

Now the building itself caught my attention, and I gazed at it, blazing with lights. It wasn't a modern house, its exterior of gray stone giving it a stern look. The first, second, and third floors were dotted with huge windows, each lit up as though they were staring at us.

There were other smaller buildings fifty yards away, their lights dim, as he circled the house and tapped his phone. A four-car garage door flipped up, the headlights picking out three other cars, before he drove in and the building swallowed the car, the small clunk when it closed a contrast to my hammering heart.

While there'd been no escape route since I was cuffed, now I was a prisoner in a mansion or whatever mobsters called their pad. Freaking big house maybe.

He got out and came around to my side. He could have let me starve and wither in the car, but that would be messy. I couldn't fathom why I was here but guessed I'd find

out once we were inside.

He unhooked me from the armrest but recuffed me and led me into the house, after unlocking a door with his thumbprint. I surveyed the room, searching for an escape, knowing there probably wasn't one.

The interior wasn't what I expected. I assumed mafia chic was fake french furniture, gold-plated everything, carpet so thick it reached my ankles, gaudy chandeliers hanging from every textured ceiling, and a mess of twirly crown molding.

Instead, the floor was a honey-colored wood, the furniture comfortable and understated, and the walls lined with quirky modern artwork. But this was one room. There were plenty of others where gaudy design might lurk.

Without thinking, I kicked off my shoes. It was something we did at home, and I'd continued during my college years. It was weird how my body performed actions automatically, even though my brain was in survival mode.

"You're wearing hospital socks." He stared at my feet, a playful grin on his face. But I wasn't taken in. This was a trick to get me to forget about why I was here, and then, when I least expected it, I'd get what was coming to me.

"Yeah. They're comfortable." The non-slippery grippy things made for a more pleasant experience when working. "Bartenders are on their feet for hours each night." I lowered my voice. "Something you wouldn't know in your mezzanine palace."

One brow shot up, like a right angle. He couldn't have heard me. Maybe he could read lips. Damn, I needed to stop running my mouth. But this guy, my now former boss, was a combination of steel and... and... softness. No, there was nothing vulnerable about him. Fear had warped my brain.

“Why am I here?” I’d gotten no response to the question about my father.

“This is where you’ll stay.” He ignored me and jerked his head at a door.

Stay? Gods, he was doing concrete work in the basement and I’d be buried under layers of lime and other stuff. That was why he brought me here. This house would never be sold, and no hiker or hunter would ever stumble across my body.

He unlocked it with another code. I strained my neck to see, but he was too savvy and covered it with his other hand.

The metal door opened, and I studied the thickness of the steel. It would muffle any screams or calls for help. This was no basement with a wine cellar, a pool table, or a second-hand sofa, its fabric frayed where a bunch of kids played video games or watched Sunday-night football. Nothing other than a bulldozer was getting through that door without the combination.

The steps led into a pool of darkness, and I bit the side of my mouth, trying and failing to tamp down the anxiety that threatened to overwhelm me.

I glanced in his direction. “I hate creepy crawlies.”

A smile tugged at the corner of his mouth. Ass! He was enjoying my discomfort, and I turned away, berating myself for almost feeling something for the guy.

He shrugged. “And I’m not a fan of licorice!” He screwed up his face.

“What?” My screech bounded down the stairs and bounced back at me, and I swiveled to face him. “I don’t give a damn. What’s that got to do with me?” The rage that I’d bottled inside me exploded.



His hand moved to the holster with lightning speed before I'd finished yelling, and his face fell, but he quickly recovered and maintained a more neutral expression. He crossed his hands in front of his crotch, giving me the perfect view of the tattoo.

What was that saying about not being fooled by a snake?

## Page 6

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

Tony stood at the top of the stairs, fear in his eyes. Since we met, he'd been sassy and shouty, curious and contrary, and any hint of fear had been replaced with spunk. But staring into the basement, his body trembled. Did he think I was going to off him here? It wasn't beyond the realm of possibility, but no, it was a place to keep him until I'd thought this through.

And when I'd tried to connect with him on a human level, sharing something personal about myself, he'd misunderstood. But that wasn't fair. I'd misjudged what he was saying. I'd assumed we were doing the "sharing is caring" thing humans were fond of repeating.

You really messed up. My wolf sighed.

Until I met Tony, my beast and my dad were the only ones who called me out on my shit these days. But I refused to admit how crushed I was when Tony shouted at me. Also, anyone who yelled at me, other than my dad and brothers, never did it again. Except this guy.

But I was humiliated, and as much as I wanted to inhale his scent, I needed space from him, and the aroma of his shampoo, body wash, and deodorant, while in the background, nestled his natural scent, the one my body craved. He represented chaos, and my life was about rules and order.

"Lights on." Tony's body jolted as I barked out the order. The system responded to my voice, but only mine, and the stairs lit up.

The basement was a fully functioning apartment, a place I often spent the night,

though my personal items were in the main part of my home. I had the whole house at my disposal, but wandering around those rooms, empty of life, illuminated how lonely my life was. I was always surrounded by business associates, friends, or family, and yet at the end of the day, it was just me, staring in the mirror.

Thanks to the door and thickness of the walls, no wifi or phone signal could penetrate the basement. I did have an illegal wifi jammer but hardly used it, except when conducting important meetings. That was rare, as this was my private domain and I hated it being invaded by outsiders.

“Warn me next time.” He gave a good impression of a snarl before stumbling down the stairs.

Not bad. My wolf was impressed with his wild-animal imitation.

I checked the fridge was fully stocked. But I needed his phone, just in case he was a tech wizard and managed to send a message.

“It’s in my locker at the club,” he replied when I asked him to hand it over.

But I couldn’t take the chance he wasn’t telling the truth.

“I have to frisk you.”

He narrowed his eyes. “You’re going to put your hands all over me?”

This guy. He had the ability to get under my skin, and I hated it.

You don’t hate it. Sometimes I wished I could mute my wolf.

Of course I do. I’m the La Luna Noir boss, the pack Alpha, the most powerful mafia

shifter pack in the entire state, maybe the country.

You're not being honest. My beast closed his eyes and pretended to sleep.

Perhaps I wasn't, but my judgment was fuzzy when I was close to Tony.

"Spread your legs." I'd wanted to say those words from the moment we met, with both of us naked, his slick-covered ass pushed up waiting for me to plow in.

Despite the work I did, I had a moral compass. I wouldn't fuck him if I didn't have his permission, and...there were so many obstacles, I almost wished I'd told Emilio to deal with him.

You don't mean that! My wolf was aghast, his hackles rising.

Tony was still cuffed, so I had him raise his arms in front and patted along them. Next I went down his sides, and he winced. I said, "Sorry," without thinking and checked he had nothing hidden around his belt. Then the legs. I started on the left, but as I ran my fingers over his upper thigh, I encountered a bulge. He had hidden something before Emilio caught him.

I glanced up. "You're packing."

His lips curled as if he was stifling laughter. "That's a strange way of describing it." He shrugged. "I was always told I was big."

I froze, my hands still pressing into him, unable to move, my fingers clawed like from arthritis. "This is?—"

"Me. It's all me." Now he grinned, a huge smile from ear to ear.

He'd outmaneuvered me. Me, the guy with a weapon, a lethal one that would result in a through and through.

"Did you find what you were looking for?"

"Enough!" I yelled, my voice echoing around the windowless basement, and he reacted as if I had shot him. He shrank away, his jaw clenched. I arranged my features and glowered at him, but what I desired was to hold him in my arms, pepper kisses over his face, tend to his wounds, and beg for his forgiveness, while telling him he was my mate, the love of my life.

And even if he did fall for me after I'd kidnapped him and he lost his entire life, how could he love me when I wasn't human and he didn't know my kind existed? And there was the little matter of him snooping at La Luna Noir, not to mention he thought my family killed his father. And my line of work probably didn't align with his values. Fuck!

"There's plenty of food." I waved my hand toward a bowl of fruit. "And ummm, bananas."

"Bananas are my favorite." He sauntered to the table, licking around his mouth. "A good banana fits perfectly in your hand as you strip the peel off." He picked up one and peeled it. "And you wrap your fingers around it before taking a bite." He snapped his mouth closed, lopping off the top of the banana.

There was something seriously wrong with Tony. He was acting like he didn't give a shit what happened to him. I was annoyed that he'd put me at a disadvantage, and despite his scent clogging my nostrils and making me dizzy, I wanted to get out of the basement.

"What are your plans? For me? Why are you feeding me and giving me a place to

stay? Are you fattening me up?” He was much smaller than me, though perfectly well proportioned, except for the bit I’d felt up. That was huge. “Like in the fairy tales. The wicked witch liked to fatten children before... you know.”

I teetered between being furious he thought I wanted to eat him and him comparing me to a wicked witch, though I’d eat his ass in a heartbeat.

I hadn’t decided what to do with him, but I wasn’t telling Tony I was wavering. My signature move was gathering information and making a quick decision. No flip-flopping, no umming and ahing.

I pointed to the bedroom and bathroom. “There are clothes in the closet, and the lights in each room are controlled by a switch.” I turned on my heel and put one foot on the stairs. If I didn’t leave, I’d grab him, stick my tongue down his throat, before asking if he wanted another pat-down.

“Haven’t you forgotten something?”

I paused, wondering if he could read my mind.

“Like what?” I didn’t turn around. “Oh, the first-aid kit.” I grabbed it and ice packs from the fridge. I went to put a pack over his lip, but he reared away, snarling that he could do it himself. “What then?”

“Cuffs, or am I supposed to go about my day with them on?”

I dug in my coat pocket for the keys and grabbed the cuffs, deliberately not looking at him, though his prominent bulge was hard to ignore. My hands shook. That was what he did to me. I hated that I couldn’t control myself around him.

“Is there a problem?”

“Yes,” I raged. “I have an employee who broke the rules but who doesn’t seem to understand the seriousness of the situation. He’s more snark and sass than... than...”

“Groveling and fawning? F that.”

I straightened my spine and drew myself up to my full height which was a head taller than him. “It’s called respect. I’m your boss, the person who clawed their way up to that position.”

“Garbage.” He spat out the word like he was trying to get rid of something disgusting. “You got handed the job because of your alpha father and grandfather. And I’m pretty sure it’s former boss.”

He was partly right. I had been destined to take the role of Alpha, but my father made me work for it. I’d washed dishes, cleaned toilets, and tended bar on my way to the top. Sadly, that training was cut short. Papa was murdered, and I was Alpha in my early 20s.

“You know nothing about me.” I put my hand inside my jacket, feeling for my gun.

“I know enough. I did my research before getting the job at La Luna Noir.” He was treading into dangerous territory. “But you can do one thing before deciding if I live or die.”

It was late, my head hurt. I needed to eat and sleep, and tomorrow I’d figure out the mess I was in, how deep it was, and if I could crawl out and still be the same person.

He pulled out a wrinkled photo from his pocket. “Please find out who killed my father.”

## Page 7

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

The door slammed and the stairs shuddered. Not great construction considering he was in the business. Tut-tut.

He was gone, and the basement was empty without him. But that should've been a good thing. Him being with me was when he might exact his punishment.

Apart from a dripping tap in the kitchen, the basement was as silent as... well, a grave.

I rubbed my wrists and got water from the dispenser on the fridge. After gulping one glass and another, I limped around the space holding an ice pack to my face. Being kidnapped was thirsty work. Putting up a snarky facade was hard, and the adrenaline that coursed through my veins decreased, leaving me limp with exhaustion.

Flopping onto the couch, I closed my eyes. Not that I could sleep. The pain from my lip had eased, but my nose and leg were sore, and my mind was racing. I hauled myself up and inspected the rooms, feeling along the walls for any irregularity like people did in the movies. Not that I expected to find a secret door or a mislaid tablet or phone, but I had to do something. The synapses in my brain were still firing.

My desire to avenge my father's death had overridden all else, including following sensible precautions. Dad always said I acted first and asked for forgiveness later. I doubted the owner of the house was in the business of forgiveness.

My thoughts sidestepped to the more mundane part of my life, the one that didn't include taunting a mobster while a whiff of desire held me in its grip. My tummy grumbled, and I surveyed the selection of food in the fridge, including salad, lasagna,



fried noodles, tuna salad, and crispy chicken. I grabbed one dish, but when it was twirling around the microwave, I couldn't recall what I'd chosen.

Taking a bite, I savored the fried noodles, but after the first mouthful, my taste buds went on strike. Maybe they were as exhausted as me. After shoveling in the rest of the food, I tossed the dishes in the sink. Tomorrow might be my last sunrise, so I wasn't going to waste whatever time I had left washing dishes.

A quick shower was next on the list. The bathroom was well stocked with toiletries, and I floated out on a cloud of jasmine and coconut. But when I selected PJs from a drawer, I paused. Was the last person to wear these dead? Dropping them on the floor and stepping over them, I climbed into bed naked.

There was nothing stopping him from coming down here while I was sleeping. I could do the chair-under-the-door trick. Did that work? It would give me a few seconds' warning so I could defend myself with a pillow? Or a lamp?

Closing my eyes, I allowed my thoughts to wander.

In college, I donated blood and discovered I had a rare blood type. That set me on a path to discover more about my birth father. The more I researched, the more intrigued I was. Dad was evasive when I asked what the guy did for work, saying, "Many different things. He'd get bored and move on to something else."

When I questioned how he died, Dad told me it was an unfortunate accident at work. Something about a machine malfunctioning. I sensed he was uncomfortable talking about it when he'd avoid my gaze and talk in short, sharp, clipped sentences. I let it go and never spoke to him about his first husband, my alpha birth father, again.

Instead, I set off on my other research journey, sitting in libraries studying old newspaper articles, checking family histories, and traipsing along a street where my

father had lived as a child and a desolate space where factories once stood, a place my father had worked after leaving school at fifteen.

It had been a single mention in an old newspaper article of him working for a waste management company owned by Florian Durand that sent me on the path to applying for a job at La Luna Noir, now run by his grandson.

But my eyes grew heavy, and when I opened them, the room looked the same. With no direct sunlight, it could have been mid day or early hours of the morning.

He'd taken my watch, in case it connected to the internet. It didn't. It was a cheap one, but there was a clock on the microwave, and I tiptoed into the kitchen. I snorted, my shoulders shaking with laughter as to why I was creeping around. I could scream until I was hoarse and no one would hear me.

It was seven. Morning or evening? I blinked and studied the digital numbers again. It was a twenty-four-hour clock, so unless someone had deliberately set it to the wrong time to confuse any basement occupant, it was morning.

The club didn't open until evening, so he spent his days elsewhere. His business acumen was legendary in the city, his fingers in many pies, including the antique business, real estate, casinos, waste management, and construction. He might have left for the city already.

The bathroom door was open, and I studied the towel I'd dumped on the floor. Last night's dirty dishes were where I'd left them. Did the basement come with a housekeeper? Unlikely. Dad had taught me to pick up after myself. "I'm your father, not your maid," he used to tell me.

I sighed. If this was my last day on earth, I'd prefer to be lounging by a pool, eating caviar and drinking champagne, not rinsing dishes. But I stood at the sink, getting rid

of dried noodles stuck at the bottom of the bowl I'd used and washing the cutlery and glass.

But as I closed a cupboard, another louder sound reverberated around the basement. The door at the top of the stairs!

"Lights on." I didn't need a cartoon speech bubble to tell me the owner of the voice laced with honey.

The lights on the stairs didn't flicker.

"What the fuck?"

I pursed my lips, telling the giggle to stay where it was.

The honey in his voice vanished and was replaced with fiery-hot chili peppers.

"Lights on." Louder than the first time and fused with frustration.

The giggle escaped, and I stuffed the dish towel over my mouth. I was enjoying this, Mr. Oh So Freaking Perfect being thwarted by technology. But as my body shook with laughter, I glanced down. Damn, I was naked. I crouched down low and crawled toward the bathroom and the thick terry cloth robe folded on the vanity.

"Lights on," he thundered.

I stuck my head out of the bathroom. The main room was still lit up, as I'd left those lights on all night, but the stairs were in darkness. He strode halfway down the stairs, one perfectly suited leg after another. "Let me see you." He wasn't holding that gun he'd been stroking last night like it was his good luck charm.

Putting my hands in the robe pockets, I sauntered out. And damn, his cologne or maybe body wash hit me, reminding of a strong wind. It teased and taunted me, and I tried to ignore it. Didn't succeed, though.

"I'll be back late this evening."

I almost replied, "Yes, dear, and what would you like for dinner?" but didn't want to push my luck.

I dithered over whether to tell him I was supposed to deliver a presentation this afternoon. My professor would mark me absent, I'd fail the assignment, but no one would send out a search party. I lived in a house with four other guys, but we were never all at home at the same time.

But it might irk him if I mentioned it.

"I'm due in class after lunch. Attendance is mandatory." He wouldn't pick up that I was fibbing. Mobsters didn't go to college, did they? "They'll call me if I don't turn up and then contact my folks."

He twisted his lips as if he'd tasted something sour. "I'll deal with it."

"How?" I regretted mentioning my parents and wished I could stuff those words back in my mouth. What if he asked Emilio to silence them? "Don't hurt my family, please."

He studied me, those dark eyes that held so many secrets. "I'll get a doctor's certificate saying you broke your leg and you'll attend class remotely."

I noted his dark hair curling around his collar and pictured me flicking it back. My body betrayed me again, and I overheated. Sweat dribbled down my spine, and my

cock engorged.

For a second, I wished I had the power of a mob boss. He wanted something done and it was. Like the emperors and kings of old. But many of them met a nasty fate. Maybe being head of the mob had its downside.

“But I can’t.” I opened my arms. “No wifi, phone signal, or computer.” I was enjoying his eye twitching every time I tossed a problem at him.

“Fine.” He gritted his teeth. He’d need to see a dentist if he kept doing that. “You’ve been in a car accident and you’ll be in hospital for a couple of weeks.” He added he’d get whatever I needed from my professors and bring me class notes and assignments. Without access to a library, my files, and wifi, I couldn’t do much, but I was done talking.

He planned on keeping me here. But I didn’t come from a wealthy family, nor did I own anything of value. So why was I lingering, not dead and yet not living my life? Stuck in a basement, admittedly better than where I rented.

“You didn’t answer my question.”

“Wasn’t aware you asked one.” His testy tone and the shadows under his eyes suggested he didn’t get much sleep.

“Last night as you were leaving, I asked about my father.”

He snorted. “That wasn’t a question. You said please.” He had been paying attention. “I did some digging last night.”

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“And?” His brow quirked, his eyes alert.

“I have to go. I’ll fill you in tonight.”

What I didn’t say was that the man in the photo Tony showed me was familiar but not the name. I’d spent the night keeping Emilio and pack elders awake with my questions about Antonio, whose real name was Anthony, and I hoped La Luna Noir had nothing to do with his death.

I also didn’t let on that I’d stayed the night outside the door to the basement. I’d dragged couch cushions along with a blanket and a pillow onto the floor, hoping to hear him breathing or mumbling in his sleep. But the thick door thwarted even my shifter senses.

“That’s not fair. You can’t leave me wondering.” He grabbed my arm, and fuck, a current surged through my veins. We both fell back, my expression probably mirroring Tony’s one of confusion and awe.

Get it over with and mate him, my wolf sighed.

What I’d found out, and I didn’t have all the information yet, wasn’t something I could tell his son and run off.

Why not? My wolf was bored with the cat-and-mouse game.

“I don’t have the whole story.”

His eyes widened. “So you did have him killed.” He pummeled my chest, and I let him, his tiny fists smashing against me seemed like the punishment I deserved for not treating him like any other employee who’d fucked up. I longed to wrap my arms around him, letting him have his temper tantrum, before carrying him to bed and mating him.

My wolf said nothing. He’d never witnessed anyone treat me this way, not even my brothers when we were younger.

Grabbing his hands, I held them tight until he stilled, tears leaking from his eyes, sobs wracking his body. He sniffed, and I allowed him to pull out of my grasp.

“Why? My stepdad is a kind guy, but you took away the man who was a part of me, and you almost ruined my omega dad’s life and mine.”

“Sit.” My command left no room for refusal, and he slumped into an armchair, bringing both knees to his chin and wrapping his arms around them. I poured a glass of water and placed a box of tissues on the side table.

“Your father worked for my grandfather and father.”

“What?” Tony’s head shot up, and the water sloshed over his white robe. “I don’t believe you.”

“Emilio remembers him and so do some old-timers in my p... ummm, group.” I’d been going to say pack, but in the state Tony was in, he might not have noticed. I didn’t add that there was a photo of Anthony in my den, along with my dad, grandfather, and me as a young child. As soon as Tony showed me the pic, I recognized him.

“Why would I take your word?”

Ahhh, this human was so irritating I wanted to shake him until his teeth rattled.

“In my world, my word is law.”

“Oh yeah? Well, that’s not my world, and my father would never have worked for the mob extorting money from people.” He folded his arms and rested them on his knees.

“We don’t do that.” I waved my hand. “That is small-time stuff.”

I should have given up and left. Told Emilio where to find Tony and spent the rest of my life grieving for something that had been within arm’s reach but was untouchable.

“How old were you when he died?”

He shrugged. “A baby.”

“So you didn’t know him, but you’re convinced he wouldn’t have worked for my family.”

“My dad told me he was a good man.”

“My organization is full of good men.” There was a sliding scale of what “good” meant.

“Pfft. You siphon money from ordinary people who are too scared to speak up and import drugs that ruin lives.” He waved his hand in the air and sniffed.

We did none of that, but now wasn’t the time to lecture him on morals and our pack’s business, but I would leave him something to chew over. “Your father was part of the mafia, but I suspect he never told your omega dad.”



Tony lifted his head, his pale, tear-stained face staring at a spot on my chest.

“Why? Why would he work for you?”

I hadn’t expected to break a guy’s heart, gutting his dreams about his dead father. That wasn’t part of the plan, though since last night, the plan had been torn, shredded, and stamped on. There was no freaking plan, and I hated uncertainty.

“He was born into this life. His folks were part of La Luna Noir.”

“Huh? He worked at the club?” He plucked a tissue from the box and wiped his red-rimmed eyes.

Big mistake, my wolf piped up.

Shush!

The club existed back in the day but looked nothing like it did now. But I was talking about the pack, the one my grandfather created and named after he was thrown out of his birth pack. He’d disrespected the Alpha and was lucky to survive with a scar raking along one side of his body. But he’d never seen his parents again.

“Maybe. I’m not sure about that. But he wasn’t a stranger to the mafia. Both his fathers worked for my grandfather.”

Tony wiped a hand over his face, and my heart softened. I’d dealt him a severe blow. The father he never knew, who had been held up as an honest man, one who would have loved and provided for his family, was a member of the mafia. I didn’t see the contradiction. I was honest to a fault, at least from my perspective.

“I... I see.” He dabbed his eyes again.

“I’m sorry it wasn’t what you wanted to hear.”

He pressed his lips together before fiddling with a thread on the robe. “But that doesn’t answer how he died.”

“As I mentioned, I don’t have all the details.” I may never, but I’d sent word to Emilio to investigate. Our family had an aversion to keeping records, saving only what was necessary. I’d have to rely on people’s memory.

But I had to get to the office, the one in the gleaming office building in the city center that I’d had built, an ode to our pack’s success with me at the head.

“You have food for today. I’ll bring more this evening.”

I got up awkwardly. Leaving a guy you’d kidnapped when he’d learned bad news about his father screamed cruel. But focusing on work pushed the decision about his fate further away.

“Don’t leave me, please.”

I could stay a while. “Do you like coffee?”

He studied me from behind his long dark lashes dotted with teardrops. “Are you asking me on a date?”

And he had to go and ruin the moment with snark. “I was being kind.”

I flounced to the coffee maker and grabbed two mugs, not speaking, only fuming, until I had two steaming cups. Too bad if he wanted sugar, I was in no mood to act as a good host, though maybe sugar might have sweetened him up. I tried to imagine being mated to Tony. It’d be like living with a prickly pear.

