







# Staff Only: a contemporary m/m mpreg romance (The Scarlet Hotel)

**Author:** *Trisha Linde*

**Category:** LGBT+

**Description:** Behind closed doors at The Scarlet Hotel, anything can happen... even breaking every rule.

Alpha Emerson Holland has been running his father's hotel for years. It's his life, his entire world, and he won't do anything to jeopardize it. He will eat nothing but jam sandwiches for weeks on end if it means being able to pay his staff when times are tight, and he will work every shift for free if he has to. He will even deny himself what he truly wants most, because being in love with an employee is strictly forbidden. When his father tells him that he must sacrifice just a little more, it's not even a question. Of course he will—even if it means losing himself.

Omega Roland has been in love with his boss for as long as he can remember. He dreams about him every night, fantasizes about him every day, but that's all it will ever be—a fantasy. The few times he's gotten the courage to hint that they could be something more, Monsieur Holland has made it perfectly clear that things must remain professional between them. And so far, Roland has listened. Except things have been getting weird around the hotel lately. Clandestine meetings, whispered rumors, and it's obvious that Emerson is falling apart. Roland is certain he can make his boss feel better—but only if he agrees to break a few rules.

Staff Only is the twelfth standalone book in the m/m mpreg romance series, The Scarlet Hotel, from bestselling author Trisha Linde. Each book features a new couple and begins and ends in a different room at The Scarlet Hotel. Staff Only is the final book in the series and features the tale of forbidden romance between boss and employee that readers have been waiting for since the beginning. The story revolves around the hotel's sordid past and its uncertain future, an alpha who will do anything for the ones he loves, an omega learning to take control, explosive chemistry that refuses to be tamed, and a happily ever after for all the staff at The Scarlet Hotel.

**Total Pages (Source):** 25

## Page 1

*Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 2:43 pm*

I'd really screwed up this time. I had no idea how I'd managed to lose the money. I swore I'd taken the guest's payment correctly, but then... it was just gone! Shit. Guilt made my insides squirm, and my hand shook as I raised it to knock on Monsieur Holland's office door. I waited patiently until I heard him call, "Come in."

This wasn't the first time I'd knocked on his door, and I hoped it wasn't the last. He wouldn't fire me... right? It was an honest mistake. It wasn't like I stole the money. Sweat slicked my palms as I turned the knob and crept into my boss's office.

Emerson Holland made my heart race, this was nothing new. Every damn time I saw him, my world seemed to spin just a little faster, but it was usually for a more familiar reason. A more pleasurable reason... The man drove me absolutely wild, and I wasn't even sure if he knew the extent of my fixation. I dreamed about him every night, fantasized every day.

But he was my boss, and that meant he was off-limits.

I stepped into his office, filled with dread, and he looked up from his paperwork, his cool blue eyes making me shiver. "Yes, Roland? What is it?"

Reluctantly, I closed the door behind me with an ominous click. If he was going to yell at me, I didn't need witnesses. My coworkers were a bunch of gossiping hens. Turning to face him again, I couldn't quite make eye contact. "Um, I... I kinda... lost some money." I gulped, my throat tight. "I promise I'll find it! And if I can't, you can take it out of my paycheck!" I blathered, hating the way his eyes narrowed on me.

"That won't be necessary," he said, his voice surprisingly calm. He simply picked up

his pen and went back to his paperwork.

“It-it won’t?” I stammered.

“No, of course not, as you will no longer be receiving paychecks here. You’re fired.”

“What?!” I screeched, panic taking control of my senses and leaving me breathless. Black spots flitted across my vision. I couldn’t be fired! It was the first time I’d done anything wrong, and I’d been working here for years! This place was like my home, the staff like my family! This couldn’t be happening. “Please, sir, I’ll do anything! I can’t lose this job!” I wailed.

He seemed to go perfectly still, then he set his pen aside and looked back up at me through his blond lashes, his eyes flashing. “Anything?”

“Yes! Absolutely anything. I’m yours to command.” Did he want me to beg? Because I totally would.

Emerson leaned back in his chair, steepling his hands under his chin, giving me his whole focus. As his eyes roamed lower on my body, it left a trail of goosebumps, like his gaze was a physical touch. “Very well, Roland. I’m sure we can come to some kind of agreement.”

My body sagged with relief, and I blew out a long breath. “Thank you, sir. You won’t regret this.”

“I’m sure I won’t,” he said, his voice deepening, and as I watched, he licked along his bottom lip slowly, tantalizing, his eyes hooded and pupils blown. Then he reached down and tugged on his belt, threading it through the buckle.

“W-what are you doing?” I asked, gulping, my mouth going desert dry, moments

before flooding with saliva. He couldn't mean— Surely, he didn't want me to— My brain stuttered and snagged on the mere thought. He can't possibly mean what I think he means. Even as I wondered it, I hoped to gods it was true. Inappropriate? Without a doubt. But it was also all of my dreams come true.

The sound of his zipper being pulled down seemed impossibly loud in the unnaturally quiet office. "Come closer, Roland," he rasped, widening the opening of his pants, showing the black fabric of his underwear. "Let's see you earn this second chance."

I practically ran across the room, eagerly dropping to my knees between his spread legs. Emerson lifted his shirt out of the way, and I saw the head of his erect cock peeking from the waistband of his underwear, glistening with a perfect bead of precum. He was so well-endowed that it couldn't be contained. I groaned, my own dick aching in the confines of my pants.

"You've been dying to have a taste, haven't you?" he taunted, and I nodded eagerly, unable to look away from the gleaming tip. "Well then, don't stop now."

Granted permission, I leaned in and collected the bead onto my tongue, closing my eyes to savor his nectar. It was better than I ever could've imagined, but it wasn't enough. I needed more. I needed everything he had to give.

Looking up at him for instruction, I paused with my fingers tucked into the elastic waistband of his briefs. "You may," he said after a long pause, and I wasted no time in yanking the fabric down to expose his full length. The veins along the shaft were throbbing with his racing pulse, and my own heart struggled to match the rhythm, syncing our bodies as one.

Groaning with need, I gripped the base of his cock in one fist and sank my mouth down over him, stretching my lips to accommodate his girth. His skin was silky smooth, and as my saliva dripped down over my hand, I was able to work him deeper

and deeper inside me, until he was nudging at the back of my throat.

I couldn't believe this was really happening! For years I'd been pining for Emerson. He was everything I looked for in a man, and ever since my first shift here, I'd been hopelessly head over heels in love. No other man could compare. And now? Now that I'd had my first taste, I was thoroughly obsessed.

"You're doing such a good job," he praised, stroking my hair, before gripping at the back of my neck. "But I think you can go a little deeper, don't you?"

Moaning my assent around my mouthful, I focused on relaxing my throat, allowing him to fill every inch of space. He used his grip on my hair to guide me, increasing the pace. Deeper and deeper I went, until my nose was brushing up against the coarse curly hair at the base. "You're such a good boy," he gritted out, "with the sweetest mouth. I've always known you would be able to take all of me." His breathing came in sharp pants, and he was struggling to keep himself still, his thighs tightening on either side of me. I could tell he was getting close. Who knew he had this rougher side hidden under his calm and cool exterior? I had to admit, I loved it.

Using one hand to massage his balls, I reached down with the other and squeezed my erection. Fuck, I could come just using my mouth on him. Slick seeped from my hole, making my ass cheeks slippery. I was going to need to change my clothes before going back to work. Or maybe... I would just leave them like this, serving our hotel guests while knowing my desire was still coating my skin.

Emerson's hips arched off the chair as he began to fuck my mouth from below. "I'm going to come. Will you swallow like a good boy?" he panted.

I wanted to shout YES! or at the very least nod, neither of which I could do while he pistoned into my mouth. Instead, I moaned around him, long and low. My balls tingled as his tightened in my palm. I wanted so desperately to taste his seed, to take

it into my body at long last. And maybe next time, he could fill my ass.

“Fuck, Roland. I love you so much,” he gritted out, his inhibitions non-existent with all his barriers down. “I always have.” I almost pulled straight off to tell him I felt the same. “Yes,” he panted. “Yes, yes... I’m checking out.” Wait, what? Was that a euphemism for coming?

“Excuse me? Sir?” His voice sounded strange.

I blinked a few times, the fantasy disappearing, slipping through my fingers like mist, no matter how tightly I clung to it. There was no cock in my mouth, no fingers tangled in my hair. I wasn’t in Emerson’s office. Instead, I was standing at the hotel’s front desk, and my eyes were dry, my lids scraping like sandpaper, like I hadn’t blinked in a good long while.

In front of me stood a man with a pinched expression. He’d obviously been trying to get my attention for a while. “Can you hear me?” He waved a hand in front of my face. “Hello?”

I cleared my throat, trying to release some of the tension. “Yes, sir. I hear you. You’re checking out.”

This was such a familiar task that I could do it in my sleep. Unfortunately, I was now very much awake, and no matter how much I longed to slip right back into the fantasy, I knew it was no good. It was gone. Emerson Holland was not mine to have. He was just my boss. The same as he always was, and always would be.



## Page 2

*Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 2:43 pm*

I hadn't even had my morning cup of coffee yet, and already my heart was racing.

Walking along the sidewalk at a clip, my shoes, polished to a high gleam, beat a quick rhythm in the predawn stillness. The city was just beginning to stir, but there would be no sleeping in for me. In fact, there never was, not even on Sundays. The Scarlet Hotel was my life. I had poured my blood, sweat, and tears into this place for over a decade, since I graduated with my business degree and my father handed the managing role over to me. He had patted me on the shoulder in an uncharacteristic gesture of affection, and he'd said, "I'm entrusting you with my hotel—my father's legacy. Don't fuck it up."

And so far, I had done everything I could to make my father proud, or at the very least, minimally angry. Time and time again, the hotel had inched its way toward closure, between structural issues and near financial ruin, but in each case, I had done whatever it took to come out on top. Budget cuts, working extra hours, maneuvering deals. I had no social life to speak of. No friends, no family other than my father, and certainly no man to warm my bed.

I told myself it was worth it. It had to be. Otherwise, I would be lost. I would have given up everything... for nothing.

Glancing at my watch, I saw the hotel's night shift was almost over, and I picked up the pace. I was later than I thought. The sun had not yet risen, and already it was too warm, the scent of another impending summer scorcher in the air, like sunburnt leaves and baked pavement. We desperately needed rain, but it looked like it wouldn't be today. Pressure was building in the atmosphere. We were due for a storm.

As I approached the hotel, a figure in a crisp red coat stepped forward. “Morning, sir,” Gerald said with a tip of his hat. The doorman was by far our oldest employee, though he showed no interest in retiring. In fact, he had more energy than some of our other young pups. Gerald pulled the door open ahead of me.

“Thank you, Gerald,” I said out of reflex, but my attention was elsewhere. My gaze went straight across the lobby to the front desk, and my chest tightened.

Every morning I felt this sharp anticipation, even when I told myself it was hopeless. Nothing would ever change. I must’ve been some kind of masochist to keep torturing myself, but no amount of pain could stop my eyes from searching for him.

For Roland.

Like every morning, I found Roland staring back, as though he’d been waiting for this moment as much as I had. His dark eyes held a smoldering intensity that was nearly strong enough to knock down every wall I’d built around my heart. Instead of rushing, now I slowed my pace, allowing myself to savor this moment. It was the most luxurious misery, to be so close and yet so far from the one thing I wanted more than anything.

Roland was younger than I was by nearly ten years, but it wasn’t the age difference that made me pause. He was also my employee, and while a relationship with a staff member would be inappropriate, breaking at least one rule in the employee handbook, it still wasn’t the real reason I kept my distance. It was that Roland deserved better than what I had to offer.

That didn’t mean I couldn’t admire from afar, though.

“Good morning, Roland,” I said softly as I stopped in front of the desk.

His Adam's apple bobbed with a hard swallow, and he reached up and tugged at his collar, as if his tie were suddenly too tight. "Morning, sir," he replied in a whisper that felt far too intimate for the public setting. His tongue darted out and seemed to drag slowly along his bottom lip, and I watched the motion, wondering what he tasted like. "Did you sleep well?"

It would absolutely be inappropriate to tell him I would've slept much better with him tucked in beside me, so instead I murmured something indistinct. "Quiet night for you here, I hope." I was delaying going to my office. I didn't really care whether his shift was quiet or not; if something noteworthy had happened, I would have been notified. I just couldn't bring myself to walk away just yet.

"Mm," he hummed, his eyes trailing lower. I wondered if he was aware of how he looked at me, with unguarded hunger. Oh, how I wished I could tell what he was thinking. Some days I hoped he would quit his job and put me out of my misery, while other days, the thought of him not being nearby was impossible to imagine.

I opened my mouth to say something else—not sure what, as if it even mattered since it was all just a stall tactic anyway—but I caught sight of movement over Roland's shoulder, and my jaw snapped shut. My cheeks warmed. Why did I feel guilty, like I'd been caught doing something wrong?

Emily, the front supervisor, came up, ready to take over the desk from Roland. "Morning, sir," she said, her eyes missing nothing as they flicked back and forth between us. She smirked and raised a brow at me, as if to say I'm on to you.

"Yes. Morning, Miss Matthews. If you'll both excuse me, I have a lot of work to do. Have a good day, both of you, and... sleep well, Mr. Stohl."

Roland seemed to flinch when I used his last name in an attempt to put some distance between us. It hadn't come naturally to me, which was part of the problem. When I

had first hired Roland, I'd brushed what I felt off as merely physical attraction, assuming it would fade. I couldn't have been more wrong. In fact, the longer we worked together, the harder it was to stay apart. It was clear he felt something for me too. Lingered glances, the brush of a hand on the way by, and just once he'd invited me for dinner. I'd had to turn him down, obviously.

Feeling cold and sick, I turned away from the desk and made my way to my office, feeling Roland's eyes on me until I closed the door behind me. His shift was now over. That brief glimpse of him would have to hold me over until I left late this evening when his next shift began.

I sat heavily in my chair and rolled closer to the desk, booting up the computer. For the next hour, I caught up with emails, made sure all the proper supply orders had been submitted, looked for necessary maintenance orders, checked staff schedules—obviously not so I knew when Roland would be working. That would be unprofessional. It was only because I needed to know everything about the hotel, to ensure nothing fell through the cracks, as had happened too many times in the past.

At some point, Cherie, the hotel's chef, popped in to drop off my first cup of coffee. An hour later, Diya, our sous chef, dropped off the second.

I was just about ready to shut down my computer and walk the hotel to visually inspect how everything was running, when the phone on my desk rang. My body instinctively tensed. The phone never rang to give me good news. Picking up the receiver, I braced myself for the worst. "Hello?"

"Hey, Emerson, it's Anna." Anna Abrams was our accountant. My stomach sank straight down to my toes. I heard her take a deep, slow breath. "I'm afraid we need to talk."

When I was just a child, the class bully had stolen my crayon, sneered, and called me

a virgin. I was a virgin, obviously, but neither of us even knew what the word meant at that age. He was simply repeating something he'd heard, but he'd said it like an insult, so I'd yelled "I am not!" I had then proceeded to punch him square in the nose, knocking the kid on his ass. I was escorted to the office and my father was called. That night when I got home from school, my father sat me down, and we had a long chat. First, he'd explained what a virgin was (I was both curious and horrified). Then, he congratulated me on standing up for myself. Lastly, he'd lectured me on the benefits of using words instead of fists. He'd said one should never act out of anger. That it was important to pause first, think things over, before deciding on a course of action. Yes, sometimes we might need to use our fists, but usually, there was a more logical, less violent option.

It was good advice, and it had served me well over the years.

I tried my best to follow that advice today, I swore I did. My blood pressure skyrocketed, my pulse throbbing in my temples, as I clenched my fists in my lap. I wanted nothing more than to punch someone—my father.

I paused...

I thought things over...

Then I picked up the phone and dialed.

My father picked up on the fourth ring. "What have you done this time?"

Gritting my teeth, I forced myself to remain calm. "Well, Father, I'm afraid that's the question I must ask you. I just got off the phone with Anna Abrams, and she informed me that we're behind in paying property taxes. Not only that, but the money that I had set aside to pay it seems to have been transferred to an outside account—by you. Care to explain? What have you done with my money?"

“It’s not your money,” he growled, not even attempting to deny it. “Just as the hotel is not yours. It’s mine. You can have it when I’m dead and gone.”

“Not at this rate, I won’t!” I snapped, pushing out of my chair to pace around the office. “I have worked my ass off to keep this business afloat, while you keep pissing away any profit right out from under—”

“Watch your mouth!” he shouted, and I instinctively shut up. I had always been a respectful son, a dutiful and obedient son, but my father had truly pushed me to the limit these last years. I felt like I was fighting a losing battle. No matter what I did, I was losing ground. My father’s voice got low and dangerous. “You don’t know what you’re talking about, trust me. If you only knew the half of what I’ve had to do.”

A memory fluttered to the surface, of a woman in a crisp business suit, telling me she would be in touch with my father, that it would be “business as usual,” whatever that meant. I didn’t want to ask, but I needed to know. “Does this have anything to do with the mayor?”

There was silence on the other end of the line, and I found myself dropping back into my chair, holding my breath.

Finally, he sighed. “Maybe it’s time you hear the whole story. Can we discuss this over dinner?”

“I’m working.” Because I was always working, always fighting to keep the hotel running.

“After dinner then. We’ll have a drink.” He sounded resigned, and I knew from experience that he wouldn’t budge once he’d made up his mind.

No matter how much I didn’t want to hear what he had to say, it was time to uncover

buried secrets.

“Fine. Be here at ten.” I didn’t even bother saying goodbye before I disconnected the call and dropped my cell onto my desk, leaning back in my chair and pinching my nose against an impending headache. I honestly wasn’t sure why I even bothered anymore.

I glanced at my watch and saw that it was already late afternoon. I hadn’t eaten lunch yet, but I wasn’t even hungry. I’d lost my appetite—for everything but Roland. Roland would make me feel better, he always did, with his shy, lopsided smile. He would probably be waking up soon, to get ready for tonight’s shift. I wished I could be in bed beside him, curled around him, burying my nose against his neck and breathing in his warm scent. The mere thought of him calmed my frayed nerves, and my erratic pulse evened out to a steady thump-thump.

## Page 3

*Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 2:43 pm*

“Closer, Roland,” he whispered softly, his lips tickling my ear. My skin tingled, goosebumps raising. His arm snaked around my waist and dragged me across the mattress until we were flush, his warmth enveloping me. “No matter how close you are, it’s never enough...”

Even before I opened my eyes, I knew. The bed beneath me was my own, and I was alone. I tried to go back to sleep since the alarm hadn’t gone off yet. I could stay with Emerson just a few minutes longer... but it was no use. The spell was broken.

I knew it was too good to be true. It was always a dream, but that didn’t stop me from hoping that one day I might wake up to find Emerson lying beside me. With a reluctant sigh, I blinked open my eyes and stared resentfully at the empty spot beside me. One day...

My heart gave an aching squeeze. Gods, I was lonely—in my awake life, anyway—but that didn’t mean I was willing to accept just anyone into my life. I wasn’t so desperate that I couldn’t afford to hold on to hope.

With a groan, I threw back the blanket and rolled out of bed, the hardwood blissfully cool under my feet. The vestiges of the dream clung to me, beckoning me back, while reality tugged me in the opposite direction, toward the shower. I had to get ready for work, and that meant seeing Emerson for real. Either way, I had a boner to take care of.

This was part of my daily ritual—jacking off to the image of my boss. I imagined his lightly muscled body while the water cascaded over me. I’d never seen him naked, but I had a good imagination, and as I closed my eyes and leaned back against the



tilled wall, my hand became his, tugging and stroking at my cock.

“Mmm, Roland. Is this all for me?” I heard him say as he lowered himself to his knees, prepared to worship me with his mouth. I swore I could feel the heat of his tongue lapping at my crown, it was so damn real. My hand worked faster, harder, as he ran his hands over my hips and around to my ass, spreading me with his fingers...

“Fuck, Emerson. Yes!” I cried. As I shuddered and shook, my cum splattering across the bottom of the tub to be washed down the drain, instead of into his mouth like I’d imagined, I heard my alarm going off in the bedroom.

I blinked my eyes open and looked down and my semi still heavy in my fist and sighed again. “Work. Right.” I cranked off the water, dried off, and wrapped the towel around my waist as I padded over to the bedside table to turn off my alarm.

Routine was good. Everything I did was with Emerson in mind, and not just the masturbating part of it. I pulled open my closet and brought out my freshly laundered uniform of black pants and white button-up and laid them across the bed, then I set up my ironing board and spent ten minutes making sure to smooth out every wrinkle. Emerson liked perfection, and I wanted to be that for him.

I ate a quick bowl of cereal, standing in the kitchen still in my towel, before getting dressed. I didn’t want to risk spilling food on my clothes. Then I got dressed and stood in front of the bathroom mirror and tied a crisp knot in my tie, laying the collar down. Running a bit of product through my hair, I took a deep breath. Maybe today would be the day.

Locking my apartment door behind me, I walked down the hall, stopping halfway to the stairwell at the apartment next to mine. I gave a soft knock in case she was sleeping, even though I could hear the TV blasting all the way from my own living room, then used my key to open the door. I peeked in and saw Collette in her

armchair in front of the TV, feet up, her short gray hair in curlers.