I shoved the mug at him, and the seconds ticked by before he took it, mumbling a thank-you. He took a sip and made the ahhh sound people did when they got their first coffee in the morning. It was an “all’s right with the world” sigh, except nothing was right in Tony’s life, nor mine.

“Is it weird that you have a huge house, grounds, and probably a large-ass pool, but we’re sitting in the basement?”

I studied my manicured nails, not wanting to admit I slept down here most nights and ate breakfast and often dinner in the apartment.

“You’re wrong.” I drank a mouthful of coffee. “It’s only a medium-ass-sized pool.”

His eyes crinkled, and he put two fingers to his lips. He snorted, the coffee jiggling in the cup. “You’re funny.”

No one had ever called me that. I was the serious one, the responsible son who had taken over the pack before I was ready. I wasn’t funny. Ever!

“You didn’t think so last night.”

He stiffened. “Well, sorry for not laughing as I was kicked, slammed into a wall, thrown on the floor, and kidnapped.”

I gripped the cup. “When I mentioned licorice.”

“Huh?” He frowned and took another sip. “You inserted yourself when I was talking about being scared. Dark places. I thought you...” His voice trailed away, and his gaze dropped to his coffee.

“Sorry. I thought we were telling each other interesting things about ourselves.”

Saying it out loud sounded pretty silly. No wonder he was pissed.

He opened his mouth in a perfect O, and our eyes locked on one another. “Underneath that tough exterior, you’re a softie.”

Maybe. But I never showed it to anyone, and I convinced myself my hard-as-nails shell was the real me. Mostly it was.

“Not really.” I drained my cup and got up.

“You’re leaving?”

This human tugged at my heart, and his scent had my belly fluttering. While I didn’t want to work, I needed to clear my head and consider the immediate future. I couldn’t keep him locked up forever, but also, he couldn’t go back to his previous life. But the only punishment I wanted to give him was to bend him over my knee and smack his beautiful behind before I fucked him.

“Yeah.”

“Will you be sending Emilio here?”

“No.” Why would I do that? So he could bang up Tony more? That wasn’t happening.

“Please find out more about Antonio.”

He didn’t say “my father” or “my dad.” Maybe he was divorcing himself from the perfect memory of the man he never knew.

I may not be able to fill in the blanks and tell Tony how his father died. It may have

been a natural death. But for sure I couldn't say who he really was 'cause that would break our pack's code of silence.

How could I tell Tony his father was a shifter?

## Page 9

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

“What am I supposed to do?”

“Today? You have books, magazines, and TV.” He washed his coffee mug and placed it in the drainer. I liked that he was house-proud, or perhaps he needed to keep his hands busy.

“It doesn’t connect to wifi.” I shoved my legs out in front and crossed my ankles, wishing I could go to the gym or jog.

He side-eyed me. “You’re good at snooping.”

“Oh, really? Then how come I got caught?” I folded my arms, waiting for him to elaborate.

“Okay. You’re a shit snooper.”

“Thanks. Does that label come with a prize? Or a medal?” If we’d been an alpha and omega who’d met in a bar and struck up a conversation, I would have enjoyed our bantering.

He closed his eyes, and I could almost see him counting to ten before he opened them again. Perhaps my attitude and sass was too much and I was pushing him too far.

“Are you always like this?” He wiped his hands on the dish towel.

“Like what?” I genuinely wanted to know. It might be the last home truth before my life ended.

“Cocky. Your future’s uncertain and yet?—”

“Uncertain? You said uncertain.” I hung on that one word. “I thought it was guaranteed.”

He bit down on his lower lip, his eyes darting from left to right. I’d caught him out. He was having doubts about offing me. And that was a thumbs-up from me. But why? What had I done to deserve a reprieve?

“It’s just a word. It means nothing,” he spluttered.

“Sure means a lot to me. Last night my life hung in the balance, and now you’re dithering.”

“You are a smartass, but you’re wrong. And I do not dither.”

Oops. That word got him worked up and an image of him in bed, naked, popped into my head. I bet he didn’t dither between the sheets. I fanned myself with one hand, not that it had any effect.

“Okay, are you going to interrogate me? Pull out my nails one by agonizing one until I blurt out all my secrets?”

His nostrils flared and his scent sharpened. “I do not yank out anyone’s nails. That’s old-school.”

“You get Emilio or one of your other henchmen to do it for you.” I took a look at my nails. They were bitten to the quick, a contrast to his pampered ones.

He clenched his fists. I was getting under Mr. Tough Guy’s skin. Again.

“I’m honoring your request to find out what happened to your father.” He shoved one hand in his pocket but didn’t reach for his gun as he’d done countless times last night.

“I have another one.”

“That’s not how it works. One last request, not an ongoing list.”

My shoulders slumped. He said “last request.” That was pretty final. “I’d like to tell my dad how Antonio died.” While he’d never wanted to discuss it with me because it was too painful, it would answer a question he’d probably been asking himself all these years.

“No.” He folded his arms, almost as if he expected me to toss another question at him. And I was.

“Why not?”

He dragged a stool in front of the armchair and plonked his butt on it. “That part of your life is over, Tony. The person you were before you went into Arnie’s office no longer exists.”

My lips trembled, and there was a sinking feeling in my tummy. He didn’t put into words, “I can’t let you leave,” but he may as well have.

“Is being in this basement the mafia version of witness protection?” Except I had a life before this, and now it was much smaller, confined to these four walls.

“Not exactly.”

For a high-profile mobster, he had a hard time making decisions, at least about me.



“I do want to probe you—ummm, no, I mean...” He tripped over his words. “Probe what’s in that head of yours.”

If he wasn’t who he was, I’d pull my pants down and yell, “Probe me, please!” What was it about him that fascinated me? Not just his cologne that tormented me, surely, or how he constantly tugged at his ear. My body urged me to run toward him, when he represented everything I loathed.

“I’m an open book, though I can’t say the same about you. Or is that what they tell you in the mobster’s handbook.” I put a hand to my head in the manner of a fortune teller. “I can see it now. It says you have to be mysterious and opaque.”

He got up, sporting an exasperated expression.

“Don’t suppose you have a gym in this mansion of yours.”

“I’m not giving you the run of my house.”

“You could stay while I lift weights and run on the treadmill. But I warn you, I get a tad sweaty, and I grunt and curse a lot when I exercise.”

For a guy who might still kill me and who I should be putting as much distance as possible between us, there was something pulling me to him. Almost as if we were joined by an invisible thread and he was winding it up and reeling me closer.

His face kind of warped. Perhaps squirrely was the best word to describe it. Judging by his physique, he worked out, and he definitely had a gym in this monstrosity of a house. So why was he weirded out by the mention of sweat and grunting?

Something tweaked in my head, but I poo-pooed the idea. He was a gangster, a man who put his gun to people’s temples and pulled the trigger, leaving Emilio to clean up

the mess. But the notion popped back into my mind and wouldn't leave.

He wasn't weirded out, or not in the way I imagined. It was him picturing me in sweats or maybe just shorts, bare-chested, my body glistening with sweat while I puffed and panted. Was that why I was here? He wanted to do things with me or to me before he pulled the plug?

I got up and pushed past him, my body trembling, a million thoughts tumbling into my head. Tightening the tie at my waist, I wrapped my arms around my body.

"You're right. It's time for you to go. Wouldn't want you to lose money by being stuck in the basement with me. Or worse, miss an execution." I kept my tone even, but there was a brittle quality to my voice.

I sensed his hackles rising but refused to glance at him, and I strode toward the bedroom, realizing my mistake when I reached the doorway and detoured toward the kitchen and gripped the sink. The cold metal under my fingernails was welcome as heat and fury rose within me.

"Get out!" I leaned over the sink, hoping I wasn't going to be sick.

"This is my house and my goddam basement. You can't throw me out of my own home."

There was that steel in his voice, the one that had me wanting to shrink away. But at the same time, I wanted to place my hand over his heart. But that was ridiculous. Why would I want to touch him and have his flesh beneath mine? Nope. The urge to feel his heartbeat was to reassure myself he had a heart!

I twisted around, the metal pressing on my lower back. "You don't live down here. This is for your prisoners." I picked up the dish towel. "How many people used this

before you unalived them?”

“Unalived?” He scoffed at the word. “That’s not a real word.”

“It’s a social media thing.”

“This is real life, Tony, not fools posting cat memes.” He pushed hair back from his brow.

“Stop skirting the subject. How many?”

“You!” His voice was filled with venom as he pointed at me, his eyes blazing. “You don’t get to ask the dammed fucking questions.” He poked his chest with one finger so hard, it had to have hurt. “I do. Me. Flint, the boss of La Luna Noir and the Alpha.”

Putting my hands on my hips, I met his fire with my own. “You can do better than that. You have to end with a foot stamp and a ‘So there!’” I flung up my arms doing my best imitation of a flamingo dancer, my chin held high.

“You are the most infuriating person I have ever had the displeasure of meeting!” He was at screech level 10 or maybe 20. It was hard to measure.

“You’re complaining because I refuse to bow down and kiss your feet? F you and your alpha garbage. This is the twenty-first century. Those traditional role models got left behind in the last century.”

He reacted to what I’d said, not by tossing a vase at my head or aiming his gun at me. He didn’t throw me over his shoulder and ravish me. It was as though his anger had been popped with a pin, like a balloon. He sagged like he hadn’t slept in a week.

“Not in our wider community,” he said in a small voice.

“And yet you still keep to the rules or you wouldn’t have used the word ‘alpha’ against me.”

“Change is slow or almost non-existent in the mafia. It’s the way it is and probably always will be.”

I shut up, his defeated tone showing the weight he carried. “You’d better go. These thick walls must have blocked a lot of messages. Can’t have your underlings waiting before they break the law.”

He hissed and moved to the bottom of the stairwell. I shouted, “Lights on,” in a gravelly voice, mimicking his. They flicked on, and his stunned face, mouth gaping and eyes widened, turned toward me.

“How’d you do that? It responds to my voice, no one else’s.”

I shrugged. “Pure luck.”

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

“Hi, Dad.”

I hadn’t waited for him to say hello.

“What’s wrong, Flint? Emilio called earlier and talked of everything and nothing.”

“Nothing.” My people were frantic after receiving my curt messages last night and this morning. Not the ones about Anthony, though that did rouse suspicion with Emilio.

I’d told the household staff to take the week off. They’d left early, probably to visit family. My security detail, at least two of whom were always with me, called repeatedly asking to gain entry to the grounds and the house, but I’d said to wait outside. There were plenty of security guards roaming the property.

Emilio didn’t sleep, continually leaving voice messages asking what was going on with Tony. His exact words were, “It must be bad if it’s taking this long. Let me know when you want me to clean up.”

My belly churned at the thought of Tony’s blood and guts spread over the basement, and my wolf was ready to take Emilio’s head off if he tried to hurt our mate.

I’d put off an important meeting with a human, head of a multinational conglomerate. He had a problem and had decided I was the one to fix it. For a huge fee. A valuable piece of art that had been in his family for generations had been stolen, and he’d asked me to track it down and to give the thief his just desserts.

But I lied, saying I was sick. I sent him a bottle of the best cognac to smooth his ruffled feelings and had my brother, Ranger, take the meeting.

“Don’t bullshit a bullshitter, Son. I can almost taste your lies,” Dad huffed. “I heard there was trouble last night at the club.”

I sighed. Rumors were the lifeblood of the pack, but coupled with my disappearance, I’d have to stamp them out or my ability to head our wolves would be questioned. “Mmmm.”

”Out with it, or maybe you can’t.”

We were both using an encrypted app, but my dad was old-school and wary that the technology could be hacked. Not that the police were interested in my private life. But if another pack hacked the app and discovered there was gossip about my ability to lead La Luna Noir, they could use that information to destabilize my role as Alpha, weaken the pack, and encroach on our business.

“Perhaps...” I was dithering, as Tony had accused me of. And it was his fault. My head was full of images of him, my nose scented him in the living room and entryway. I ran my fingers over my shirt where he touched me, and there was a reel going around in my head of his bloodied nose and split lip, wishing I could make it all better.

“Are you still at the house?”

Had I said that? Nope. My dad had a network of people who kept him up to date on my comings and goings. Spies, the lot of them!

“Yes.”

“I’m coming over.”

“Please come alone, Dad.” I could cope with my dad, but not my brothers and my uncle all trooping in, everyone talking at once over the top of one another.

“That bad, huh?”

I ended the call. Ahhh, not only was I failing as an alpha, as the Alpha, but also as a man, and my dad was coming to the rescue. He’d scent Tony as soon as he walked in. There’d be questions and more questions, he’d ask me why I hadn’t put an end to this mess.

Waiting for him to arrive, I wandered into the den and studied the photos lining the wall. The rest of the house was mine, decorated how I liked it, but the den remained as it had when this was first my grandfather’s and then my father’s home. The dark walls and curtains and the old leather couch gave it an almost hallowed atmosphere. As a kid, I’d crept in here and studied the photos on the walls.

Now I removed the one of Tony’s father and took it to the window. Everyone was smiling, including Papa and Dad and my grandfather. They had their arms around one another. Anthony was a trusted member of our pack. My brothers and I sat in front of them. I must have been about five, my brothers three and eighteen months.

I ran my thumb over the images of Grandpa and Papa. My life would have been so different if they hadn’t been killed. Taking on the responsibility for the pack in my early 20s was a huge burden. It still was.

But that was the past and this was now.

How had Anthony been able to mate a human? Maybe my dad would tell me. Emilio’s mind was brimming with pack history, but I’d wait for Dad to fill me in.

The house was strangely quiet, and I wished I could see what Tony was doing. There were cameras in the basement, and they'd been useful in the past as part of my interrogation process, but even with my finger on the app, I couldn't do it. Invade his privacy.

My wolf rolled his eyes and asked to hunt.

After Dad leaves or tonight. We had a shifting and hunting schedule, but from the moment I caught Tony's scent, I couldn't think of anything but him. And I seesawed from wanting to hold him close, so our hearts beat in unison, to wanting to shake him and remove his snarkiness and sass. He made my blood boil.

Sounds nasty.

But if he became a shadow of his former self, he'd no longer be Tony, the guy I... I didn't fall for. Humans did that, gushing about someone they just met. Shifters didn't gush, they scented, sighted, and marked one another and loved with their entire being.

My phone beeped. My dad had arrived. I opened the app connected to the security system and studied the car coming up the driveway. He was at the wheel, the bodyguard beside him, his face ashen. I grinned 'cause Dad was a terrible driver, and I should have forbidden him from driving. Fuck, if I made a list of all the things I should have done but didn't, I'd question if I was the right person to lead the pack.

"My darling." He placed a coffee carrier and cake box on the table and turned my face to the light. His brow furrowed. "It's worse than I thought." He didn't sniff, but he couldn't hide his slack-jawed expression.

He was dressed in a black sweater and jeans but topped it with a purple-and-aqua knee-length coat. He loved to make a splash, though Papa had frowned at his flamboyant dressing habits. He'd suppressed his love of color while Papa was alive



and for a year after his death. But slowly he added a touch. A kerchief, scarf, hat, sunglasses, until eventually he'd thrown off any inhibitions and dressed how he pleased.

As children, my brothers and I had rolled our eyes at the clothes he wore at home when he dressed how he wanted, but when I grew older, I understood how he'd kept that part of him hidden for his mate when in public.

"In the den."

His brows shot up. We always sat in the light-filled living room, so my suggestion told him something was going on. But he knew that already. He settled himself on the sofa in the den, grabbed a donut and coffee, and said, "Shoot."

Just as well Tony wasn't within earshot.

I removed the photo from the wall and pointed at Tony's father. "Tell me about him?"

"Anthony." He barely glanced at it, a sign he'd been prying. Emilio. They'd been at school together, and he could never keep a secret from my dad.

"What happened to him?"

He bit into the donut and chewed very slowly. "He died a long time ago."

"How?"

"I don't remember. Accident, I think." He licked sugar from his lips and gulped the lukewarm coffee. "You were very young." He tapped the pic of five-year-old me. "You were adorable. Still are."

“Dad, you’re hiding something.” Tony had said much the same thing to me.

He arched a brow so high it looked painful. “And you’re not?” He swallowed the last mouthful and licked the sugar off his fingers. “Where are you keeping the human?” He put up a hand. “Nope, don’t tell me. In the basement, your home away from home.”

Of course he knew that.

“Why didn’t you let Emilio deal with the human? He wouldn’t have hurt him much. Roughed him up a little.”

“Or a lot. Remember, there was that one time...” I let my voice trail away, leaving an unpleasant image hovering between us.

Dad glanced at me. “Oh, you’re right.” He examined a nail. “And there was that other time.”

“Mmmm. He’s Anthony’s son.”

His mouth fell open. That he didn’t know. He got up and went to the window overlooking the pool. The medium-sized-ass pool. I grinned as I remembered Tony’s and my conversation.

“I’m intrigued.”

Dad wanted the details, but I needed something from him first. “Anthony was a wolf shifter but he was mated to a human. How was that possible?”

He examined the curtains and told me they needed washing, a stalling tactic.

“That broke one of La Luna Noir’s basic rules, enshrined in our law.”

My dad shot me a glance. “He didn’t mate. He married.”

“Come on, Dad. We can’t be with a human, ‘cause if we did, we’d have to tell them who we really are.” What sort of relationship would it be if you hid everything from your life partner?

“He met his mate and fell in love.” He put the last three words in quotation marks. “And he pleaded with your grandfather to allow him to be with that human.”

My mind was whirring. I was the Alpha, I didn’t need to ask anyone’s permission regarding my personal life. But who was I kidding? I couldn’t break our cardinal rule.

“He led a double life. Antonio Oakes with his husband and Anthony Oakley with us.” Dad explained his omega partner also wasn’t aware of his husband being part of the mafia.

“So he didn’t know him at all.” It must have been a shallow relationship.

“Your turn.” He patted the sofa beside him, but I chose to stand.

“History has repeated itself. Tony’s my mate.”

Dad took a bite of another donut and chewed slowly while furrowing his brow. “But you kidnapped him.” He winced. “It’s not the best start to a long and loving relationship.”

“It’s the beginning, the middle, and the end.”

## Page 11

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

I'm bored.

I banged my palm on my brow. I'd been kidnapped and should've been looking for a way out or huddled in the corner weeping, my life flashing before me. Boredom came with privilege, and I had none.

Unless he took pity on me and cut off a finger and said enough! But the bit about me not going back to my old life? That stuck in my head. Maybe kidnapees were allowed to live, but in return, they were forced to work for the mob.

Was that how Antonio got caught up in mob business? But the boss... Flint... damn, I used his name. That made him flesh and blood with feelings, wants, and needs and urges. Just like me.

But we weren't alike, and we had nothing in common other than we were both human.

Flint said Antonio's folks, my grandparents, worked for his grandfather.

"Ahhhh!" My voice echoed around the space, becoming softer with each round.

My mind was whirring, and I avoided the feeling from earlier that he'd wanted me. And I ignored how my body reacted the moment Emilio had thrown me onto the floor. But it wasn't just my cock. His scent, voice, those dark eyes, even that damn snake tat were rolled into an intoxicating package.

But he killed and cheated for a living, his organization on the other side of the law, a

line I couldn't cross. I gulped. Maybe I was attracted to him because it was in my blood. No, I refused to believe that sins-of-the-father nonsense.

As I puzzled over my future—assuming I had one—the door at the top of the stairs opened, and I leaped off the couch and backed away, hitting the kitchen counter. I bit back a yelp because my bruised body was aching from being banged up by Emilio.

He thundered down the stairs, dressed as he was earlier, but he'd removed his jacket. Another set of footsteps followed, someone smaller dressed in black. My heart constricted and one hand felt for a knife on the draining board. The cutlery in the basement was plastic, so me grabbing a knife was a bust.

It wasn't Emilio, because I was familiar with how his body swayed as he strode through the club each night.

Flint stood at the bottom of the stairs, eyeing me, wary, as if testing whether I was going to yell at him again. But it was his companion that caught my attention. An older man with the same dark eyes who strode toward me.

“Who the fuck are you?” I aimed the plastic fork at his chest.

He said over his shoulder, “He's no pushover. I like that.” He examined my face and tut-tutted before brushing past and opening the fridge. “I'm Rudy, and you need proper food.”

Compared to the fast food I ate while at college, what was in the fridge was a huge step up.

“Did you eat breakfast?” the older man asked.

This was the weirdest kidnapping I'd ever been involved with. I'd been placed in

luxury accommodation with great food, air-conditioning, and a nice bathroom, and now Rudy, whoever he was, might provide room service.

“Cereal.”

Rudy turned up his nose, and the resemblance to him was undeniable. “I’ll make you something.”

Flint growled, a sound that came from deep inside him. It was terrifying but with a sliver of sexy. I did not just say my kidnapper, the mafia boss of all bosses, was sexy. Nope. My brain had lost the plot and needed reconfiguring. Maybe a reboot. It reminded me of Arnie’s old computer. Maybe my motherboard needed replacing.

“But not here.”

“Everything you need to make brunch or breakfast or whatever is here, Dad.”

The older man sighed and looked straight at me. “My son inherited this beautiful house where he was born when his father died, and yet he spends his nights in the basement.”

“What?” I swiveled to face him. “This is your father, and the basement is your what? Your bolt hole? Your secret pad? Your den? Is this where you squirrel away your concubines? Harem?” I couldn’t come up with the right word, but those would do for now.

Had he been down here last night? I was a light sleeper, and thanks to Emilio, the pain he’d inflicted refused to allow me a comfortable night. Not that I could sleep easy, being kidnapped and all, so I was certain I’d been alone.

“My father is offering to cook you a meal,” he said through gritted teeth. He hadn’t

shaved this morning, and for a fleeting moment, I wondered what it would feel like to rub my hands over his stubble. Goosebumps erupted on my skin, but I was still wearing the robe so they were hidden. No human could pick up my body's response.

“Upstairs.” His dad pointed to the ceiling. He took my arm with a smile, and I allowed him to lead me up the stairs, but I couldn't resist glancing back at him as I limped. Flint was staring at me, twisting the signet ring on his left hand, the snake tat slithering under the shirt cuff.

I shivered not just because this man held my life in his hands, but also... My thoughts trailed away. I was confused, the terror I was experiencing bringing up possible scenarios for why I didn't hate him as a way to save myself.

But I was going into the main house. There'd be a landline, maybe, wifi, windows and doors that opened. A father who possibly could be coerced into... taking me for a walk. He was pretty small, about my height. I could overpower him. I had to make nice with the dad. He was my ticket out of this mess.

“I'll make an omelet. It's about one of the few things I can cook.” The father bustled around the pristine kitchen while I stood awkwardly, my hands at my side. It was a huge room with expensive modern appliances, and from where I stood, they looked brand-new. Did Flint cook downstairs too? Nah, he probably got his staff to fill the fridge.

He hadn't cuffed me, but I couldn't escape with both of them in the room. Flint stood behind me, the hairs on my arms rising. I closed my eyes, willing him to walk away because I couldn't think properly with him so close.

“Sit,” his dad insisted.

“Is this how a kidnapping plays out? You kick the guy around, lock him in the

basement to stew overnight, and then lower his defenses with food?”

The dad paused as he held an egg while his son snapped, “Just be thankful we’re not starving you.”

“Oh right. I should be grateful I’m just bruised and battered and still have all my limbs.” I twisted around, bile on my breath.

His fingers curled as if he was going to wrap them around my throat and squeeze the life out of me. The seconds passed, our eyes locked on one another, his chest heaving as if he couldn’t decide whether to kill me now or wait until his dad fed me. This family was obsessed with food.

“I see what you mean.” His father chuckled.

The dad was amused when his son could have strangled me as he was cracking eggs. This was one messed-up family. I couldn’t wait to meet the rest of them, assuming they weren’t all dead, their bullet-ridden bodies lying unclaimed in some dusty morgue.

I slumped onto a stool and rested my elbows on the kitchen island. Flint left the room to answer a call, but the low mumbling suggested he was just outside the door. The murmuring subsided, and I studied the scenery beyond the kitchen window. The bushes shaped like animals appeared to be dogs, but I was interested in what lay past the lawn. More wooded land, and the security guys were out there somewhere, probably a bunch of cameras too. I searched the kitchen for a landline. There was a bulge in the dad’s hip pocket. A phone? If I could grab it and call 911, I might survive.

“How can you be okay with this lifestyle? Your son keeping me prisoner. Your husband and father-in-law were murdered.”



His dad stirred the egg mixture, but his back stiffened. “I knew your father.”

He was changing the topic. Or was he? Was he saying Antonio was murdered too? I decided to play along while trying to hear what his son was saying. More like cursing and veiled threats. Or was I imagining how mobsters talked to people? I got up and edged closer to the door. His short, sharp sentences reminded me of a gun firing.

“He was part of our extended family. He ate many meals in this kitchen, though it looked a little different back then.”

The boss was quiet, murmuring, “No,” and “Yes,” and “Not yet,” and I returned to the stool.

“Did he kill for a living too?”

Rudy placed the food on the island and grabbed a knife and fork. But his son came in just as his dad was handing me the utensils. “No knives or forks, Dad.” He rummaged in a drawer and brought out plastic ones.

I grimaced and muttered, “Go green. Get rid of the plastic.”

Rudy’s eyes darted between me and his son. “How are you going to resolve this?”

He was asking us both. I raised a hand. “You fire me because I broke the rules, and let me go home. And you never hear from me again. The end.”

“The end,” Flint repeated. Damn, not the best choice of words on my part. “Nice try, but you’re not leaving here.”

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But I didn't want it to end.

What I wanted was Tony by my side as my mate, the Alpha Omega, my partner and equal. But he hated my guts. I could mark him, but he'd still hate me. I could shift and introduce him to my wolf. He'd be terrified and still hate me. Not that I'd expect him to fall into my arms after I'd kidnapped him. But I had no choice. The universe saw to that.

His alpha father was a shifter, so he had shifter blood running in his veins. Perhaps something would stir inside him when he met my beast.

You aren't going to kill him, are you?my wolf asked.

That was a given the moment he walked into my office, though I'd refused to admit it.

No.

I had to get to the office. There were urgent matters I had to deal with, and I couldn't deputize my brother. Another mafia pack, one with a link to a pack that had shaped my life, was stirring up trouble. But every part of me yearned to stay close to Tony. He was my mate, my heart beat for him, and there would never be anyone else but him. I was intoxicated in his presence, making me lightheaded, and imagined myself at the top of a tall mountain with little oxygen.

It was heart-wrenching last night leaving him in the basement. When he'd screamed at me earlier, it was better than silence and quiet loathing. Tony filled that empty part

of me, the hole I'd stuffed with work, the pack, traditions, and making our family intact while keeping the world at arm's length.

Tony examined each mouthful of food, as if he suspected Dad of poisoning him, while his eyes darted between us. But as he ate, the phone buzzed. Emilio. I stepped out of the room again and closed the wooden sliding doors that separated the kitchen from the rest of the house.

"Boss, we have a problem."

Yeah, one that landed on my office floor last night, but Emilio filled me in on trouble brewing within the pack. The gossip was rife that I'd apprehended a human trying to infiltrate the pack and he was at the house. The rumors were that I was doing a deal with humans and making them partners in the business.

I groaned at the ridiculousness of that, but I also understood "mob mentality." Not us specifically, but any group of people that got hyped up because of real or imagined reasons.

"They're demanding a meeting at pack headquarters with you and the pack council present." He paused. I'd known Emilio since I was a kid, and we'd worked together since my father died. I braced myself for what he was about to say.

"People are really worked up. Text messages are flying back and forth. You'll have to meet them, boss."

Firebrands I called them. There were a group of them who resented I'd been made pack Alpha instead of it going to a vote. They pushed against the old rules, complaining we had to change as society did. And we had, but not as fast as they expected. I couldn't take a group of wolf shifters whose ways were fashioned centuries ago and drag them into the twenty-first century overnight.

“They see the human as a threat to their existence and their ability to work and provide for their loved ones.”

So instinct had kicked in and they were acting as our ancestors did, harking back to the old ways, circling the wagons as humans would say. So much for wanting to change.

“I have to go.” I strode into the kitchen.

Tony paused, the plastic fork halfway to his mouth. “Where have I heard that line before?”

“I’d like to come with you, but maybe I should stay here.” Dad twisted a dish towel in his hands, the diamond ring on his finger my father gave him for one birthday glimmering in the sunlight filtering through the windows. He would’ve heard my part of the conversation

“I’d like that.” Tony’s face brightened. I didn’t trust him. He might trick Dad into letting him stay in the main house or go outside. “Where are you going? Somewhere nice?”

My mate licked toast crumbs from the corner of his mouth and glowered at me, a contrast to the simpering grin he’d given my dad. He was up to something, but I couldn’t stay and couldn’t take him with me. Him being sassy didn’t surprise me anymore. I was exasperated every time he opened his mouth.

My mind went to the pack and what I’d be facing when I stood before them, explaining the human wasn’t finagling in on our business. But if they believed me, there’d be the inevitable questions of who the human was, why he was at my house. They’d demand answers. What I did on my own time was nothing to do with the pack. But my life was entwined with La Luna Noir, and I couldn’t untangle it.

The phone buzzed again. Emilio said they were gathering at pack headquarters, some of the more junior members of La Luna Noir were ramping up the crowd with outright lies. Me telling them to mind their own business wouldn't fly with a bunch of young wolf shifters determined to revolutionize our way of life.

My brothers called saying they were on their way to headquarters and would take charge until I arrived. I couldn't let them take the heat for something I'd done.

There was a solution that would protect Tony and allow me to keep him with me. Not one I favored and one that went against everything I stood for. It would bind me to him, but as he was human, he would be free to live as he chose, with or without me.

My eye caught Dad's, and maybe he sensed a quietness in me after the nervous energy and the fear that I might not be able to protect my mate. His brows shot up, and he nodded.

You said you couldn't. My wolf didn't understand my about turn.

I know, I know. I'd be doing something that couldn't be undone and might leave me alone until I went to the goddess. But even if we didn't mate, I would never be free of him.

Dad took Tony's hand and led him to my side. "This is going to seem strange, but we don't want to hurt you."

"Hmmm." Tony gulped a mouthful of food. "Sounds ominous." He aimed the fork at Dad and the knife at me.

"My son brought you here against your will." Dad flashed me a glance, but I had nothing to offer. "But you won't come to any harm. I will not allow it." There was a strength in my dad's assurance that I hoped Tony would hear.

“Ummm... okay.” My mate’s tentative voice had my heart aching.

“Slip your robe down and expose your shoulder.”

“Huh?” Tony couldn’t hide the fear in his eyes, though he lifted his chin and stared at me. “Strange doesn’t begin to explain it.”

“Please. This will keep you safe.” For now. There’d be meetings and explanations, questions would be raised about my leadership, and maybe someone would challenge me for the role of Alpha. But I hoped I could contain any opposition today and stem a possible uprising.

“No, tell me why.” He hugged the robe tighter.

“It won’t make sense.” My dad took over again, placing his hands on Tony’s upper arms. “But trust me, if your father were here, he would say, “Follow Flint’s advice.”

“That’s easy for you to say.” He maneuvered away from us toward the window. “He’s been dead for more than twenty years and can’t speak for himself.”

Dad tore out of the room and returned with the photo I’d removed from the wall. He tapped a nail at Anthony. “This is your father, this is me, my mate, and his father. And this is Flint taken beside a special flame tree in the woods.” He flipped the photo over, revealing our names scrawled on the back.

“But it says Anthony! His... his n-name was Antonio.” The fork Tony clutched shattered.

“He was Antonio Oakes at home, but his real name was Anthony. Anthony Oakley.”

Tony took the photo, his trembling hands gripping the old wooden frame, and a tear

dripped onto the glass. “You were friends.” He pulled the old tattered pic from the pocket of his robe and compared the two.

“I hear what I imagine to be his voice in my head, telling me to trust you. It’s not a good idea to listen to imaginary voices, but here goes.” He slid the robe down.

“Close your eyes.” Dad held his hand and put Tony’s head on his chest. I hated that he didn’t understand what I was about to do or who I was inside.

I hesitated, my hands on my mate’s warm flesh, and wondered if the primary motive was my and my family’s safety and my status as Alpha I was protecting. Perhaps a smidge if I was honest, but my desire to protect my mate outweighed everything else. In my head and heart, it was all Tony, all the time.

I could give up being Alpha. Grandpa left his birth pack and thrived. We had enough family money tucked away that me, my brothers, Dad, and Uncle could leave, start anew someplace else.

My wolf’s claws extended from my fingers as Dad put his head close to Tony’s and whispered, “It’s going to be okay.” Tony’s body jolted when my beast’s teeth made contact with his skin, and he yelped when they dug into his flesh. Dad mopped up the trickle of blood with the dish towel.

“Mate,” I mouthed to Dad.

He nodded. “Now he’s family,” he mouthed back.

“What’s going on?” Tony opened his eyes, my face the first thing he saw before he glanced at my dad. He twisted his head and examined the wound on his shoulder. “Is this like a cult thing? A ritual of some sort.”

“Not a cult.” My dad hugged my mate and drew me into his embrace. “My loves.”

Tony eyed us both. “What’s with the my loves thing?” He reared away from me while Dad held him.

“Do you feel like you’re on a ship and haven’t found your sea legs?” Dad asked.

“No. I’m fine.” Tony mumbled as he looked up at me. “What’s with that smile?” He pulled a face. “You’re being more weird than usual. That grin is warm and velvety, and I don’t like it. And please explain why you wounded me!” His voice rattled as it rose.

“I’ll explain, but first, you’re both coming with me.”



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“Are you sure?” Rudy shook his head at his son.

Flint raked his hands through his dark hair, the snake tat slithering between the dark strands. “He can’t not appear.”

My gaze swiveled from Rudy to Flint. They were discussing me but in a secret language. I understood the words but not the meaning.

“You either go alone or you show yourself to him.” Rudy patted his son’s folded arms. “But there will be consequences no matter what you choose.”

“Can someone tell me what’s going on?” I was ready to stamp my foot to get attention. “Show me what?” They’d already torn my skin which was ouchy at first, but the pain faded and blended with something else that I pushed to the back of my mind.

Flint stood in front of me, and I raised my head to meet his gaze. Those dark eyes with their mesmerizing almost hypnotic power making me think of him not as my kidnapper but as... as someone else. Once I was back in the basement, I’d puzzle it out after a long nap.

“There’s a problem.”

“I figured that.” I rubbed my shoulder. “And will someone explain what this was about?”

“Not now” He steered me toward the basement. “You need to get dressed.”

“Nope.” I stood my ground. “Not until you tell me what’s going on.” Flint was the kidnapper, but I needed answers, though I couldn’t ignore the tension that I could almost see, touch, and taste that made his body shimmer.

“We’re going to meet my business associates.”

No, no, and no. That didn’t sound like fun. I was reasonably safe here with Rudy and Flint, or as safe as I could be with my kidnapper and his dad. Going into the unknown with a bunch of mobsters, some like Emilio who wanted me punished, that wasn’t on my bingo card.

“No way. Sounds scary. I’d like to return to the basement, please.”

“Do you ever do as you’re asked?” His eyes blazed as he towered over me, with something close to... not passion... irritation or maybe hostility.

“I don’t recall being asked,” I snapped. “You said we were going. I didn’t get a choice.” I needed to piece together what was happening but didn’t have enough clues. “Bring your business associates here if you’re so worried I’ll escape and alert the police. I’ll stay in the basement so you’ll know exactly where I am.”

He growled, it came from deep inside him, and goosebumps paraded over my skin. Outwardly, I reacted the same as last night when we first met. But now, instead of being deathly afraid, I was... not. I couldn’t pinpoint the difference. Maybe that was part of his plan. But for what purpose?

“Rarely does anyone other than family come to the house.”

The silence yawned and stretched between us as the synapses fired in my brain. Family. That photo of my father was taken on the grounds, Rudy said. Was he blood family or just in the family business? And that led to me. I was neither.

“So why did you bring me here?”

He opened his mouth and closed it, then looked at his dad. Maybe this was his first kidnapping and he wasn't sure of what to do next.

“You'll see.” Rudy hustled me into the basement and chose a button-down and a nice pair of jeans that fit from the closet. He mumbled something that sounded like, “These were left here once.” That wasn't weird. “Your lip is healing, but your nose is still swollen.”

“No way can I meet the mob when I look less than my best.”

He studied me. “Is that a defense mechanism?”

“What?” I pretended to be ignorant about what he was referring to.

“Using sarcasm and humor to deflect from real life.”

I shrugged. Now it was my turn to change the subject. “Where are we going?”

“To La Luna Noir headquarters.”

The nightclub had a headquarters? That was odd, but then what wasn't about this situation and his family. But I was going out in public. I could slip through the crowd or steal someone's phone. Or just ask someone to phone 911 and I'd be out of Flint's clutches. I did want to get away from him. Yes, I absolutely did. I reran that sentence over in my head as Flint took me into the garage while his dad headed out the front door to his vehicle.

“No handcuffs?”

“Not today.” He stared straight ahead as we drove around the long driveway. Outside the gate, two cars were waiting; one went ahead, one behind, sandwiching us in between. “My security detail.”

I side-eyed him. He sounded like a president or monarch. Gods, he had a huge ego. I tried the door but couldn’t unlock it. Not that I was prepared to leap out on a lonely road or in the middle of traffic.

He pulled into a parking area under a tall building. I’d been past this place many times. The reflective glass changed color depending on the angle and the position of the sun. It wasn’t how I’d conjured a mob meeting place.

The shadowy darkness in the parking garage seemed more akin to the mafia. Flint cut the engine and turned toward me. “You’ll hear a lot of things you don’t understand.”

“That’ll be a first, because since we met, everything has been crystal clear.” Damn, that was what Rudy was talking about. I deflected, covering up confusion and fear. Ugh, I should have my head examined at meeting a bunch of mobsters who... wanted my blood? To string me up to the ceiling? My crime was just a little snooping. I didn’t find anything. That had to count.

“They’re not going to hurt me, are they? If they’re baying for my blood, I’ll sit this meeting out.”

He drew in a sharp breath. “It’s interesting you used the word baying.”

I couldn’t get a handle on this guy. Before his big old important meeting, he was ready to discuss my choice of words.

“Because there might be some of that.”

“People want to hurt me?” My heart sped up, and I fumbled for the door again.

“No. The baying part.” He moved his hand across the console, and I yanked mine away but was almost disappointed when he didn’t pull it back. “They’re more angry at me.”

“So what? I’m your shield? Hi, everyone, instead of being pissed at something I did, look at this guy. He did something way worse.” Gods, I might not make it out in one piece. “What is wrong with you?”

“That’s my line,” he muttered as I curled up in the corner, making myself as small as possible. “Look at me, Tony. Please.”

“No. I can’t stand you.”

He exhaled and something changed inside the vehicle. The temperature? It was a little chilly, and more goosebumps crawled over me. The penetrating scent was no longer his, the alluring one that signaled danger combined with something I refused to name. Now it was more feral, and I shivered, afraid of what or who sat beside me.

And then there was the growl. Not the gravelly grunt from earlier but something prehistoric. I put a hand over my heart, the comforting beat reassuring me I wasn’t dreaming, though if it continued to gallop, I might need to see a doctor.

This was silly. What was I going to see? Did he have a gun pointed at me? Killing me in the car when he’d had the opportunity in or near the woods was kind of ballsy and messy.

I gathered my courage and twisted my body, angling it toward him. His eyes were darker than before, if possible, and his nose and mouth combined to form a... a... snout? His nails had extended and become claws, while his stubble was now furry.

He snarled, a guttural sound from deep in his belly.

I was frozen, unable to scream, though one clogged my throat in case I needed it. I couldn't extend an arm to touch his face but concentrated on breathing. My brain couldn't brain, and I counted the seconds as time warped and wove around me.

And in an instant, the fur and snout vanished and he was him. Except the eyes remained, boring into me, as if trying to read my thoughts.

Inside, my mind was blank. I was incapable of rational thinking. Flint must have come around to my door and helped me out, because I was in an elevator, with him holding my arm, flanked by two bodyguards. At least I hoped that was what they were. Their unsmiling faces didn't give me confidence I could make my escape or steal the weapons they couldn't conceal under their coats.

We entered a huge room, filled with people talking, shouting, and gesturing. There was a logo on the back wall of a dog, maybe a wolf, the name La Luna Noir circling it. Damn, I should have asked him why he couldn't correct the typo. It bugged me, and I wanted to add an E to noir and change luna to lune. Did no one in this place go to school?

The cacophony of noise hurt my ears, and I couldn't distinguish what they were saying. But as they sighted us, they went quiet, like a wave across the room. Some were curious, standing on tiptoe to catch a glimpse, others sneered, some sat and grimaced at their neighbor while pointing at me. Or was it Flint.

He led me to the front of the room. My heart sped up, my hands were clammy, but his grip was so tight I couldn't shake him off.

“My La Luna Noir family, I'd like to introduce you to my mate.”

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“I’m not your friend,” Tony hissed. He must have recovered from catching a glimpse of my wolf.

It was low enough that most humans wouldn’t have it picked up. But everyone here except him was a shifter with supercharged hearing.

There was a collective gasp from the room. No one spoke to me that way except maybe my dad, who chose that moment to stride into the room and gave me a thumbs-up. I admired his confidence. Or maybe he, like me, was putting on a brave face.

Emilio walked in and stayed near the back, arms folded as he scrutinized the crowd, while my security guys manned the exit. My brothers, Ranger and Hunter, also stood close to the front, their wolves’ eyes swapped with their own.

“The Alpha Omega is correct.” I squeezed Tony’s hand, hoping my tight grasp would send a message but worried that Tony wouldn’t translate. Be quiet and let me take over. “He is my fate, the one the universe placed before me, until I meet the goddess and beyond, for all eternity.”

“Your fate? Does that mean something different in the mafia than it does in the outside world?” Tony tugged, but I couldn’t release him. “Bringing me here was a big mistake.” He faced the pack members, puffing out his chest, and I couldn’t help being proud of his spunk.

“Flint kidnapped me.” He waved his free hand toward the La Luna Noir shifters and then pointed at me. His self-satisfied smile deserved to be kissed away. His gaze

swerved from me to the pack as silence settled over the group. “Even now he won’t let me go.” He raised our joined hands.

A chuckle broke free from a young shifter near the front, and another from one of the council members. Dad guffawed, a little too loudly, and more laughter tumbled into the space. Faces lit up with broad smiles, some of the pack clapped, while others slapped their thighs and nudged their fellow shifters. Like me, Emilio and my brothers didn’t join in but were gauging people’s reactions by scanning the crowd.

Tony fumed, and my beast wondered if he had a dragon ancestor as he checked for a plume of smoke.

No one snarls like our mate unless he can breathe real fire.

I let go of Tony’s hand, and he put both on his hips. “Why are they laughing?” He narrowed his eyes at me as if I could control the pack’s reaction.

I hid a smile, the laughter was infectious, and my mate was spirited as usual. But I wished he was as passionate about caring for me as he was with his loathing.

“You’ll have to ask them.”

But a shouted, “Alpha is old-school when it comes to choosing a mate,” had Tony’s mouth opening and closing. Someone had finally silenced him.

“Did he throw you over his shoulder?” another shifter asked.

“No! He put me in handcuffs.”

Peals of laughter filled the room, and Tony grunted.



“I doubt you would have agreed otherwise,” an elder in the front row responded while I twisted my signet ring.

“But I didn’t give him permission,” Tony protested.

“You will.” There was stifled laughter as pack members whispered to one another. I squirmed, thankful Tony couldn’t hear them talking about us having sex.

“He is the Alpha. He does not need permission,” Saul, an elder, said.

“Isn’t anyone going to call the police?” Tony pleaded. “I’m here against my will.”

The entire room broke out into hearty laughter.

“Alpha, your mate is feisty and enjoys a good joke,” one of the council members shouted.

Tony rolled his eyes, and the creases in his brow reminded me of furrows in dry earth waiting for rain.

But Foley, a noted troublemaker and leader of the discontents pressing for change, stood. Everyone quietened, and the tension ramped up. It reminded me of a rubber band stretched to breaking point. I shoved one hand in my pocket and fingered my grandfather’s dented watch.

“Alpha, perhaps you can explain how you mated this man when it is against our law?”

Foley’s family had been rogues, and when they asked Papa if they could join La Luna Noir, he agreed. While his parents blended in with our pack, Foley always pushed the boundaries of what was allowed. And Emilio let on that Foley had been seen recently

in the company of Sewell, the Nightfall pack's Alpha.

The Nightfall pack rose out of the ashes of the Silverback pack after years of mafia and pack turf war that resulted in the deaths of my grandpa and father. When I took over as Alpha, we battled the Silverbacks for three years, and when the war was over, that pack's survivors signed their names in blood that they would never encroach on our business again.

Tony side-eyed me. "What's with the mate reference and what law?" But I didn't fail to notice he edged closer to me.

He likes us. My wolf wanted to reveal himself.

Not yet.

I put an arm over my mate's shoulder but needed to quell the uneasiness before it spilled over and rippled into the crowd. The scent in the room heightened, and even Tony must have sensed it as he brushed a hand over mine. Some of the pack member's eyes darkened and fur rippled over a couple of shifters toward the back of the room. I hissed at them, my wolf at the forefront of my gaze.

"That is true, but this man..." I wanted to say human but was doing my best not to freak Tony out more than he already was, "is one of us."

"No, I'm not a part of the mafia," Tony insisted.

"Once again, my mate has reminded me I must be more precise when I speak." I sent him a smile of thanks, but he glared at me. "My mate's father, Anthony Oakley, was from our pack."

The room buzzed. Pack members put their heads together, checking their phones,

some looked at Emilio for clarification. But I stood still, not a muscle moving, my wolf close to the surface, and everyone stopped talking.

“Anthony was a valued member of La Luna Noir, and he met an untimely death when my mate was still in diapers. So by returning Tony to the pack, the circle is complete.”

The tension in the room evaporated, and Foley fumed, probably because he didn’t get the reaction he was hoping for.

From the corner of my eye, Tony swayed, and I gripped his hand. If he keeled over, there might be an uproar, with people thinking this human who was part shifter did not have the strength and courage to be part of the pack.

Foley stood, and I readied myself for another attempt to blacken my character.

“Word on the street is that before he met you, he was intent on hurting all of us.” He glanced around the crowd who had gone quiet. “You put your personal feelings before that of the pack.”

I took a deep breath and took strength from my mate who had faced death and hadn’t given up.

“Those of you who have scented your mate, what would you do?” There was a low rumble of agreement, though not from Foley, as he hadn’t mated. “Tony scented me and was ready to do anything to find me.”

“I would have killed if someone got in my way,” Horace, a council member, announced.

Most of the pack nodded and some yelled at Foley to stop stirring up trouble.

“I understand some of you have questions about our kind mating with outsiders, but at the next council meeting, we will listen to submissions about whether our law should be changed.”

“That’s not for months,” Foley sneered.

“Correct. And for the rest of today, I intend to be with my mate. Undisturbed.”

Grumbles mingled with gasps and knowing smiles. Chairs scraped back as we walked toward the door. Tony said nothing, his expression blank as he repeated the words mate and pack.

Many pack members congratulated us, and some older folks remembered Anthony and spoke of him warmly. My mate mumbled thank you. But I was also concerned about the small group, huddled around Foley in the middle of the room, gesturing toward us, their faces contorted into grimaces.

The elevator may have been traveling at its normal speed, but I was tempted to wrench open the doors and shimmy down the cables to get us out of the building.

Once in the car, we traveled home as we had come, with my security detail fronting and tailing us. But I let out a deep breath when I parked and the garage door closed, the darkness pooling around us.

Tony collapsed on the sofa and hugged a cushion after we entered the house. His head must’ve been exploding, and I longed for the snarky questions he would hurl at me.