“Roland, is that you?” she called over the blare from the TV, squinting in my direction, ignoring her glasses hanging around her neck on a beaded chain.

“Yes, it’s me. Were you expecting someone else?” I stepped in and wiped my shoes on the mat out of habit, closing the door behind me.

“Oh, you know. Just some young lothario, come to seduce me.” She cackled, wiggling her slippered feet in delight.

I picked up her dinner dishes from the side table and brought them to the kitchen for her. Collette was wearing her housecoat, wrapped tight around her all the way up to her neck, even though it had to be close to 90 degrees in here. “Aren’t you hot?” I asked, but she just shrugged, her eyes focused on the TV. I stepped over to the air-conditioning unit in the window and turned it on, giving it a little nudge to get it started, the fan giving a metallic whine of complaint.

“Do you have time to watch some of my show with me?” she asked hopefully. She looked almost ready for bed.

“I wish I could, but I’m just heading to work. Do you need anything before I go?”

She pretended she hadn’t heard my question. Instead, she reached for my hand. “Have I ever told you about my grandson, Alan? He’s about your age. Such a good boy. Tall, you know, although everyone seems tall to me, so what do I know. He’s sweet too, brings me flowers.”

“Yes, I believe you’ve mentioned him.” Only every time I stop by, I thought with affection. Collette was sharp as a tack, and I knew there was nothing wrong with her memory. She was just playing matchmaker.

Sure enough, she followed it up with, “You know, I bet he would bring you flowers too, if you’d let him.”

Now it was my turn to pretend I hadn’t heard her. “Do you need me to help you get to bed?” I asked.

“Such a flirt,” she joked. “No, I’ll be fine. I’m just gonna finish my show.” I glanced at the TV where Lonely Alpha was on. It was a reality dating show, but I wasn’t a fan. I didn’t understand how these people could claim to fall in love after only 12 episodes. “It’s down to the final four omegas, and I need to know who’s getting the boot.”

“Sure, but don’t fall asleep in your chair, okay? You know how it tweaks your back.”

She patted my hand before letting it go. “Such a good boy you are, Roland. You’re going to make some lucky alpha very happy one day.”

My heart gave another squeeze, nearly painful, and I swallowed hard. I didn’t want some lucky alpha. I wanted Emerson.

It was that thought which carried me all the way to work—anticipating that first glimpse of him, the way his face would light up when I caught him by surprise, the twitch of his lips into an almost smile before he could get control of his reaction. I was barely aware of the bus rocking, starting and stopping its way downtown, but luckily my feet knew where to get off.

As soon as I stepped into the hotel lobby, I sucked in a breath and held it, my eyes searching him out—but there was no sign of him. His office door was closed. Assuming he was inside, I hurried to the staffroom to grab my blazer from my locker; I didn’t want him to miss him leaving.

“Hey, Roland. How’s it going?” someone said, Patrick from housekeeping maybe, I wasn’t really paying attention.

“Hmm? Yeah, for sure,” I mumbled, hurrying past. “See ya later.” Patrick just shook his head, saying something about me being distracted all the time, but I didn’t have time to stop and ask what he meant. He was hardly one to talk about being focused while at work. He’d recently published his first romance novel, so steamy that he’d put it under a pen name because he didn’t want his mom reading it. He was always pulling out his notepad to take notes, planning out the next book.

Emerging back at the front desk, my eyes went straight to Emerson’s office door, still closed. I was ten minutes early for my shift, but that was fine with me.

I was taking over for Mercy. She was still pretty new, but she knew what she was doing. She never made mistakes, and I liked that she was quiet and kept to herself, and she never expected me to be chatty either. In fact, she seemed to prefer when I spaced out. It was nice. Mercy was better suited to running the daycare Emerson had set up for guests who needed a breather, but when there weren’t any kids in attendance, she worked the front desk. As great as she was with kids, adults were another story. She had once confessed to me that she found it difficult to read people’s faces. They could be smiling while saying the rudest things. She didn’t like the disparity. With kids, you always knew where you stood.

Mercy remained at her position until 10pm exactly, the end of her shift, before stepping back from the desk without a word.

My eyes flicked again to the closed door, a sense of panic descending. Had I missed him already? But he was always here this late. I always thought it was because he wanted to see me, I hoped... Before Mercy could disappear down the hall to the staffroom, I quickly asked, “Uh, hey, Mercy, did Mr. Holland go home for the night?”

She turned her black eyes on me briefly and shook her head.

I sighed, nodding. “Okay, thanks. Good night.” The relief I felt was short-lived. If he hadn’t gone home, then where was he? Maybe he wasn’t even here at all. Did something happen? Was he okay?

It was usually quiet at the front desk this late in the day. There were a few guests returning for the night, and a few headed out for some reckless fun, but not much for me to do but watch and wait. It wasn’t long before my eyes caught sight of a familiar figure—the same blond hair, though streaked with gray, the same blue eyes. He was an older version of Emerson, with deep creases around his eyes and mouth and a body built more thickly, stretching his suit shirt across the torso.

Reinhold Holland, Emerson’s father.

The man rarely put in an appearance here anymore, though his portrait was hanging in the dining room next to that of the late Friedrich Holland, the hotel’s founder and Emerson’s grandfather. What was he doing here so late in the evening?

Unease crept up my spine as Reinhold marched straight over to Emerson’s office and knocked sharply. When my boss finally emerged, longing burst through me. I wanted him so badly I could nearly taste him, and I clamped my teeth down hard to keep from calling to him.

I frowned, watching as the two men headed across the lobby to the lounge. Emerson’s shoulders were curved, and his usually perfect hair was dangling loose over his forehead, like he’d been running his hands through it. As if he could sense me watching him, he looked over and our gazes met for a single drawn-out moment. My heart tripped over a beat.

Worry skittered through me like static in the air before an impending storm.

Something was very wrong.

## Page 4

*Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 2:43 pm*

I was glad when my father and I stepped through into the lounge, the door closing me off from Roland's penetrating gaze. The way he watched me with such intensity and heat, I always craved it, but with how vulnerable I was currently feeling, it wouldn't take much to make me spill my guts to him, and that simply wasn't an option. It was impossible to disguise my emotions from him when under the glaring lights of the lobby, but here, within the more private shadows, I felt the first hint of relief I'd felt all day.

Much of the hotel glistened and sparkled with obvious wealth, marble and crystal and bright lights, but the lounge was like another world entirely. It was all gleaming mahogany, dark walls and floor, and thick velvet curtains between the booths to give a sense of privacy. Tiffany lamps suspended over the tables gave a more subtle warm glow, though no less luxurious. Instead of shouting of glitz and glamor, it whispered of nighttime secrets.

I headed straight for a booth in the back, as far from other patrons as possible, nodding at the bartender on the way by. "A bottle of scotch, please, Timothy, and two glasses."

I slid onto the bench, my back to the wall so I could face the room. "Let's get this over with," I muttered. The leather upholstery was cool to the touch, but I knew it would soon warm beneath me, a small bit of comfort.

My father dropped into the booth across from me, steepling his hands on the table. "I haven't seen you in months. Shouldn't we catch up?"

"No," I said shortly. There was no need; nothing ever changed. I worked impossible

hours, while he did whatever it was that he did all day, wasting the money I tried so hard to manage. “Just tell me whatever it was you couldn’t say over the phone.”

For all his pompous attitude, I was surprised to see an emotion cross his face that looked a lot like remorse. He opened his mouth to speak but paused as Delia approached the table with our scotch, as well as a tray with two glasses and a small container of ice cubes. “Good evening, sir,” she said softly, almost somberly. She was very good at reading people, and I could see she likely had a better grasp of what was going on than I did.

“Thank you, Miss Carmichael,” I said, not unkindly but with a firm dismissal. She nodded and left.

Neither my father nor I spoke for a long moment, the silence stretching between us until it was taut and brittle. Father busied himself with pouring us each two fingers of scotch, dropping an ice cube in each glass, then slid the drink across the table to me before he finally cleared his throat, ready to begin.

“This hotel was your grandfather’s dream. He came to this country with his young wife, prepared to work hard. After the first world war, the economy was flourishing. Auto and airline industries were booming, and he saw this as the perfect time to invest. He was determined to turn his dream into a reality, and nothing would stand in his way.”

I frowned, spinning my glass on the table in front of me and watching the ice cube slowly melt. “That was almost a hundred years ago. What does this have to do with our current financial problems?”

He shook his head sadly. “It has everything to do with it.” He sighed and took a deep swallow of his scotch, nearly draining his glass in one go. When he set his glass down, he seemed reluctant to say more, but he clearly had no choice. He was



cornered. “I wish I could say my father was a good man, that he was loyal to my mother, that he maintained that strong work ethic through his life, but... it wouldn’t be the truth. In reality, he struggled to get a foothold here. He didn’t know anyone, had no family here to support him, and he ended up working low-paying jobs, struggling just to put food on the table. My mother wanted children, but they simply couldn’t afford it. He decided there had to be another way... an easier way...”

“Easier,” I repeated, my unease morphing into dread.

My father nodded, not meeting my eyes. “He got a job working for a man named Barbieri. This was during prohibition, and through Barbieri, my father got into bootlegging, helping with the manufacture and distribution of moonshine. He worked his way up through the organization quickly, with his willingness to do anything, commit any crime, no atrocity too great. And to reward him for his efforts... he and Barbieri came to an agreement.”

My breath skittered past my lips as I tried to keep my breathing steady. “What kind of agreement?” I asked, though every fiber of my being told me I didn’t want to know.

“Barbieri built the hotel using dirty money. My father’s name was on the paperwork, every inch the respectable businessman, all very legit, but there was nothing clean about it. They laundered money, had an illegal gambling hall, prostitution, loan sharking. You name it, they had their hand in it.”

“I always thought he started the hotel with family money.” My stomach twisted dangerously, and I took a swallow of my drink to keep the acid from crawling up my throat, welcoming the burn. “And you? What did you do when you took over?” I asked darkly, glaring across the table at the man who’d raised me. How had I not known any of this? What other secrets was he keeping?

The accusation finally brought his eyes up to mine, a cold fire lit from within.

“Nothing. I’m not my father. When I took over the hotel, I put an end to all of it. Except...”

“Except what?” I spat, clenching the cut-crystal glass in my fist. If it had been a cheaper glass, it would’ve cracked for sure.

“Except it didn’t matter,” he growled back, glaring at me. “You can’t just cut ties with the mafia. It doesn’t work like that. Even doing everything aboveboard, I still had to pay them their cut of the profits. My father was dead, but this was a generational kind of debt.” He grabbed the bottle to refill his glass, spilling when his hand shook. “Barbieri is long gone, but do you think that matters? I took over the hotel, and meanwhile, Barbieri’s business was handed down, until it ended up with Bruno Santana.”

Now that was a name I recognized, and I was suddenly glad for the warm leather bench beneath me, helping to hold back the creeping chill taking over my body. Bruno Santana was a well-known gangster who dealt with human trafficking and drugs. “But... wasn’t he arrested?” I’d followed the story in the press. “The FBI took him down, right? Along with a bunch of his associates after some tech whiz got their hands on some incriminating evidence. All the networks covered the court case. They were sentenced, they’ll die in prison. The mob was shut down, and the last mayor, Philip Black, disappeared.”

“Mm-hm,” he murmured, nodding. “Sure, but when you put out one wildfire, another pops up somewhere else. And in this case, that fire is Eva Ward.”

“The new mayor?” I asked breathlessly. My chest was tightening and making it hard to catch a full breath. I bit back a moan. “I can’t compete with this, Dad. The hotel is a good business on its own, but I can’t afford to keep paying her off. What would happen if we just stopped?”

“Do you really want to risk finding out? They’re the fucking mob, Emerson,” he seethed, before tempering his reaction, smoothing down his tie. He cleared his throat. “I know we’re fighting a backward slide, which is why I had a little chat with Ms. Ward this afternoon, and we came up with a solution that will benefit us all.” He sat back, and while his hands were steady once more, he’d gone back to avoiding my gaze. I had a feeling I wasn’t going to like this.

“You did?” I asked suspiciously.

His lips thinned into a hard line. “I know how much you love this place. You’ve put so much time and effort into it. I’m proud of you, Son. You’ve shown yourself to have a solid business sense, and a good businessman is always willing to make sacrifices...”

The dread was back, pooling in my gut and slithering through my limbs, because I knew with absolute certainty that my father wouldn’t be the one sacrificing anything. It would be me. It was always me. “What’s this solution?”

“You will marry Eva Ward.”

“What?!” I sputtered, shock like a sledgehammer to the chest.

“The hotel will become half hers, and we will no longer need to make payments to her.” He saw the panic taking over me and held his hands up to forestall any argument I might have. “It’s not without benefits for you as well, I promise. Not only will you get to keep running the hotel as you see fit, but she will allow you to be a part of several of her other ventures. She has a mansion, and she’s a beautiful woman. I’m sure you can—”

The glasses jumped as I slammed my fists down on the table. “No!” I shouted, seeing red. Conversations around the room tapered off as heads turned in our direction to see

what was going on.

“Now, Son, you’re not thinking clearly. Just give it some time, I’m sure you’ll get used to the idea.”

Except there was no chance I would ever get used to it. I refused to. I shoved my way out of the booth and stormed off, my father calling behind me, “We’ll talk about this later.” There was nothing to talk about as far as I was concerned.

I had always been a calm man, a well-tempered alpha. Just like my dad taught me, I saw the benefit in using words over fists, but for once, I so desperately wanted to break something, to hurt someone. My pulse rushed in my ears as my blood pressure spiked.

I’d done everything I could to keep this place afloat, and meanwhile, I was always going to lose. As desperation took over, the anger seeped out, and I found myself stalled in the middle of the hotel lobby. That was it, I supposed. It was done. All this struggling for nothing.

Feeling his gaze, there was no mistaking who was watching me. I knew him like I knew my own reflection, and I turned to look at Roland, watching me from the front desk. His eyes were so sad, worried for me, and I hated so much that I was the cause of that worry. Without conscious decision, my legs took me straight to him, and while I could’ve overridden the action, I decided to indulge myself for a moment, to find relief in his presence. Didn’t I deserve that much?

I stopped beside him, close enough that I could feel the heat coming off him. His scent was so alluring, but when I tried to breathe through my mouth instead, it was like I could taste him on my tongue. That only made everything so much worse.

“What’s wrong?” he asked softly, tenderly. His hands twitched as though he was

considering reaching for me.

I wanted nothing more than to take refuge in his arms, to tell him what my father wanted me to do and have him tell me that everything would be okay, and I wanted to be able to believe him.

Instead, I shuttered my emotions and schooled my expression, stepping back to avoid the temptation. “Nothing is wrong,” I heard myself say, my voice surprisingly even considering the war being waged in my heart. “I’m going home. Have a good night, Mr. Stohl.” I turned away before I could see his reaction and headed for the door.

Though we’d never crossed that line between us, we were somehow still too close, too entwined for a boss and his employee. I needed to say goodbye to him once and for all. Roland deserved better than the disaster coming my way. Because I either had to fire everyone... or commit to a woman I could never love.

## Page 5

*Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 2:43 pm*

Emerson's grip tightened on my waist, near painful, until I was sure I would be left with bruises. I looked forward to seeing the marks he left on my body. Evidence that I belonged to him, not just as his employee, but as his partner. Then, without warning, as if my weight meant nothing to him, he hoisted me up onto the counter, and when I parted my knees, he stepped in, notched close enough that I could feel his bulge pressed hard against mine. The counter vibrated under me with the rocking of the industrial washing machine.

"Someone could walk in. They'll see," I warned, even though I was way past caring. We were in the hotel's laundry room in the basement, and there were always staff coming and going, emptying and reloading housekeeping carts.

"So?" The corner of his lips turned up in a smirk, and I found myself leaning closer, wanting to bite those lips. "Don't you think we've waited long enough? Roland, I can't keep you at a distance any longer. I'm a patient man, but even I have my limits." As if to emphasize that I was that limit, he dug his fingers into my hair and pulled until my head was tilted back, then he descended on the exposed skin of my neck, sucking and biting up the column of flesh like a man starved.

"Emerson," I panted, wrapping my legs around his waist so he couldn't run like he so often did. He couldn't leave me again, I wouldn't survive it. Fumbling against him, I blindly grappled with his jacket, trying to force it back over his shoulders, but he refused to let go of me to undress himself.

The washing machine switched to a spin cycle, and as the vibration changed, it set off a tingling sensation through my body. Between that and the searching nature of Emerson's mouth as he loosened my tie to lick the hollow between my collarbones, I

was becoming frantic. I felt slick trickling from my ass, dampening my underwear.

My body called to his, and for once, he responded to my need with desperation of his own. We were made for each other, and fighting against it was driving us both insane.

I was jolted from my fantasy by the click-clack of high heels across the lobby's polished marble floor, and I groaned in frustration under my breath. I was always interrupted at the best part. It didn't help that I was working late to cover for Emily, and the mornings were obviously busier than my usual night shift.

When I saw who it was, I clenched my teeth so hard that my jaw ached. Coming toward me was the city's mayor, Eva Ward. As always happened when in her presence, my skin crawled with revulsion, and it took everything in me not to sneer. She'd taken over the role of mayor by default when it was uncovered that the previous mayor had been dabbling in bribery, blackmail, and extortion, and though she'd won the next election (supposedly fair and square), there would always be this lingering doubt about her integrity. Her smiles were too practiced, her words honey-smooth.

And when she approached the desk and asked, "Is Emerson in?" I hated her even more.

"He's very busy today," I told her, and while I didn't know that for sure, it was probably true. He was always busy.

She arched a perfectly sculpted brow at me. "Well, would you please tell him I'm here? We have something to discuss, and I'm afraid it can't wait."

I wanted to tell her no, to fuck off and crawl back under whatever rock she came from, but I couldn't do that. So instead, I made a show of walking out from behind the desk and knocking gently on Emerson's office door. "Come in," he called, his

voice muffled and yet still somehow potent.

When I opened the door and peeked through, his body went rigid, his nostrils flaring, the grip on his pen tightening. “Roland,” he purred roughly before he could stop himself and go all formal, and I swore his pupils expanded until they swallowed every speck of blue in his eyes. “You’re still here?”

My skin flushed, thinking of my most recent fantasy. “Yes, but I’ll be going home soon. I didn’t mean to disturb you, sir, but Madame Mayor is here to see you.”

And just like that, he seemed to deflate, his skin taking on a gray pallor. He threw his pen to the side of his desk with a muttered curse and rubbed both hands over his face. “Fine. Send her in.” I’d never seen him like this, and I didn’t like it one little bit.

I wanted to slip into the office and close the door behind me. I wanted him to tell me what was wrong, and then we would fix it; I had no doubt that we would be an unstoppable force once we worked together, but we were forever apart, and we were weaker for it. Why couldn’t Emerson see that?

Backing away instead, I nodded to the mayor that she could enter, and she gave me a sly predator’s smile as she sauntered past me. Her soulless eyes stayed glued to mine until she closed the door, locking them inside.

I felt numb as I made my way back to the desk. No amount of fantasizing would make this better. I used to think my dreams were better than nothing, that pretending Emerson was mine would tide me over... but that was a lie. It would never be enough.

“Hey, man, can I borrow twenty bucks?” Benny asked, coming from the back. He’d changed out of his server’s uniform, so I assumed he was finished working the breakfast shift. Gods, what time was it? No wonder I was exhausted. I’d been



working for over 12 hours. Where the hell was Emily? She said her doctor's appointment would only take an hour. "I asked Joseph, but that guy is so cheap. He said I'd have to pay him back with interest." He scoffed.

I was already fishing out my wallet. "Yeah, sure. Whatever." I shoved some bills at him, whatever I had, without really thinking about it. My attention was focused squarely on that closed office door.

"Hey, what's up?" he asked, surprisingly gently, even as he slipped the undetermined amount of money into his pocket. "You're even more spacey than usual."

"Nothing. Or I guess, something, but I don't know what. The mayor just went into Mr. Holland's office."

"So?" he asked, missing the point. "What do you care if they have a meeting?"

I scowled, letting my professional image slip. "I just don't like her, with her tight blouses and short skirts, flaunting all that skin. She's like an angler fish or something, distracting everyone from her pointy teeth by waving something shiny around, and meanwhile, she's just waiting for the right moment to bite your head off."

Benny started laughing, the sound echoing a little off the polished surfaces and high ceiling. "Ohhh, I get it now. They're having a 'meeting,'" he said, using air quotes. I sputtered and tried to correct his assumption, but he was already walking away. "Dude, I know how you feel about our boss—hell, everybody knows. But if you're not going to act on it, someone else is going to move in. You can't expect an alpha to wait forever. The man has needs."

I growled in frustration. Everybody knew? I thought I'd been discreet. "You think I haven't tried?" I snapped in a harsh whisper, not needing to advertise my failure. "And what about my needs?!"

He laughed again on his way for the door, and it made me want to cry. Why couldn't he have said something comforting, like how she wasn't at all his type or that everybody knew how Emerson felt about me too. Now that would've been helpful.

Just as my mood had sunk to a brand-new low, the office door opened and the mayor swooped through. She cast one last discerning glance my way, and she narrowed her eyes with a malevolent glint, before she spun on her patent pump and stalked out. I swore the air temperature plummeted in her wake, and Sandy, the morning door attendant, scrambled to get the door open in time.