“I don’t understand.” He stared at the ceiling. “None of it. Mates, mafia law, and what happened in the car?” He rubbed his eyes with the heel of his hands. “Did you inject me with something? Is this a form of brainwashing?” He sat up, the cushion

forgotten. “You’re breaking me down before you build me back up as one of you.”

“No. We don’t do that. We are born into this life.”

He flopped back on the couch. “And why did they laugh when I said you’d kidnapped me?” He slapped a hand on his brow and leaped up again. I was getting dizzy with the frantic up-and-down movements.

I wished to take him in my arms and massage the confusion away. My wolf urged me to, but I ignored him.

“I have a question. Why didn’t you walk out and take your freedom?”

Tony scrambled off the sofa.. “Are you kidding me? You were there. Some of them wanted me strung up.” He shoved past me toward the basement entrance. “I want to be alone. Open the door.”

“Answer me first.”

“I hate you.” His nostrils flared, and I thought he was going to pummel my chest again. I would have welcomed it. “I was scared. I was expecting gun-toting men in expensive suits and wearing gold jewelry.”

He’d kinda described me. Maybe I was a cliché, but I didn’t give a fuck.

“But they were all kind of ordinary.” He jiggled the handle.

“You’re free to go.”

What? No, he can’t leave. What are you saying?My wolf clambered to get out.

Until I said it, I hadn't considered setting him free. I couldn't expect him to return my feelings. But he would never truly be my mate if I kept him here. It might break me, and I'd never be the Flint or the Alpha I was before.

"This is a trick, right? I'm going to get halfway down the drive and boom." He mimed shooting a gun.

"No, you'll be driven home. Anthony was a man of his word, as am I."

His head shot up when I mentioned his father. If he left and never returned, I would mourn him every day, but I couldn't keep him locked up waiting for him to return my affection.

"My dad never really knew him, did he?" He yanked at the front door and glowered at me when it wouldn't open. "What made you change your mind?"

"You. Your strength and determination even in the face of fear. I admire that."

"But aren't you the same? Always looking over your shoulder for someone who might put a bullet in your head. Like that ass today?"

"Maybe." While my loved ones were downed by a bullet, my death would more likely come from a wolf. "I had to learn those skills, and some of it is pretense." I'd never told anyone that. Only my mate.

"One more thing. I don't suppose I still have a job."

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Flint barked instructions into the phone, and a car appeared through the huge windows, making its way up the driveway. I'd never get the answers to the mate question or the weird shit in the car or how the mafia worked.

But I'd learned something about my father. And for the first time in my life, I met people, other than my dad, who knew him. He was liked, loved even, by this found family.

The door opened, as if by magic, and I told myself not to say goodbye and not to look back. Never look back at your kidnapper. I was sure that was written somewhere.

I strode out, and the urge to glance over my shoulder was so strong, but I steeled myself to look straight ahead.

The ride back to my shared apartment was a blur. I made the driver stop two blocks from my place, not wanting him to report back where I lived. But of course Flint knew the location of my apartment. He'd probably sent his henchmen to ransack it, looking for evidence that I was a plant, working for another mafia family or something equally ridiculous.

I tumbled into bed and slept until the next morning when I awoke with a start, wondering where I was. My first thought was, Where is he? and I was filled, not with joy or relief but something close to disappointment. Yikes, after being a captive for less than twenty-four hours, I needed to see a therapist.

The apartment was empty when I staggered out to the kitchen and made coffee. Ugh, it wasn't as good as the stuff Flint had made yesterday. As I sat in bed, sipping my

brew, I slid a hand under my shirt, the same one I'd worn yesterday. Not mine.

I was too exhausted to change last night before falling into bed. Or that was what I told myself. It was a reasonable explanation. No kidnap victim wasted time getting changed when they got their first taste of freedom, because I was now an expert on all things kidnapping.

My injuries were scabbing up as I brushed my hand over the uneven flesh.

My phone was at the club, so I'd need to get a new one. A burner phone. All the detective shows mentioned crooks with phones that couldn't be traced. While I was no criminal, I suspected Flint's people had the power to bug any device.

With no phone, I couldn't contact the police and report what happened to me. And as the university had me on sick leave and with no job, I had no reason to leave the apartment. A new phone could wait until tomorrow or the next day.

I grabbed my laptop and opened a new document, ready to list everything that had happened since Emilio put a gun to my head.

Around midnight...

Was that when I was caught snooping? Maybe it was later? I chewed a nail and figured my brain was processing trauma and I couldn't expect to type screeds of notes.

"Tomorrow," I announced to the room and pulled the covers over me, ready to nap.

But Flint infiltrated my dreams. His scent, which was a combination of seduction, old leather, and danger, tickled my nose, demanding attention. The snake slithered off his punctured skin and taunted me, hiding under the bed before sliding into my closet,



waiting to pounce. The grinding of his teeth when I pissed him off penetrated my dreams, as they grated and rubbed against one another.

While I tossed and turned, telling Flint to leave me be—no mobsters allowed—I clutched the bedding, the softness reminding me of his hand when it gripped mine. Woven in with dream-Flint was the creature I witnessed in the car, and I cowered until it vanished and only Flint remained.

In my head I saw Flint disrobing, his pants puddling on the floor before he dropped his underwear. His cock! That cock was going to be inside me. I spread my legs, begging him to hurry, telling him slick was sliding from my hole.

“I know.” He leaned over me and dragged me to the edge of the mattress, and my breathing sped up.

“You’re mine.” His eyes glowed, and I shivered, welcoming the hint of danger.

“Yes,” I mumbled. “Always. But I need your dick in my hole.” I lifted my legs and bent my knees and urged him to hurry.

He stood at the side of the bed, his length lined up with my entrance as I peered between my legs, begging him to shove it in. He fingered me, murmuring how wet I was, and when he removed it, I grabbed his dick, tired of his go-slow technique.

He grunted as I pumped his cock, pleased at his reaction. I pumped more and harder until he came in my hand. No! I needed him inside me.

I woke, my fingers on my cock, coated in my own cum, and I wept. He’d freed me, and yet I wasn’t really free.

With nowhere to be, I dozed the days and nights away, and not wanting any contact

with my roommates, I avoided going to the kitchen when they were around.

But when I opened my eyes to an inky blackness and the computer told me I'd been home for four days, I studied the wrinkled shirt Rudy had given me. Gross! I showered, ridding my body of his aroma, his fingerprints, and traces of his breath. The water slid down my body, over the tiles, and gurgled into the drain, but I fell to my knees, hands scooping up the soapy water, wanting to keep the memories of him alive.

Gods, what was wrong with me? I turned off the water and lay on the shower floor until goosebumps pimples my skin. Knowing I wasn't going back to sleep, I pulled on jeans and a hoodie, put on a backpack I used for college, and grabbed my debit card, thankful I hadn't taken it to the club that night.

Trawling the aisles at a convenience store a few blocks from my apartment, I stocked up on cheap snacks, needing the salty, oily, overly sweet, fake flavors to wash away the taste of kidnapping. And I bought a phone and a prepaid plan. I experienced a thrill at purchasing a device that couldn't be traced.

But as I left the store, I should have turned left toward home, but I headed right, while stuffing cheeseballs and candy in my mouth at the same time. Gross but oh so satisfying. The phone jiggled in my pocket as I strode along the almost empty streets.

I didn't have a destination in mind. I didn't, and yet as I sped up, jaywalking across streets usually clogged with traffic, I told myself I was going to retrieve my belongings from my locker at the club.

The streets brightened with flashing neon lights as I headed toward the entertainment district where crowds spilled onto the streets and expensive cars disgorged and picked up their passengers. But I bypassed the street, the one fronted by La Luna Noir, and traipsed around the back. With each step, my brain implored me to turn around and

walk away.

This part of your life is over.

Crinkled chips fell from my mouth onto the sidewalk, and I brushed the salty, spicy remains from my lips. What was I doing, having escaped Flint's clutches and his basement, heading into the lion's den?

But I reasoned I needed to get back my stuff. Yeah, my stuff. What was it? I banged a fist on my forehead trying to remember. A phone, ID, and something else. Clothes? Oh right, clothes. Damn, I had to return Flint's clothes, but I left them at home. Shoot, I'd have to come back another night.

For now, I'd sneak around back. Maybe Bobbie or Todd would empty the trash and I could plead with them to collect my belongings from the locker. Not that I had the key, and I had no memory of where I'd left it.

There were three black cars near the back entrance. His in the middle, plus the two who'd flanked us to and from his house. I crouched behind the dumpster, telling myself I needed to rest before returning home, but why was I doing it behind a container of trash?

My old hoodie wasn't very warm, having been washed countless times in laundromats, often late at night. I pulled out a chocolate bar and took a bite, enjoying the teeth-decaying flood of sugar. But I froze mid-chew as a door opened, the one for Flint's private use, and I caught a whiff of his distinctive cologne.

I squinted because he always wore black, and in the dark, against the backdrop of La Luna Noir, I couldn't make him out. But his security detail had to be there. I held my breath, waiting for footsteps, the car door to open and slam. But the footfalls continued, across the alleyway. What the fuck? Why would he be tossing garbage in

the dumpster when he had people to do that for him?

My pounding heart blocked out any noise apart from the footsteps. I counted them as they came closer. One, two, three, while the chocolate melted on my tongue, the sweetness having turned bitter.

He stopped, and while I couldn't make him out, he was so close I could hear his long, slow, deep breaths.

"What are you doing here, Tony?"

I must have imagined he said my name. No way could he have known I was hiding in the alley.

"Tony?"

Damn, wishing I could slither away like the snake etched on his skin, I heaved myself up. His shadowy form towered over me, and I held up the candy wrapper.

"I needed somewhere to toss my trash."

He sighed. "Go home." He turned and walked away, taking something of mine with him. Not my heart. Nope. That was firmly intact in my chest.

"I was going to return your clothes."

His dark form paused. "Okay, but there was no need. They weren't mine."

Right. They belonged to some other kidnap victim. An unfamiliar emotion bubbled inside me, sliding and creeping into my veins. It was kind of like jealousy when I saw a former boyfriend with his new partner. But that wasn't this. It couldn't be. This was

the guy who was considering killing me. And kept me in his basement.

But if it wasn't jealousy, what was it?

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I walked out and was hit by his scent. The same scent I'd dreamed about every minute since he left.

He came for you, for us! My wolf was alert, having been lethargic since Tony walked out the door and had been pestering me to go get him.

How many days has it been?

Four. My beast was good at keeping track of time.

Are you sure? Not fourteen or forty or four hundred?

Find him! He'd had enough of the math and wanted to be with our mate.

Tony was close by, my keen eyesight telling me the only place he could be hiding was near the dumpster. Hoping he wasn't in the dumpster, but I'd welcome him even if he stank of rotten fish.

You would? Ewww!

Hush, I told my beast as I walked toward it. I almost paused and took deep breaths, while his intoxicating fragrance filled my lungs, but couldn't stop, not when I was close enough to touch him.

He answered me with a ridiculous excuse about trash. Those four days hadn't affected his sass, thank gods, but his wounds were healing.

“You shouldn’t be out here in the middle of the night. You never know who you might meet.”

“Oh noes. What if a mobster kidnapped me and locked me in his basement? I’d better skedaddle home this instant.”

I laughed, I couldn’t help it. Despite my heartache, a possible threat to our business and to me as Alpha—not that we’d identified one, but my spidey senses were tingling, and Emilio had men tailing both Foley and Sewell—and me not paying attention to work, my mate’s silliness lifted my mood.

“Sounds crazy, right? That’d never happen.” He tossed a wrapper in the dumpster and brushed something off his hands.

“I’ll drive you home.”

“Your place or mine?” he quipped before sniggering, probably a nervous reaction.

“Yours.”

He took a step toward me, a faint illumination from the streetlight caressing the curve of his cheek. “I don’t want you knowing where I live.”

“I know exactly where you live, Tony,” I snapped and regretted it.

“Of course you do,” he huffed. “Fine. Drop me at home. I’ll give you the clothes.”

After telling my security detail the address, I drove through the empty streets. taking quick glances at him as he sat beside me. He wasn’t huddled and hunched over which I took as a positive sign.

“Found someone to replace me?”

“That I can never do.” I’d probably said too much, but the last days without him, I’d been lost, going through the motions of work while my heart yearned for him. I slept in the basement, in the sheets he’s used, his scent massaging the loneliness just a little.

“So you’re out of the kidnapping business?”

“I didn’t say that.” Even if he did grow to love me, the issue of us marrying our principles, and our moral compasses leading us on the same path, were close to zero.

I pulled up outside his building, trying to think of an excuse to get him to stay, but knowing as I did days ago, I had to let him make up his own mind.

“I’ll get them, but they haven’t been washed.” He didn’t move.

“I prefer them that way.” That sounded a bit icky and a lot creepy, but I’d said it. Too late to take it back.

He paused, his elbow on the armrest. “Is that a fetish? Sniffing someone’s dirty clothes?”

I rested both hands on the steering wheel, stopping myself from leaning over and kissing him. “Nope.”

He made no move to get out. “You owe me an explanation.”

“About the clothes?” I didn’t want to discuss the stupid clothes, but if us talking kept him in the car longer, I’d describe in detail how I’d wrap them around myself while I slept.



“Everything. The bite on my shoulder, the mate thing, you sleeping in the basement. And how you did the trick with the fur and the snout. That scared the crap outta me.” Filtered light from outside shone on his face, and as he turned his head, shadows played a game of tag with the light.

“Now?” I’d prefer to enjoy a meal with him, but that was probably out of the question.

He rummaged around in his pack. “You provide the entertainment, and I have refreshments. Chips, nuts, or candy?”

I took the chips and yanked the packet open; its splitting was the same sound my heart made since Tony left. But as I shoved my hand in the packet, he did the same. It rustled and his fingers brushed against mine. Laughter bubbled out of him, and I wished we were lying in the grass near my medium-sized-ass pool, his head on my shoulder.

He grabbed a bunch of chips while I took one. Perhaps our chip-taking habit reflected our personalities. Tony jumped into life with both feet, arms wide open while questioning everything, whereas I ate one at a time, careful not to spill any crumbs.

My wolf groaned, saying, They’re just chips!

We both bit into the snacks at the same time, the crackling a contrast to the laughter and rustling.

“Okay, shoot.” A look of horror passed over his features, and he shoved out both hands, placing them on my hip, but not touching the gun. “No, don’t.” He’d had his hands on me before, mostly in anger. But this time he didn’t remove them. “Oops. I’ve put salt and barbeque seasoning over your jacket and shirt.

“Can’t have that,” I joked, and we shared a glance. Maybe, just maybe, we could be something to one another other than mafia shifter and human or kidnapper and kidnaped. “I could take them off.”

He withdrew his hands. Fuck, I’d ruined the moment.

“Sorry, bad joke.” I dug into the chip bag, hoping he wasn’t going to rush out of the car. “What did you want to know?”

“I don’t suppose you’ve found out any more about my father.”

“A little. From what I understand it was a terrible accident. In the waste management plant.”

“That’s what my dad said too.”

I left it at that as the stories were vague, with both Emilio and Dad giving conflicting accounts told to them by both my grandfather and father.

“Fine. Let’s start with mates. I gather it doesn’t refer to friendship.”

I had two choices. I could lie or be truthful, but Tony didn’t have enough background information to process mateship ‘cause he didn’t know shifters existed. How could I tell him he was the one for me?

I decided to do neither.

“You think we are so very different, and in many ways we are, but I also lost my alpha father too early. Not like you with the only memories provided by your dad, but as the eldest son, I carried on the family business while helping my dad and brothers grieve.”

He licked around his mouth, and I squeezed my thighs together as my cock swelled. It would be so easy to pull him toward me and lick the seasoning from his lips.

Do it! My wolf was fed up with the shifter/human conversation.

He placed a hand over his mating mark. “Okay, let’s start with the easy stuff. Why this? It’ll leave a scar so it’ll be part of me until my dying day.”

My wolf whimpered, not wanting to think of our mate going to the goddess.

“It’s bound up with mating. Our kind are a little different to many people on this planet.” I was being deliberately vague, but he wouldn’t accept me mumbling about our differences for long. He’d want answers.

“Yes, because most people on Earth are good and honest. They don’t kill for a living or rip people off.”

I sat, allowing the words to percolate in the small space between us. I should defend the pack and our way of life. We didn’t kill indiscriminately, and we were more Robin Hood than the Sheriff of Nottingham. Sorta. That was how I thought of it. But we did expect loyalty, and the punishment was swift if we didn’t get it. We looked after our own and cleaned up others’ messes.

But anything I said would sound like an excuse.

“It’s not like that.” I looked out the window at a paper bag being blown by the wind. That was me with Tony at this moment. I was powerless, my longing for him leaving me limp and battered.

The chips were finished, and I took out my frustration on the crinkly packet, scrunching it into a tiny ball.

“Wow! What did that poor packet ever do to you?” He snatched it out of my hands, but I took a chance and my fingers latched onto his. His gaze met mine, and we sat, our fingers entwined, not moving or speaking. His chest heaved, and his scent changed, just a little. Frustration mingled with... I didn’t want to put a name to it, fearing I’d jinx whatever this was, though my wolf jabbered in my head that this was the moment, instinct would tell him what we were to one another.

“I have no right to ask this, but I need a favor.” Usually when I asked for a favor, money was involved.

“Go on.” He didn’t pull away.

“Everything you’re confused about will be explained if you let me show you something.”

Tony’s eyes swept over my crotch before studying my face. “Even my father’s death?”

I shrugged. “Probably not that, but it will help you to understand who he was.”

“Fine.” He peered over the back seat. “Is whatever it is in the car?”

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“No. It’s related to what I showed you last time you were in the car.”

His head edged closer to mine, and I didn’t pull away. I tasted his breath and longed for my tongue to be inside him. My eyes blinked rapidly as he fixed his gaze on me and parted his lips. The tip of his tongue poked out. My cock swelled, leaving little room in my pants, the zipper pressing on the shaft.

I ignored the discomfort, concentrating on Flint’s lips, and wondering if we kissed would it hurt my lip. When we last met, he was my kidnapper. So what was this? Who were we to one another and was I tempted by the undercurrent of danger that he brought with him? I was apprehensive of what might happen next.

The air in the car heated up as we both panted, our chests heaving. My body was saying, “Yes,” as he leaned in to me, his lips a hair’s breadth from mine. Goosebumps flared on my skin, rippling over me, their spiky heads making me shiver.

“Tony.” He extended a hand toward me. I didn’t flinch, and he brushed hair from my brow while I enjoyed the warmth of his fingertips.

“Flint.”

A garbage truck beeped at a car blocking its path, the noise freaked me out, and I pulled away.

“Fuck that shit. I should freaking well send Emilio after those guys,” he bellowed.

He'd broken the spell, and I picked up my pack, needing to get out of this small space.

"I'm sorry for my outburst."

That was a first.

"Please, Tony. I beg you. Hear me out."

A faint gray dawn edged around the buildings as people jogged past and others walked their dogs. Early-bird workers tucked their briefcases under their arms while chatting on the phone and drinking their first coffee of the day.

"I can show you what I need to and have you back in an hour."

Sixty minutes with Flint. No handcuffs, no gun pointed at my face. I could do that.

"Fine, but no weird shit, and I need a coffee." I rolled my tongue over my teeth. "And some mouthwash."

"Stinky breath doesn't matter to me."

"Really?" I leaned back and studied him. "So if Emilio got in, breathing garlic in your face, it wouldn't bother you?"

A smile tugged at his lips. "I'd tell him to get the fuck away and brush his damned teeth."

I grinned. "So why'd you lie?" I nibbled a nail and waited.

"Didn't. Can we not talk about Emilio, please."

“Fine,” I agreed. “He’s not my favorite person.” I rubbed my bottom lip that was almost healed.

“He’s a good man, and remember, he knew your father.”

“Getting back to foul breath, whose would you put up with?” I was daring him to say what I thought he was going to say. “Your dad? Brothers? That ass who stood up at the meeting?”

“No, nope, and no.”

“Then who?” This reminded me of a kids song, one of those never-ending ones. Or was it a beer-drinking ditty? “You have to spill or I won’t come with you.”

“Someone I met recently. We didn’t meet under the best of circumstances. This person really annoys me part of the time. I want to shake some sense into them because they have no self-preservation skills.”

Wow! He really said it. Or almost. I wanted to hear the rest. “And the other part?” My harsh breathing punctuated the stillness in the car, and my heart was thudding so loudly it sounded like the pile driver in the empty allotment next to my building.

“No matter how stinky his breath was, I’d smother his face and every nook and cranny on his body with kisses for now and always.”

My mouth opened, slowly, dropping lower until my chin touched my chest. Mixed emotions welled up inside me. If he was talking about me, what the freaking hell? He kidnapped me. But but but... his words were so heartfelt, and there was a tremor in his voice, as if he was barely containing his passion. My heart constricted.

But what if he was thinking of someone else? The green monster reared its head, and

I clenched my fist and pounded it into my palm, wanting to punch the guy, whoever he was.

“Oh.”

He turned on the ignition and pulled out without looking, his security detail scrambling to catch us. I would have snarked that I’d like to be alive at the end of the trip, but his words were zinging around my head. When I finally focused on where we were headed, we were outside the city, and I guessed on the road to his place.

Unlike the first and second times I’d arrived, I noted the gate clanging shut behind us and didn’t dread what lay ahead. The security guards appeared and were swallowed by the undergrowth as we passed. The driveway, the bushes shaped like animals. I half expected it to look different, but it had only been four days.

Flint didn’t park in the garage but left the car in the front of his home. I leaped out, pleased I could unlock my own door, and he pointed to the woods at the back of the house.

“You’ll keep your promise, right?” The woods were scary.

“Absolutely.”

We walked in silence through the brush, dead leaves cracking under our feet, and our presence disturbed a flock of birds on a high branch. They flew off, their wings creating shadows on the forest floor.

Flint paused at a fallen log and invited me to sit while he stood a ways away. He unbuttoned his jacket and dropped it on the ground before addressing me.

“You saw something in me that day of the meeting.”



I nodded. I got the feeling this was going to be a magic show and I was the audience. Why we had to be in the woods was odd, but I was willing to find out.

“Long ago...” His voice trailed away, and he pursed his lips. I was enjoying the view of his narrow hips and the significant bulge at his crotch. “No, that’s not right. The people in La Luna Noir...”

“I’ve always wanted to correct the name.”

“Not now, Tony. I’ll explain later.”

That was one of his most-used words. Later.

I’d find out later. He’d tell me later. All would be revealed later.

I pressed my knees together and rested my hands in my lap. “Over to you.”

“My people are different to you.”

“I didn’t need to traipse out here for you to tell me that. You and your people,” I put the last two words in air quotes, “are mobsters, and I’m not.”

He sighed. “Okay. No more talk. I’ll show you.”

I clapped. Where was popcorn when I needed it? I should have brought the snacks from the car.

Flint toed off his shoes and yanked off his socks. Maybe the soles of his feet were hardened, but there were big owies on the forest floor. But his hands went to his belt, and I recalled horror stories where kids were beaten with a man’s belt. I wiped my clammy palms on my pants as a feeling of unease expanded in my tummy.

But if he was going to drop his pants, I'd stay where I was and not take off back to the house before getting a look at what was underneath.

Oh gods, they puddled onto the ground and he was wearing briefs, not boxers. Tight briefs that left nothing to the imagination. I swallowed hard and swallowed a second time as he removed his holster. That he treated with reverence, and he laid it carefully on the ground. Next came his shirt. Instead of undoing every button, he ripped the shirt apart, and the buttons tumbled onto the ground, probably lost forever.

"I'm not looking for those."

"Okay," he said so softly I almost didn't make out the words.

He stood, clad only in his briefs, and I wanted to chant, "Take them off. Take them off," but I couldn't wrap my head around why he was doing this.

"I won't touch you," he said.

I gulped, wondering what he was going to do, but he slid his underwear over his thighs, and I leaped to my feet, a fist in my mouth as his huge dick bounded out and pointed at me. It was a thing of beauty, pink and hard and nestled in a patch of dark curly hair.

What was I supposed to do with that? Look away? Tell him how gorgeous it was? Stroke it? Run like hell? Maybe all of the above?

But the pink dick vanished along with anything that resembled Flint or a human being. There were big pointed ears, fur, a snout, and a tail. Not a dog but a wolf. A magnificent gray, white, and black wolf. This was the creature he'd shown me in the car to scare me, shut me up, or both.

I rubbed my eyes with my fists, but the wolf was still there. I blinked. Nope, still there. “Can you speak?” If this was a fairytale come to life, we could have a chat.

But the creature padded toward me, and I backed up until my legs bashed into the log. “Don’t come any closer.” I wagged a finger at the wild animal. While I didn’t know how to fend off a wolf, I was pretty sure waving a finger in its face wasn’t it.

My head was crammed with ideas, images of Flint from my dreams and the wolf’s fangs which were dripping with saliva.

“Flint,” I called. “Come back. I’ve seen enough. I need you. There’s a big bad wolf.”

The wolf snarled. “Okay, he’s not bad, he’s just a big oversized puppy who wants to play.”

The wolf nodded and vanished, the fur whizzing past my face as the animal turned into Flint. Human brains weren’t prepared for people who became animals, and I couldn’t fathom what or who he was. The only reference I had was a werewolf.

No! He was never going to kill me but turn me instead.

“I thought your kind only appeared at the full moon.”

He took a step toward me, hand outstretched, his cock still at attention. “I’m not a werewolf. They don’t exist.”

“Ha!” There was rustling in the bushes caused by my shriek and more birds took off. “You turned into a wolf and I’m supposed to believe you about werewolves. Also, stay back. I don’t want to be bitten.”

Shoot. The bite on my shoulder. I rubbed it.

“It’s too late. You already did.”

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I caught him as he sagged and his eyes rolled back in his head.

Fuck! Now he'd seen my beast—or both beasts if I counted the one in my pants—but we were no closer to finding each other because he thought I bayed at the moon and turned into a predator once a month.

My wolf didn't understand werewolves and urged me to look after Tony.

Luckily the household staff were still on vacation 'cause I'd extended their holiday beyond this week. I hadn't wanted them to remove Tony's scent, and I needed to be alone when I was at home.

I pulled on my briefs, slung on the holster, and flung the remaining clothes over my shoulder before scooping Tony up and striding back to the house.

I placed him in my bed on the second floor, and he stirred, though he didn't open his eyes. After pulling on a robe, I heated up chicken soup and brought it to the bedroom. I stood away from the bed with my back to the window, not wanting to scare him by being in his face when he opened his eyes.

My wolf sensed Tony was awake before I did.

His heart is beating rapidly, and he's sweating.

My mate jerked his eyes open and stared around the room.

“Not the basement. I've gone up in the world.” He grabbed two pillows and stuffed

them behind his back. He grunted and punched them into shape before leaning back and folding his arms. “This must be your lair.”

I had to unravel this shit before we could get into my story.

“Not a lair. Just my bedroom.”

“Right. The basement is your lair.” He fingered the sheets. “No handcuffs?”

“I can’t control how you think or feel. But let’s get one thing clear.” My voice was louder than I intended, but we had to get past this freaking werewolf situation. “I am not a werewolf. They do not exist.” I paced the floor, the words erupting with every step. “I’m a shifter and?—”

“What’s that smell?” he interrupted.

He was doing it again. Avoiding what he didn’t want to think about.

“Is this for me?” He pointed to the soup. “I can’t have my world turned upside down on an empty tummy.” He eyed the robe I was wearing. “And you’re dressed. Hmmm. I enjoyed your little show.”

“Little,” I growled. “No one uses that word when talking about me.”

“Ouch!” He giggled. “Did I puncture your ego? Sorry, I didn’t mean to. What you showed me was amazing. Like nothing I’ve ever seen before.” His impish grin had me coughing to disguise a chuckle before placing the tray on his lap. He slurped the soup. “Go on.”

I related our history and how centuries ago we came out of the forest and began living amongst humans. “Outwardly, we are indistinguishable.”

“So am I one of the few people who didn’t know about shifters?”

I sat at the end of the bed. “No, it’s against our law to reveal our identity to humans. In ancient times humans were aware of us, but because of discrimination, we chose to hide our identity.” And now they’d forgotten we ever existed. Faint memories of shifters was possibly how the werewolf legend began.

He took a mouthful of soup and it dribbled over his chin. My shifter reflexes had me grabbing the napkin, and our eyes met as I dabbed his chin before the liquid could drop onto his clothes or the bedding.

“Tell me that wasn’t magic.”

“Shifter reflexes are much quicker and stronger than a human’s.”

He put down the spoon. “What else can you do? Fly? Become invisible?”

“I’m a wolf shifter. Wolves don’t fly. You’d need a bird or a dragon for that.”

“Dragon,” he screeched, and the tray wobbled before I rescued it. “This is so exciting.” He munched a piece of toast, and I ignored the crumbs tumbling onto the duvet. I hated crumbs in the bed, but I held my tongue as my Tony was under my covers. “So why did you show me your wolf if it’s not allowed. Why am I so special?”

Once again this was crunch time. I could tell him he was my mate, but while he didn’t loathe me as much as when I’d kidnapped him, we weren’t best buddies.

“La Luna Noir is our pack’s name, and I’m the head, the Alpha.”

“Head honcho, huh.” He finished the toast and wiped his mouth. But his hand froze

as he patted around his mouth. “The pack... the group I met... they’re all shifters.”

“That’s right.”

“My father was a part of the pack.”

He was so close, and I could almost see the cogs in his brain whirring.

“My father was a shifter too.”

“He was.”

Tony lifted the covers and peered underneath. He pulled off his hoodie and examined his belly. “So what does that make me? Have I got a wolf inside me? Here, boy. Come to Tony.”

What is he doing?my wolf sniffed. Make him stop.

He’s not trying to be offensive. He doesn’t know what’s happening, and he might be in shock.

“You’re human.” I explained if he had a beast, they would have met at the onset of adolescence.

He made a face. “I’m a little disappointed.” He pulled the bedding up to his chin before tapping his head. “I’m trying to piece together everything I couldn’t understand at the meeting. You said I was your mate.”

I couldn’t hide behind excuses or half truths or turn the conversation in another direction. “In the shifter community, some alphas and omegas are fated.”



Tony slid down in the bed and huddled under the covers. “Sounds bad.”

“No. They’re fated to spend their lives together, and they recognize one another by their scent. It’s a life-long relationship. It’s like marriage but the bond can’t be broken.”

He flung off the covers and bounded out of bed. “You and me? I’m the one fate chose for you?” he scoffed.

“Yes.”

“So a human with a shifter father who was part of the mafia is the shifter mafia boss’s one and only?” His voice rose and his hands fluttered in the air.

I took hold of his hands. “The universe chose for me, but you don’t have to abide by that decision. You can walk away.”

He paced over the rug, his bare feet hardly making a sound. “But we don’t like one another, and you kill people for a living.”

Gods, we were back to that. Even if I detailed what we shifters had suffered, he would never understand. To Tony there was black and white and no gray area in between.

He slid his shirt down, exposing his mark. “And what’s the purpose of this?”

“It’s the mating mark, a sign to every shifter you are my mate.”

He stomped over to me, shoving a finger in my face. “You took me as a mate without my permission.”

“Yes, and I’m sorry. It was to protect you. You are not bound by it, though I am. You can walk away and never see me again. You can marry. Have a family. Live a wonderful life.”

I choked and had to turn away until Tony padded over and put a hand on my arm. My wolf squeed, thinking we’d kiss and have babies, but I couldn’t allow Tony to feel sorry for me and agree to be my mate out of guilt.

“Oh, Flint. I’m so sorry. But maybe there’s another mate for you out there somewhere.”

No! Tell him no, my wolf implored me to set our mate straight.

“Perhaps.” No, that wasn’t happening. “I’d better get you home.” I had to be at the office for a meeting in a few hours, and I couldn’t allow the turmoil in my private life to mess with pack business yet again.

“I can stay a while because someone got me a month off from college.”

I took hold of his shoulders and swung him around. “Don’t do this.”

“Do what?” He opened his eyes wide as if he had no clue what I was talking about.

“Feel sorry for me.”

“Listen, finding out I live among people who have an animal inside them is a lot.” He studied the almost-empty soup bowl. “I need more food.” He charged out the door and tore over the landing. “So many rooms for one person.” His thundering down the stairs brought the house to life, and I imagined our children doing the same.

I craved his presence at my side, and I should’ve been pleased he was hanging

around, but it would be that much harder when he left.

“Hurry up, Flint. I’m starving. Ravenous even.”

Me too but not for food. I’d lost all interest in eating this week, but I couldn’t blame everything on my longing for my mate. I was frazzled when Emilio had reported back about Sewell and Foley’s movements. Not that he’d discovered anything, but my insides were in knots.

Tony had his head in the fridge, giving me the perfect view of his ass. Sadly, it was encased in jeans.

“I’ve never seen you eat.” He twirled around, spots of pink on his cheeks. “What do you want?”

“You.”

He stepped back, eyes open wide as his back banged against the fridge door.

Shit! Did I say that out loud?

## Page 19

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Did he just say that? I think he did. Now what?

I was so confused, my mind flip-flopping between two columns, the yay and the nay.

Flint was an integral part of the mafia and the head of his pack. My head said there was no question we could be something to one another. That was a check mark in the nay column.

His hair curled at the front into an adorable cowlick... that was a positive, right? But me wanting to run my fingers through his hair couldn't be measured against him being head of a crime family.

My father was in the pack and friends with Flint's family, so that was a vote in favor. It had to be.

But I wasn't my father. I had no memories of him, and despite what Rudy said, he might have been a shitty guy. He must have done bad things while in La Luna Noir.

"Are we going to pretend I didn't say that?"

"I'm weighing things up." I sat at the kitchen island because I didn't want my legs to give out.

"How's that going?"

"For you? Not so good."

He dug his hands into the pockets of his robe and it parted, revealing his chest in a delicious V strip. Why the heck couldn't it part a little lower down. I'd been given the full picture in the woods, but I wouldn't say no to a second sighting. Or third or thirtieth.

Damn, I should go home and forget about how Flint's eyes crinkled at the corners when he smiled. Then there was his enticing cologne that made me weak at the knees and his big fat pink cock. I bit my lip to fend off the desire in case I did something silly.

But I had to fight back against him and his sneaky methods of bending me to his will.

"Don't do that."

He'd been staring at the floor, but his head shot up. "Do what?"

"Show me your chest. It's putting you at an unfair advantage. How would you react if I ripped my shirt off?"

He pulled the robe around him, but he couldn't hide that little smile that tugged at the corner of his mouth. "I'd say, 'More, please.'"

I studied my nails while my face burned. "Well, you haven't seen me naked, so of course you want to see more of me." I swiveled the stool so he couldn't peer at my face, worried I was getting in so deep I couldn't claw my way out. And did I want to?

"Rewind what you just said. You've seen my cock, but eying part of my chest is making you hot?"

"Huh? Did I mention the word hot? I don't think so." He was putting words in my mouth.

“But you insinuated.”

“Did not.”

“Okay.”

I glanced at him as he picked up an apple from the fruit basket. “That’s it? Okay?”

He eyed the apple and weighed it on his palm before biting it, the crunch as his teeth sliced through the silence sending a prickle of fear and also desire through me.

“I’m agreeing with you. Isn’t that what you want?”

Was it? I didn’t know what I wanted, except last night I left home and headed to the club, the place I was certain where my kidnapper would be. Who did that?

Someone who wanted to be with him, that was who.

But I wrestled with being with him. We had nothing in common and his line of work was illegal. The mafia were involved with drugs and ruined people’s lives. And yet he loved his family, what remained of it. That counted.

I shivered. While I’d been grappling with him as a gangster, a person who inhabited the criminal underworld, he’d snuck up behind me. Well, maybe not snuck, but I was distracted. He should have given me a heads-up if he and his big dick were going to be so close.

And that led my thoughts back to his cock. Did he have anything on under the robe?

“Is it hot in here all of a sudden?”

“There, you did say it.”

The marble countertop was cool to the touch when I placed both hands on it. If left to themselves, my hands might hug Flint or hold his head still while I kissed him. Or worse, fondle his gigantic dick. I lay my cheek on the marble, relishing the hardness, but my brain conjured up other hard things, and top of the list was Flint’s enormous length.

“Did biting me inject me with anything?” Please say no.

“It’s just a sign to other shifters, like a wedding ring. You are still you.”

Goosebumps lowered my temperature a tad as they scampered over my skin while my dick engorged and slick streamed from my hole. Thank gods he couldn’t smell the slick, though I might have to live on this stool or carry it around stuck to my ass for a while if the slick had soaked through my jeans and left a telltale stain.

My poor overloaded brain scrambled to process everything I’d learned, and did he say he had a better sense of smell than humans? I couldn’t recall, and I wasn’t going to ask him. Closing my eyes, I concentrated on the cool countertop and not the raging inferno inside me.

“What’s going on in that head of yours?” Flint was so close, his breath tickled the goosebumps on my skin. He must’ve been leaning over me.

“Not much.” That was a big fib.

“I thought you were hungry. Do you need a pillow instead?”

And we did a 360 and were back at starving and heat and cocks. Nope, the cocks never went away, or at least one of them. His. The image of his huge length was

embedded in my brain.

“You could do something else, you know.”

“Like this?” He placed his lips at the nape of my neck, and I shrieked and my eyes shot open.

He and his lips weren’t playing fair, but I had to expect that with a mobster. “I wasn’t talking about your mouth or any other part of you.” Not his cock. I wasn’t thinking about it. I wasn’t. “Your job. You could go straight.”

“Tony, you’ve been watching too many cop shows from the 1950s. Or maybe cowboy movies. The mafia is part of me. Even if I left La Luna Noir, I’d still do mafia business.”

I had two questions before I let go. If he didn’t answer how I wanted, I’d find the stamina to leave. I had to.

“Do you kill people at random?”

“No.”

One down and one to go. “Do you kill... kids?” I could hardly get the word out.

“Fuck no! Never! You’ve got me all wrong.”

Okay. What was wrong was him turning my brain to mush and my dick hard as a rock. I didn’t know what I was doing, but my body told me I couldn’t turn back now. Once. Just one time. I repeated it in my head to convince myself.

He peppered kisses over my skin, and as his lips swept over my flesh, a longing took



hold of me, shaking me and telling me to accept him for who he was. I wanted him, but logic told me I shouldn't. He wasn't right for me.

"You love your dad." I was still making my list, though Flint was doing his best to confuse my yay and nay columns.

He pulled away and twisted the stool so I was facing him. There was no mistaking his eyes blazing with lust. They were fixed on me, their pupils dilated. His gaze was so intense, sweat formed on my upper lip, and I squirmed as slick surged from my hole. Flint's flushed cheeks and his deep, husky breaths sent shivers up and down my spine.

"You... you wanna talk about my dad? Now?" He traced a finger along my jaw. I caught it and shoved it in my mouth, my tongue lapping and sucking it, and I savored the first taste of him.

"I was just adding up your good points."

His head drooped, and he sighed. "We can't do this unless you're certain." He moved away, and I missed him already. His scent, that damned snake tat, and his scruff. My heart constricted, and I grimaced. Was this how a person responded to true love? I thought of my dad and how he lost my father, though he found love again with my stepdad.

I longed to be with Flint, and maybe it was the whiff of danger that I was responding to. My head told me to be wary, but my heart said jump in. He was my... something. It didn't have a name. Mate? No, I couldn't get my head around that. But no matter where he was or what he was doing, nothing would change how I felt about him, even if we couldn't be together.

I leaped off the stool and flung myself at him, jumping into his arms and wrapping

my legs around his torso. I clung to him, wanting to stay pressed against him and never letting him go.

“Tony, don’t?—”

I cut him off with my lips on his. Gods, I’d imagined kissing him, but it didn’t measure up to reality. My body melded with his as I captured his bottom lip and nibbled. He moaned, and my tongue slipped between his lips. I was inside him as I hoped he’d be inside me. Soon. In the next five minutes.

Flint grunted into my mouth, his tongue dueling with mine, his breath and saliva mingling with my own as I pulled out and gazed at him. Saliva coated his lips, and his eyes were almost bloodshot. Maybe that was what passion looked like. I’d never experienced it before. Not like this.

“Are you sure?”

I put a finger to his lips and ground against his cock. “Take me to bed.”

“You tired?”

I snorted and rested my head on his shoulder. “No, I need that cock inside me.”

But I wondered if he was too big?

Was that possible?

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I bounded up the stairs two at a time, Tony's unique scent filling my nostrils as I hugged him close.

His mouth was on my throat, nibbling, licking, and finally biting, his human teeth not even grazing my skin. I shivered. As a shifter, I was used to pain, but this delicious tingling snaking over me threatened to be my undoing.

"I like the way you smell." He put his nose at the base of my throat and inhaled. "It's not cologne, is it?"

"It's all me." I managed to get the words out as heated blood surged into my veins and my dick, swelling it further. My length was so hard, I longed to shove it in his hole. But I told myself I had to go slow. This wasn't a wham, bam, thank you, but I'll never see you again. This was my mate, and if today was the only time we had sex, it had to be memorable for Tony. My needs were secondary.

I lay him gently on the bed, wanting to tear off his clothes, but I slid my robe and briefs off so once again my rigid cock was aimed at him.

He raised one brow and got up on his elbows, my ego inflating as he eyed my length. "Are you going to put that in me?" He licked around his mouth while his voice trembled, but unlike when I'd kidnapped him, I was pretty sure it was lust, not bravado.

"I am, as long as it's okay with you." I needed his permission every step of the way. Any miscommunication might ruin this for him.

He nodded and tore off his shirt. His peaked nipples were asking to be licked and suckled.

“Can I do that? Please.”

He smirked. “Go ahead, but I have to warn you I’m so wet. Slick is streaming from my hole.”

I folded my arms and angled my cock so it was still pointed at him, enjoying his reaction as he stared at it. “Don’t believe you.”

One brow shot up as he lifted himself up and shoved a hand in his pants. Damn, that should have been me, gliding, stroking, fondling, and finger-fucking.

He held up his hand and wiggled his fingers, drenched in slippery, sticky slick. It leaked over his palm and dribbled down his arm. I needed a taste. Tony gave me a come-hither look and crooked his finger. I crawled onto the bed, reminding myself not to make any sudden movements that might unnerve him. He had just seen my wolf, after all.

Thrusting out my tongue, I captured the droplets of slick on his forearm and lapped them, the musky taste flooding my mouth. My heart sped up as I greedily licked and sucked, making my way from his wrist to his fingertips.

Smacking my lips, I pulled away. His mouth was half open, his breathing harsh as his chest heaved. “That was one of the hottest things ever. Are you going to eat me?”

Was that an invitation? “Putting my lips on your hole and thrusting my tongue inside you? Yes, please.”

His mouth gaped, and he whimpered before taking my hand and undid his zipper.

“Let’s start with your fingers and then cock. Tongue will come later.”

I wanted that and my mouth wrapped around his shaft and to be inside him, but I let him set the pace.

Tony got on his side and slipped my hand inside his jeans and underwear. He coated my fingers in slick, but instead of plunging them into his hole, he removed them and offered them to me. But as I leaned forward, he snatched them away and licked one.

My nostrils flared, and I growled when he glided his tongue along my sticky finger, tantalizingly slowly before swallowing it inch by inch. He pulled it out and shoved it in again. I removed it and licked around his mouth, savoring him before pulling away.

“Wanna undress me now?”

I hauled off his jeans and gazed at the hard ridge under his briefs. I’d had my hand on his bulge that first night, and I’d dreamed of uncovering it multiple times. But now that it was a reality, I paused as my heart hammered in my chest.

“I do.” I walked my fingers over his midriff. Gripping the elasticized waistband, I eased it over his hips, desperate to catch a glimpse of his cock. It bounded out, slapping me in the face. Tony giggled, and I ran my tongue around the tip, shoving it in the slit as he rocked his hips and moaned. Skimming my lips over the shaft, I gripped the base of his cock and pumped twice.

My mate yelped and gripped my hair, twisting strands around his fingers, while raking his other hand over my scalp.

He lifted his hips and shimmied off his briefs to his thighs, and I tossed them and his jeans on the floor.

“How do you want to do this?” My voice was husky as desire pooled in my belly.

Tony’s self-satisfied expression gave me pause. He was about to give me a hard time. “Usually the cock goes in the hole.”

I bared my teeth, a combination of lust and aggravation hovered just below the surface. “Tony!”

He fluttered his eyelashes and grinned. “Yes.”

Tired of going slow, I crawled between his legs. “I was asking if you wanted to get on all fours or stay as you are?”

His eyes grew wide. “I want to watch.” He spread his legs wider, and I put a pillow under his hips. But he shivered, and I hesitated.

“I can adjust the temperature.”

He lifted himself up and grabbed my jaw, twisting my head to look at him. “These goosebumps,” he patted his belly, “are anticipation.” He poked his tongue in and out. “Now hurry. I was promised sex.”

I nestled between his legs, and the head of my cock nudged his thigh. He gasped, taking it in his hand and tapping the pre-cum with his fingertip. I shivered and leaned over him, my lips only inches from his belly button, and stuck my tongue in it.

His body jolted, and he giggled. “That tickles.” I lapped a trail up his chest and around one nipple, grazing it with my teeth before kissing over his throat and along his jaw. My core temperature rose as lust percolated in my veins, the desire to claim Tony foremost in my mind. I’d marked him, but he was mine in name—or mark—only.

Tony drew my length to his hole, while pressing his thighs on his chest. I pushed in, the head sliding in a ways. He was so tight. I waited, giving him time to adjust to my girth, and we panted together, our breath mingling.

“Eyes on me, Tony.”

He blinked rapidly, and I slid into him, watching his expression as I filled him. His mouth formed a perfect O when my cock sank into his channel. My heart thudded so loudly, I expected Tony to comment on it. But he lazily swayed his hips, forcing my length deeper inside him.

I ached to thrust into him, to skewer his body with my own, but reminded myself he was my equal, my mate, the one I loved and desired above all else. I pulled out, and Tony fixed his gaze on me and gripped the bedding, his knuckles white as his fingertips disappeared in the thick duvet.

“Fuck me, Flint,” he panted. “Fuck me with that thick, beautiful cock.”

I plunged into him, and he raised his hips, the slick that eased me in spilling onto both of us, smearing our bodies.

The soft drone of the air-conditioning formed a backdrop, along with the pungent aroma of slick as our bodies slapped against one another. My breathing sped up, and I thrust inside him, studying his reaction, but at the same time, desire weighed on my eyelids, forcing them closed, the darkness amplifying the longing inside me.

But Tony flipped his legs over my shoulders, and my eyes snapped open. He batted his lashes and wriggled his ass, igniting a hunger deep inside me. I slid my hands under his butt, removing the pillow, and he gasped.

“Oh gods, that’s even better.”

My fingers pressed into the soft flesh on his ass as my cock claimed him. We both panted and moaned while Tony twisted his body, sending pleasurable vibrations through me.

“Harder,” he begged as he writhed on the mattress, tiny mewls escaping his lips. He seized my wrist, his fingers pressing into my tattoo, while he tossed his head from side to side. I removed my hand from his ass and gripped his ankle, while turning my head and nuzzling it.

He yelped, telling me he was ticklish, and I stopped, tucking the memory away for the future.

I fucked him hard as he’d asked, each lunge bringing a fresh wave of raw physical desire threading through me, rocking my body and mind. This wasn’t just sex; it was love.

I tamped down the sensations that were building toward a climax. Tony had to come first.

“Flint, you fuck really well,” he yelled as he pressed his legs on my shoulders and bucked his hips in time with my thrusts. “I’m going to pump my cock now, okay?”

I managed a grunt. Gods, he didn’t know what he was doing to me as he wrapped his hand around his sizable shaft and pumped while his saucy grin snuck into my heart and held it tight.