When Emerson emerged through the door Eva had left open, he looked shaken. Somehow, his face had gone even paler, his eyes losing their light, his blond hair curling across his forehead. He looked... broken. Subconsciously, he seemed to gravitate toward me whenever he felt lost, like I was his compass, but he didn't look up until he was only a foot away.

"Please, Emerson," I whispered, pleading with him, not for the first time. "Don't try to pretend everything is fine when it clearly isn't. I can't help you if you won't let me in."

I saw something that looked a lot like fear in his eyes as they shone with unshed tears. He shook his head and stumbled back a step, but with Benny's words still bouncing around in my head, my arm darted out and I snatched his hand, refusing to let go. Instead of pulling away, his fingers instinctively tightened on mine, but his skin was so cold. "I-I can't... You can't help me. Nobody can. I'm so sorry, Roland." The tension seemed to crackle between us, like an electric current. "Enjoy your night off. You deserve it." And with a final squeeze of his hand, he jerked free and fled.

I should've been tickled that he knew my schedule, but all I could think about was chasing after him. I was about to say screw it and abandon the desk, when Emily appeared from the hallway, looking confused. "What's up with the boss man?" she

asked, looking back over her shoulder where she'd obviously just passed him in the hall.

Huffing a breath through my nose, I muttered, "Nothing, I guess." I glared at her for being way later than she'd said she would be, but it was like water off a duck's back. Instead, she just shooed me away and wished me a good rest of my day.

Normally, after an extra-long shift like this, I would've been exhausted beyond belief, ready to fall into bed, but instead, the extreme emotions playing tug-of-war with my heart kept me way too alert to consider sleeping. I was worried for Emerson, but soon enough, that shifted into frustration and confusion, and then swung straight through to anger. I was pissed.

How dare he keep pushing me away! Just because he was the alpha of my dreams, did that mean I was supposed to wait for him to come around and make time for me? Well, forget it! I was an attractive, eligible bachelor, and if stupid Emerson Holland didn't want me, then I would find someone who did.

I practically stomped my way up the stairs of my apartment building, all the way to Collette's door. I knocked then let myself in as usual. She was in the kitchen, washing up some dishes and humming a tune. "Hello, dear. Are you just getting home? Are you hungry? I could scramble you some eggs if you want."

My appetite was nowhere to be seen, though. Instead, my pulse was pounding in my ears. "Hey, Collette? Why don't you tell me about that grandson of yours, Alan? Would he really bring me flowers?"

Her smile was a thousand watts.

## Page 6

*Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 2:43 pm*

Eva Ward had strutted into my office like she already owned the place, sitting in the chair in front of my desk, crossing her long legs, a picture of poise. I had immediately shut down. I refused to give her the satisfaction of seeing how she riled me, so I built up my walls, I donned the ice-king persona my staff claimed I had, and I leaned back in my chair with my arms crossed over my chest, mask in place. “What do you want? I already told my father the answer was no. I won’t marry you.” My top lip curled in disgust.

Instead of answering me, though, she’d asked, “That omega at the desk out there... what’s his name?”

As calm as I had intended to stay, knowing her attention was on Roland left me hollowed out, my insides replaced with a fury so hot and liquid that it felt like lava—and I was getting ready to blow.

She didn’t even wait for an answer, her shark’s grin widening like she’d scented blood in the water. “He’s very handsome, that one, and I can tell he’s very protective toward you. But the question is... do you feel the same? What would you do to protect him?”

I’d planted my hands on the desk and stood, leaning in and towering above her. “You would dare come into my office and threaten my staff?”

She tutted, not a single feather ruffled by my ire. “I would never dream of it. I’m only remarking on the precarious financial situation you seem to find yourself in. It would certainly be a shame to see your employees suddenly without a job. Some of them—such as that young man out there—might even live in an apartment on Elm

Street that just so happens to be owned by me. Without the means to pay his rent, he might find himself without a place to live. That would be terribly tragic.” She sighed, examining her manicured nails, painted a sharp red. “I don’t really know why I bought the place, to be honest. It’s so old and rundown, I’m surprised there hasn’t been a gas leak.”

I didn’t even need to check Roland’s employee record to know that he did, in fact, live on Elm. This woman had done her research, and no matter how she claimed this wasn’t a threat to the man I loved, there was no other way to interpret her words.

And after sowing that tiny seed of fear, she’d stood and said, “I’ve always found fall weddings to be quite lovely, wouldn’t you agree?” Then she strode back on out the way she came, as if she weren’t the devil herself. She was probably bluffing, but I couldn’t afford to take the chance. I couldn’t let something happen to Roland, and yet I couldn’t protect him either. Helplessness threatened to choke me, wrapping itself around and through me, pouring down my throat and into my lungs until I felt certain I would drown.

When I’d wandered out of the office, Roland had been there, a steady certainty in my life. He was always there for me, no matter if I could allow myself to lean on him or not. He felt like my anchor, both keeping me tethered, but also with a weight of responsibility that had the power to drag me under.

There was no doubt he could feel me drifting away, and he’d grabbed my hand, grounding me. For one single moment, I could breathe. “Please, Emerson. Don’t try to pretend everything is fine when it clearly isn’t. I can’t help you if you won’t let me in,” he pleaded.

“I-I can’t... You can’t help me. Nobody can. I’m so sorry, Roland.” Walking away from him was physically painful, like a knife plunging into my chest and straight through my heart, but it was the right decision. It had to be. It didn’t matter if I was

tired and broken, writhing in agony and destined to walk this earth alone forever. All that mattered was that Eva Ward couldn't touch him. I had to protect what was mine.

I watched Roland on the security monitors to ensure he got onto the bus and that nobody was following him. I would drive him home myself if I thought it wouldn't paint a giant target on his back, admitting to everyone how much he meant to me. Hell, I would lock him up in my own home if I could get away with it. Eva didn't come across as a violent person, but in my mind, that just made her all the more dangerous. I didn't know what she was capable of. She was an unknown, and I refused to let down my guard for even one second knowing she likely had someone watching us.

With Roland safely out of sight, I shut myself back in my office and got to work. I pulled up all the financial files I had, invoices and expenses and payroll, and I started crunching some numbers. The math just wouldn't add up. The hotel needed to make more income, but there were only so many rooms to rent.

I grabbed the desk phone and called Sawyer Sheen, my PR manager. He answered on the second ring. "Hey, Emerson! I was just thinking about you."

"Oh yeah? For good reasons, I hope, and not because I'm the thorn in your side that you can't get rid of." I laughed uneasily, but he heard the edge to my voice.

He sobered instantly, going into damage-control mode. "What's going on?"

I sighed, caving in on myself. "I don't know what to tell you, Sawyer. You've worked so damn hard to help me get this hotel back on even footing, and now it looks like it might've been for nothing." I gnawed on my lip, desperate for someone to confide in. "Look, this needs to stay between us, but... it turns out, my grandfather was in bed with the mafia, and now he's gone, and I'm left paying the price. He screwed us all for the sake of his dream." I hadn't called Sawyer with the intention of

spilling my guts to him, but the words just started pouring out. He was the closest thing I had to a friend these days. “And now the fucking mayor wants me to marry her in order to wipe the debt clean, taking half my business and ruining precisely all of my life, for the sake of saving my hotel and my employees’ jobs!”

He was totally silent on the other end of the phone, and I started to regret dumping this all in his lap. “I’m sorry, I didn’t mean—”

“No, no!” he said quickly, cutting off my backtracking. “It’s okay. Actually, I was just thinking about how it makes sense.”

I laughed darkly, assuming he was making a joke, but when he didn’t continue, I scoffed. “What? Are you serious?”

“Yeah. I saw the upswing in marketing, and I knew money had to be coming in, but nothing we did seemed to make any difference. It made no sense. It was like the hotel was a sponge, just absorbing the income. Like a parasite.” I thought that word described Eva Ward perfectly.

His confirmation made me feel a little better but no less hopeless. “Don’t suppose you have any suggestions on how to fix this.”

He made a little humming sound. “I mean, it’s not like I have any mob ties, if that’s what you’re asking, but...”

That last word hung suspended in the air between us, and I found myself holding my breath. “But?” I asked.

His sigh wasn’t as heavy as the ones I’d been heaving lately; it was hesitant but not exasperated. “Look, I don’t want to get your hopes up or anything, but I know a guy. He might be able to help.”

My hackles already up, I snapped, “A guy? What kind of guy? I’m already in over my head here. I don’t want to get in bed with any other criminals or anything.”

Sawyer laughed, bright and tinkling. “Who on earth do you think I am?”

I blew out a long breath. “You’re a guy who knows a guy.”

“Don’t worry so much. My friend’s legit, used to work for the FBI.” I could hear the clacking of computer keys as he got to work. “Just hang in there, okay? Don’t do anything stupid like say ‘I do.’”

“I might not have another choice,” I muttered as I hung up the phone.

Even though he’d told me not to get my hopes up, I couldn’t help it. The spark had caught the tinder, and a small blaze had begun to smolder inside my chest. I felt like I’d dropped a little of the load I was carrying.

In the aftershock of everything that had happened over the past 24 hours, my body was entirely drained, wrung out, until I was little more than a damp rag. Pushing away from my desk, I decided to call it an early night. It was Roland’s night off, which meant I could go home and get some sleep. I had to trust that he was safe for now.

Except when I emerged from my office, I did a double take. “Roland? What are you doing here? Isn’t it your night off?” It took a moment to register that he was wearing a suit and tie, but it wasn’t his work uniform. In fact, it fit him far better, the shirt a tight fit across his chest, his pants also a slimmer fit, hugging in all the right areas to draw the eye—well, my eye, anyway. I refused to think about who else’s eyes were drawn. I was suddenly no longer tired.

He didn’t seem surprised to see me and tilted his chin up defiantly, a strange



expression on his face. Was he mad at me? “I’m here on a date,” he said, and I couldn’t stop my wince, as if his words had hit me like a slap across the cheek.

I gulped. “A date? That’s... nice.” I nearly choked on the word. “Where is he?” I was already searching for this supposed date of his. He’d never mentioned a boyfriend before, and part of me wondered if he was faking it, trying to get a rise out of me. I immediately felt guilty for even thinking that. Roland wasn’t the type to play games.

“It’s starting to rain, so he dropped me off out front then went to park the car.”

Sure enough, the front door opened and a tall, good-looking alpha made his way across the lobby, his suitcoat sparkling with raindrops. There was no mistaking that he was here with Roland, and the way his eyes were focused on my omega made me feral. And then the man’s lips began to stretch into a tender smile, and my fists clenched at my sides. Who the fuck was he, thinking he could smile at Roland?!

“Are you going to introduce me to your date?” I asked through gritted teeth.

With zero hesitation, Roland said, “No. I don’t think that’s a good idea, do you?” He looked straight at me as he said it, clearly judging me for my reaction, and I felt a little chagrined by my attitude. Roland turned and joined his date halfway, and together they headed to the restaurant, leaving me to watch them go. Roland didn’t turn to look back at me even once.

The devastation was crushing. Roland could’ve gone anywhere else for dinner! Was he trying to torture me? Punish me in some way? I followed in his wake like a lost puppy, begging for even a scrap of his attention. Fuck. I was trying to let him go. This was a good thing. It was what I wanted... wasn’t it?

When the asshole ushered Roland into the restaurant with a hand on his lower back, I growled under my breath and turned down the hall to the left, slipping into the

kitchen instead of the dining room. The din and clamor of pots and pans enveloped me, but I barely noticed it. Cherie was shouting directions at the staff above the sizzling of the stove and clatter of dishes, water running, but it all disappeared into the background as I wound my way through the kitchen to stand in front of the door to the dining room, looking through the small window to find where Roland was being seated across the room, his stupid fucking date pulling out his chair for him.

Cherie sidled up beside me, trying to get a peek at what I was looking at. “Holy shit, is Roland on a date? Good for him.” When I snarled at her, she smirked and bumped me with her shoulder. “You snooze, you lose.” I didn’t even bother trying to deny it. She snickered and headed back to the grill, but I planted myself right there. I wasn’t going anywhere anytime soon.

I wasn’t snoozing, and I sure as hell refused to lose.

## Page 7

*Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 2:43 pm*

Alan smiled at me. It was a nice smile, showing off his perfectly straight, white teeth. “And the guy actually bit into the peach, can you believe it?” He laughed, and I decided he had a nice laugh too. “He had no clue what was wrong with it, not even when he’d eaten the whole thing! I didn’t have the heart to tell him.” He gestured with his hands as he talked, and yep, he had nice hands, with long, slender fingers, no sign of a single callous since he worked a desk job as an architect.

I laughed along with his story because it seemed to be required of me, and I was struck by a wave of guilt. There was nothing wrong with the guy. In fact, on paper, he was everything right. He was smart, funny, good-looking, respectful, successful, and driven—but all my mind could see was that he wasn’t Emerson.

When Alan’s gaze softened and he bit his lower lip, I felt a prickle of panic. I knew that look. “Did you want dessert, or should we get out of here?” he asked, his voice getting deeper. Shit. After dinner came the part where he drove me home. He would probably want to kiss me, maybe more.

I pushed my chair back from the table. “Uh, you know, actually, dessert sounds great. I’m just gonna... run to the bathroom, and you order for me.”

His eyebrows jumped. “Sure, what did you want?”

My heart was beating too fast. I was sure I was probably flushed, and I didn’t want him to get the wrong impression. This blush wasn’t meant for him. “I dunno. Surprise me.” If I didn’t get away from this table, I was going to have a meltdown right here in the dining room.

He chuckled. "This feels like a test."

"Oh, it's absolutely a test," I teased, while backing away from the table. He laughed lightly, totally oblivious to how I was already mentally checking out of this date.

I burst out of the dining room into the hallway, gasping. "Fuck," I muttered, rubbing at my temples. This was such a mistake.

I didn't really need the bathroom, so instead, I decided to wander up to the desk for a few minutes, maybe shoot the shit with Emily. Anything but sitting across from that perfect man who felt all wrong.

Before I had even reached the lobby, I could hear the rumble of thunder from outside. Through the wall of windows, I could see a torrential downpour had started coming down, flooding the streets and spilling over the sidewalks. I stood there and watched for a minute, flinching at the bright flare of lightning that lit up the street like it was daytime. In the resulting boom of thunder, I didn't hear the door open off to my right. I gasped when something clamped down around my wrist, and I was jerked to the side. I nearly lost my footing, but before I could stumble, strong arms banded around me. I caught sight of blond hair and ice-blue eyes, just before the door was once again closed and darkness descended.

"Mr. Holland? What the hell are you doing? Why are we in the supply closet?" I asked, even as I grabbed a hold of his lapels, clinging to him. Was this a dream? So many of my fantasies started just like this.

I could barely see the sheen of his eyes in the darkness. "Are you sure he's right for you?" he burst out without answering my question. "This date of yours, whatever his name is?"

"Honestly, no," I admitted, feeling a little irritated, "but does that matter?" Was he

really going to pull this macho jealousy bullshit right now? Because I didn't think I could handle that, not when I was already struggling to get through this date as it was.

Emerson frowned, blinking down at me. "Why waste your time with someone who isn't worthy of you?"

Gods! Didn't he get it? I shoved off his chest, putting some distance between us. "Why waste time pining over someone who doesn't want me?!" I nearly shouted in his face. "I'm lonely, okay? Is that what you want to hear? I want to cook dinner with someone, wake up every morning with them. I want to feel like I'm the center of someone's world." My throat clamped shut, and tears threatened to overflow. "And I refuse to wait around for you to see me." I spun on my heel and reached for the doorknob, prepared to storm off with all the drama I could muster, but he wrapped an arm around my waist and pulled me back hard into his chest.

"I see you, okay?" he whispered harshly against the back of my neck, his breath skating over my sensitive skin and raising goosebumps that tingled downward. "Gods, I've always seen you. I'll never see anyone else the way I see you."

His grip on me was tight, but he loosened enough to let me spin around in his arms until our chests were pressed flush. When he didn't pull away as usual, I reached up with shaking hands and cupped his cheeks, and he dipped down to rest his forehead on mine and closed his eyes. He looked so damn tired.

"Then why?" I asked.

"I'm your boss," he tried, the same used-up excuse. "I can't take advantage of you."

"Isn't there a form we can sign? Do we have an HR department? And if that's not good enough, then I'll quit," I said simply.

His eyes flew open, shocked. “What? You can’t quit.”

“It’s just a job, Emerson. I can get another one.” I ran my thumb slowly along his bottom lip. “I’m only working here to be close to you.” The admission slipped out, but I didn’t regret saying it.

“I-I’m too old for you,” he sputtered, searching for another excuse, his fingers digging into hips.

I tipped up onto my toes, brushing my nose along his. “It makes me feel safe with you, like you’ll know how to protect me and care for me.”

He groaned softly. “Roland, you’re making it impossible to stay away from you.”

“Then don’t stay away,” I whispered against his lips.

I really didn’t expect anything to happen, because nothing ever happened. I’d spent years anticipating the moment when the barriers between us would come down, but it had always been this impossibility, this massive what-if that lived in my dreams. It wasn’t real.

No sooner had that thought come into my head than everything came crashing down. I felt the exact second it happened. Emerson let out this animalistic growl, wrapped an arm around my waist to drag me in and up off my feet against his hard body, then his lips crashed down on mine, entirely owning me.

No matter how many times I’d imagined it, my fantasies were no comparison to the real thing. It started off hard, almost angry, as he swept his tongue into my mouth, licking every part of me. He tasted just like he smelled, absolutely divine, and he swallowed down my moans like they were keeping him alive. And then the kiss shifted into something else, turning softer, our mouths melding, and my entire body

seemed to melt against him, our mountains and valleys fitting together like a puzzle, like he was the part of me I'd always been missing. I felt whole for the first time in my life, and it was everything. It was like being drained but filled up at the same time. My lungs expanded to near bursting as I tried to absorb everything about him, breathing in the air that had once been inside him.

His hands were everywhere, groping and kneading. Emerson didn't even seem aware of what he was doing, and I wasn't about to clue him in; I didn't want to break the spell. He tore at my shirt, pulling it out from where it was tucked into my pants, searching for skin. "Fuck, Roland," he gritted out as he worked his way down my neck, placing wet open-mouthed kisses on every inch of me he could reach. "You taste so sweet."

I wanted to taste him too, but straight from the source. I could feel his erection grinding right alongside mine, and I reached between us and palmed his cock. His hips jerked in encouragement. I made a very unmanly sound and went weak in the knees. Was this real? Did I really have Emerson Holland's dick in my hand? Gods, he was huge too, and so fucking hard. I stroked him through his pants, but it wasn't enough. I fumbled with his belt buckle, trying to get his pants undone.

While he didn't stop me, his lips did stutter to a stop just above my collarbone. "Roland, we should—" He didn't have a chance to tell me what we should do before the door behind me opened. Light spilled into the small, dark space, and I caught sight of Emerson's kiss-swollen lips as he jerked upright at the intrusion, a look of panic on his face. Without a second's hesitation, he picked me straight up and shoved me behind him, as though protecting me from some unknown assailant.

When I peeked around him, though, I saw it was only Patrick, likely coming to grab some cleaning supplies. He froze, blinking at the sight, before his smirk spread across his face. "Ohhh, sorry to interrupt. As you were," he said, waving vaguely as he closed the door once more.

Shit, he was totally going to write us into his next romance novel.

We were plunged back into darkness, leaving the outline of our intruder burned into my eyes like a bad omen. Even before I placed my hand on Emerson's shoulder, I knew it was too late; he was already halfway gone.

"Hey, Emerson," I said, trying to get him to face me, but his entire body was rigid. "Would you turn around and look at me?" I snapped, on the defensive, since this was starting to look more familiar, more what I was used to when it came to my boss.

Sure enough, he stepped away, and cold air came rushing in to fill the space between us. "Roland, we need to stop," he said without looking at me.

"Bullshit!" Anger surged through my veins to replace the lust.

He sighed, sounding more than just exhausted. He sounded defeated. "You're a forever kind of guy, Roland, and I... can't be that for you." And just like that, he opened the door and strode away, leaving me confused and frustrated as hell.

Fuck. I knew it was too good to be true.



## Page 8

*Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 2:43 pm*

Years ago, when I had first hired Roland, it was before I'd even set eyes on him. I had recently taken over management of the hotel, and I was set on making a good impression, proving to my father that I was capable of doing the job. And that meant hiring staff that embodied the same traits I hoped to instill in myself—honesty, approachability, a hard-working nature. I had Roland's resume, but he lived out of the city in North Salter, and it hadn't made sense to make him drive in for the interview when it could just as easily be done over the phone. There had been something about his voice that put me at ease, personable and relaxed, and I'd been really impressed. We ended up going well over our allotted time, just chatting, and in the end, it was obvious to me that he was perfect for the desk position. I hired him on the spot.

Boy, did I ever royally screw myself over.

The day he first showed up to work, I nearly came in my pants right then and there. He was so damn adorable, moving to the big city to carve out a life for himself. He was such a breath of fresh air. I'd had to shake his hand while his scent muddled my thoughts and give him a tour of the hotel with an erection pressing into my zipper. It hadn't helped matters when he'd taken an interest right back, always standing just slightly too close, his eyes lingering in all the wrong spots. He was smart, sweet, kind, but he was way too young for me, fresh out of high school, just 18 years old, while I was approaching 30, and he had entrusted me with his care in this vulnerable stage of his life, so far from home. I made a vow that I would never take advantage of him, and so far, I'd kept that vow.