Stroking his skin, I plowed into him, my eyes now closed, relishing the ripples of pleasure surging over my body as Tony repeated my name, his voice rising each time.

“I’m... yeah... I’m going to... I’m going to...” He lifted his hips, his body tensing while his cock throbbed and cum sprayed over him.



His pants punctuated the air as my length rammed into him. My body jerked and spasmed as cum spurted into him, and my knot swelled and claimed him.

He was mine, but I was his. Forever.

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

My eyes were closed, but my sense of smell was working overtime.

A multitude of scents assaulted my nose, and I tried to separate them. An aroma wafted off the duvet covering me. Fabric softener? There was a hint of sweat. It must have been hot last night. But there was an unmistakable smell of slick. Mine. And an overarching scent of him: Flint.

Keeping my eyes tightly closed, I ran over the events of whatever day it was. It'd been early morning when we arrived at the house. Maybe it was still today and not tomorrow.

Inconsequential thoughts pushed to the front of my mind, because I was scared that if I went over what happened after I told Flint to take me to bed, I'd regret my decision. Not because it wasn't the most mind-blowing sex and not because he hadn't been the most considerate lover, not because he had a big dick and not because he was a shifter and not because I'd developed feelings for him.

Ahhhh. I shoved the covers over my head. Developed feelings? Who said that? That was for people who had a one-night stand and one person in the couple wanted more.

This wasn't that. Flint had captured my heart and taken it prisoner, much like how we met. But unlike being kidnapped, now I was a willing participant.

Flint was a mobster, and while I didn't know the ins and outs of his business, unsavory would be the least of it. But being part of the mafia was in my blood, and while I had no shifter traits, I must have shifter DNA from Antonio.

If I hadn't been Flint's mate, he would have killed me or handed me to Emilio to do it. How could I love someone like that? Love wasn't blind, and I couldn't pretend the man who fucked me senseless and whispered how much he loved me didn't have a day job that was about evading the law and hurting people.

What were the odds of a relationship surviving between people like us?

I rolled onto my tummy and pulled a pillow over my head.

And where was Flint? Did having sex with your mate dull the mating instinct and he was off carousing at the club? Not that I'd heard of him or seen any evidence he did that, but I was just human college student Tony, and it was hard to understand what he saw in me.

The door opened, and I hunkered down. He had staff. Was this them? If I pretended to be asleep, maybe they'd leave. But Flint's scent announced his presence, along with something yummy. Or something else yummy, because Flint was delicious rolled up with tasty and wrapped in scrumptious.

A warm naked body slid under the covers, and my body reacted. Damn! Lips were at my ear, followed by cool minty breath.

"I've got something for you."

"Oh really. Is it hard or soft?"

He brushed something very hard against my bare bottom, and I couldn't help giggling. Gods, he was so gorgeous.

"What if I want something soft?"

“Pfft.” He nibbled my ear. “I only do hard.”

I shivered and raised one leg, hoping he was going to put his cock in me again.

“But do eggs count as soft? I’ve made some.”

“Didn’t know you could cook.”

“I’m a man of many talents.”

Damn, he ruined the moment and brought up my dilemma. There was Flint, the alpha who I adored. Could I use that word? Yeah, I could. But I freaking adored only one side of him.

I rolled over, and he pulled me close, our cocks pressed together while he nibbled the soft skin on my throat and kissed the scar on my shoulder; my mating mark. If I’d planned to have a serious discussion, I’d made a huge mistake.

His fingers danced over my skin, twirling around my nipple before using feathery strokes to reach my belly button. He shoved his hand between us and traced lower over my happy trail.

“I’m fine with a bit of fucking before I go home.”

His hand froze. Damn, what had I said? Maybe he objected to me using the word fucking, thinking I was a delicate flower. Nah, I’d disproved that theory the moment we met.

“I have time, but I have to prep for class tomorrow.” I’d missed a week with my so-called accident.

“You can’t.”

“Don’t worry. I’ll say I had a miraculous recovery.” I grabbed his length and spread my legs.

“This is your home now. We’re mated. And you’re the Alpha Omega. Your college days are over.”

My body bristled with anger, and I whacked Flint with a pillow and leaped out of bed, searching for my clothes. “You did not just say that!” I glowered at him as he lay, hands behind his head, reminding me of medieval paintings in an art gallery.

“I believe I did.”

“Two things.” I held up two fingers. “Mated we may be, but I never agreed to any of this or said I’d live in this... this... McMansion.”

“I can have it redecorated. Just tell me how and it’ll be done.”

I flung another pillow at him, but his wolfy reflexes had him catching it. So not fair. I wished there were a way to turn those off. “That’s not the point. You’re making decisions for moi.”

“Moi?” He quirked a brow and smirked.

“You are the most infuriating person I’ve ever met.”

He forked a mouthful of scrambled eggs between his oh so kissable lips. “That’s my line. You can’t have it.”

“And secondly, I’m a grad student, and I intend to graduate.” I put the last word in air

quotes. “To do that, I need to attend class sometimes.”

“You’re the Alpha Omega.”

“Does that come with a badge?” I peered under the bed. “Can’t see it.”

Flint lowered his gaze to my cock. Having this discussion would be better if I wasn’t buck-ass naked and my dick wasn’t bobbing about. I grabbed a pillow and stuck it in front of my crotch.

“Now I’ll have some of those eggs and I’ll mosey on home.” I’d never agreed to live with him or even be his mate, though waking up beside him every morning would be a perk. One tick in the yay column. “We can talk later and come up with a plan.”

“You’d need a bodyguard at college.”

“I’ve managed to survive this far all by myself. I do not need a nanny.”

“Oh yeah? How’d that work out at the club? Huh? Huh? You almost got your head blown off.”

“By you!” Grrrr! “A slight miscalculation.” I stomped into the attached bathroom and paused. Sometime in the last few hours between our fucking sessions, I’d stumbled in to pee, but my eyes must have been closed. I could live in here. It was freaking enormous.

My bare feet stepped over the cool marble, reminding me of the bar at the club. At one end of the room was the stand-alone tub with a view to the grounds and the medium-sized-ass pool. The topiary wolves and the woods beyond. I wouldn’t mind visiting just for a dip in that bath that appeared to be made of marble too. Yikes!

There were his-and-his sinks in the long vanity, and at the other end of the room was a massive walk-in shower with two shower heads. They might have been those ones that simulated waterfalls.

Set into the wall were shelves piled high with fluffy white towels. Opposite was a floor-to-ceiling mirror, a sofa, and an array of toiletries, most of which were unused.

“Do you ever use this bathroom or do you slum it in the basement one?”

Flint appeared, still naked, his hands on either side of the doorway. If I wasn’t so peeved I’d have jumped him.

“I’ll be taking a shower now, as we’re late.”

I noted two words: we and late. We weren’t anything unless the driver waiting to take me home was pacing over the driveway and checking his watch.

“Huh?”

“I have lunch with my family every Sunday, but as it’s past lunch time, I postponed it to dinner.”

I wagged my finger, and his eyes glowed, his chest heaved, and I got a hint of a feral aroma. Damn, was his beast going to pop out?

“I said you’d be there.”

“You didn’t ask me.” I strode into the shower, closed the glass door, and turned on the shower. Water cascaded onto me, and it felt like heaven.

“I didn’t think I had to.” He came in and turned on the other shower. “You’re my

mate.”

I turned away, not wanting to focus on my mate soaping up his body. “And I’m a human who isn’t familiar with wolf shifter culture.” Or mafia either.

“Fine. I would very much like you to come and have dinner with my family.”

I avoided the sound of bodywash lathering over his bare wet skin, though my dick paid attention.

“My dad struggled under the Alpha Omega moniker. Perhaps the pair of you can talk about how to manage the role and not let it be everything about you.”

“Not today. Maybe next Sunday or the following one.” I longed to say yes, to be by his side, but I needed some distance or I’d be dragged into a new life, having no say. I wouldn’t recognize myself. “And I haven’t agreed where I’m living, and also, I’m still going to college.”

“Two weeks? I won’t see you for fourteen days?”

I shimmed over to him, rubbing my wet body over his soapy skin. “Maybe your driver could pick me up every so often.” I traced a finger over his jaw and throat. “Or every second night and bring me here.” I clasped his shaft and pumped. His chest heaved, and he yanked me close, his scent filling my nostrils. Gods, I couldn’t keep away. “Or every night?”

“I hate this,” he growled as he bent me over and nudged his cock against my hole.

We hadn’t had the talk about his lifestyle. I was putting it off, fearing it was a deal-breaker.



Would I have the courage to walk away?

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

“This isn’t what I was expecting.” Tony peered at my dad’s house as I drove up the driveway.

It’d been two weeks of him coming to the house each night and leaving the following morning. My poor heart was almost wrenched from my chest each day when he left.

What about me?my wolf complained. I hated it too.

I’d juggled work and put off questions from my family as to why he wasn’t at lunch the previous two Sundays. And there was an undercurrent of dissatisfaction in the pack stemming from Foley and his cohorts stirring up trouble. Foley had been canvassing the younger pack members, asking their opinion on how an Alpha was chosen. Emilio had a theory that was a ruse to get us thinking how we might reform, when the danger lurked elsewhere.

I tried to see Dad’s home from Tony’s eyes. He’d bought the land and the house after Papa died, when he’d wanted to shut himself off from the world. Whereas the grounds of my house were manicured and orderly, Dad’s were the opposite. Untamed was how I described it. The unwieldy trees, their fallen leaves forming a carpet covering the ground, dotted the acreage, along with tall grass, pockets of moss and mushrooms, shrubs, and a pond covered in water lilies with a little bridge over the top.

“Wow! This is magic. I like it much better than your place. How I would have loved to live here as a kid. Imagine the adventures you could have in this place.”

I experienced a pang of guilt, because while I hadn’t lived here, I did grow up in my

current house, and I'd never considered myself lucky. It was just the way things were. I hadn't asked Tony where he'd lived as a child and wondered if he'd wanted for anything. His omega dad was a single parent until he met the new guy.

I made a mental note to ask Emilio if Grandpa had helped out the family anonymously, saying the money came from the plant management.

Tony was right about the house not being what he expected. The grounds maybe 'cause they showcased my dad's personality, but the two-story house with its shutters and climbing pink roses reminding me of a chocolate box was more traditional.

There were two cars in the driveway, so we were the last to arrive.

Tony leaped out of the car, and Dad walked onto the porch. My mate hesitated. I understood why. Yes, we were mated and we fucked a lot and slept in the same bed, but we weren't "mates."

Dad hugged him, and they strolled into the house arm in arm. Hmmm. They'd met once, under less-than-pleasant circumstances, and now they were best friends? I was pleased, though I couldn't fathom how they'd connected so quickly.

I brought in the wine and dessert to find Dad introducing Tony to my brothers. They hadn't met formally, though they'd witnessed me introducing my mate to the pack. I was still seething over Foley and his power play, but we had no evidence he'd broken any pack law. I told Emilio I was willing to let it go as long as possible, hoping Foley would fuck up and basically put his head in the noose.

But for the next hour or so, business was not to be discussed; Dad forbade it.

"Is Uncle Arnie in the kitchen?"

Tony swung around, the color blanched from his cheeks. “Arnie from the club? That Arnie?” he whispered.

Dad mouthed, “You didn’t tell him.”

Fuck no. From the moment Tony was flung on the carpet, I’d made mistake after mistake. I could blame it on him, saying he’d distracted my head, my cock, and everything in between. But I was the boss and his now mate, and I had to take it on the chin.

“Mmmm. He’s a great cook.”

Tony shot me a venomous look, and I hated that I quaked a little. That was a new experience. My wolf was amused and settled down to enjoy the evening.

The man himself appeared from the kitchen in a cloud of steam, an old-fashioned apron wrapped around his waist.

“Tony, I’m so glad you joined the family.” Tony stared at me as Arnie enveloped him in a bear hug.

“Arnie is my great-uncle, my grandfather’s brother.”

“Thank you, Uncle Arnie. It’s so nice to see you again.”

My heart almost melted at my mate being so kind to my elderly relative. Our story, which had just begun, started with Tony and Arnie sorta. Or was it the day Anthony died? It was a little tangled and had almost severed in places, but here we all were.

We sat down to eat. Arnie had cooked the main meal while my brothers and I brought wine, salad, dessert, and bread rolls. Dad fluttered around. Cooking wasn’t his thing.

He'd struggled in the kitchen in the years when mated to Papa. Arnie often saved his ass when he'd moved in with my parents after Grandpa was killed.

I thought about Dad's relationship with my father and compared it to me and Tony. Dad was considered "the odd duck" by Father's family. He blurted out what was in his head, he wore bright colors instead of the sedate black, brown, or gray.

At the first snow, he'd led me and my brothers outside to catch snowflakes. We'd open our mouths wide and stick our tongues out, jumping up and down and yelling when the first one melted on our tongue.

My father said Dad kept the embers alive in their relationship, tending them, making sure the spark never went out. Papa was the pack Alpha after my grandfather was killed. He walked the line, as I did, but Dad brought sparkles into his and our lives.

Tony was already the spark in my life, shining light on the shadows.

"Earth to Flint." Hunter clicked his fingers in front of my face. "We wondered where you got to."

"Just thinking about our childhood."

"Oh," my brothers yelled in unison. "Tony, we have so many stories to tell you about your mate."

"Lies, all of it lies!"

I put my hands over Tony's ears, but he flung them off and giggled. "I want to hear all of them. Was he a grumpy guts and a stickler for the rules?"

"How'd you guess?" Ranger served my mate a piece of pie, and we all tucked into

the dessert. “And he hates mess.”

“Does that include crumbs in the bed?” Tony side-eyed me.

“Yes,” everyone yelled.

Tony’s spoon clattered to the floor. I should have caught it, but I was too busy shoving in tender, spicy apples, pastry, and ice cream. Dad handed my mate another spoon, but his outstretched hand froze as he studied Tony.

Everyone stopped eating, and my head snapped toward my mate. His cheeks, normally pink and perky that I kissed every chance I got, were ashen.

My wolf who’d been sleeping demanded I take him to the doctor.

“Hey.” I put my head close to my mate. “Something wrong?”

“I need fresh air.” He pushed the chair back, and it scraped over the wooden floor. “Sorry.” He flung himself out the closest door, with me at his heels. He gulped huge mouthfuls of air and a little color returned to his cheeks. While he rested his head on my chest, I rubbed circles over his back.

“Let’s go home and I’ll put you straight to bed.”

“Home,” he mumbled, his mouth on my sweater. “Where is that?”

We’d been living in limbo the last weeks while he got back into the routine of classes, assignments, and study. He’d fall into bed late, and we’d make love long into the night, leaving him little time to sleep.

Being a shifter, I needed less sleep than a human. My driver would take him to his

place or campus the next morning. We'd compromised on a bodyguard who stayed outside his classrooms and kept a short distance from him as he made his way around college.

But every day he'd fire questions at me about the business.

"Do you traffic drugs?"

"No. I would never. My grandfather and father refused to touch the stuff."

"Human trafficking or arms trafficking?"

"No."

We made humans' lives easier by fixing their problems and making them go away, and we washed the money through our casinos and other businesses.

"Home is where you are." I kissed the top of his head.

"That's what you always say." He looked up at me. "Maybe I should start saying that too."

"Don't." I pulled away but draped my arms around his shoulders. "Not if you don't mean it."

"I do. But we have to iron out some rules."

"Like what? You have to put dirty clothes in the hamper?" I pulled him close again, picturing him in the house, our home. But I understood the meaning behind his words.

“No, your business. I’m still fuzzy on it.”

From the corner of my eye, I noted four heads poking around the doorway. Dad was waving frantically and miming something about his belly, or perhaps it was a basketball. Hunter was sticking a finger down his throat, and Ranger was rocking back and forth. Was he holding a doll or a cat?

“My family’s trying to tell me something.”

“We should go inside. They’ll think I’m rude,” he sighed.

We wandered arm and arm toward the house.

“What are you all staring at? Never seen a mated couple making plans for the future?”

“Do those plans include a baby?” Uncle Arnie asked.



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

“What baby?” Did Flint forget to tell me about a child or had he adopted a puppy?

Rudy drew me inside, and I sat while Flint stood beside me, holding my hand. “I’m not certain, but it might be.” Rudy was bouncing on his toes.

Whatever I had couldn’t have been bad, because Rudy was beaming, but when I looked up at Flint, he was as white as a sheet. Maybe he had caught the same nasty bug I had.

“Okay. Is it catching?”

Ranger guffawed. “Not the way you mean. And besides, many human illnesses don’t affect shifters.”

I squeezed Flint’s hand because he wasn’t saying anything, and the others were downplaying what was wrong with me. Rudy was bubbling with excitement.

“Flint?” Hunter nudged his big brother. “You got something to say to your mate?”

“Yeah, Flint. You got something to say?” I mimicked Hunter.

Flint squatted in front of me. “They’re trying to tell us that you might be pregnant.”

“Pregnant? We only had sex for the first time two weeks ago!”

Everyone except me and Flint burst out laughing.

“That’s all it takes, especially for shifters.” Rudy hugged us. “I’m going to have a grandbaby. But I warn you, I won’t be doing the traditional grandpa activities. There’ll be color, laughter, and dancing under the stars at midnight.” He raced off looking for a purple feather boa.

“Are they right?” My hand went to my belly, but it was Flint’s reaction that worried me. Tears were streaming over his cheeks, his face was red and puffy, and ewww, there was snot. I’d never seen him look anything other than put together.

“Do you not want a baby?” I was suddenly very protective of the sesame-sized nugget in my tummy.

“Gods, no, the opposite.” He covered my face with kisses despite the tears and the mucus. “I just never imagined... we... I don’t know.” He sniffed and put his head in my lap.

“Is that what happens when you find out you’re a father?” Hunter asked his dad as Arnie handed Flint a box of tissues.

“Pretty much.” Rudy had returned with a bunch of photos of Flint as a baby.

“Do you feel well enough for the drive... back to... my house? We can stay here for the next nine months if you don’t.” He helped me to my feet.

“That’s a joke, right?” I frowned at him as the Durands shook their heads at him. “I’ll be at college tomorrow and the next day and the next until I defend my thesis.”

I kissed the four Durands who were standing at attention and waltzed out the door. Amazing how the prospect of an argument with my mate made me feel so much better.

“You and the baby won’t be safe on campus.” Flint raced in front of me while scrolling on his phone. “I’m hiring a doctor who’ll be with you every minute until the birth.”

“Stop.” I grabbed the phone out of his hand and tossed it in the car. “I’m no different than I was an hour ago or yesterday or last week. I have a tiny speck inside me which is the size of our baby.”

“But what if something happens?”

“Omegas have been giving birth for centuries.” I buckled the seat belt, the metal cool to the touch. “Wait, is there something different about a shifter birth?” I could ask my dad because my alpha father was a shifter. Not that he was aware of that, so no, I couldn’t.

The last time we spoke a week ago, he and Derek had been embarking on a cruise, and he’d talked about them and their upcoming vacation and never once asked how I was.

“No. If the baby is a shifter, they won’t meet their wolf until adolescence.”

Ahhh, that was one worry crossed off my list. For a second, I’d pictured myself running through the woods after a diapered wolf cub.

I yawned, and Flint stopped the car. Now what? I was no mechanic, so we might have to spend the night at Rudy’s.

“Are you well enough for me to keep going?”

“Flint, I yawned. People do that. I’m tired, and I have to read over a paper in the morning.”

He continued driving. This was going to be a long nine months.

“Stop the car!”

“I knew it. I’ll head to the hospital.”

“Stop right now and listen. I trust you to keep me safe with your bodyguards and cameras and apps and gods only knows what else. But you must trust me to look after our baby. I won’t be hurdling over tall buildings or mountain climbing.”

Poor Flint. His eyes bulged, and I hid a smile, thinking of him traipsing up a mountain with a heap of baby paraphernalia.

He exhaled. “I can do that, but if I slip and fail, be gentle with me.”

“Not sure about that. I might have to smack your backside.”

“Tony, I almost came in my pants.”

“Naughty.” I put a hand on his thigh, and he gasped.

No matter what happened, we were linked forever because of our child. But we hadn’t had the mate discussion, nor had we come to an agreement about his work. I was floundering in a deep pool, but no matter what the future looked like, I had to step up and be responsible for the baby.

Flint helped me into the house. My instinct was to fling off his hand, saying, “I can do it myself,” but I bit off my response and enjoyed having him at the side and the skin-to-skin contact.

But when I crawled into bed and my eyelids were too heavy to keep open, my brain

refused to quiet down. I flicked on the bedside lamp and shook Flint, even though he wasn't asleep.

"If we decide to live together and be... you know... mates, what does that mean exactly?"

"If?" His poor brows were getting a ton of exercise.

"Calm yourself, big guy. I'm just asking. I need all the information before I make a decision." This must have been hard for him. His body was rigid with tension and his jaw so tight it might break.

"As my mate, you are the Alpha Omega."

"Yeah, yeah, I got that on the meet-the-pack day. And what a fun event that was." I rolled my eyes at the memory.

"Traditionally—"

"Cut to the chase, babe." I wasn't in the mood for a history lesson. "In the twenty-first century, what role am I expected to play?"

"Ummm, well... you attend full-moon runs, though you'd be an observer, as you can't... shift."

"So once a month I show my face to the pack, stand under the full moon while the wolves do their thing. What else?"

"Support the family."

"When you say family, is that the Durant family or the La Luna Noir family, because

those are very different.” I tensed, waiting for his answer.

“Both.”

It was time to have that conversation. The one I’d been avoiding. I loved Flint the man, but what he did when he wasn’t with me couldn’t be excused by me saying, “That’s nothing to do with me.”

“I can’t bring a baby into this world and teach them about love, compassion, empathy, honesty, sympathy, and be with an alpha who is in the mob.”

There I’d said it. The only options were a) I’d leave Flint and raise the baby on my own, though knowing him, he’d have a bodyguard or maybe just Emilio sneaking around to check out what I was doing and that the little one and I were safe. Or b) he left his position in the mafia, which he probably wouldn’t do and that might end in his death? I’d never seen the mafia handbook rules, so I wasn’t sure.

Flint took both my hands in his. “You see the world in black and white. People are either good or they’re bad. That’s what your books and movies teach humans. But look around, Tony. Real life isn’t like that.”

“Oh, come on. Don’t give me that tired old, ‘You don’t know what my life is like,’ crap.”

We should have had this discussion during the day when we could be on either sides of a room, not with his leg brushing against mine, his hands clutching mine. We should have had it weeks ago, and now I was carrying his baby.

“When shifters came out of the forests, we were treated like the animals inside us by humans, but we had to survive. The world was very different. Chaos reigned, and shifters clung together. We saw a way to not only get through the turmoil but to

thrive.”

“But that was then and this is now.”

Flint got out of bed and put on a robe. “Listen to me. We couldn’t afford to stick to the moral high ground, and now this way of life is in our blood. It’s who we are. We were born into this life. Our heritage marked us, for better or worse.”

He explained it was their wolves who gave them an advantage over small-time crooks, saying they chose to be predators not prey. “They are one of the reasons we have been so successful.”

He paced the floor, shoving his hands in the robe’s pockets. “What do you think would happen if I said, ‘Okay, today’s the day we give up everything and you all have to go find another job.’”

“The pack might riot?”

“You think?” His voice was close to shriek level. “They’d come for me and my family. But it’s not just about me. The other shifter families would take everything from us and probably kill us to make sure we didn’t try a comeback.”

“So which comes first? Shifter or mafia?” I asked.

“They’re intertwined. Shifters are who we are. Mafia is what we do.” He bit his bottom lip. “One favor. Please stop using the word mob. We are mafia.”

I hid a smile. My big tough guy with his gun was irritated by three little letters. I gave him a thumbs-up.

I looked around the room, the palatial furnishings provided by criminal activities. He

couldn't stop doing what he was born to do, not that I was sure he wanted to. His role as Alpha and his job were two halves of the whole.