Until last night. Fuck.

Kissing Roland was better than I'd ever dreamed it could be, and now that I'd had a

taste, my brain was working overtime, trying to find a way that I could keep him. How stupid all my past excuses seemed in hindsight. What did it matter if there were a few years between us? Whose business was it that I was his boss? All that time we wasted, when he could've been mine ages ago!

Now the barrier between us seemed a little more life-and-death—hopefully not literally...

“There has to be something,” I snarled into the phone. “What did your friend say, Sawyer? You talked to him, right?”

I could immediately tell he felt awful for not having better news for me, his voice strained. “I’m sorry, but he said the mayor hasn’t done anything illegal that he can find. Either she’s innocent or she’s just very good at covering her tracks.”

It was definitely the second option. Innocent women didn’t coerce people with veiled threats.

My leg was bouncing under my desk, and I pinched the bridge of my nose, eyes clenched tight. I was usually such a calm, relaxed person, but the dread was practically spilling out of me. “Are you telling me that I actually have to marry that woman? Tie the knot or lose my hotel?” Either way I would lose Roland.

“I’m not telling you to do anything,” he said, speaking in a soothing tone to try and placate me. “My friend has her name now, so she’s on his radar. Don’t give up hope. He could still find something, maybe she’ll slip up or—”

“Fuck,” I cursed before I hung up on him and dropped my phone onto the desk. Eva had proven to be a patient woman when maneuvering me to where she wanted me, but now that I was cornered, we both knew she had me in check mate. And honestly, I would do anything to save the hotel. Even marry my enemy.

Maybe she wouldn't care if I kept Roland on the side...

Gods, I hated myself for thinking that. Roland was better than being someone's side piece. He was worth romantic dinners. He deserved true love and marriage and kids. Kissing Roland had only solidified that I would do anything to protect him—and Eva had made it clear he was a target. He was everything I'd ever wanted, and even though he couldn't be mine, I would do everything I could to ensure he found his happily ever after. Even if it wasn't with me.

I never should've interrupted his date. It wasn't my right, and all it had done was make everything worse.

There was a knock on the door, and I snarled, this inhuman sound. I did not want to deal with people today. I had enough on my plate. "What?" I snapped.

Usually, I only got interrupted by problems—customer complaints, burst pipes, order shortages—so when Roland stormed in, it took me a minute to find my footing. "Wha—" I began, but it was clear he had something to say.

He slammed the door shut behind him and marched up to my desk, his dark eyes flashing dangerously. "My date brought me flowers, you know." He was worked up, panting to catch his breath. "He wanted to kiss me good night. It would've been so easy to invite him in. Instead, I had a long shower and jerked off while thinking of you," he said, stabbing a finger in my direction.

My mouth gaped, and I wanted to avert my eyes but couldn't seem to look away. The picture he'd painted snuck into my mind, of his hand wrapped around his shaft, frantically pumping, and once I imagined it, it wouldn't go away. "W-why are you telling me this?" I stammered.

"Because it's always been you. Why don't you get that? Even dreaming of you is

better than a real version of someone else.”

I gulped, my resolve weakening. He looked so helpless, and I wanted nothing more than to pull him into my arms and declare my undying devotion to him—because I understood all too well that level of desperate need. I felt it too.

Roland stepped around the desk slowly, approaching as if I were a skittish animal, as though he expected me to turn and run. “You wouldn’t be taking advantage of me,” he whispered, pleading, as if he could read my mind. “You would be putting me out of my misery.”

“Roland,” I whimpered, begging him to stop, to keep going, to make it all go away. I didn’t know how to ask for what I wanted.

When I didn’t stop him, he crawled into my lap, straddling me. “Stop fighting it,” he whispered. And so I did.

Gripping his ass in both hands, I surged to my feet, forcing him to cling to me, clamoring at my shoulders. Didn’t he know I would never drop him? I would always keep him safe, first and foremost. Sweeping my arm across the desktop, I cleared a space, papers scattering across the floor. What did I care about the mess when I had Roland in my arms. I set him down, far more gently than what I had in mind. I wanted to own him, even if it was just for today, one single hour, one minute. I just wanted to be able to say that he was mine.

I started tugging at his belt, and at the same time he tried to reach for mine. Our arms tangled, and finally, he laughed a little manically. “I’ll do mine, you do yours. Just hurry.”

We didn’t even get our clothes fully off. Neither of us had the patience to wait. He kept trying to kiss me, and when his pants and underwear got caught around his

ankles with his shoes in the way, he fumbled frantically. “Get them off me!”

“Don’t bother, there’s no time,” I gritted out, grabbing him around the waist and flipping him over. I shoved the hem of his shirt up his back, exposing his perfect ass. There was no doubt he was slick enough when I drove myself inside him.

He cried out, grappling for something to hold on to, and I stilled immediately, fighting against the urge to move. This was wrong, so wrong. This wasn’t how our first time was supposed to be. “Sorry, too rough?”

“No, never.” He looked over his shoulder at me, his cheeks flushed, looking more alive than I’d ever seen him. “I’ve been waiting forever for you. Make me feel it. Fuck me hard, Emerson.”

His name on my lips was enough to light a fuse and set me off like a powder keg. I groaned, drawing myself out before thrusting back in, again and again, working myself up to a frantic pace. His channel tightened around me, the sound of slick flesh slapping together mixing with our moaning.

I told myself to savor it, to make it last. If I could only have him once, then I needed to make it count. The pleasure I felt only barely held back the self-loathing. Roland and I should’ve been talking, I needed to tell him the truth...

But then his ass clenched around me like a fist, and all rational thought was lost. “Gods, you’re so damn tight.” I marveled at how perfect he felt, as if he were made just for me.

“Emerson, fuck, yes,” he grunted as I pounded into him hard enough that the desk skittered forward, squealing against the floor.

His moans were getting louder, and these walls weren’t soundproof. As he crested his

climax, I clamped a hand over his mouth to muffle his shout. He stiffened, his cum dripping down the side of my desk. As his inner walls squeezed around my shaft, his entire body shuddering beneath me, the heat and pressure that had been building for what felt like years finally blew, and I emptied myself into his ass, painting his insides with my cum. It felt like it went on forever, pulse after pulse, until finally my knot expanded, locking our bodies together.

I collapsed over him, resting my head on his shoulder, sweat wicking into his shirt. My chest heaved as I tried to catch my breath. Shit. What have I done? Guilt and regret were already taking the place of pleasure. How was I supposed to let him go now? He needed to get himself as far away from me as possible! I was poison.

He chuckled, a sleepy, sated sound. “Emerson, that was—” he began, but I couldn’t let him finish that sentence.

“I’m getting married,” I blurted out before I could second-guess myself.

“W-what?” he gasped, pushing off the desk and forcing me to stand, our bodies still locked together. He stumbled, and I tried to brace him, but he slapped my hands away, wrenching around to try to look at me. “To who?”

“To Eva Ward.”

He instinctively tried to flee, and I bit back a groan as it tugged on my knot. “You bastard,” he muttered, tears building.

“Roland, I’m sorry. I should’ve told you.” Even as I said the words, I knew they weren’t enough.

“Yeah. You should’ve.” He cursed as he finally managed to pull himself off me, far too early, and both of us shuddered at the sensation of my knot, still semi-inflated,

squeezing from his hole. My cum dripped down his legs, and he bent over to jerk his pants back up, turning away to stuff himself into his underwear.

Under different circumstances, we would've been basking in bed in the blissful afterglow. I felt a fresh wave of grief as I mourned the loss of him and anything we could've—should've—had. So what if he hated me? It was better that way.

I didn't want to give in to the mayor's demands, but I just didn't see another way out of this. I would never leave anyone on my staff without their job, the income they relied on to support their families, not to mention breaking up the found family they'd built here with their coworkers at the hotel. They were counting on me to do whatever it took to protect them, and I wouldn't betray that trust.

Tears spilling down his cheeks, Roland looked back at me and shook his head, scoffing. "Fuck you, Monsieur Holland," he spat, before storming out the door.

## Page 9

*Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 2:43 pm*

I wanted to despise Emerson. I'd earned it, that hatred. I wanted to scream, pull my hair, throw and smash something into a million pieces. I wanted to rage against the complete betrayal of how he'd used me and then cast me aside, but... the emotions just wouldn't stick.

Because I didn't hate him. Not even a little.

Gods, I was pathetic. I shoved my half-eaten sandwich away and sagged deeper into the breakroom chair, dropping my head onto the table with a thud. I wished I could retreat into my fantasy land where Emerson was mine, but with a single act of real passion, the dream was shattered beyond repair.

It didn't make any sense that he'd use me like that. I knew Emerson Holland, right down to the depths of his soul. We'd been working together for years, and never once had he given in to the temptation. Why now? What had changed? It couldn't have been that I wasn't what he'd expected, that he'd had a taste and decided I wasn't good enough... Right? Was it just about the chase, and once I'd let myself be caught, the game was over?

He didn't love Eva Ward, that was a fact. I wasn't blind, I saw the way he was around her. He didn't want her; he wanted me! He couldn't disguise how much he'd enjoyed my body. Our chemistry was off the charts, always had been, and there was zero interest in his eyes when he glared at that vixen. What could make a person marry someone if not for love?

The question opened up a bottomless pit inside me, and I felt like I was falling, my stomach lurching. Because what problem had plagued Emerson and the hotel as long



as I'd known him? Money.

The door opened and Mercy peeked in. "Are you coming back?" she asked softly. "I need to pee."

"Oh." I peeked at my watch and realized it was later than I'd thought. I'd been on break for too long. "Sorry, I lost track of time," I muttered.

I followed her back toward the front desk, but when she turned down the hall toward the bathroom, I went straight, emerging in the lobby. It was a quieter night than usual, with the end of summer looming and the school year about to start up again. Vacations were over, which meant the light, happy feeling was gone. The lobby was empty, the electric glow of the chandeliers above reflecting off the marble floor, and my eyes drifted across the room to Monsieur Holland's closed office door.

There was a tug from somewhere in my chest. Emerson wasn't here since it was well after midnight. He was probably home sleeping—I refused to think about who might be in that bed with him. Even knowing the office was empty, my feet directed me toward it, and I threw a quick glance over my shoulder to make sure Mercy wasn't on her way back. The hotel had security cameras, but the position of night security guard hadn't been filled, and nobody ever watched the camera footage unless there was a reason to. Besides, the door was probably locked.

Except when I twisted the knob, it turned easily in my hand.

I paused, licking my lips, as I debated with myself. Was I really doing this? Damn right I was. Something was going on around here, and I was tired of just being a witness on the sidelines. I needed answers.

With fresh resolve, I pushed the door open, and a waft of air washed over me and nearly brought me to my knees. It was Emerson's scent, all too familiar to me after all

these years of pining, but there was no disguising the distinctive tang sex and slick, from what he'd done to me, how he'd splayed me out across his desk.

Forcing the image from my mind, I took one more glance around the lobby then slipped through the door and closed it behind me with the softest click. It wasn't likely that someone would come down to the desk at this time of night. The lounge and restaurant were closed, and if someone called for room service, it would be directed straight to the overnight kitchen staff. I still had to be fast. Any number of things could go wrong here.

The office wasn't in the usual impeccable order Emerson liked to keep it. There were papers stacked in haphazard piles on the desk, likely the same ones he'd swept onto the floor in his desperate need to take me. Normally, he wouldn't go home until every paper was filed in the cabinets properly, not a single speck of dust in sight. It was almost as if he was as distracted as I was. I immediately made my way over to the desk and sat down in his chair with a kind of reverence that I tried not to examine too closely. The leather was molded to the shape of his body, and I wiggled my ass against it subconsciously.

Would he notice if something wasn't in the same place as he'd left it? Did it matter if he did? What would he do if he knew I'd snooped?

With the utmost care, I shuffled through the closest stack and saw it was old invoices. Nothing shocking, though I didn't understand why he would be looking back at financial records. Another stack was staff pay records. I frowned, confused. Some of these records were going back years. Why was he digging into the past? And honestly, why were these printed out at all? Couldn't he just do all this on the computer?

It wasn't until I saw the bank records that a cold, creeping chill began to worm its way through my chest. I pulled the papers closer, no longer caring if I moved

everything out of the way. These were the records for the hotel's bank accounts, and even though I had no experience with accounting, it was very clear that something was wrong. The hotel was pulling in a profit, that much was obvious, but there were large sums of money being transferred to another account. Every month, like clockwork. I tried to think about what kind of bill that could be. Water and waste were quarterly payments, and I could see those. Electric was labeled too. Property tax, maybe? But that wouldn't be some unnamed bank account; it would go to the city. Either way, the account balance was dangerously low. There was no way he could possibly keep up with those payments. At this rate, Emerson wouldn't be able to make it another three months without being forced to declare bankruptcy.

Gnawing on my lip, I picked up a notebook where Emerson had been scribbling down some notes.

Sawyer's friend—dead end. Find another way! Is a prenup pointless? She already owns me. Maybe I should just sell. Would it carry over to the new owner?

I stared at that last one. Would what carry over? Debt?

I stood on shaking legs as I numbly tried to put everything back where I'd found it. Looked like I was right, it all came back to money. Was she blackmailing Emerson into marrying her? That didn't make any sense. He couldn't possibly have done anything so wrong that it could be used against him like this.

The east coast had a shadowy history, and you didn't even need to dig very far down to find it. Recently, the FBI took down a mob boss involved in the drug trade and human trafficking, and last I'd heard, they were still trying to carve out the rot branching out into the city's elite. Even our last mayor, Philip Black, had been implicated and fled to avoid prosecution. I'd heard rumors of him hiding out on some island in the Caribbean. So wouldn't it make sense that his deputy mayor could also be guilty?

Just as I was rounding the front desk, the phone rang, startling me out of my daze. I picked up the receiver and answered, “Scarlet Hotel.” I couldn’t manage more than a whisper, my throat tight, my thoughts swirling, but the person on the other end heard me just fine.

“Roland?” His voice was like melted butter, rich and warm and soothing.

“Emerson?” I choked out before I could stop myself. My heart leaped, skipping a beat—but then I reminded myself that I wasn’t joining in whatever game he was playing. I cleared my throat and steeled my resolve. Distance, right. I needed to keep distance between us. I squared off my shoulders, even though he couldn’t see me through the phone. “Apologies, sir. What can I do for you this morning?”

“I couldn’t sleep,” he explained, too softly, though I wasn’t sure why he thought it was any of my business. “I just... I needed to hear your voice and make sure you were okay.”

“I’m fine,” I answered on reflex, though we both knew that was a load of horse shit. I couldn’t be much further from fine.

A long pause opened up between us, and I almost wondered if he’d hung up. Then he drew in a deep breath. “Roland, I owe you an apology.”

“Not at all,” I snapped, keeping my voice chilly. Distance, I repeated in my head. “I can be an adult about this, and considering you’re so much older than I am, I’m sure you can too.” I couldn’t help taking a jab at his age since he seemed to think it was a big deal. “We’ll just pretend it never happened. You are my boss, and I am your employee. Nothing more. Was that all you needed? I have work to do.”

There was a little snuffle down the line. Was he crying? Shit, I couldn’t handle him crying. I sagged against the desk, grateful to be alone. I thought of him being forced

into marriage, being manipulated, and I just about broke. He deserved so much more. Against my better judgment, I offered, “Emerson, if you need my help with something...”

“It’s nothing I can’t handle,” he said with so much conviction that I almost believed him. “I don’t want you to worry about me, okay? Whatever happens, I need you to know that it was worth it.”

“What the hell have you gotten yourself into, Emerson?”

He chuckled, without a trace of humor. “Believe it or not, this one’s not on me.” I was about to press him to explain, but now that he’d unloaded his burden and apologized, sleep was coming to claim him. I could hear his yawn through the phone. “I hope the rest of your shift is quiet. I have some stuff to take care of tomorrow, so I won’t see you in the morning. Take care, Roland.”

“Yeah... you too.”

We weren’t dating, no declarations or promises were made, but I still felt like we’d just broken up. Like this was goodbye, not just see you later. I barely noticed when Mercy came back to the desk. She said something, but I wasn’t listening, and she didn’t bother repeating herself. We stood there in total silence for the rest of our shift, and when Emily came in to take over in the morning, I tuned out her upbeat gossip and staggered home on autopilot. I avoided stopping by my neighbor’s apartment because I wasn’t in the mood to field questions about her grandson. By the time I fell into bed, I’d still made no clear decisions about what to do next.

Would I really let Emerson push me away so easily? Was I really ready to let him go?

*Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 2:43 pm*

The dripping of the tap seemed louder today. I'd tried to fix it on several occasions, but no matter what I did, the damn drip always came back. Just like the limescale on the bathroom tiles and the cockroaches that I was certain my neighbors were feeding like pets.

I was usually able to ignore these things, cutting corners and telling myself that it was worth it to keep my staff employed, but everything was grating on me today. The bed sheets were too scratchy, the mattress too lumpy. And this fucking sandwich was like paste in my mouth. I threw the half-eaten jam sandwich down on my plate. I used to have a nice place, an expensive place. At the time, I didn't even hesitate to let it go. It made sense when I thought it was temporary. Now, though? I was so sick of sacrificing for the hotel, paying the price for my grandfather's greed. Just once I wanted to collect a fair wage for the hours I was putting in. I wanted to be able to afford to eat a real meal, something with meat, for gods' sake!

Shit, the apartment wasn't even the real problem.

Dropping my head into my hands, I allowed myself to admit what I really wanted—Roland. I never should've allowed myself to give in to the temptation. Everything was harder now, knowing what I was missing. The memory of his taste still lingered on my tongue. But no matter how shitty things got, I would keep sacrificing—anything and everything—if it meant he was safe.

I stared down at the sandwich, and I swore it stared back. I couldn't force myself to take even one more bite today, so instead, I pushed away from the table. I didn't even have the luxury of throwing out the damn sandwich, so I wrapped it in plastic and tossed it in the fridge for later.

The shower was cold, big surprise, but at least it helped me make it fast. I had somewhere to be this morning. I quickly towel dried, with barely a glance at the mirror. Normally I would spend extra time on my appearance, aiming to impress, but I was having a hard time seeing the point anymore. Especially today. So instead of donning my uniform with its crisp creases, I dragged on a pair of jeans and a t-shirt. It felt... wrong. But what the hell was right anymore?

The city's main library was an impressive building, with features of the original structure erected in 1884, but after some irreparable damage due simply to its age, they'd updated it, giving it a modern twist. The main entryway was glass and steel, but as I made my way through to the archives, the modern feel made way for creaky, stained hardwood floors and pressed-tin ceiling tiles. Even the smell of the place changed, and I felt myself relax. This was dangerous, because as soon as I let my guard down, hope began to creep through the cracks.

I was going to find an answer here, I just knew it.

I approached the librarian seated at the desk. "Excuse me, could you please help me get started? I need to look through the newspaper archives and cross-reference names."

She smiled at me warmly. "Of course. Come with me and we'll get you started on a computer over here." She led me toward a desk and signed me on. My fingers tingled with anticipation.

Hours later, however, the pleasant warm tingling sensation felt more like pins and needles jabbing at my insides. Nothing. There was fucking nothing! How was that possible?! I had dug up articles about Bruno Santana easily enough. His trial had been sensationalized, the details of his crimes so sordid that readers lapped it up. From there, I found articles about the accusations against Mayor Black, his ties to Santana, and his subsequent disappearance. But that was where my research seemed

to end. When I tied the city's new mayor into the mix, there was nothing but praise for Eva Ward, touting her as a savior here to clean up the city's corruption. It was almost like she had wiped any dissent clean. Damn, she was good.

"This is such bullshit," I hissed, and the librarian turned in her chair to give me a sour glare. "Sorry," I mouthed at her, before logging out of the computer and shoving back my chair. This was what I got for allowing that tiny spark of hope in—crushing disappointment.

I was officially out of time.

I stopped by my apartment long enough to throw on a suit, but I left the wrinkles exactly where they were. It was the tiniest act of rebellion, and I doubted anyone would notice, but I would know. It was my whispered fuck-you to Eva and my father.

They were already there waiting for me when I stepped through the hotel's main doors. I hated seeing them here, like a stain on my pristine hotel. My father at least had a right to be here, as he technically owned the place, but Eva reminded me of an oil slick, choking and toxic.

"There you are," my father said with a frown as he spied me coming in. "You're late."

I made a point of looking at my watch. "Hmm, you said five, and it is precisely 4:59. You will find I am in fact one minute early." It wasn't my fault he'd shown up too early and had to entertain our guest.

My eyes flicked to the briefcase dangling from his left hand. He nodded, seeing where my gaze had gone. "Shall we?" he said, holding an arm out, indicating my office. As much as I didn't want them in there, it was better than doing this out in public where everyone could see.



I led the way across the lobby, and my father fell into step beside me. “I was glad you called. For a minute, I thought you were never going to come to your senses. It’s a smart business transaction. You won’t regret it.”

“Right,” I muttered.

As we came even with the front desk, I made the mistake of looking over at Emily, but she was staring off to her left, brow furrowed. When I followed her gaze, my breath caught. Roland? Shit, why was Roland here? He wasn’t supposed to be here yet. His shift didn’t start until ten. I specifically chose a time when he wasn’t working because I didn’t want him to witness this. I wasn’t that cruel.