He didn't have a choice, but I did.

I could leave, love him, and ignore what he did or embrace his lifestyle.

"Swerving off that path we chose would be the end of us." He slouched into an armchair and lowered his head, his brows knitted together.

I was standing at a fork in my life's journey. The path on the right might be fraught with danger, while the left would be a life with my baby, but I'd grieve Flint with every breath until my very last. Dad had avoided this question because he never knew my father, not really.

"But what about our little one? Will they follow the same career path as you?"

He held up his hands in surrender. "I can't answer that, but I will protect our child and you with my life."

The fight went out of Flint, and I pulled him into bed. I still had so many more questions, but for now, we needed to be together, as a couple, as expectant parents, as mates.

I just hoped he would never take our child to take-your-kid-to-work day.



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

“We can postpone.”

Tony was curled up on the sofa asking how many more minutes he could stay there before he had to shower and get ready.

We were going to meet his dad and stepdad, but the dinner had been put off once already, with his father, Evan, canceling at the last minute. I’d also had to swear off once when there was a ruckus on one of our construction sites.

While I had plenty of spies—both in and out of the pack—I had no proof Foley was conspiring with Sewell and other shifters to encroach on our business. I’d kept my silence, not wanting to warn him. But if Emilio got evidence, I would deal with Foley and any others myself.

For the moment, my attention was on my mate and his dad. Tony had related how he often felt like an afterthought growing up. Not that he wasn’t loved, but his dad and stepdad were so wrapped up in themselves, they didn’t have time for him.

That was a huge contrast to my family who were all in one another’s business. They were loud and funny and hugely protective of each other. While I took no shit from my younger brothers, if some other kid gave them a hard time, I was in their face.

“I’m so tired, babe. Our little one is sucking all my energy.”

“Your dad will understand the first trimester is exhausting.” I took one look at my mate’s expression. “Tony, you have told him, haven’t you?”

He avoided my gaze and slid off the couch, padding into the bathroom. Standing under the shower, still wearing his clothes, he brushed his teeth and staggered out, toothpaste foam around his mouth.

“I wanted it to be a surprise. I’m not that far along.”

Now I understood why this dinner had to go ahead, so Tony could announce his pregnancy.

I’d booked a table at a restaurant where we could sit outside on the terrace and each table was secluded from passersby and other diners. The ma?tre d’ greeted us—I was a semi-regular customer or had been before I met Tony when I’d wined and dined clients—and led us to the table. Tony’s folks were already there, their hands clasped.

Tony’s dad, Evan, stared at me, his eyes narrowed. Both my wolf and I picked up a change in his scent, sparked by tension. Meeting your new son-in-law was a potentially prickly situation, so I wasn’t bothered by his wariness.

After Tony did the introductions, I asked his parents questions about their jobs and what Tony was like growing up. I could have pushed a little and mentioned Antonio, but Tony had forbidden me, saying any mention of his father caused his dad stress.

“We have news!” Tony was bouncing on his chair, his earlier exhaustion forgotten, and he took my hand.

Evan and Derek shared a glance, and his dad’s lips set in a straight line. It was an odd reaction when your child was smiling and with a guy he obviously cared about. But my phone beeped, and I apologized, squeezed Tony’s hand saying it was lousy timing, and excused myself.

Emilio was babbling about Foley and the Nightfall pack, he and his men had tapped

their phones. But he also told me a retrieval mission had been unsuccessful. Shit, this was our bread and butter. We had a reputation of getting in and out with little fuss.

I'd have to leave the dinner early. Not a good first impression for the in-laws. But when I returned to the table, Tony was on his feet begging his parents to stay while they pushed past me. Evan hissed at me to stay away from his son, before they disappeared between the potted plants.

"What happened?" Fuck, they were insulted 'cause they thought I'd disrespected them.

Tony was mopping up his tears with a handful of napkins. "Dad said he'd heard you weren't a good guy and I should stay away from you." He blew his nose. I'd have to leave an extra-large tip.

Evan may have had some idea who his husband worked for, though the Antonio/Anthony names suggested Tony's late father kept the two parts of his life quite separate.

"I didn't wait for you and told them about the baby."

That brought on more tears, and we left. In the car, Tony let on that his father told him getting pregnant was a huge mistake. "He said I wasn't responsible like he'd been, and that you'd toss me aside after the little one was born."

I drove with one hand on the wheel and the other on my mate, wishing I didn't have a crisis on my hands.

"Where are we going?" Tony looked out the window at the shop windows lit up and passersby hurrying along the sidewalks.

“I’m taking you home, but I have a job to do.” I could have had my guys take Tony home, but after the disastrous meeting with his dad, I refused to hand him over. Even me leaving him at home was meh, but I had to finish this job.

His head snapped to the side. “Like what?” There was a tremor in his voice.

“It’s something only I can do.” That wasn’t strictly true. My men could have done it, but they’d fucked up and lost the scent.

“Don’t lie, babe. I need you to be straight with me.”

“Fine.” I summarized that I had to retrieve a valuable piece of art and return it to its owner.

“I’ll come too.”

I sighed. This wasn’t a group activity. I’d start outside our client’s home. But tracking the thief’s scent could lead me to bars or back alleys, the forest or a lonely stretch of highway. And I’d be in my fur at least part of the time.

“It’s not a good idea.” I’d be leaving the bodyguards behind.

“Flint!” My mate had that tone. The one he’d used when we met. The feisty one. “I’m not a wilting wallflower.” That was one of his favorite responses when I went into full-on alpha-protection mode. “You mated me, you wanted me in your life, and after a bumpy ride, I agreed. You can’t shut me out by saying it’s too much because I’m human and pregnant.”

“Okay, okay. The security guys will be in the car with you.” I didn’t want a procession of three cars following me.

“I can get behind the wheel.”

“No!” He growled at me, and I backed off. “You can drive, right?” Fuck, how had I never asked my mate that before?

“Mmmm.” His sheepish expression didn’t fill me with confidence. “About as well as your dad. But don’t worry. I’ll crawl along.”

Oh gods. Why had I agreed to this? I asked the universe to keep my mate and baby safe.

The house was in an old industrial area, much of the surroundings still in disrepair. The client had bought an abandoned red brick factory and made it part home, part art gallery. There’d be few people on the streets, as most of the buildings were uninhabited.

I picked up takeout, and we ate in the car.

“This is fun. My first stakeout.” Tony shoved a fry in his mouth.

I didn’t correct him, but our work wasn’t fun. We were good at it and got paid accordingly, and sure, I got an adrenaline rush when I was successful.

The bodyguards got in my car, and I drove to the client’s home.

There was no need to shift yet, and after scouting around the front and sides of the two-story building with Victorian-style windows, I identified the aroma of a human mingling with the fragrance of sweat, tension, and oil paint.

“I’m going to take my fur. Stay here.” My beast would likely follow the scent away from the area, but I’d told the security guys where to meet me if I disappeared.

“Wait.” Tony pulled a tracker from his pack. “I’ll put this around your wolf’s neck so I can see where you are.”

My wolf leaped over a wrought-iron fence and through the tall grass of a deserted allotment, tall grass sprouting in the cracked concrete. From there he wound his way around the streets. In the distance, the soft purring of my expensive car told me my mate was in the vicinity.

Strange, my wolf noted. That our human mate is following us.

Strange didn’t begin to explain it.

My wolf traipsed over broken glass and crouched near a burned-out truck, staring into the darkness. Why the client lived in this dump of an area when he had money was beyond me, but his home was secure with high-tech alarms and cameras.

A feral cat arched its back and hissed at my beast before taking off, and mice scuttled through the undergrowth. My wolf padded and sniffed around rusted machinery and piles of trash.

The scent my wolf followed led us to an abandoned warehouse, surrounded by a padlocked fence. Part of the roof had caved in, but there was a flicker of light coming from a far corner and a lower murmur of two voices.

The stealthy humming of my car in the distance—and not for the first time I was thankful I’d spent so much money and it was so quiet—alerted me Tony hadn’t given up the chase.

This is more than weird. Our mate should be at home.

We mated a human. One with his own mind. We have to accept and love his

differences.

I told my beast to concentrate on the task. We couldn't afford another fuck-up. He leaped over the fence and squeezed into the warehouse through a broken door. He treaded over shattered glass, catching the pair as one was on the phone conducting a bidding war.

My beast handled the two men, and I retrieved the painting.

As I walked toward my car, Tony raced out, clapping. "That was so exciting." He admired the painting. "Aren't you going to call the?—?"

He caught sight of my face. "Oh. Ohhh!"

I waited, expecting tears and accusations, but he nodded and glanced toward the warehouse, his lip trembling, before getting in the car.

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

“You haven’t forgotten what today is, have you?”

My pregnancy was advancing, and we needed baby clothes and paraphernalia. I’d been staring at websites late at night but wanted to feel and examine everything the baby would use and wear.

“Have not.” Flint walked out of the two-person shower enclosure that I would never not be amazed at. “Jog my memory.”

“You’re such a liar.”

He put his head against my bump. “Your dad just called me a big bad word.”

“Tell me. What are we doing today?”

He wrapped the towel around his hips. “Stuff. Lots and lots of stuff.”

I rolled my eyes. “It’s baby day.”

His slack-jawed expression told me everything I needed to know.

“Not birth-day but buying-everything-baby day.”

“I knew that.”

When we’d agreed to spend a day shopping, Flint had promised it would be about us and our little one. But he’d been so distracted with work, maybe it was better to let



him do what he had to.

“What time do we start?” He looked at me in the mirror as he brushed his teeth.

“You don’t have to.” I was sincere, not playing silly games. If he was with me, he couldn’t be on his phone all the time.

He turned around and kissed me with a toothpaste mouth. “I’m all in.”

“Do they really have to be here?”

We were in the baby section of a large department store, and as well as Flint and myself, there were four hulking bodyguards lurking behind cots and strollers. Flint hated when I used that word, saying shifters never lurked.

“Yes. I won’t change my mind. They stay.”

I didn’t argue. And I couldn’t get annoyed because he was looking out for me and the baby.

“What do you think about this cot?” It was a stunning piece, all white with solid panels at each end and two drawers underneath.

My mate grabbed the bars with both hands. “Looks like a jail.”

I fixed my gaze on him. “Have you ever been in one?” Maybe I should have asked him that earlier in our relationship.

“Visited, yes. As a guest, never.”

A sales person hovered, not saying anything but gazing at my mate as if he wanted to

eat him. I grabbed Flint's arm and planted a kiss on his mouth.

"Mmmm, what was that for?" Flint smacked my ass and pulled me close.

"Can't I show my mate how much I love him?" I tweaked his butt.

"You can." He kissed me back. "Are we done?"

"Kissing? As long as you don't mind, we can kiss more."

"No, the cot." He turned to the sales guy and asked the price, before saying, "We'll take it."

The guy's face lit up. Maybe he worked on commission or he thought he'd get our address. That wasn't happening. Whatever we bought would be delivered to Flint's office.

"We're not going anywhere. I have a long list." I showed my mate the phone.

"Really? They need that? Aren't they like yay big?" He put his hands about six inches apart.

"Are you messing with me?" I pulled his hands farther apart.

We worked our way through the list. Changing table. Check. Rocking chair. Check. Sofa. Check. Baby monitor. Check. Baby bath. Check. And diapers. Lots of diapers, along with a stroller and a car seat. The sales guy was practically orgasmic every time Flint or I said, "We'll take it."

My mate exaggeratedly mopped his brow. "Whew. We did it." He whipped out his phone to pay. I still wasn't used to having enough money to buy things. Dad and I

always had a tight budget, even after he met Derek, and some months we ate cup noodles leading up to payday.

“Now we buy the clothes.”

I picked up the most adorable white onesie with bunnies and rested it against my belly. “It’s so cute.” I put it up against Flint. It was even tinier compared to his huge frame.

He fingered it. “It’s so soft.”

I went through my list, piling more onesies, baby blankets, PJs, socks, and mittens in Flint’s arms. His face was hidden, and I only had half what I needed. The sales guy carried the rest, though his eyes darted to the bodyguards, maybe wondering why they couldn’t carry stuff.

I was so excited to get home and get the nursery ready, I didn’t want to wait for the crib and other big items to be delivered first to the office and then have Emilio and his men bring them to the house.

“Is there any way we can take everything now?” The clothing and some of the smaller items would fit in our car and the other two vehicles that went with us everywhere.

“I’ll have Emilio arrange a truck.”

By the time we made it home after picking up food, the truck arrived, and everything was carried inside. The domestic staff had already finished cleaning and left. Instead of being in the house all day, they came earlier and were done usually before I got back from college. They were sweet and hardworking, but I’d never gotten used to having people who weren’t family in my home.

“This used to be my room.”

Flint looked out the window to the medium-sized-ass pool. “I used to dream of being the Alpha when I’d see Papa coming home.”

The silence stretched from seconds to minutes, and I took his hand. He didn’t talk about his father much. Having both his grandfather and father die violent deaths had to have left scars. He’d been so young when he took over as head of the pack. This room must have had some unhappy memories.

Maybe we could banish them.

“I saw some paint in the basement.”

He swirled around, his eyes blazing. He avoided talking about the night I stayed there after Emilio roughed me up, unless it was to apologize over and over. “What?”

“Yesterday. I was in the storeroom and saw some light gray water-based paint.”

“Hmmm. Dad was going to paint my room a couple of years ago. Said the white was too stark.” He pulled his phone out of his pocket. “I’ll get someone to do it.”

But I yanked the device out of his hand. “We can do it.”

“We can?”

“Yeah.” I demonstrated the slapping of paint on a wall. “There were also paint brushes, rollers, and drop cloths. It’ll be fun.” It wasn’t often there were activities we could do together, which was why I loved tracking Flint if he did a retrieval, not that he did them often, and now that my pregnancy was advanced, we’d agreed I wouldn’t “participate.” I still tracked him, but from home.

“Fun?” he repeated, as if he’d never had any. “Sure, why not.”

He brought everything up to the nursery, and I changed into a ragged tee I’d been going to toss and paternity shorts. My mate didn’t have any old clothes, so I chose a bland white-shirt that probably cost big bucks and told him to strip to his underwear.

He paraded his sexy ass around the room, twirling the paint brush as if he were a model on a runway. I smacked his butt and said we’d never get the painting done if he didn’t stop wriggling his butt.

“Maybe we shouldn’t.” His voice deepened, sending shivers through me.

Much as I would enjoy sexy time, I was in get the nursery done mode.

“Priorities, babe. Paint, then sex.”

He grabbed me from behind and ran his hands over my bump. “Or sex then paint.”

I pulled away. If we had sex, we’d spend the rest of the day in bed. I slapped some paint on the wall and a tiny bit on his nose.

“Didn’t know that was allowed.”

I shooed him away and told him to get up the ladder, while scrolling through a playlist on my phone. After finding what I wanted, I turned the sound up and pressed play.

“What is that crap?” Flint stared at me.

“It’s disco.” It made me think of painting my room as a kid with Dad. Any memory of him was now tainted after his response to Flint and my pregnancy, but I’d been

trying to banish the bad and reclaim good memories of my childhood. I refused to let him being an ass ruin the good times.

I strutted around the room and boogied.

“Ummm, excuse me. You’re supposed to be painting.” Flint waved his brush and almost splattered paint over me.

“Getting in the mood.” I bopped about, doing the signature disco moves. “Dance with me.”

“Don’t really know how.”

“What? You own a club and you don’t dance?”

“Not whatever that is you’re doing.”

“Get down here.” I pointed to the floor. “It’s called the Funky Chicken.”

Flint turned up his nose. “It’s funky alright.”

“Not funky as in stinky.” I flapped my arms. “Pretend to be a chicken.”

My mate rolled his eyes, muttering, “Don’t see the point,” but he followed my example.

“Now stick your neck forward like chickens do when they’re walking around.” I blasted the music so it filled the room. “And strut like a chicken. Come on.”

We flapped and strutted and shoved our heads forward, and Flint chortled, and that got me laughing. When the music stopped, we fell into one another’s arms.

“That was ridiculous.” He kissed the top of my head.

“That’s the point, babe.” I surveyed the wreck of a room. The painting could wait. I took my mate’s hand and dragged him toward the bedroom.

“Thought it was paint, then sex.”

“Changed my mind.”

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

“Sure you wanna come tonight?”

My mate was close to his due date. His belly was so big he'd almost tripped a few times. I'd had a new bed delivered, and we slept in the living room as I didn't want him climbing the stairs.

Tonight was the full moon. La luna for my great-grandmother. The moon shining light in the darkness. Noir for her mate. It was a pack tradition. La Luna wolf shifters were superstitious, and we believed the goddess herself was looking over us on this night.

“You might have to take me in a wheelbarrow,” he said as I helped him out of bed after his early-evening nap.

Our mate can not sit in a wheelbarrow! My wolf was indigent.

“Ummm—”

“Joking, babe.” He staggered into the first-floor bathroom to pee. “Besides, I have a big strong man to hold my arm and make sure I don't go face first into the ground.”

“That would be me.” I did a little shoulder shimmy. It was hard to imagine me doing that before I met my mate.

La Luna Noir pack started their run a few minutes before midnight and ended it an hour later. Tony ate a late dinner, and I packed snacks for him to nibble on. When I looked at what I'd prepared, maybe I should have gotten a wheelbarrow—for the



snacks, not him. But a backpack would do.

The woods on our estate were perfect for a midnight run, but this was our private domain, and so we drove thirty minutes into the countryside to pack land, accompanied by the usual security detail.

During Tony's pregnancy, I'd doubled the security that accompanied us everywhere, remembering what had happened to Grandpa and Papa. Though Emilio assured me he and his men had found nothing between Foley and Sewell, I wasn't taking any chances with my mate and child.

"It's so beautiful in the moonlight." Tony pressed his face to the window.

"You used to be frightened of the woods, especially at night."

"Now I know that the scariest thing here is... you!" He giggle-snorted.

We drove through the gates into pack land. There were small buildings scattered about, the first being the security checkpoint. The rest were cabins. They were for pack members who wanted a vacation or to retire in the countryside. Our shifters never strayed too far from pack lands.

Many of the pack had arrived before us, and flaming torches surrounded the clearing where the run began and ended. Hunter and Ranger were here with Dad. Uncle Arnie was unfolding a deck chair, as he was sitting out the run. He'd hurt his back gardening and was considering retiring. I doubted he would. He loved his job.

I couldn't see Emilio, but he'd be around somewhere, sniffing out possible trouble.

The crowd swelled, and people gathered in small groups.

“I can stay with you and have my brothers lead the run.”

“No. I’ve got Uncle Arnie to keep me company.” I eased my mate onto the lounge I’d brought and gave him the snacks, leaving my gun in the car.

Two of the bodyguards would stay with my mate. They’d get to run on the next full moon.

“It’s time.” Ranger and Hunter flanked me as the pack undressed. I folded my clothes and left them with Tony, while most everyone else left them in piles. I blew him a kiss before moving to the middle of the group.

“Take your fur.”

A flurry of dust and dirt filled the air as men became wolves, and my beast loped toward the trees. We would run around three quarters of the land perimeter and then cut through the woods until we reached our starting point.

Dad’s wolf preferred to stay at the back, while my brothers often raced ahead of me. There was no rule that I always had to be in the lead, except at the beginning and end of the run. I often lagged behind with my dad’s beast, though usually Arnie was at the rear.

We ran under a cloudless sky, the moon shining on the path and bathing us in her light, giving us strength.

We had reached the three-quarter point and turned into the thick forest. My wolf was bounding along when I picked up a familiar scent of one of the bodyguard’s beasts who should have been with Tony. My wolf skidded to a halt, and I took my skin. The bodyguard also shifted.

“The Alpha Omega is in labor, Alpha. He is asking you to come back. He’s in a lot of pain.”

“Go to him. I’ll be there shortly.” I had less than a minute to find my brothers, as one of them would need to end the meet according to tradition.

But as pack wolves passed me, stragglers going at half the pace of the leaders, Dad’s beast leaped over a bush, and he shifted, landing on his two human feet.

“We have a problem.”

“It’s under control.” I explained Tony was in labor.

“No. Foley and friends...” He panted and bent over. “They detoured into the woods at the halfway point and... maybe others.”

Every Alpha had probably been faced with a choice of the pack or his mate. Tony needed me. It was my duty as his mate but also as the one that held my heart in his hands. I wanted to support him as our little one entered the world.

“It’s a trap, Flint. I’m sure they’re planning an ambush.”

Of course they’d use my mate as an excuse to get me out of the way. But what if the baby was coming? What then? How could I face Tony if I ignored him when he needed me most. Fuck, if both bodyguards were in on it, Tony and our child were in danger.

I had to go to my mate, but Dad grabbed me, telling me he’d go to Tony. “You and your brothers deal with Foley and his friends.”

I had to put my mate first.

“If you’re with Tony and they kill your brothers and other pack members, they may kill you too. You have to stop them so Tony and the baby will be safe.”

Every sinew in my body longed to be with my mate and child. “You and Arnie can’t fend off two strapping bodyguards.”

Hunter and Ranger bounded up and shifted. “What’s going on? You disappeared, Bro.”

I filled them in, but the seconds were ticking by. As Alpha, I dreaded having to make a choice. “Dad, you and Hunter go to Tony. Ranger and I will be with the pack.”

Foley would not be stupid enough to rely on only him and his friends, so there would be others waiting for us.

Dad and Hunter shifted and were gone, taking my heart with them. Ranger and I huddled, discussing strategy. He would catch up to the pack, warning each group, while I went a roundabout way. There was a section in the deepest part of the forest, where vines dangled from the tall trees and the smallest amount of light penetrated through the canopy.

“I hope Emilio has scented Foley and his traitorous friends.” I needed him and his wolf, both scarred from former battles.

My wolf was in fight mode as he took his fur. Like his wild cousins he knew how to move stealthily when hunting. Only this time, the prey were shifters. I didn’t want to be the third Durand killed after a war with another pack.

Tony and our unborn child were my world, but if I went to the goddess, my family would look after them. But I dreaded what would happen if Ranger or Hunter had to fight a challenger for the role of Alpha.

My beast slowed as we neared the place where Foley and his buddies probably waited, hoping to catch us unawares. Other shifters often underestimated Dad, thinking he was too scattered to pay attention to their antics. That was their first mistake. Let's hope it wasn't their last.

My beast crouched low behind a log. The universe was on our side 'cause the breeze was blowing toward us. I scented Ranger and the others close by pounding through the forest. Before they reached this place, they'd spread out and surround it.

My beast also scented Foley and companions, but he was too hot-headed to plan a rebellion. He was all bluster. We'd be fighting shifters more shrewd than him, and my beast sniffed the air for the scent of Nightfall shifters. There were scents but from La Luna Noir beasts. My heart rate kicked up a notch, fearing there were more traitors from our own kin than just Foley and co.

I counted the seconds until Ranger led the pack into the shadowy darkness. Foley and four others leaped out, creating a diversion.

But foolish Foley and companions were fodder, a distraction, and they went down, one by bloody one, their throats slashed, their beasts crying out as they sacrificed themselves and took their last breath.

More wolves joined the fight. I'd been prepared for the Nightfall shifters who'd been in skirmishes with other packs over the years. What I wasn't expecting was La Luna Noir pack members, battle-hardened from those early years of fighting the Silverback pack with me. With me, not against!

The forest floor was covered in blood, the metallic smell mixed with moss and soil while Ranger and the others battled. My wolf was tempted to join in, but I urged him to be patient. There was one waiting for me, not caring he'd sent other La Luna Noir men to their death. The one person other than family who'd been with Grandpa, Papa,

and me. One whose fighting skills had been honed from many shifter wars.

Now.

My wolf leaped. Flying through the air over at least fifteen feet, saliva dripping over his canines. A threatening growl silenced the forest and he attacked Emilio's beast. His teeth penetrated the flesh covering his throat. Blood gushed over my beast.

He was wounded but not fatally.

Both wolves charged at one another, and the other beast's teeth penetrated my wolf's flesh. Blood flowed, mingling with his as our beasts' snapping and snarling was the only sound in the forest. They lunged again, each clawing at the other.