His eyes were frantic, his cheeks flushed as he stepped around the desk to head us off. “Emerson, we need to talk.”

“Not now,” I snapped, panic like a bitter tang at the back of my throat. He didn’t understand the danger he was in by bringing attention to himself. Dammit, why was he here?! “You should watch yourself, Mr. Stohl. What makes you think you can be so casual with me? You will call me Monsieur Holland. Know your place.” Even as the acidic words came out of my mouth, I tried to convey how I really felt with my eyes, but it seemed to go right over his head. His jaw dropped, shocked, like I’d slapped him, and his eyes grew glossy.

I needed to do whatever it took to keep Roland out of today’s business dealings, even if it hurt his feelings, but no matter my cruelty, it was too late. My father’s eyes flicked between us, realization dawning. It only got worse when Eva’s focus turned to him, her shark’s grin widening. She had a knack for sensing weakness.

The flare of protectiveness burned hot and seething. I wanted to wrap him up in my arms and tell him everything would be okay—but it was very, very clear that nothing was okay, and it might not be okay ever again.

I hated that I'd hurt him, but at least if he hated me, he would keep his distance.

I forced myself to march straight past him, spine rigid, my face a perfect mask, not showing a single ounce of emotion. I shoved my way into my office, holding the door open for Eva and my father, before closing it behind them. I allowed myself one last fleeting look at Roland and saw a single tear drip down his cheek, before I closed him out, once and for all.

Eva sat down on the low couch and dropped a folder on the table in front of her. "I brought all the paperwork that needs your signature, including our marriage license."

My father sat beside her, perched on the edge of the cushion as though ready to bolt as soon as the business was done. "I have as well. This will transfer ownership of the hotel to you, Emerson, and then once you're married, it will become half Miss Ward's." They both pulled out their contracts and set them out on the table, and my father reached into his inside pocket and withdrew a pen, clicking it once, then holding it out to me.

I stared at the pen, at the contracts, then at each of them in turn. Logically I knew that I'd exhausted my options. My heart, however, was nowhere in this office, and I couldn't bring myself to give up. Not yet. I cleared my throat, tucking my hands into my pockets instead of reaching for the pen. "Yes, thank you. Leave the contracts there and I'll have my lawyer look them over. I'll get back to you next week."

"Excuse me?" Eva drawled, raising an eyebrow as if she couldn't believe my audacity. My father sputtered, and I swore he was trying not to laugh.

I smiled grimly at her. "You understand, I'm sure. I'm a businessman, not a fool. You didn't really expect me to just sign this blindly, did you?"

She chuckled, shaking her head. "Oh, Emerson..." she said, rising from the couch.

“That was precisely what I expected.”

Refusing to flinch, I tipped my chin up and stared right back. “What’s the rush, Madame Mayor? The hotel isn’t going anywhere.”

There was a flash of something in her eyes—doubt, maybe even a bit of fear—but before I could identify it, it was gone. “Very well,” she said, smooth as could be. “You take your week. But if you think you can stall forever, you’ll find you’re mistaken. Don’t make me push back.” Her threats were becoming a little less veiled.

As we stepped back out into the lobby, I refused to look at Roland, but from the corner of my eye I saw that Emily had her arm around his shoulders, comforting him. This was my fault, she was comforting him because of me.

Eva paused, turning in a circle right there in front of the desk as she admired the high ceiling and reflected light. “Yes, I think the hotel will do nicely as a reception venue, don’t you? And that way, all your employees can be there to witness your marriage. Isn’t that just perfect, my love?”

My lip curled in a sneer, acid crawling up my throat at the pet name. I maneuvered myself to block her view of him, and she winked at me. “I’m thinking November 15th for the ceremony. Maybe young Mr. Stohl could be your best man? I know how much he means to you.” She had no right to say his name. She knew exactly what she was doing, digging that knife into my chest and giving it a twist.

She could do whatever she wanted to me. I just wished she could leave him out of this.

*Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 2:43 pm*

It seemed like a case of wrong place, wrong time, but what else was new? I was starting to feel like The Scarlet Hotel would always be the wrong place for me.

I'd come in early to cover someone's shift, but there was no way I could stay now. It didn't matter that he didn't love her. All I could see when I closed my eyes was the way she'd touched his arm, like she owned him, leaning into his body and whispering sweet nothings in his ear just loud enough that I could hear them. As soon as the mayor was headed for the door, I'd mumbled something to Emily about feeling sick, then rushed away from the desk. She didn't try to stop me.

I was proud to say I managed to hold the majority of my tears back until I was safely in the staff room. As soon as the door closed behind me, though, all bets were off. The floodgates opened, my grief and frustration spilling down my cheeks in a torrent. Gods, I was such a fucking masochist! Why did I keep holding on to hope? I collapsed onto a bench, a ragged sob tearing out of me.

Even over my sobbing, I heard Emily's voice shouting down the hallway, "Sir? Sir! You shouldn't go in there right now. Please! Haven't you done enough?" I loved my friend for trying to protect me, but she should've known better. There would be no stopping him.

The door swung open immediately after. Emerson stormed in, eyes wild, then he spun around to close the door behind him, flipping the lock.

I buried my face in my arms. "Go away," I blubbered. I couldn't look at him, because if I caught even one glimpse of remorse in his eyes, I would never let go. I would keep giving him chance after chance, and at some point, I had to say enough was

enough. I was worth more than that.

I heard him cross the room and crouch in front of me, then he tried to pry my hands away from my face. “I’m so sorry, I didn’t mean any of what I said.”

I scoffed a watery, snotty sound. “Didn’t you? If you wanted me to get the hint, I heard you loud and clear. Message received.” I tried to blindly push him away, but he kept a firm grip on my wrists, giving me a little shake.

“Roland, will you listen to me?” He was getting frustrated or maybe desperate; was there a difference? Either way, he had me trapped here between his hot body and the bench, and I was trying very desperately not to pay attention to the way I seemed to gravitate toward him, like a satellite, forever orbiting a planet but never meeting. No matter how much I fought him, my body had taken on a mind of its own and was falling into him, totally against my will.

I will not look at him. I cannot forgive him. I refuse to love him.

Emerson reached between us and gripped my jaw, turning my face toward him. “Open your eyes and look at me.”

“No, and you can’t make me,” I huffed in childish stubbornness, by far the most immature words I’d ever said.

He sighed. “You’re right. I can’t.” The moment his lips touched my forehead, I knew I would lose whatever battle I was fighting with my heart. He stroked my cheeks, my neck, my back, until I collapsed against him, my tears soaking into his rumpled suit. My sobs eventually evened out, my tears drying. He didn’t tell me everything was going to be fine, make promises he couldn’t keep, and he didn’t even shush me or tell me to stop crying. He just held me through all my tears, bracing against the force and waiting for the tidal wave to pass.

“I think I loved you from the first moment I saw you,” he whispered. “Years, Roland, and I’ve loved you every day.” He moved to sit beside me without breaking contact. I halfway crawled into his lap, and he let me, his fingers smoothing through my hair. “The hardest part in all this is that it doesn’t matter if I love you. And it doesn’t matter if you love me back.”

I pulled back, eyes puffy, and finally looked at him. He looked just as bad as I felt, his own eyes red-rimmed, his unblemished skin splotchy with rosy patches, and it looked like he’d forgotten to shave today. I’d never seen him this disheveled. “I don’t understand. Why doesn’t it matter? Whatever is going on, why can’t we work through it together?” I gripped his lapels, trying to keep him here, even as I could feel him pulling away.

He put his hands over mine and squeezed. “You deserve so much better than me. I’m doing you a favor.” Then he pried my fingers off his jacket and worked his way out from under me, setting me aside with the utmost tenderness.

“A favor?” I echoed as my feet dropped back to the floor, the word triggering something deep inside me. “Excuse me? A fucking favor?!” I surged up to my full height and stood toe to toe with him, tilting my chin up to stare him in the eye. “Well, thank you so much, Emerson. That’s so thoughtful of you, I really appreciate it,” I seethed, injecting as much sarcasm as I could into my words. “The way you kissed me, fucked me, told me you loved me, and now you’re marrying someone else. What a fucking prince.” He flinched but didn’t step back. “Now let me do a favor for you,” I snapped. “I quit.”

His eyes widened. “No, Roland, you can’t—”

“Oh, I can, and I did.” I spun on my heel and stalked over to my locker, grabbing my few possessions out of my locker and shoving it all into my bag.

Emerson went on and on behind me, begging me to stay, to reconsider, but I did everything I could to tune him out. Disbelief had me reeling. Did I really just quit? Pride made me strong, though. I would not take it back.

I forced myself to look him in the eye, to imprint this memory onto my soul. “Goodbye, Monsieur Holland,” I said with finality and a calmness that didn’t at all match how I felt on the inside. “I wish you and your wife the most happy of endings.”

“Roland, please,” he choked out, his facade cracking.

“No. You were right. It’s better this way. Now I can finally move on with my life.”

For so long, I’d been asleep. I’d had this dream of being with Emerson, and even when I was awake, I was living inside that dream. Now, though, it was like the bubble had popped. My feelings for him felt sharp and jagged, tearing at my insides, but through it all, my eyes were finally open.

Emerson was not mine, and he never would be.

Oh, and also, I no longer had a job, so that was bad. Fuck.

The whole way home, my emotions played a tug-of-war inside my chest, waffling between regret, anger, and cool, crisp relief. I had no idea where I would be tomorrow—likely applying for jobs—but one thing I knew for certain was that at least I wouldn’t be mooning over my stupid sexy boss.

As distracted as I was, I forgot that I’d been avoiding my neighbor, so instead of tiptoeing past her door on the way to my apartment, I was stomping. Just as I passed her door, it creaked open, light spilling into the hallway.

I panicked and bolted for my door. “Not so fast,” she called after me in her no-

nonsense tone. “Get your ass in here.”

I deflated even further, turning to look over my shoulder at her. “Can we not do this today? I just quit my job.”

Her eyebrows hiked halfway up her forehead, doubling the creases in her skin. “But you love your job.”

I sighed, my eyes burning with the threat of tears. Great, as if I hadn’t cried enough already. “It wasn’t the job I loved,” I whispered raggedly. It was my boss.

She nodded once then stepped back. I thought that meant she was going to just let me get on with my wallowing, but she waved a hand to usher me inside. “Come on. Drinks are on me.”

“Do you mean tea?” I asked, stepping into her apartment, as familiar to me as my own home. I hated to admit, it made me feel just a tiny bit better.

She scoffed, closing the apartment door behind me. “Tea is for losers. Scotch will put hair on your chest.” She pulled open her cabinet and pointed up to the bottle on the top shelf. “Be a dear and grab that for me, would you?”

I did as she asked and brought the bottle down, then poured a tiny amount in the glasses she set out. She speared me with a look and tipped the bottle further until the glass in front of me was far too full.

“Cheers,” she said, tapping her glass to mine. “To new beginnings.”

“Right. To new...” I couldn’t even say it. I didn’t want a new beginning when I didn’t see anything wrong with the old one. I brought the glass to my lips, the fumes burning my eyes. Forcing myself to take a small sip, I grimaced at the burn and set



the scotch aside. "I'm not really much of a drinker," I explained.

"Neither am I, but sometimes, a situation calls for it, and I get the impression this is one of those times."

She nudged the drink back my way, but I shook my head. "I don't think alcohol is going to fix this."

I hated the look of pity she gave me. "Honey, why did you quit your job?"

"I'm in love with my boss, and he loves me, but he's getting married to someone else anyway." Even as I choked on a laugh, the tears pooled again; I promised myself they would be the last tears I shed over him. Before she could give me some kind of advice about how I should let him go, good riddance, I added, "And I'm pretty sure the bride-to-be is blackmailing him into it."

Blinking, she tipped her glass back, draining it in one go. "Well... that certainly is a bit of a pickle." Then she reached across the counter and took my untouched glass, throwing that one back as well. She didn't even wince. "It's no wonder you weren't interested in my grandson."

"I'm sorry, Collette. Alan is very nice. He just isn't Emerson."

She waved away my apology. "The heart wants what the heart wants. No apology necessary." She pursed her lips in thought, then reached for the bottle and poured herself one more shot. "So... what are we going to do about this bitch? You're not going to just let her take your man, are you?"

"I—I mean... what other choice do I have?"

Her grin was full of wicked intent. "Why, honey, you fight fire with fire, of course."

*Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 2:43 pm*

I was the boss. By default, that meant that I had to be the hard-ass sometimes. I couldn't laugh and joke around with my staff, try to be their friend. If I showed any sign of weakness, it would leave me vulnerable to being stepped on. I had to keep a stern and serious demeanor, and when they did something wrong, I had to handle it, either teach them how to do it properly in the future or admonish their behavior, even fire someone if it was called for. Because of this, I would never be their favorite person, and I was fine with that. I expected it, even.

Now, however, things had gotten much, much worse. In their eyes, I was no longer their boss—I was the villain.

As I strode down the hall toward housekeeping, I heard whispering behind me. I spun around and caught Benny and Joseph having an intense gossip session, while staring directly at me. They didn't even try to hide the fact that I was the topic of conversation. Benny actually sneered at me!

My mouth opened with all the excuses I wanted to make—it wasn't my fault that Roland quit, I'd begged him to stay, they couldn't hold it against me forever—but there was no use. Joseph just rolled his eyes and walked away. I snapped my mouth shut with a hard clack of my teeth. There was no point in arguing with them.

They'll get over it eventually, I thought to myself, without really believing it.

When I got to housekeeping, I found it empty. The laundry was empty too, the machines quiet. Where the hell was everybody? It was the middle of the day. Everyone should've been hard at work.

I wandered through the halls until I heard a murmur of voices coming from the kitchen. It struck me as odd because it was just a gentle buzz of chatting, instead of the usual clang, clatter, sizzle of the lunch rush.

Pushing open the door, I was met with a handful of staff standing around, picking from a plate of fries on the counter between them. They turned to glance at me when I came in, but otherwise ignored me.

“What the hell is going on here?” I sputtered, my blood pressure spiking. I didn’t want to yell, but gods, this was ridiculous!

Emily turned to glare at me, her usually friendly face marred by a heavy scowl. “What does it look like? We’re having lunch. Why don’t you go back to kicking puppies or whatever the hell you do all day.” She made a shooing motion with her hand.

“What the f—” I just barely managed to bite back the curse. I huffed an angry breath. Weren’t there customers in the restaurant to serve? Linen to wash, rooms to clean? “Are you on strike? Is that what this is?”

“Call it whatever you want,” Cherie said, her lip curling in distaste. “You fucked up, and everybody here knows it.”

When I took a step forward, the dishwasher Coral blocked my path with her broad frame. She crossed her thick, tattooed biceps the size of my thighs over her chest and shook her head at me, pink curls doing nothing to diminish her obvious threat. “I think it’s best if you leave,” she said firmly, brooking no argument.

“But...” I began. I searched my mind for the right words to make this better, but what argument did I have? Honestly, I didn’t have a leg to stand on. I couldn’t blame them for hating me. Hell, I hated myself. Roland was the sweetest, kindest man, and

everybody here loved him like a little brother. And all thanks to me, he left.

And I should know. I felt his absence more harshly than anyone else.

My shoulders sagged, my mouth evening out into a hard, flat line. “I’ll fix this,” I promised them. I didn’t know how to make this better, but I had to try.

There was no point in my staying at the hotel now. The staff were more likely to put in the work if I wasn’t there to harass, so I headed for the door, a plan beginning to take shape in my mind. I nearly walked straight into the glass door, so used to having the door attendant open it for me. I stopped just in time and caught Sandy’s eye through the window as they very purposely stood at their station beside the door. Then they looked away.

“For fuck’s sake,” I grumbled, pushing the door open for myself.

I needed to talk to Roland. I needed him to come back to work, and it didn’t matter how I convinced him. I figured it wouldn’t hurt to come bearing gifts, though, so I headed down the street to Crave Coffee to grab some of his favorite chocolate croissants.

As soon as I stepped into the warm, fragrant café, I loosed a breath, feeling the tightness in my chest ease a fraction. The place smelled like Roland, like rich, roasted coffee and cinnamon and sugar. I closed my eyes and breathed him in. Longing tugged me toward the counter. As I got closer, though, I was distinctly aware of a shift in the air. There were eyes on me, I could feel them.

When the man at the counter finished serving the customer in front of me, and I stepped forward to place my order, he suddenly just turned and walked away. “Uh, excuse me?” I called after him. I might’ve thought he hadn’t seen me standing here... if I hadn’t just been snubbed by every single one of my staff members.

“Seriously?” I growled, leaning over the counter to try and get someone’s attention, but everyone working here was suddenly too busy to help me.

As tempted as I was to simply walk behind the counter and help myself, I figured that wouldn’t do me any favors in the long run. They were obviously Roland’s friends and were supporting him, and I wouldn’t do anything to jeopardize that. So instead, I raised my voice and said, “Does it matter that I’m buying something for Roland?”

A man I recognized as the owner, Hugh, stepped through the doorway that led to the back, thunderous frown on his face. His green eyes seemed to darken. “Is that true? Or are you just using him to get your fucking coffee too?”

The sound that came out of me was animalistic. “Yes, it’s true. I’m trying to make amends, and all I want is to buy some of favorite snacks.”

Hugh narrowed his eyes at me. “So, bribery? Is that your game?”

I whimpered in frustration. I couldn’t win. No matter what I did, the hole I’d dug myself was so deep, there was no crawling out. Didn’t they realize I was already suffering? Wasn’t losing the love of my life enough of a punishment?

“I just wanted to fix what I broke,” I tried to explain helplessly. “I want to show him that I care. It’s an olive branch, not a bribe.”

He seemed to think that over, and then he reluctantly made his way over to the pastries and started throwing a few croissants into a paper bag; he somehow managed to multitask, glaring at me while he worked. He brought the bag over, pressed a few buttons on the till, then said, “That’ll be 50 dollars.”

My eyes must’ve bugged out. “Fifty bucks?! Are those croissants dipped in gold?”

He leveled me with a malicious smirk. “Do you want them or not?”

“This is bullshit,” I muttered under my breath as I pulled out my wallet. I had to hope it would be worth it.

I’d never been to Roland’s apartment, but I had the address on his employee record. And I knew it wasn’t the best part of town, so I wanted to think I was prepared for what I encountered. The streets in this neighborhood were narrow, both sides filled with parked cars, bumper to bumper, mostly rusty beaters. There were a few window boxes filled with brightly colored flowers, but it didn’t do much to counteract the overall grungy feel of the sidewalks below, and I was fairly certain I witnessed a drug deal happening on the corner.

I hated that Roland lived here. It was likely all he could afford. I’d always wished I could pay him what he deserved, but he was the type of guy to report when he’d accidentally been paid too much. He would never accept charity.

When I found his building, I was appalled to find the front door lock was broken and I was able to just walk straight in off the street. I desperately wanted to track down the building’s owner and give them a piece of my mind... if that owner weren’t Eva. I gritted my teeth, trying to dislodge the unbearable need to throw Roland over my shoulder and carry him the whole way home where I could protect him properly. Instead, I trudged up the narrow stairs, wood risers worn in the middle from decades of shoes, and I came out on the second-floor hallway.

Raising my fist, I rapped my knuckles on his door. I made sure to hold the brown paper bag up high enough that he could see I brought gifts if he looked through the peephole. He needed to answer the door, even if it was for no other reason than sugary treats, so I could talk to him face to face. Surely he would see reason and come back to work. The staff missed him—hell, I missed him. The hotel wasn’t the same without him there.

When he didn't answer the door, I knocked again. "Roland? Are you in there? We need to talk." I was pretty sure I heard rustling on the other side, and a shadow cut in front of the peephole. "Roland, come on. Answer the door. I'm sorry, okay? We can work this out. You don't need to quit."

While his door remained stubbornly shut, a door to my left opened, and an elderly woman shuffled out in her housecoat and slippers. "Are you here to finish the job?" she snapped, her narrowed eyes magnified through her thick glasses.

"Pardon me?" Who was this woman, and why did she think she had a right to judge? What did she know about who I was and what I was dealing with?

This tiny woman snarled at me, and I halfway expected her to attack. "Seriously, haven't you done enough? I assume since you're here trying to beg for Roland's forgiveness that you're his selfish, naïve, omega-using boss. Tell me I'm wrong."

Shame heated my cheeks. "Well... I wouldn't have used quite those words, but—"

"No more talking," she said sharply, cutting me off. "If Roland wants to talk to you, he knows where to find you. Otherwise, don't you dare set foot here again, unless you want me to shove my slipper so far up your ass, you'll be giving birth to a whole litter of footwear."

"Oh." I cleared my throat. The woman was tiny but fierce, and I had to admit, knowing Roland lived next to her made me feel marginally better about his safety. "All right. I'll go." I handed her the bakery bag on the way by. "Please tell him..." She waited for me to finish the sentence, but I realized there was nothing new to say. He knew how I felt, and he knew things would never change.

"Right," I said, nodding my head once before turning toward the stairs, grief swelling inside my chest and threatening to swallow me whole. "Have a good night."

## Page 13

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Fuck. Fuckity-fuck-fuck.

“Nope, this doesn’t change anything,” I said in an attempt to convince myself, as if the words spoken out loud would somehow make them true. “The plan must go on. Just maybe... a little faster than before.” I blew out a shaky breath, casting a glare over at the pregnancy test still lying on the floor where I’d dropped it.

Pregnant. With a baby. A tiny human baby. I rolled my eyes. Obviously, it was human. Or, I mean, I hoped? A manic giggle snuck out, cut off abruptly when my throat closed up, choking off my air supply.

Thinking about the baby had my steps kicking up a notch as I paced back and forth across the short distance, from the front door, three strides to cross the kitchen, four more to the window, and then back. I couldn’t seem to get my thoughts in order, so I outlined the plan again.

Get my job back.

Get evidence that Emerson was being forced into marriage.

Put that bitch mayor in her place, either behind bars or six feet under—I wasn’t picky. As long as it was far the hell away from here. I mean, I’d be happy enough if she moved to Timbuktu. I wasn’t asking a lot.

When you put anything in point form, it made it seem easier, but I was quite certain it wouldn’t be anywhere near as straightforward as that. Especially now that I had a physical deadline of approximately seven months.



I placed my palm over my flat stomach. What would Emerson do when he found out I was pregnant? Would he still go through with his marriage to Eva? Or would he insist on marrying me instead? Did I want that? I mean, I didn't need an alpha to take care of me. I was totally capable of raising a child by myself. But that didn't mean it wouldn't be nice...

Growling in frustration, I resumed my pacing, until three thumps came from the wall I shared with Collette. "Cut the racket, I'm trying to watch my show," her muffled voice said. Gods, these walls were thin.

Her voice seemed to cut straight through my anxiety, and I stood there in the middle of my living room, staring out the window at the darkening street below.

Fuck. I'm pregnant.

I wanted to be excited about it. In an alternate universe, Emerson would be here by my side, and we would be celebrating our baby. Our love would be enough to make it work. We would lie in bed and talk about baby names, and we would search real estate websites to find a bigger place together, where we could decorate a nursery. I would say, "Let's paint it blue," and he would say, "What if it's a girl?" and I would say, "Girls can't like blue?" And of course, I would win, because I knew, in this hypothetical world, he would always let me win.

Sometimes, I wished I didn't have a good imagination. It only made this harder.

Before I could talk myself out of it, I spun on my heel, grabbed my keys off the table, and stormed out of the apartment. I was going to fix this. For me, for Emerson, but more importantly, for our child. No baby daddy of mine was going to marry some uppity bitch. Who the hell did she think she was? Well, she had another thing coming. Soon, she would see what an omega like me could do when he had the right motivation. She was going down.

I kept my momentum going, psyching myself up for everything I planned to do, the hurdles that I needed to jump in order to get there. If I stopped for even a second and let myself dwell on the what-ifs, my heart would come to a screeching halt, and that would be the end. Game over.

Sandy saw me coming, and their smile stretched wide. “Roland, you’re back!”

“Damn straight,” I said with far more ferocity than I ever would’ve imagined in my current situation. They held the door open for me with a gloved hand, and I marched in through that glass door, eyes zeroing in on Emerson’s office door.

With the acoustics of the space, I swore I could hear my heaving breath reflected back at me, so I let it bolster my courage. In, out, in, out, my heart pounding a steady staccato in my chest. I knew my coworkers were watching me, their whispered encouragement almost gleeful as I passed. They knew I was about to give our boss a piece of mind, and they were here for it.

I barely paused to knock before bursting into the office. Emerson’s head jerked up, and I hated how he was a shell of his former self. He was thinner, his hair lank and unwashed, deep creases under his eyes. “Roland, I—” he began, rising out of the chair, fully prepared to rush at me.

I pointed a finger at him. “Sit,” I commanded firmly, and he obeyed without hesitation. It was such a heady, powerful feeling to be holding all the cards. I took a deep breath to keep from getting dizzy. My stomach was threatening to empty itself right here on the floor, and I didn’t think it had anything to do with the baby growing inside me.

The room wasn’t large, but it felt smaller than usual, like I was growing to fill the space. I marched straight up to his desk and glared down at him with all the ferocity I could muster. “I’m coming back to work.” He nodded fervently, relief shining in his

eyes. “But I’m going to set some ground rules, and you will follow them. You will only talk to me about work, nothing personal. I don’t want to hear about your day. You will not ask me if I’m okay.” I paused long enough for him to nod again. “There will be no touching, zero, not even an accidental brush of the shoulder, because you should never be close enough to me for this to happen. And you will never be alone with me. If you ever notice this has happened by accident, you will get up and leave the room immediately. Got it?”

Emerson’s eyes flashed with a cold, blue light. I waited for him to acknowledge that he understood. He gave a final nod, his lips pinched tight. He wasn’t happy about it, but he was smart enough to keep his mouth shut. “Good. I’ll be working dayshifts, Monday to Friday, from now on. Make it work.” I spun around and marched straight back out.

Emerging from that room, my heart was racing like I’d just run the hundred-meter dash and come in last. I became aware of the sweat dripping down the inside of my shirt, and I plucked the fabric between my fingers and tried to flap it a few times, hoping to catch a breeze.

Phase one was complete. Piece of cake. I faced down Emerson and got my job back, which put me in prime position to take control of the situation. Now, all I needed was a legion of accomplices.

To do that, I would have to enlist the help of my friends. There was only one guaranteed way to spread the word: Patrick. He was by far the biggest gossip in the entire staff, and since he worked in housekeeping, his job took him all over the hotel, making him an ideal point of contact with everyone. And so, my search for Patrick began. You could never quite guarantee where you’d find him. He might’ve been in any of the hotel’s 200 guest rooms... or he might’ve been hanging out in the laundry or the kitchen or, in today’s case, sitting on an overturned bucket in the very same supply closet where Emerson first kissed me.

When I opened the door, he looked up at me from where he was hunched over his notepad, pen in hand. “I take it the muse came knocking?” I teased, slipping into the closet with him while I tried my hardest to banish all memory of what had transpired in here. As if by reflex, my skin heated.

“Absolutely!” He grinned, patting a box of glass cleaner for me to have a seat. “See, I heard about how you swooped in here like an avenging angel and demanded your job back, and I had this idea for a spicy scene in my next book. I had to write it down straight away before it slipped away.”

My lips puckered in a frown as I perched carefully on the box. “How have you already heard about that? I’ve been back in the building for all of five minutes.”

He shrugged and waved me away like it was no big deal. “What can I say? It’s a slow day for gossip. Or maybe, it’s that we’re all insanely glad to see you finally take charge of that adorably grumpy boss of ours.” He sighed dreamily, then looked at me fully, his gaze turning curious. “You know, I think he might actually be good for you. Your cheeks are rosy, and your eyes are all sparkly. I haven’t seen you this alert in ages—maybe ever.”

“Geez, why do people keep saying shit like that? It’s like everyone think I’m sleepwalking on the job.” He raised a brow as if to say, “Aren’t you?” I forged ahead before I could agree with him. “Anyway, I might have some better gossip for you nosy busybodies.”

“Ooh, goody!” He leaned in conspiratorially, notching his chin in his palm, elbow propped on his knee. “Lay it on me. I’m all ears.”

Even though we were enclosed in a closet, I still leaned closer until we were only inches apart and whispered, “You’ve heard Monsieur Holland is getting married?”

He scoffed and threw in an eye roll. “Duh. That’s not news. Is that all you’ve got? Lamé.”

I could feel my smirk widening as phase two began to take shape. “Well, did you know he doesn’t want to marry her?”

Patrick’s eyes narrowed. He hated to admit when there was something he didn’t know. “Well, I mean, I suspected as much, the way he looks at you. Go on...” He began tapping his pen, and I almost laughed at how his muse was already tugging a story into shape.

“What I heard...” I paused for maximum effect, “was that Eva Ward was actually connected to the mafia, and she’s forcing him into it so she can control the hotel.”

Patrick gasped, face a mask of overdone shock, as he played his part as gossip queen. “No!”

“Yes!” I chirped back. Just because I didn’t have any proof that Eva was a criminal—yet—that didn’t mean I couldn’t stir the pot a little. I hadn’t been able to find any proof myself, but many hands made light work.

“But... that’s not fair,” he said, frowning as he thought it over. He mirrored the same indignation that I’d been feeling since the moment Emerson had told me he was marrying her. “He’s clearly in love with you.”

His words stabbed at me, and I winced, swallowing through a tightening throat, but Patrick didn’t seem to notice. “There has to be something we can do!” he snarled, shoving to his feet.

I stood up beside him, adrenaline pushing through the dread to take center stage. “I have a plan... sort of...” It was flimsy at best and would very likely fail, but I

couldn't just stand around and do nothing. "Spread the word. Staff meeting tomorrow morning, we'll meet in the kitchen before the dining room opens. Don't tell Monsieur Holland."

*Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 2:43 pm*

I got out of my car and smoothed a hand over my tie. It was black satin, with the same luster as Roland's eyes. I'd actually showered this morning, which was a step up from yesterday. Halfway down the street to the hotel, I was shocked to find myself whistling. And I was even more pleased when Sandy actually stepped forward and held the door open for me.

Roland was back at work, and all was forgiven with the staff.

I probably shouldn't have been so happy that Roland was back. It put him right where Eva would notice him, but it soothed me to know I could keep an eye on him this way. I was fully aware how selfish I was being, but I couldn't seem to stay away from him, not even for a full week. Even though he wasn't technically mine, he was still my responsibility, and I took that job very seriously. I had made it my goal to keep him safe no matter the cost—in this case, rearranging the staff schedule. Even if he hadn't demanded to be put on day shift, I would've done it anyway. I had zero chance of sleeping at night knowing he was at work and unprotected. I really wished I had the budget to add security to the payroll to watch those cameras. For now, this would have to do.

Roland hadn't started work yet, but I stopped by the desk to say good morning to Mercy. She nodded wordlessly in reply.

I looked around the lobby. Although it would be quiet until after breakfast, Mercy shouldn't have been by herself. "Emily didn't leave already, did she?" I knew she wouldn't be happy about being put back on the night shift, but she hadn't said a word to me in complaint.

Mercy's brow furrowed, and she nibbled on her bottom lip, her eyes skittering away. "No," she said softly, refusing to meet my gaze. Why did it feel like she was lying?

"Mercy?" I drawled, stepping to the left to catch her eye. "Where's Emily?"

She hummed and looked back the other way. "Um, on break?"

"For the last 15 minutes of her shift?"

Mercy shrugged. While she may have been a horrible liar, she was loyal to a fault. I would just have to track down Emily on my own.

This felt like *déjà vu*. The laundry was quiet, housekeeping empty, and sure enough, when I approached the kitchen, there was a buzz of voices.

I approached slowly, trying to catch what was being said. I immediately recognized Roland's voice, and it set my body on fire. "...to spread the word. Call around to see who's on board and get back to me right away. We have to move fast. We don't have much time."

My breath caught. What was he talking about? I shoved through the door, determined to demand answers, and every person in the room turned to look at me. Caught in the act of something, obviously... but what?

Why did it feel like they were having a staff meeting without me? Wasn't I the boss?! Oh gods, I couldn't believe this was happening again. Roland was back; what more did they want? What worried me more was that Roland seemed to be the leader of this little meeting. What the hell was he trying to do?

"Am I interrupting something?" I asked suspiciously, trying to act casual.



“Nope, not a thing,” Roland said without missing a beat. “I was just grabbing a cup of coffee before work.”

“Uh, me too,” Patrick said before sidling past me out the door.

“Yeah, what they said,” Emily agreed, lying smoothly, “except at the end of my shift. Have a good day, everybody. I’m off to bed.” She waved over her shoulder on her way out.

The kitchen staff all turned their backs on me and started getting breakfast prep started as if nothing had happened, and the employees who didn’t belong in the kitchen scattered like the roaches in my apartment when I turned on the light. Roland tried to walk past me, his scent overwhelming my senses and clouding my judgment.

Before I could stop myself, I snapped a hand out and grabbed Roland’s arm. “What the hell are you up to, Roland?” I hissed.

He rounded on me, his eyes like fire as he ripped his arm out of my grip. “No touching, remember? You wouldn’t want me to quit again, would you?”

“No, no!” I sighed, closing my eyes and forcing myself to calm down. “It’s just... whatever it is you think you’re doing, you have to stop. Please.”

He shifted awkwardly. “I don’t know what you’re talking about. We were just having coffee and—”

“Roland,” I hissed sharply. “Cut the bullshit.” I was far too aware of all the eyes on us right now. The entire staff seemed to think they had a right to butt into our lives. Instead of dragging Roland out of the kitchen like I so very badly wanted to, I simply nodded toward the door with my chin. He followed me warily out into the hallway.

As soon as the door swung closed behind us, he took a step back to put some distance between us. “What do you want, Emerson? This had better be work related. I said we should never be alone together.”

“I know, and I’m sorry. Making you uncomfortable is the last thing I want. It’s just...” I blew out a long breath. I could feel a headache coming on—there would probably be plenty more in my future. “I’ve done everything I could to protect what’s mine... I mean, the hotel, of course,” I said, my words stilted. “But there are outside factors at play... dangerous factors. It would be best for everyone if you stayed out of it. Do you understand?” I would never tell him the full story, but he had to get it. I wouldn’t be able to live with myself if something happened to him. “Please, Roland.”

The angry mask he’d been wearing slipped a little, and he took just one step closer, a softness sneaking into his voice. “I know you truly believe that, but you’re wrong.”

As he spun and walked away from me, I was desperate for him to stay, for even one more minute in his presence. “Roland?” I called. When he looked back at me, I said, “Thank you for coming back to work. I was pretty sure the staff were about to come after me with torches and pitchforks if you didn’t.”

He huffed a little laugh. “I’m sure that’s not true.”

“Oh, it is,” I assured him. “Painfully true. I still don’t trust the staff at Crave not to spit in my coffee.”

He smiled and nodded, before turning and heading back to work. It seemed we had called a temporary truce. Even then, I had an awful feeling percolating in my gut. If he didn’t leave things alone, he would end up getting himself killed.

It felt like my whole world was crumbling around me. I’d come so close to losing everything, including my freedom—but at least I didn’t have to lose the hotel, right? I

would marry Eva, and she would own half of everything, but the doors would stay open. Roland was destined to remain out of reach forever, but at least I could see him. Maybe one day we could even be friends. It would be no more torturous than every day since I first hired him, right? ...Ignoring the fact that I could remember in vivid detail what it felt like to be buried inside him. He was ingrained on my very soul.

Fuck, I was so wrecked.

Roland disappeared into the staff room, presumably to grab his work blazer from his locker. I hated having him out of my sight even for that short period of time, but I couldn't allow myself to become a stalker. I was being unreasonable. There was obviously no threat in there. He was fine, safe.

Going against my instinctive alpha protectiveness to head toward my office, instead of standing outside the room and waiting for him, was like dragging my feet through wet cement. It certainly didn't help matters when I emerged in the lobby to see Eva through the plate-glass windows, strolling toward the hotel. For a brief second, I thought Sandy would let her open the door herself, but at the last moment, they did their job, but it was done grudgingly and without a smile.

Wow. For someone as personable and charming as the mayor, she really did seem to be making enemies here at the hotel.

Eva was wearing a slim pantsuit today, her billowing coat long enough that it could be concealing anything—even a weapon. It was hard to imagine someone so poised being that level of dangerous, but appearances could be deceiving. Like a fuzzy slow loris, all cuddly cute but lethally toxic.

I reminded myself to tread lightly, even as my temper reared its head. “What do you want?” I snapped under my breath as she approached me.

“Now, now, is that any way to greet your future wife?” she said, her voice laced with saccharine poison. She leaned in, her perfume cloying, and I held my breath to keep from suffocating on it. I locked my body down so I didn’t cringe away as she kissed me on the cheek. “Whoops,” she tittered, wiping the lipstick off my face. “Wouldn’t want people to get the wrong impression, now, would we? They might think we’ve been up to something naughty.”

I was quite certain that she was in constant control of the impression she wanted to make. It was like a game of chess, and she was always one step ahead of me.

She was too close to me, but if I backed away, I felt like I would be showing weakness. Forcing my words through gritted teeth, I repeated, “What do you want, Eva?”

She pretended to pout at my gruff attitude. “I was just in the neighborhood for a meeting early this morning and afterward wanted to stop by to see if you’d had a chance to look over the paperwork yet.” She walked her fingers up my tie, and it made my skin crawl to have her touching me. Before she could reach my neck, I grabbed her by the wrist and forcibly removed her hand from my body.

“Nope,” I said, popping the P with satisfaction, hoping to needle at her in any way I could. “I’m afraid you’ve wasted your time. And just so you don’t feel the need to come back all this way again for nothing, my lawyer won’t get the chance to go over it until Monday.”

She sighed dramatically, seemingly unperturbed. “Oh well, that’s too bad. Good thing I came by with some binders for wedding planning instead. Hope you’re not busy, we have a lot to discuss. Color palettes and theme, flower arrangements, decorations, the guest list. Oh, and ring designs—I’m thinking a matching his-and-hers set. What do you think?”

I actually snarled, which only seemed to amuse her further. She didn't actually care about the wedding except for the outward appearance of it. And while hiring a wedding planner to take care of the whole damn thing was more her style, Eva was using this opportunity to make herself a nuisance until I gave her what she wanted.

Well, two could play at that game. I wrestled my mouth into a semblance of a smile. "Sure thing, dear. I have nothing but time for you. Let's talk flowers. You'd better cancel all your appointments; I could do this all day."

She narrowed her eyes. If she thought I would give in so easily to avoid spending time in her presence, then she had severely underestimated me. It would be good practice for the lifetime I would have to spend at her side.

Movement from behind me caught her eye, and as she glanced over, her expression shifted to triumph. I looked over my shoulder to see what had caught her interest, and my insides turned to ice. Roland was about to start his shift.

I could sense her intention even before her eyes flicked back to mine briefly, mischief and malintent gleaming. She started to walk in his direction. "Mr. Stohl, so good to see you again," she purred.

Out of the corner of my eye, I saw him stiffen, his breath catching. It was a prey instinct. Maybe he'd sensed enough to know she was more dangerous than she first seemed.

Before she could get to the desk, I darted between them, making myself a physical barrier. It was exactly what she'd expected me to do. "That's enough," I muttered under my breath.

"Oh, I'm just getting started." Her full, painted lips widened, her canines flashing in a predatory grin. "So, about that paperwork..."

She knew exactly which of my strings to pull to get what she wanted. “Fine. Let’s step into my office.”

I had stalled all I could. My time was officially up. I had no choice but to sign.

*Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 2:43 pm*

I could tell by the curve of Emerson's spine that he'd officially given up. I wanted so very badly to tell him not to let her win. It wasn't over yet.

They might've been speaking too quietly for me to hear what was said, but there was no doubt in my mind that this woman was playing a dangerous game with my boss. I felt like Emerson was moving around a chess board, trying to protect one measly pawn. The way he'd put himself in her path to block her from approaching me... He was doing all of this for me, I knew that now.

What he didn't know was that I was playing a game of my own behind the scenes. I only hoped I would have a chance for it to play out before it was game over.

Eva was only in his office for a few minutes, but she left with her head held high, daring to throw a wink at me that set my teeth on edge, and my stomach plummeted down to my feet. What the hell just happened in there? She'd closed the door behind her, and it remained that way, no sign of Emerson. I was really regretting telling Emerson not to talk to me.

The day shift was significantly busier than what I'd grown accustomed to after years of working nights, and I was considerably more exhausted these days, thanks to the baby growing inside me, but I welcomed the distraction. For the first time since I started working here, I didn't want to think about Emerson. I banished him from my thoughts. The space in my brain that was usually devoted to his clear blue eyes, the gentle wave of his blond hair, and that damn, adorable cleft in his chin that I just wanted to lick, was in lockdown. There was nothing I could do to fix anything at this exact second, so I checked customers in, got a papercut on the old-school reservation book, ran through dozens of credit cards, answered the phone, and took reservations.

I even helped a woman catch her hyperactive chihuahua that had escaped from her purse.

By the time noon came around, I was more than ready for a break. My feet hurt, my back ached, and baby was demanding I eat all the food. “Think you can handle things for a few minutes?” I asked Conner. He was fairly new to the job, and I hadn’t really had a chance to get to know him very well since we used to work opposing shifts. “I just want to scarf down a quick sandwich.”

“You’re gonna leave me by myself?” he squeaked, his face scrunching up in a mask of horror. “Oh, um... sure. I-I got this.” His throat worked as he gulped. “I guess I can just ask Monsieur Holland for help if—”

“No,” I said sharply, and he looked startled. I smiled tightly at him. “I just mean, he’s very busy today. If you need something, come get me. Okay? I don’t mind.”

“Oh. Okay...” He nodded uncertainly.

I really didn’t want to leave him by himself, but I also couldn’t go all day without a break. I was just debating grabbing my lunch and eating it in the hallway around the corner, when I caught sight of someone familiar cutting through the bustling lobby. “Fuck off, not today,” I muttered quietly under my breath. Didn’t I have enough on my plate without having to worry about this snot rag?

Sawyer Sheen. He was the hotel’s PR rep. He was this young, good-looking omega, and I had taken an instant dislike to the guy, regardless of his in-your-face charm. I tried telling myself it wasn’t because he tended to spend far too much time with my boss, but that would be a lie. At least Sawyer was already married.