A gunshot rang, and Emilio's wolf twisted around toward the sound, allowing my beast to attack him again, tearing at a huge chunk of flesh.

The shot was followed by a howl. Uncle. A warning. The scent of fear mixed with blood, and my wolf almost paused the fight and raced to our mate. But we had to finish this.

My beast was drained of energy as he hurled himself at his opponent, tearing at his throat and leaving a gaping hole. Emilio's wolf fell back as my beast lay on the ground, enough energy for one last attack.

Emilio shifted, blood streaming from his wounds and out of his mouth. He mumbled, "You... never... knew... how I hated... what you stood for... and then... and then... you mated a human," before his eyes closed.

I took my skin and examined my wounds. I'd survive, but my wolf was spent.

The pack shifted. Bodies lay scattered on the bloodied ground, and I told my brother to burn the conspirators. The rest of La Luna Noir dead, the ones who gave their life for our pack, would be given a proper burial.

I limped toward Tony, blood and sweat dripping into my eyes.

I'd been assured the danger came from outside the pack. Instead, the rot was festering from within. I'd have to purge any remaining traitors.

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

Arnie and I were chatting and eating the snacks, and he was talking about his job. He was proud of his old-school betting ring that avoided surveillance and couldn't be monitored by law enforcement. He and his punters had been friends for years.

"I'm so glad you and Flint found one another."

Me too, though found wasn't a word I'd use.

My back was aching, and I couldn't get comfortable. But I wasn't the only one fidgeting. The taller guard was putting his weight on one foot and then the other, while the second one had his hand resting on his gun.

Uncle leaned toward me. "Something's up," he said in a low voice. He studied the pair. "Their scent is off." He casually popped some peanuts in his mouth. "I need to warn the others, but I can't leave you." He suggested I barricade myself in one of the cabins while he shifted. He'd howl a warning to Flint and the pack.

But they'd kill him.

My palms and underarms dripped with rivers of sweat as I told the guards I needed to pee, and we strolled toward the closest cabin.

"You need to stay here." The security guy's gruff voice sent goosebumps prickling over my belly.

"Hey, old man," the other one yelled at Arnie. "The human can go alone."



Arnie bristled and ignored him, and we continued walking. “You work for my nephew, and you don’t speak like that to the Alpha Omega.”

The second security guy stormed over to us and wrested Uncle’s hand from my arm. Arnie growled, his wolf showing in his eyes as he glared at the guard.

“You don’t frighten me, old guy. You were past your prime before I was born.”

“Get your hands off the Alpha Omega,” Arnie snarled.

“The human should not be on pack land but dead and buried, dirt stuffed in his filthy human mouth.”

“It’s time.” The first guy checked his watch. “Take them back. Shame they can’t watch what happens.” He put his face in mine. “Your beloved is going to race back when he hears the baby is coming.”

He leered at me, and I cradled my belly, determined to protect my little one as I thought of Flint, and panic engulfed me, my heart racing at twice its normal speed.

“Forget the human. Go,” the other one said as he grabbed me and Arnie, and a stabbing pain shot along my arm. Uncle made a big deal about the guy hurting his shoulder, and he hunched over.

The first one took off and shifted, not bothering to remove his clothes first as Uncle and I were dragged back to our chairs.

“Make any attempt to move and I’ll shut you up permanently.” The guy brought out his gun.

I caught Arnie’s eye and rubbed my bump before pretending to double up in pain.

Arnie held my hand, saying the stress had brought on my labor.

The alpha guard fell for it and muttered I'd need to cross my legs because he wasn't delivering any kid. "Besides, your baby will only take a few breaths." He grinned, and the blood in my veins turned to ice.

I wailed and told the guy I needed more water from the car. He told me to shut it, but I insisted while holding my bump. Arnie held me, telling the guy the baby was coming.

"You go get it, old man." The guard pivoted toward the car. "And don't try anything stupid." He snorted. "As if you could." He sneered at Uncle who sort of hobbled to the vehicle.

"Oh gods, the baby's coming. I need to push." I clutched the guy's arm, making sure he was looking at me and not Uncle.

"Get your hands off me, human." Despite the guy's shifter strength, I clung to him while begging the universe to protect my baby. "What are you doing?"

"The baby. The baby," I wailed.

"Shut the fuck up."

"I need your help to get on the lounge."

He grunted and led me to the chair, though he kept glancing at the path the pack and his sidekick had taken. My hair had flopped over my eyes, and from the corner of my eye, I saw Arnie opening the car's glove compartment.

I was fearful of what he was going to do. One elderly guy and his wolf were no match

for the burly bodyguard. The flaming torches flickered with a gust of wind as Arnie made his way back to us.

But I made the mistake of concentrating on Arnie, and the guard twisted his head. “What the fuck?”

A bullet exploded, and the guy thumped onto the ground. His skin turned to fur and his snout appeared. Oh gods, his wolf was going to kill us. But his shift was only partial, like Flint the day of the meeting, and Arnie put handcuffs on him. The handcuffs from the night I met Flint.

“Why didn’t he shift?” I asked as the guy groaned and passed out.

“His shoulder shattered, so the same for his beast.” Uncle shifted and howled, a sound so haunting, I’d never forget it. He shifted back. “They’ll have heard the gunshot and now my warning, so Flint and the others will...” His voice trailed away, and his pinched expression didn’t give me hope.

“Will what, Uncle?” My belly tightened, and I took deep breaths while grasping his arm.

“I’m going to take you away from here. Flint and the pack will deal with this.” He steered me toward our vehicle.

“No, I can’t leave when Flint and everyone is in danger. I am the Alpha Omega and I will not run.” I bent over as another cramp took hold of me. Please stay where you are, little one. My baby was safer inside me tonight than out.

“Shift, Uncle.” He had his wolf, and I grabbed the gun so I also had a lethal weapon. I coated myself in the injured guard’s blood and lay on the lounge, writhing. I wasn’t pretending. Our baby wanted out.

Footsteps padding through the forest announced the bodyguard's wolf's arrival. I peered at him through half-closed eyes.

He shifted. Big mistake. "What the fuck?" Uncle Arnie's wolf leaped at him and took him down as two other wolves arrived and finished off the bodyguard.

"Tony, where are you hurt?" Rudy examined me.

"Not my blood. But the baby is coming. Where's Flint?"

Rudy's eyes filled with tears, and I saw my life as a single father, just like Dad.

"He'll be here soon." Rudy and Hunter helped me onto the ground, and my father-in-law removed my clothes. Poor Rudy, I was gripping his hand so tightly with each contraction, he winced.

Pain tormented my body as it cramped and pushed the baby lower. I wanted Flint here, and he might never meet our child. Pain clogged my mind as a scent washed over me.

Tears spilled over my cheeks until a voice said, "I'm here, love."

"I thought you were dead!" Sobs wracked my body.

"I'm not going anywhere."

"They pretended the baby was coming... to lure you here..." I gasped and gritted my teeth as my belly got hard. "But the stress of everything... it just...brought on labor."

"It's all over."

“No,” I yelled. “The baby’s not here, and you’re covered in blood.” I was too.

Rudy wiped my face with a wet rag, while Flint breathed with me through the cramps, mumbling he wished he could take the pain away.

Minutes and maybe hours passed. I had exhausted my strength. Did I have enough energy to push the baby out? I was small and my mate... wasn’t. Maybe our little one was too big.

“I’m so tired.”

“You are the strongest person I know, love. You won’t give up on our baby.”

“Easy for you to say,” I hissed.

“I can see the head,” Rudy shouted.

Hunter and Uncle cheered, and I urged my mate to watch our child being born. Humans shifting into animals was amazing but nothing was as miraculous as pushing our baby into the world.

Using my last bit of strength, I pushed, and Rudy said the baby’s head was out, covered in matted dark hair. Then shoulders and... and...

“It’s a girl.”

We had a little girl. Flint cradled her, and I kissed her before he held her up to the moon.

“You are the newest member of La Luna Noir.”

He put her in my arms, and I examined her button nose and the lips like her alpha dad. I made sure she had ten fingers and toes.

Much as I wanted to go home and forget about tonight, Flint had responsibilities to the pack. Burning bodies and burials. I held my daughter close,

As Alpha he had to stamp out what was left of the rebellion and deliver punishments to those traitors who remained alive. I hated there would be more bloodshed, but none of us would be safe if he didn't mete out the appropriate punishment.

"Dad and Arnie will take you home."

"No. We'll sleep in one of the cabins until you're done. Rudy can stay with me." We had snacks, though the cabins were stocked with food. "Also, Uncle Arnie was a hero."

"One of many heroes tonight."

I snuggled with our daughter, and we slept for hours as loyal pack members surrounded the cabin, and Rudy made sandwiches.

When Flint finally came and put us in the back seat of the car, he slumped beside me, worry creasing his face.

"It's done."

Rudy was in front, Uncle at the wheel, both bickering in whispers about who was the better driver.

Some things never changed. Thank gods.

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

Lottie squirmed in my arms as we stood around my father's memorial plaque, and Rudy took her. Flapping his purple scarf at his granddaughter calmed her, and she tried to grab it. It wouldn't last long once our little girl got her hands on it.

My father. While Antonio was how my dad knew him, I now thought of him as Anthony, his real name. Those who worked with and cared about him had given him a backstory, instead of being shrouded in mystery. Anthony was fiercely loyal to his pack, La Luna Noir, and to Flint's grandfather, Florian, the pack Alpha.

We'd designated the ground under the flame amur maple tree where the photo was taken that Rudy showed me. It had convinced me they were telling the truth about my father. In the fall, the tree's leaves were a stunning flaming red.

My family gathered around me: mate, in-laws, daughter, and Arnie who was still wearing his cheap suit, though there was no sign of the thumb drive. Dear Uncle Arnie adored Lottie. He and Rudy were always arguing as to who got to hold her.

I studied my father's epitaph, the one I'd chosen:

Here lies Anthony, a beloved father, who carried a secret to the grave.

The secret referred to his double life. It saddened me he'd had to hide part of himself. He must have loved Dad to have sacrificed so much.

Arnie cleared his throat and glanced at Rudy who nodded. Arnie was holding a document, and he credited me with him finding it.

“Me? You must be mistaken, Uncle.”

“You should have looked behind the picture, Tony.” He waved the yellowing envelope.

I scrutinized first Flint and then around the circle at the family, but no one offered an answer.

“You’ll have to explain.” I loved Arnie and hoped his memory wasn’t failing.

“The night you snuck into my office.”

Oh gods, why did he have to bring that up? My cheeks burned at the memory, and I elbowed Flint when he sniggered. While I hated being reminded of my little escapade, I had to clear up the uncertainty.

“I did look behind it, but there was nothing there.”

“On the back of the picture,” Arnie clarified. He held the envelope up high. “It was stuck on the back, and I suspect it’s about your father.”

“Damn! I was so close.” I tried to make light of the moment and nudged my mate. “Just think. If I’d found it, I might have marched out of there and never met you. Could have saved myself a lot of trouble—and a split lip!”

He gave me a withering look. “I would have scented you when I came downstairs, and from then on, I would have made it my life’s mission to find and convince you that you were my one and only!”

My eyes flooded with tears. That man and his ability to make me cry happy tears. I leaned against him, the warmth from his body reassuring me he spoke nothing but the



truth.

All Flint had been told was that the pack didn't kill Anthony and he'd died an accidental death in a workplace accident, as Dad had said. I'd let it go, thinking I was at the end of my quest.

Hunter took Lottie from his dad and jiggled her, humming a song, and she quietened. I was ready to hold her tight but needed to find out what was in the aging envelope. It was dotted with brown splotches, reminding me of the freckles on my nose as a kid.

"When Emilio told me what you'd done, I searched the office and took the picture off the wall. That was when I found this." Arnie explained my name was written on it in his brother's handwriting. "Thank gods I didn't tell him."

Everyone was quiet at the mention of Emilio.

"But the club has been renovated twice since Grandpa died," Ranger chimed in.

"But not Uncle's office." Flint shook his head. "It's the same as it was when our grandfather was Alpha."

"Florian gave me that picture and told me to always hang it in my office." Arnie ran his fingers over the envelope, and I wondered if he was remembering his brother.

"I'm sorry I didn't give it to you before now." Arnie's lip trembled. "I put it in a drawer, fearful of what it contained."

He cast a glance at Rudy who added, "We both agreed to wait until you were certain about Flint. But you got pregnant, and it never seemed like the right time. Sorry, my darling." Rudy embraced me, and I returned his hug.

“You did what you thought was right.” My fingers trembled as I held the envelope with my name written in cursive letters. I pulled out the papers, crinkled with age, the corners curling up. Flint put his arm around me.

“Did you know about this?” I wasn’t accusing him. Lottie and I were on his mind 24/7, and he protected us always. If he had, he’d have weighed up whether to give it to me.

Flint put a finger under my chin and tipped my head so I was looking into his eyes. “No. I’m guessing my grandfather expected or hoped you’d come looking for the truth one day.”

There was a sharp intake of breath—from me. Our paths to finding one another had begun when I was a baby a little older than Lottie and not the night Emilio caught me.

I caught Flint’s eye. “You said the pack didn’t kill him.”

“Yes, I’m certain of that.” But he glanced at his dad as if to confirm he was right.

“That’s what we were told by your grandfather and father.”

I convinced myself the past was another world, and I couldn’t second-guess why anyone had done what they did, but I begged the universe not to force me to do any more soul-searching. I’d had enough for one lifetime.

Now that I was about to find out, I hesitated. Maybe it would be best to burn the letter and not let its contents come between Flint and me.

“Read it, Tony. If you don’t, you’ll regret it.” Flint rested his head on mine. “Knowledge is power.”

That sounded more like something I'd say. Taking a deep breath and after checking on Lottie who was gnawing on Hunter's fingers, I read the full-page letter from my mate's grandfather.

I skimmed the spidery handwriting about him offering to pay my dad a lump sum for my schooling and for our living expenses. Dad had refused, so Florian had put the money into an account for me.

But that wasn't what stood out. It was the bit mentioning Dad. Flint read over my shoulder as I scanned the paragraph.

My office overlooked the waste management plant, and I saw your omega father confronting Anthony, shouting he knew it was owned by the mafia. He was furious and scared for himself and you. When Anthony turned his back, your dad threw a metal bar at him and hit Anthony over the head. I'm guessing he wasn't able to shift because that would have saved him. When I reached your omega father, he'd tossed Anthony's body into the industrial shredder.

The page fell from my hands, and Flint grabbed me as I sobbed against his chest. "How could Dad do that?"

"Passion combined with rage and fear can be a deadly weapon." My mate held me tight.

"He goes on to say he refused to put a hit out on your dad. He was thinking of you." I turned my head, my eyes blurred with tears as Ranger read from the letter. "'I believe this came about because I allowed Anthony to break the rules and be with a human. I blamed myself.'"

Oh gods. My father falling in love set off a chain of events that was still playing out today.

“Now what?” I couldn’t pretend I’d ever look at Dad the same way. “Is that why he and Derek left after they met you?” I dabbed my eyes with a tissue and took Lottie from Hunter. I kissed her chubby arms and inhaled her aroma, pushing away the scent of deceit and death brought about by the letter’s contents.

“I suspect so. I’m so sorry, my love.” Flint brushed tears off my cheeks.

“This is why he was so skittish that day. How could I have been so stupid all these years?”

My mate took me by the shoulders. “This is not on you. Your dad has lived with this knowledge for years. While he has not received vengeance from La Luna Noir or been behind bars, he’s been in a prison of his own making.”

“You should read this bit, Tony.” Ranger held out the page.

I sniffed and studied the line Ranger pointed at while Lottie pulled my hair.

If you ever come looking for your La Luna Noir family, know that you will be welcomed with open arms.

Flint enveloped Lottie and me in a hug, and the others slipped away. The family I’d grown up in was nothing but a facade. “I thought I was loved, but I was a reminder of my alpha father.”

“The pain at your loss might never go away, but Lottie and I will always love you.”

The irony was my so-called law-abiding dad killed the mafia father who’d taken a huge chance by marrying outside the pack. And the mafia family kept his secret and now were the ones surrounding me with love.

“Did you want to destroy the letter, Tony? It might give you some closure.”

“I could.”

He nuzzled my throat. “You don’t sound certain.”

The letter was my last link to Anthony. He had been the absent parent, but now that I knew the truth, I felt closer to him and was so horrified at what Dad had done, I was glad he and Derek had run off.

“I’m not.”

“Did you want me to?—?”

“No!” I was adamant there would be no more killing. “As you said, the guilt and fear has been festering inside him since he did it.” I was happy to let it continue. He’d always be looking over his shoulder, peeking between the curtains, maybe checking under the car, seeing shapes in the shadows. That was punishment enough.

Besides, I might change my mind, and I needed the evidence. That I was considering that option would have sent chills down my spine before I met Flint.

Maybe I’d inherited more from Anthony than I thought.

## Page 29

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

Lottie was crawling over the picnic blanket examining twigs and leaves and trying to put everything in her mouth. That was how she learned about the world at her age.

Tony had his eyes closed, and I was scrambling left and right after our daughter.

She must be a shifter, my wolf decided. She's so fast.

Nah, she's just a baby. They're speedy. If I glanced away for a second, she was off, trying to pick up ants in her plump fingers.

Watch out, she'll hurt herself.

"Do you need any help?" Tony lifted the hat covering his face.

"Nope, I got this."

My mate had completed his thesis this week, and he deserved a rest.

We were sitting under what we now called Anthony's and my tree, planted to commemorate my birth and where Tony had placed his father's plaque.

Before I met Tony, I was all work and no play. Sundays I had lunch with the family, but before and after, my phone was in my hand, laptop open, always working, always looking over my shoulder.

But now I made time for my family. Ranger and Hunter were officially my Betas. And after what happened with Emilio, no one in the pack complained I was favoring

my siblings. We'd made progress on changing the hierarchy of the pack. Yes, I was Alpha, but when I either handed over power or went to the goddess, the pack would vote on the next Alpha.

Our law had changed regarding mating with humans. It might not go as far as some wanted, but it was more progress. If a La Luna Noir pack member met their fated mate and that person was human, they could mate.

For now, the danger had passed about my role as Alpha and the uprising stamped out, though I wasn't naive enough to think there'd never be another challenge.

Tony yawned and checked his watch. "What shall we do about dinner?"

Instead of going to Dad's every Sunday, we alternated, and the family came to us every second weekend for the evening meal.

"Let's get takeout. Even better, we can have Hunter and Ranger pick it up."

"You can't do that. Uncle Arnie would be horrified."

But as if by magic, my phone beeped. It was Dad saying as Tony had had such a tiring week, they'd bring the food. I showed the text to Tony.

"Great." He opened one eye and shot up. "Flint, where's Lottie?"

Damn, in those few seconds, she'd crawled off the blanket and was heading into the woods. My wolf might not have understood babies, but he was fiercely protective of our daughter.

He didn't ask my permission but ripped through my clothes and raced over to Lottie, herding her back to the blanket. I thanked him before taking my skin.

“Might want to put sunscreen on that.” Tony giggled as he stared at my cock. Thanks to my wolf, my clothes were shredded. “I don’t want it out of action.”

My mate had been so busy these last weeks, we hadn’t had much sex.

“Maybe we should put off the family, saying you’re ill. When Lottie’s asleep, we go to bed too.”

“No, we’re not lying.”

Tony was big on not telling lies. After us doing the falling-in-love, mating, and having a family in reverse—sorta—and the chaos in his life after finding out what his dad did what he did, he insisted we were always truthful. There was some wriggle room when it came to us having sex—and we had a lot of sex—but he considered the Sunday family meal ritual sacred. No lies would be told.

“Just as well the domestic staff have Sunday off or they’d be treated to you and your big cock prancing home.”

I loved when my mate commented on the size of my cock, and I puffed out my chest.

“There will be no prancing, my love.” I didn’t point out the security staff were always lurking around the estate. Lurking was how Tony described them, probably because he hadn’t grown up with them, whereas for me, they were always in the background.

I grabbed the picnic basket and picked up our daughter who was studying a spider. Tony trailed beside us, dragging the blanket over the grass and holding the cushions.

“Are you sure you don’t want to cancel? Everyone would understand ‘cause you’ve been so busy.” I was holding Lottie while my mate was showering. He was totally beat but insisted it was too late because everyone was on their way.



But he came out of the shower enclosure, water dripping seductively from his length, my cock swelled. “I love you.”

“Me too.” He wiggled his ass as he strode into the bedroom.

The peacefulness in the house ended when my family arrived. They could never creep in unannounced. Ranger roared up in his new sports car, Hunter in a huge SUV, my dad at the wheel of his car and Uncle Arnie hanging on for dear life, plus the assorted security guards

“Arnie made lasagna.” Dad blew me a kiss and took Lottie, while Uncle grumbled he’d never get to hold her.

“What do you think of my new car, Bro?” Ranger’s cars were his babies. I hated to think what would have happened if he became a father to real live children. He’d have them polishing the paintwork before they could walk.

“Darling Tony, you should be in bed.” Dad kissed my mate and sent me a look that said, “What’s wrong with him?”

My mate insisted he was okay, and while we heated the food, Hunter opened the basement door.

“Why don’t these lights work, Flint?”

“You’ll have to ask Tony. I think he put a spell on them.” The stair lights only responded to my mate’s voice now.

“Lights on,” Tony barked.

“Oh, I like what you’ve done with the place,” Hunter yelled.

My mate insisted the basement should be used for enjoyment, and we'd put a pool table down there.

"Uncle Arnie, I challenge you to a game after dinner." Hunter flung himself onto a chair at the table.

"I'm a little rusty, but I can kick your butt." Uncle grinned.

Lottie sat in her highchair, and Dad tried to feed her, but she grabbed the spoon and did it herself. Our little girl was growing up, and I needed her to slow down.

Tony and I shared a glance, and he tapped his glass with a fork.

"Something's up," Ranger noted. "Glass-banging time means big news."

"Are you pregnant again?" Dad gushed.

"How did you guess?" Tony rubbed a hand over his face.

"You have that first-trimester look."

There were shouted congratulations, hugs, and kisses. Uncle said when the new baby arrived, Dad couldn't hold two at once, so he'd get his share of cuddles.

After everyone left, I got Lottie ready for bed, and I made sure the baby cam app was working. Tony sang her a lullaby, and we kissed her before tiptoeing out of the room.

My mate sank into bed, and I took him in my arms. "Thank you."

"For what?" He snuggled into me.

"For being you."

He snorted. “You didn’t think that when we first met. You were very shouty.”

“That’s what kidnappers do. They shout.”

“I was your first, right?” he giggled.

“Maybe.”

“Liar!

“What? No. Oh wait, I am lying.” I put my mouth to his ear. “Perhaps I should be punished.”

“I agree. When I’m feeling better, I’ll grab those handcuffs. Where are they, by the way?”

Check out the next book in the series.

I went undercover to break up an organized crime ring—not to fall in love with a mob boss.

Investigating one of the biggest crime families is risky work. I knew that going in and am prepared for anything. If I get the story, it will all be worth it.

Only the story consumes my entire being and I decide to try a speed dating event in the hopes of meeting a distraction, and is the alpha I meet ever the distraction. He’s tall, smexy, and has eyes I can’t stop looking into. If only he were honest and let me know up front who he was.

Now I’m longing for a mob boss, trying to complete my investigation, being rescued from a different mafia family who sees me as the risk, and... oh yeah, getting stuck in a mountainside cabin with the hottie from round 7. At least my life isn’t boring.

Matched into the Mob is the second book in The Wolves of La Luna Noir, a sweet with knotty heat MM Mpreg Shifter Mafia Romance. Mated into the Mob features a sexy alpha who works for his family business (yes, that kind), the human omega who is supposed to be investigating the bad guys, not sleeping with them and ends up kidnapped, true love, fated mates, an adorable baby, and a guaranteed happy ever after. If you love your alphas hot, your men dangerous, and your omegas fierce read your copy today.