Now, though, when I compared Sawyer to Eva, he suddenly didn’t seem like such a bad guy anymore. Huh.



He smiled at me, wide and unguarded, as he approached the desk, as if he didn't know I hated him—which he clearly did because I'd done absolutely nothing to disguise my contempt. "Hey, Roland! Great to see you again."

I couldn't bring myself to ignore the greeting entirely, so I nodded once to at least acknowledge his presence. "Do you have a meeting with Mr. Holland?"

"No, not today," he said, propping his elbow on the desk.

It was none of my business, but I couldn't seem to keep my mouth shut. Just because I was mad at Emerson, that didn't mean I wouldn't keep protecting him. "I know it's not really my place to say, but... I don't think it's the best time to just drop in to see him right now. Could you maybe come back later?"

His eyebrows jumped, and he straightened up, glancing over his shoulder around the lobby, his eyes flicking briefly toward the security camera angled at the desk, before he leaned in a little. "Actually, I'm here to see you," he said softly.

"You are?" What reason would he ever have to talk to me about anything?

He flashed another of those award-winning grins. "Yes. I heard you're planning a fundraiser to save the hotel."

My jaw must've dropped. "What?! How did you hear about it? We literally just started planning it this morning!" I blurted too loudly. Lowering my voice to match Sawyer's conspiratorial tone, I hissed, "You haven't told Emerson, have you?"

He waved me away, chuckling. "Don't worry, I only heard about it because I know a guy, he's very well-informed. I promise, your secret is safe with me. But I'm here because I want to help."

“You want to help?” I asked suspiciously.

He held a finger up. “Correction: I need to help. What’s been going on here, with Emerson and the mayor, it’s beyond unfair, and I have a real issue when crooks try to take advantage of my friends.” He pursed his lips. “Unless you don’t want my help...”

Shit. I was absolutely not in a position to turn away someone with the kinds of connections he had. It was the nature of his job to know important people, not just in the city but other parts of the country and the world beyond. Besides, he was talking like he knew more about what was going on than I did. Sighing, I asked, “What kind of help are you offering exactly?”

“Well, I was mostly thinking about helping to spread the word and get donations, but I’ll do anything you need. I’ll even pour coffee and fetch snacks.” He smiled and practically lounged against the desk, and his relaxed attitude about something so dire was... comforting.

I immediately shored up my walls and packed them with spite. I refused to let my guard down, I would not learn to like this man. I could accept his help and still hate him.

“Fine,” I grudgingly agreed. My coworker was trying to be inconspicuous about his eavesdropping, but he’d actually moved closer to listen in. “Conner, I’ll be back,” I told him. Then I turned back to Sawyer and jerked my head toward the staff-only hallway behind the desk. “Come with me.”

Sawyer looked around with open curiosity; he had such an expressive face, I couldn’t imagine him ever playing poker. “I’ve never been back here before. It’s kind of...”

“Boring?” I offered.

“No. I was going to say mysterious. None of these doors have signs. Anything could be hiding behind them.”

I scoffed. “I promise, there’s nothing mysterious about them. No secret dungeons or portals to another land. Laundry,” I said, pointing at one. “Housekeeping, janitorial, maintenance, security.” I stopped in front of another unlabeled door and gestured with my arm. “Staff room. After you.”

“You’re such a buzzkill,” he teased on the way in. “Let me have my fun.” He pulled out a chair at the six-seater table in the center of the room and sat down. “All right, let’s hear this plan of yours, and we’ll see what kind of help I can offer.”

I grabbed my lunch out of my locker and dropped down into a seat across from him. “It’s been hard to come up with much of a plan when Emerson won’t tell us what’s going on, but I know money is tight. So, I figured if we could do a fundraiser, maybe a dinner or a gala or something, sold tickets and invited some big names, asked for donations, maybe we could at least buy Emerson some more time.”

Sawyer’s smile dimmed, and he shook his head. “Money is not the only problem, and I’m afraid we might already be out of time.”

“I refuse to believe that,” I growled. “Talk about a buzzkill. If your suggestion is that it’s too late to try, then you can fuck right off right now.”

“No, no!” He held his palms up in surrender. “It’s worth trying. I’m just warning you that it might not do any good. Prepare yourself for the worst because... Eva Ward is connected with the mafia.”

I shrugged. “Yeah, I’d already guessed as much.”

“Oh.” He frowned. “And you still want to go ahead with this? It could be dangerous.”

“If the alternative is having her force Emerson into marriage, then it’s worth the risk.” I placed my palm over my abdomen. My baby—Emerson’s baby—needed me to be brave.

He focused his steady gaze on me, and I wondered what he saw. Finally, he nodded slowly. “Okay. Then we’ll need to move fast. Think we can get this organized by next weekend?”

“Well, we already have the venue and food taken care of, obviously.” I gestured to the hotel, which came fully prepared to handle any event. “Patrick—from housekeeping? Anyway, he’s also an author on the side, and he happens to know Jordan Kepler.”

“Like, the bestselling romance author?” Sawyer seemed impressed.

“Yeah, and Gerald, the night doorman, he says can get Max Shepherd here too. Yes, the actor,” I answered before Sawyer could ask.

Sawyer leaned back in his chair, his gaze distant. “Well, damn, Roland. You’re more prepared than I thought you would be.” He shook his head and chuckled. “I told myself I wouldn’t get my hopes up, but... what if we actually manage to raise enough money? What if we can save the hotel?”

It wasn’t the hotel I was worried about. What if I could save Emerson? Our baby needed me to try.

*Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 2:43 pm*

I had always been a straightforward kind of guy. What you see is what you get. But now I found myself forced to be sneaky. Like, full-on tiptoeing down hallways and eavesdropping on private conversations. It didn't come naturally to me, and it honestly made me feel kind of... icky, but I saw no other way around it. My staff were keeping secrets from me, and there was a very good chance it could put their lives in danger. I wanted to believe that their sense of self-preservation would kick in, but they didn't seem to care at all. They were like lemmings leaping headfirst over a cliff.

What was going on around here?! I had lost all control of the hotel and my employees, and I did not enjoy this feeling of helplessness. Couldn't they see I was trying to help them? They needed to let me handle things!

I never would've guessed how hard it was to look inconspicuous, while also trying to walk lightly and sidle up to doorways without being seen. There was nothing discreet about what I was doing. I was just inching toward the staff room, where I could hear the murmur of voices, when the door unexpectedly swung inward, and Benny stepped out.

We both froze, locked in a standoff. I was just about to come up with some lame-ass excuse for why I was creeping around when he blurted, "I was going to get a haircut this weekend, I swear. I've just been... really busy." His bangs were long enough to hang past his eyebrows, which normally would've irritated the hell out of me, but I hadn't even noticed.

"Uh, yes. Be sure that you do," I told him as sternly as I could manage while sweat slicked my palms, adrenaline leaving my skin prickly. I gave him a sharp nod of

dismissal, and he scurried off toward the kitchen where his serving shift was about to start.

I sagged against the wall, blowing out a sigh. I wasn't cut out for this spying crap.

I was about to give up and find some real work to do, when I caught a tendril of conversation. "I don't know why Roland thinks this is going to work." It sounded like Joseph, a serious alpha who worked in room service.

A melodic voice I recognized as Delia replied, "Are you kidding? Even if it didn't appeal to people's conscience about saving a piece of our city's history, everyone loves an underdog story. And besides, a grand romantic gesture like this? Epic."

Joseph scoffed. "Did Roland admit to anyone that this fundraiser had anything to do with his feelings for Monsieur Holland?"

"No, obviously, but nobody is blind to his real motivation. He wouldn't go through all this trouble for just anyone."

My heart was thrumming inside my chest, and when I closed my eyes, I saw Roland's face printed on the backs of my eyelids. What the hell has he done? A fundraiser?

"I just think it's pointless," Joseph was saying. "The kind of money we'll need to raise to keep this place afloat? Never gonna happen."

"Just wait, you'll see." Delia sounded so optimistic, I almost believed her myself.

Before they could come out and find me spying, I turned on my heel and hurried in the opposite direction, through the warren of hallways that crisscrossed behind the scenes of the hotel. I wasn't exactly running, because that would cause a scene, but it was at the very least a quick jog. I needed to find Roland—now. He had to cancel this

fundraiser, whatever the hell it was he was planning. If Eva decided he was a threat to her plans, she might do something to get him out of her way. My knowledge of what the mafia did to eliminate problems was limited to what I'd seen on movies like *Goodfellas*, but I'd seen the news articles about Bruno Santana, and I'd done some research into Barbieri after my dad mentioned the name. The mafia didn't mess around. I had no doubt in my mind what would happen to Roland if he became troublesome.

I came around the corner and caught sight of a familiar figure down at the end of the hall. "Roland," I called. "I need to speak with you, please."

Roland turned around and saw me. He took one look at my stormy expression and panic took over his features, eyes wide. He knew I was on to him. He spun around and took off. And when I gave chase, he actually ran! "Roland!" I shouted behind him. He ducked down a hall to the left, cutting back, so I had no choice but to run after him.

"Roland? Roland, get back here, you coward!" I remembered when I used to be composed at work, a model of civility. Look at me now.

I rounded the corner and saw he was already at the service elevator, frantically pushing the call button. When it was clear the doors wouldn't open in time, he bolted into the stairwell.

The door hadn't even closed before I was shoving my way through it after him. The door slammed into the wall behind it as I gave chase, bounding up the stairs two at a time.

"Leave me alone!" he yelled, his voice echoing through the concrete stairwell, breathless and panting. "Stop following me!"

“Then stop running,” I barked back. I was gaining on him, but my legs were screaming for me to stop, my lungs burning. I’d been so busy lately that I hadn’t dedicated much time to working out. I was so out of shape!

Looking up through the gap, I could see him rounding the floor above. There was a scuffle, a curse after what sounded like him tripping on the stairs, then a door opening as he exited onto the fifth floor. I was right on his heels.

He probably assumed that if we were surrounded by guest rooms I would be less likely to make a scene, but what he didn’t realize was that I was no longer fueled by logic and sense. I caught up with him halfway down the hall.

Gripping the back of his jacket, I put on the brakes and dragged him to a stop. Then I wrapped an arm around his waist from behind and drew him back against me. He had every right to fight me on it, but instead, he melted back, clinging to my arm, his head dropping back to my shoulder. We were both heaving to catch our breath, and I could taste him on each inhale.

“Dammit, Emerson,” he panted. He brought his hand over mine on his stomach and laced our fingers together. A small whimper escaped his lips. That small, insignificant sound was enough to make my cock swell. There was no way he couldn’t feel it, nestled in against his ass the way he was.

I breathed him in, running my nose along his exposed neck. He smelled different somehow, sweeter, his skin so soft.

“A fundraiser, Roland?” I whispered, my lips tickling his skin, and it brought me great satisfaction to see goosebumps prickle along his neck. “What were you thinking?”

He shrugged, dipping his chin. I wished I could see his face to gauge how he felt.



“Maybe it’ll buy you some time. That’s what you need, right? Time?”

I groaned. If only it were that simple. “Please... just tell me why you won’t let me go.”

He squeezed my hand. “Because you’re worth fighting for.”

“No, I’m not.” My voice cracked, and I dropped my head on his shoulder to hide any tears that might escape.

“Emerson, you need to understand something. The staff at the hotel, we’re like a family, but... they’re not just mine. They’re your family too.” My whole body stilled at his words. Was that true? I’d always assumed they hated me, feared me at the very least. “You might be prickly and guarded, always keeping yourself at a distance, and maybe it’s because you think that’s your role as the boss, but that doesn’t matter to any of us. We love you all the same. And even with those mile-high walls you’ve built up, we’ve all got your back.”

I was speechless. My father had taught me independence and leadership, but nowhere in those lessons did he teach me how to accept help.

Roland turned himself carefully in my arms, cupping my cheeks between his warm palms, and tilted my face up. He was blurry through my tears, and I blinked them away so I could see him clearly. He brushed a tear away with his thumb. “We’re going to help you whether you want it or not, because we’re family.”

I shook my head. “It’s not just about accepting help,” I told him breathlessly, my heart still stuttering an uneven beat that I could feel all the way down to my toes. “I haven’t told you everything. I’m not marrying Eva because I want to. It’s because—”

He pressed a finger to my lips. “You don’t have to explain. I know all about our

city's beloved mayor and her unsavory affiliations, and not for one second did I think you actually loved her.”

“You... you didn't?”

He chuckled softly. “No offense, but you're not that good an actor.” He brought his hands down to my chest, smoothing down my disheveled jacket and tie. “I know what this hotel means to you, but you can't marry her, Emerson. You just can't. Even if that means the hotel closes and we all have to find new jobs, it's not worth you giving in to her demands. Promise me that we'll try things my way first, okay? Don't give up yet. Please?”

I couldn't say anything, because if I opened my mouth, I would lose all control. My eyes burned and my throat tightened. So instead of speaking, I just nodded.

Roland rested his forehead on mine, and I drew in a shuddering breath, closing my eyes. I was so scared to let him go. With him in my arms like this, I could almost believe that a relationship with him was possible. If I could just ignore the danger for a moment, set aside all the drama, it could be like this all the time. It was perfect—he was perfect. I nuzzled his nose, then risked my heart and my sanity to brush my lips cautiously against his.

“No more secrets,” he whispered. “For better or worse, we're in this together.”

Fear and uncertainty still dominated my emotions, but with each kiss, I became more determined to keep him. “Okay...” I agreed.

We would find a way. There was no other option.

*Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 2:43 pm*

I was blown away at how quickly we managed to pull it all together. The fundraiser was officially a huge success. There was a giant banner along the back wall that said: SAVE THE SCARLET HOTEL, and at this rate, I thought we might actually do exactly that.

With the help of the advertising company, Meyer Marketing, who had donated their services, we were able to spread the word across the city in mere days. The main ballroom was packed with people, all wearing their finest gowns and tuxedos, as if this were the event of the season. And it very well might've been, considering the A-listers who had shown up to pledge their support.

Eric Van Leer, retired NFL quarterback for the Comets, stood inches above the rest of the crowd, visible from anywhere in the room. He'd strolled in with his husband on his arm and handed over a huge donation, saying the hotel was where he reconnected with his husband, and he wanted the place to still be here for their 50th anniversary one day. Romance author Jordan Kepler and Hollywood actor Max Shepherd didn't just donate their money; they also made an appearance, which served as a massive draw for superfans willing to buy tickets for a steep price. On top of all that, a local omega shelter, A New Day, had tapped the shoulders of their patrons with deep pockets to bring in the big bucks.

I saw a lot of familiar faces in the crowd, people who had stayed here throughout the years, dined here, celebrated their important life events. They felt connected to the hotel almost as much as I did.

"You really are incredible," Emerson whispered in my ear, sending a chill across my skin. I hadn't heard him come up behind me, what with all the noise in here. "I can't

believe you pulled all this together in a week.”

I leaned back into him, and he wrapped his arms around me, holding me in place, without a care for who saw. “Nah, I didn’t do much. It was all them,” I said, nodding toward the group of staff who had gathered in front of the bar, lifting their glasses in a toast. Most of them were on duty for the banquet, but Emerson wasn’t going to scold them for drinking on the job, not tonight. They were all volunteering their time to be here. Delia’s cheeks were flushed, her eyes bright, and Peter, our newest server, was gazing at her with obvious longing. Was that how I looked at Emerson, I wondered.

“I am... so grateful to them. And to you,” he said, struggling to get the words out. I knew how hard it was for him to accept help, but he was trying. “Even if we lose the hotel, just know that I appreciate everything you’ve done.”

“Hey,” I said, pivoting to look up at him. “It’s not over yet.”

“I know,” he said, nodding, but his eyes were guarded.

We were interrupted by a familiar voice, saying, “There you are.” I turned to see Collette pattering over in short, shuffled steps. She was dressed in a floor-length dress with ruffles that looked like she’d pulled the cover off her couch.

“You made it!” I beamed at my neighbor. She didn’t get out too often, but I’d invited her all the same. Her grandson trailed behind her, giving me a bashful smile and a shrug. I felt Emerson’s grip on me tighten and turn possessive.

I thought I felt the huff of his breath on my cheek, an animalistic growl rumbling through him, and I had to resist the urge to bare my neck to him in a show of submission. “Remember, I chose you,” I murmured over my shoulder. He grumbled but didn’t say anything rude, at least.

Collette gave me a hug, forcing Emerson to let go of me. “I wouldn’t have missed this for the world,” she said. “You know my grandson, Alan.”

“Yes, of course,” I said politely, turning to shake his hand. “Good to see you again.”

Meanwhile, behind my back, I distinctly heard Collette mutter to Emerson, “You’d better not hurt Roland.”

“I’ll do the best I can, ma’am,” he assured her, but the way her eyes narrowed dangerously, I wasn’t sure how much she believed him.

Halfway through the evening, the numbers started to roll in. Sawyer had set up an online site for collecting donations from across the country, not just here in the city. He’d erected a screen under the banner to display the tally, and when I saw the number, my jaw dropped.

“Emerson,” I gasped, reaching for him.

Where my hands gripped his shoulder, his muscles were bunched up, his entire body like stone. “That’s... a lot.”

“That’s more than a lot!” I practically squealed. “That’s millions!” I sputtered for a second, thinking maybe I was reading it wrong. Had I miscounted the number of zeroes? “And it’s still going up!” I was going to have an aneurysm. “Who are these people who donated so much?”

Hope began to bloom inside me. This could do more than just buy us some time. “Emerson... this might be enough to buy the hotel from your father. You could be free and clear!”

When I finally dragged my focus away from the rolling total and looked at Emerson,

I felt my excitement dim. His expression was guarded, his lips flat. “Why aren’t you jumping for joy? You’re not even smiling.” I took him by the shoulders and gave him a little shake. “You should be celebrating! This is the answer to all our problems.”

Emerson tried to smile, seemingly to prove me wrong, but it looked tight and painful. My hope burst like a popped balloon. What wasn’t he telling me? My lips thinned, and I took him by the hand and led him from the room. No one seemed to notice when we left the party, distracted as they were with their celebration and excessive alcohol consumption.

The doors closed behind us, muffling the festivities. It was startling how quiet it was out here, like a whole different world than the one inside the ballroom. There were a few stragglers lingering near the doors, so I dragged Emerson with me down the hall, searching for somewhere we could be alone.

Once we were somewhere quieter, I turned to look at him. His face showed nothing, like a placid pond, hiding everything that lurked beneath the surface. “Talk to me,” I said, getting close, hooking my fingers under his lapels. “We agreed, no more secrets.” It still felt like I was crossing a line, breaking a rule we’d gone over time and again, by touching him, but instead of arguing or pulling away, his arms wound around my waist, holding me tight.

“I don’t need to buy the hotel from my father. It’s all part of Eva’s plan. He is more than willing to sign the hotel over to me for free as a wedding gift. Hell, he’d probably just be grateful not to have to deal with her himself anymore. Taking ownership of the hotel won’t solve anything. I... I’ve already signed the paperwork agreeing that after the wedding, half of everything I own, including the hotel, will be hers.”

My brain was spinning so fast, I had to close my eyes against the wave of dizziness. This whole time, she’d been worming her way in, right under my nose. “Okay...

okay, so you don't buy the hotel, so what? The money might not be a solution, but it'll at least buy you some time, cover a few of her payments. We can figure something out. Sawyer said—"

"You're talking to Sawyer now?" he teased lightly, quirking a brow, obviously trying to lighten the somber mood. "I thought you hated him."

I slapped his chest lightly. "I still hate him, but I can be mature about it. Anyway, he was saying he had a friend in the FBI doing some digging into her past, looking for something to connect her to Santana—drugs, trafficking, money laundering—anything illegal so they can press charges. We just need to postpone this wedding for a little bit longer."

His eyes softened. "How can you be so hopeful?" he asked. "I fought it as long as I could, but the second she threatened you, I had no choice but to give up. And then you... you're so brave, so fearless. How can you just step up and fight my battles without even blinking?"

I bit my lip. I hadn't intended to tell him about the baby yet. I'd thought it would only add more heat to an already overexpanded pressure cooker, but he was struggling to find something worth fighting for. He was ready to just roll over and give the mayor whatever she wanted in order to keep us all safe. "I have to be hopeful, because otherwise, what kind of world am I bringing our child into?" I held my breath as he took in my words.

Emerson seemed confused for a second, frowning. "Our child... but..."

I waited for him to connect the dots. As his eyes got rounder, eyebrows taking a hike up his forehead, he gasped. "There it is," I said, smiling shakily. "Yes, I'm pregnant."

"But we only... once, and that's..." he stuttered.

“Don’t you remember from health class?” I said lightly, tugging on his tie. “Once is enough.”

His eyes hardened with determination. “Once with you will never be enough.”

Emerson stalked forward, forcing me to backtrack. I would’ve stumbled moving backward at this pace, but his arm around my waist held me upright. “Where are we going?”

“Back to that supply closet, obviously. Back to where this all began,” he said darkly, his growing erection pressing into me with each step.

Trusting him to guide us, I focused on loosening his tie, getting a head start on getting naked. “If we’re being honest, I think we can both admit that it began long before that kiss.”

“Since the very beginning.” He reached behind me and wrenched open the door. “And I have years’ worth of pent-up sexual repression to unleash on you.”

Stumbling through the door, I nearly tripped over a box as he slammed the door shut, enclosing us in shadows. “One of these days, we’re going to make it to a bed, right?” I asked, shoving his jacket off. I started working at his shirt buttons, before deciding his pants were more important.

He groaned, long and low. “I can’t wait to see you spread out on my bed for me, so I can finally take my time with you.” Gripping my hair in his fist, he paused in his frantic undressing. I looked up to see what was the matter and found him staring down at me in awe. “A baby...”

This wasn’t the first time I’d felt a glimmer of uncertainty. “You want the baby, right? You don’t regret that it happened?”



“Never,” he said reverently, peppering me with soft kisses. “My only regret is that I can’t get you pregnant again.”

“Yet,” I said without thinking. But once the word was out, it was like the future spread out in front of me, and I could see it clear as day. A future where Emerson and I were married, a whole brood of children filling our house. It felt... inevitable.

I watched Emerson’s smile spread, his eyes distant, as if he too were seeing that future. “Yet,” he repeated, before we resumed the shedding of clothes.

*Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 2:43 pm*

The lounge felt like it was closing in on me, suffocating me, with its sound-muffling velvet and close quarters. It was too early in the day to justify alcohol, but I could really use a stiff drink. I couldn't breathe. My father watched me, frowning, as I hooked a finger under the knot in my tie and yanked, whipping off the strip of silk and shoving it into my pocket in a messy ball. Then I reached back up and undid the top two buttons, but it didn't do much to help me fill my lungs with air.

Roland was waiting for me back in my office, and I wanted nothing more than to bypass this entire meeting and fall into his arms. Just thinking about him had my throat loosening, and I closed my eyes, drawing in a deep breath. We were almost free.

"You're not looking so good, Son," my father remarked with a raised eyebrow.

I glared at him. "Are you surprised? The past couple months I've been jerked back and forth between obligation and desperation. A forced marriage really does a number on a man." Although, I hoped that was all about to change.

I gave him a hard smile, and he leaned back, crossing his arms over his chest. "Yes, well... Is that why you asked me here this evening? Is this about the wedding?"

Laughing darkly, I said, "Only if you want to talk about how I refuse to be bullied into that farce."

He narrowed his eyes, scrutinizing me. "What are you up to, Emerson?"

"You're going to sell The Scarlet Hotel," I told him point blank.

He cocked his head and reached for his drink. “I think we’ve already established that. As soon as you sign the paperwork, the hotel is yours.”

“No. Plans have changed.” I pulled out the contract I had drawn up earlier today and passed it across the table. “I don’t want your hotel.”

My father frowned in confusion. “But you just said—”

“I said,” I interrupted, holding a hand up, “that you will sell the hotel. I did not say to whom.”

He picked up the paperwork in front of him and looked it over, his expression getting stormier as he went, eyebrows furrowing into a deep V between his eyes. “Who the hell is Roland Stohl and where did you get three million dollars? Surely not that little fundraiser of yours.”

“Does it matter who he is?” I knew his identity couldn’t be kept a secret, but I couldn’t help feeling protective of him, even from my father.

A knowing smile stretched across his lips. “It’s that omega of yours, isn’t it. The one from the front desk. I knew there was something going on between you two, but I had no idea he was so wealthy. Why is he working here?”

I gritted my teeth, on edge, but I refused to deny anything. Roland was mine, and as soon as this pesky paperwork was cleared up, I planned on making it official. There would be no separating us from here on out.

My dad laughed without humor, shaking his head in disappointment. “There are rules for a reason, Emerson. A boss must never get involved with an employee, because it just leaves you open to a potential lawsuit when they feel taken advantage of. And likewise, your employees must never reach above their station, trying to manipulate

you for their own gain. There's no guarantee they won't stab you in the back the second they've got what they want."

"You don't know what you're talking about," I growled, clenching my fists.

He waved his hand as though brushing away an annoying fly. "It doesn't matter what is going on between you. Whatever it is you think you're doing, it won't eliminate the problem. Regardless of whose name is on the deed, Eva will get what she wants."

"But if the hotel is no longer mine, she'll have no reason to force me into marriage," I said with conviction.

He scoffed. "You can't possibly be that naïve. She'll just go after him next. If you care about him at all, you'll marry her and make the necessary sacrifices to keep him safe."

"Marrying her is a price neither of us are willing to pay." I took a slow, deep breath, bracing myself. "Roland is pregnant." I hadn't intended to tell him the news today, but maybe he would understand why I was so determined to figure out a way to keep my freedom.

My father blinked at me for a long moment, before he leaned back against the bench and laughed, throwing his head back, clapping his hands. "Brilliant!"

My pulse rushed in my ears, my entire body tense as I placed my palms flat on the table and pressed down hard. "You think this is funny?" I snarled.

He shook his head, wiping away a tear from the corner of his eye. "No, not at all! I'm going to be a grandfather!" His grin was open and honest, with more genuine joy than I'd seen from him in years. He slid out from his side of the table and came around to my side. He grabbed me by the shoulder and hefted me out of the bench to wrap me

in a fierce hug. “Congratulations, Son!”

“Th-thanks,” I mumbled, shocked by the emotion overwhelming me as I tentatively brought my arms up to wrap around my father’s waist. I’d told myself I didn’t need his approval, but now that I had it, I discovered that I’d been secretly hoping for it all along. I dropped my head on his shoulder, and in the midst of all this chaos, I let myself cry.

My dad patted me on the back, then drew me back to look me in the eye. “And honestly, I can’t wait to see that bitch’s face when she hears the news. Can I be there when you tell her?”

A surprised laugh snuck past my lips. “Sure thing... Grandpa.”

He gave me a watery grin, then released me and sat back down in his place, snatching up the pen. “I don’t know how you’re going to make it work, but the hotel is his.” He signed his name across the form, then pushed the papers across to me. “Good luck. I have a feeling you’re going to need it.”

“Thanks, Dad,” I whispered, swiping my fingers across my cheeks to collect any stray tears.

The three million dollars (and change) that we’d raised during the fundraiser was probably a lowball offer for a hotel of this caliber, but my father didn’t ask for more. I figured since he’d been willing to sign it over to me for free, this would be enough for him to retire more than comfortably. He was right, this wasn’t a perfect solution to all our problems, but it solved the immediate one—that I’d signed a contract stating that the hotel would become half Eva’s after our marriage. Now that the hotel would no longer belong to me, she would have no reason to force me into marriage.

And in case she decided to try and force Roland into marriage next, I had one more

plan to enact...

I found Roland right where I'd left him, waiting for me in my office. As soon as I opened the door, his eyes darted up, hopeful and a little wary. "It's done," I told him. "The hotel is yours."

His smile was tentative. "Really?"

"Yep. You are officially a very rich man. I think you might also be my boss," I teased.

"Oh dear," he mock frowned. "Does that mean it would be sexual harassment if I touched you?" He tapped his finger on his lips like he was thinking. "Hmm, I heard there's this handbook of rules, strictly forbidding a relationship between boss and employ—" He yelped as I lunged at him and hauled him up into my arms.

Roland immediately brought his legs around my waist, hooking them behind my back and aligning our growing erections side by side between us. "I guess you'll just have to fire me then," I said before I kissed him.

I sucked his lower lip into my mouth, and when his lips parted on a gasp, I plunged my tongue into his mouth in long, languid strokes, showing him who he belonged to. He was mine, forever and always. No more hesitation, no more doubt or second-guessing. Mine.

Walking carefully forward so I didn't trip, I set his ass down on the edge of my desk. He turned those dark eyes up at me, and while he was smiling, I could tell he was still a little cautious to let it all in. I felt so horrible that he'd learned he couldn't put his faith in me completely. I'd pulled away too many times, got his hopes up, only to let him down.

I licked my lips, savoring his lingering flavor, and his eyes tracked the movement hungrily. “Now what?” he asked softly, probably expecting me to take this opportunity to get him naked.

“Now you marry me.”

I was so glad I had my hands on him so I could feel his full-body reaction. “W-what?” he sputtered.

My smile widened, and I laughed at the complete shock on his face. First, he went pale, then his cheeks flushed a deep crimson. “Before you answer, let me explain a few things,” I began. “One, this has nothing to do with the hotel. I don’t want it, it’s yours, and I’ll gladly sign a prenup saying exactly that. Two, there’s a chance Eva will try to force you into marrying her next, to try and get the hotel that way. But if you’re already married, then it limits her way in.”

I brought my hands up to his face, trailing my thumbs across his cheekbones, the slight stubble of the day’s growth prickling against my palms. “Most of all, though, I love you. You’re my forever, and I don’t ever want to lose you. I want to take care of you and our child, build a home for us together. I want you to have faith in me when I tell you that, and I want to make it permanent. Marry me.” He opened and closed his mouth a few times, starting and stopping his reply, and I suddenly worried about putting him on the spot. “You don’t have to say yes, of course, there’s no pressure.”

That seemed to bring him out of his daze to shout, “Yes! Obviously, yes!”

Before he could say anything else, I kissed him again. I swallowed his moan and came back for more. I didn’t even care if anyone heard us anymore. He was mine, and I was glad they knew it. He clung to me, squeezing me as tightly as he could, but when he started trying to undress me, I stilled his hands with mine.

“Come on, we’re going to be late,” I said, pulling him off the desk and heading for the door. My cock ached fiercely, but it would be worth it.

“What? Where are we going?” he asked as we made our way past the front desk and through the hotel lobby.

“City hall,” I replied, winking at him over my shoulder.

His hand tightened on mine, and he started jogging to keep up. “Now? We’re getting married right now?!”

“No time like the present, right? I pulled some strings for the justice of the peace to squeeze us in at the end of the day.”

“How did you know I was going to say yes?” he asked.

As Sandy opened the front door for us, I drew Roland up beside me and hooked his arm in mine. “Well, I figured if you loved me even half of how much I loved you, there was no way you could turn me down.”

“Then it’s a good thing I love you more,” he said.



*Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 2:43 pm*

Emerson seemed to regret the wedding wasn't some grand display. He kept saying how I deserved more, how I deserved anything and everything, but instead, I got this rushed ceremony in a small office in city hall. No friends or family in attendance. "We're still wearing our work uniforms, for gods' sake," he muttered.

But in my mind, it was perfect. I liked that it was just the two of us. And I was okay with it being rushed too, because I was getting pretty needy for him to claim me already. I was not in the mood for a long ceremony right now.

Emerson paused briefly to pick a flower from a vase in the hallway outside. "Are you sure about this?" he asked, holding the single bloom out to me. "I won't be mad if you say no."

"I've never been more sure of anything in my life," I replied. Then I dragged him into the office, all the way until we stood in front of the waiting justice of the peace.

Knowing how much regret Emerson felt that this wasn't bigger, better, more extravagant, I made sure not to show him a single speck of hesitation as I turned to look up at him and said those binding words: "I do." My voice didn't waver, I didn't blink. I imbued those words with every ounce of my confidence and devotion, until I was certain he felt it too.

And when I kissed my husband for the first time, I felt an astounding amount of all-encompassing love for this man. He'd always been the one for me, but now he would forever be my only.

"I promise, when all of this is over, we'll get married again, with proper rings and

everything. A big party, with everyone we know. And I'll take you on a honeymoon anywhere you want," he pledged.

"I don't need any of that." I grabbed his tie and dragged me down to kiss me. "I just need you to take me home, Husband," I said against my lips.

So that was exactly what he did.

I was relieved when Emerson turned the car toward his home instead of mine. He'd informed me that Eva actually owned my apartment building, and I was fully prepared to abandon all my possessions rather than setting foot back inside. Emerson seemed to think she was bluffing with her threats, but I'd seen that glint in her eye, like a snake about to strike. She was dangerous, and I wouldn't be underestimating her anytime soon.

We held hands across the console of his car the whole way back to his apartment. I could see the way his leg twitched, the engine revving under his foot, and judging by the outline of his erection down his pantleg, I knew he was fighting the urge to slam his foot down on the accelerator and speed the whole way home. So I probably shouldn't have set my hand on his thigh, sliding it higher to brush against the bulge.

He hissed, the speedometer ticking up a notch. "Roland..." he warned.

"What?" I asked with fake innocence. But we got home faster, so I called it a win.

In the elevator on the way up to his apartment, he handed me his keys. "Here, hold these," he said.

"Okaaaay," I drawled, confused, frowning down at his keys in my hand. "Why did you—"

But as soon as the elevator dinged, the doors opening to let us out on his floor, he bent at the waist and swept me up into my arms. “Hey!” I protested, kicking my feet and bucking my hips.

“Quit squirming or I might drop you,” he warned in a rough growl, and even though I had total faith in his strength, I decided to settle down like a good little boy. In fact, I was quite comfortable there in his arms. I hooked my arm around his neck and rested my head on his shoulder, loving the bunch and tug of his muscles as he walked us down the hallway.

He paused in front of his door so I could insert the key in the lock. “You might need to jiggle it a little,” he instructed.

“That’s what he said,” I muttered cheekily, before managing to get the door open.

My husband carried me over the threshold, kicking the door closed behind him, before he set me down. I looked around the apartment curiously. The place was clean, his breakfast dishes stacked in the drying rack. The furniture was nice but maybe a bit bland, and the space was tidy, though sparse. I got the impression he didn’t spend all that much time here; it had that unlived-in feel, but I had a feeling that was about to change now that I was here.

“The building is a little old,” he said apologetically, “and it needs some work.”

“Don’t you dare apologize. You’ve seen where I live. This is practically a palace compared to what I’m used to.” While we talked, I headed through the kitchen, barely glanced at the living room, then kept on going down the short hall. I peeked into the bathroom, but I made it more than clear that I had a destination in mind—the bedroom.

He trailed after me, looking more nervous by the second. If it weren’t for the hard

bulge in his pants, I might've assumed he didn't want me. He licked his lips, his throat moving with a heavy swallow. He paused in the doorway, watching me with hooded eyes. "I hope once we get Eva out of our lives for good, we'll be able to afford a bigger place, with room for a nursery."

I stopped in front of his bed and turned to face him, smiling tenderly. "I'd like that," I said, but I wasn't in the mood to talk. His eyes were laser-focused on what my hands were doing, working their way down the row of shirt buttons.

"I-isn't it a little early for bed?" he asked, gulping. For some unknown reason, he had his body locked down tight.

When he hesitated to join me, I raised an eyebrow at him, peeling off my shirt. I stood there for a moment as he drank me in, his pupils dilating as he followed the trail of dark hair downward. "Don't go all shy on me now," I teased, biting my lower lip, eyes flashing.

"It's not that I'm feeling shy. It's that..." he began to explain, but his words cut off as I shoved my pants and underwear down in one move. I peeled my socks off slowly, one at a time, in the absolutely sexiest strip tease ever, leaving me naked in front of him for the first time. I swore my heart stopped for a full three seconds, before it took off again at a gallop. The way he watched me made me feel sexier than I ever had. Now I just needed to entice him to play with me.

He watched as I crawled across his bed, wiggling my ass in the air, dripping with slick. "What a nice bed you have here. Much softer than your desk," I joked with a husky laugh.

He groaned, gripping his cock tightly through his pants. "I want to make love to you, Roland, I really do, but... I don't think I'll be able to go slow."

“Who said anything about slow?” I peeked over my shoulder at him and tilted my hips toward him in invitation. “We have all night, sweetheart. We have more than one night, in fact. We have a whole lifetime of nights. We’ll have another chance to go slow.”

“Say that again,” he blurted, stalking toward me.

“Which part?” I asked, thinking back over what I’d said. Something had clearly triggered his lust.

He threw off his jacket, tearing at his shirt. “You called me sweetheart.” Who knew pet names would be what did him in?

My grin grew sly. “So I did. Would you prefer I call you... honey? Darling? Dearest?”

We’d spent so long toeing the line, and I had resigned myself to never calling him anything but Monsieur Holland, so formal, so distant, yet another barrier between us. Calling him a cute nickname, it had brought the final walls tumbling down. Emerson was mine, and I would do whatever it took to keep it that way.

His moan was louder than I could’ve anticipated as he kicked off his clothes as quickly as he could, fumbling and desperate, and made his way across the mattress to me.

I was guilty of having imagined him naked since that first time I met him in person, and I’d assumed after all this time that I’d painted a fairly accurate portrait in my mind, but I couldn’t have been more wrong. He was gorgeous.

I needed to touch every inch of him, taste everything he had to offer—but it seemed he had a similar plan. As his mouth lowered to my slick hole, I bucked in surprise.

“Fuck!” I cried, before pressing back into him hard. His mouth was so hot and wet and so, so eager. He was like a man starved.

First he teased around my hole, savoring my flavor like a fine wine, before he added his fingers. One finger, then two, scissoring them to stretch me out. By the time he added a third finger, lapping at my taint to catch every drop of slick that escaped, I was arching my back and whimpering. “Emerson, please,” I begged. “I need more. I-I need...”

“Don’t worry, omega mine. I know what you need,” he grunted, removing his fingers and leaving me feeling suddenly empty.

Taking me around the waist, he flipped me over onto my back and settled in between his thighs, my cock pinned between us as he lined his blunt head up against my entrance. There was a light sheen of sweat across his skin, his chest already heaving to catch his breath, and I loved knowing I’d worked him up like that before we’d barely had a chance to get started. “Hold on to me, love,” he instructed.

I tried to, my hands scrambling for purchase on his shoulders, but my body seemed suspended in an in-between state, half dazed, lust and need making me clumsy. And then Emerson surged forward, impaling me on his cock, and I gripped him with my whole body, thighs clamping down around his hips, a strangled cry escaping my lips.

Even as he sheathed himself inside my tight channel again and again, setting a furious rhythm, the wet slap of slick skin filling the room, I was incredibly aware that this wasn’t just fucking. This was making love, because we were devoted to each other with every fiber of our being, and no joining of our bodies could ever be anything but love.

My need for him had been hovering just beneath the surface ever since we said “I do,” and now that he was inside me? I was a goner.

Cupping me behind the knee, he hiked my leg up to my chest, changing the angle. My eyes rolled back in my head as he added friction against my prostate, and the pitch of my cries became frantic. “Emerson, Em, fuck!” I began violently quivering. I couldn’t hold on any longer.

Just as my balls drew up with the first hint of my climax, he jacked his hips even harder. One, two, three hard thrusts—and I threw my head back, shouting, as my cum unspooled in an arc across my abdomen. My entire body felt electrified.

Above me, Emerson shuddered then stilled, crying out before pulsing deep inside me as he painted my insides with his seed. It wasn’t until after his knot had slid into my entrance, expanding and filling every spare inch of space, that I finally began to emerge from the haze of orgasmic bliss. The room came into focus, and we both realized at the same time how hard he was gripping me. He pried his fingers from the flesh of my hip, the other tangled in my hair.

“Shit, I’m so sorry, Ro. I didn’t mean to be so rough.” His face crumpled, guilt and regret taking the place of his pleasure, but I quickly grabbed his face and forced him to look at me.

I could just imagine what I must look like, with my hair sticking up at all angles, my face flushed, feeling sleepy and sated. “Do I look like I’m feeling any pain?”

“Well... no,” he admitted. “But—”

“Nope. No butts.” I leaned up to kiss him slowly, sweetly. Before my thoughts veered straight over to the naughty side. “You know, I used to have all kinds of fantasies about you,” I admitted.

“Oh?” he asked, intrigued. “You... fantasized about me?”

“Mm-hm. You were always a little rough,” I admitted with a cheeky smile.

He tugged a little on his knot, and I swore he was already hardening again for round two. “Tell me what else I did in these fantasies...”



*Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 2:43 pm*

I didn't feel any different when I opened my eyes the next morning, but then I took in the rumpled blankets and the indent in the pillow next to mine, and my world shifted on its axis. Full-on flipped. I was an entirely new man. I was married. And when I crawled out of bed on the hunt for my husband, I found him standing in front of the stove wearing nothing but his birthday suit. I didn't know what I'd done to deserve this, but I was sure I still owed the universe big time.

"Now, that is a beautiful sight first thing in the morning," I said with a satisfied sigh, leaning up against the counter so I could take a good gander at those bare cheeks.

Roland laughed, filling my apartment with the musical sound. My home would never be the same again. Hell, this place wasn't even a home until he'd walked in that door; it was just a collection of rooms I'd barely lived in.

"I'm making you eggs," he said, "mainly because it's the only food you had in the fridge, but also, you definitely need to stock up on calories after that workout you got last night." He looked up at me through his thick lashes, and my stomach filled with those cliché butterflies.

"Gods, I love you," I blurted, a little off topic—but also, it would always be the topic.

Roland's face went all soft and lovey-dovey, and I had a feeling he was about to show me exactly how he felt. But I caught a flutter of movement out of the corner of my eye, and I jumped into action. "Roach!" I shouted, searching for something to squash it with. "Don't move, I'll get it."

"Oh, that's just Jerry," Roland said calmly.

“Wha—” I paused, wooden spoon suspended in mid swat.

He squinted. “Oh, my bad. I think that’s Wilma.”

“You’ve... named the roaches?” I asked in wonder.

He shrugged like it was no big deal. “I mean, we’re sharing this space with them, aren’t we? And long after we move out, they’ll still be here. Showing a little respect never killed anyone.” He scooted the roach away in case I didn’t agree with him, but I couldn’t very well squish the thing now, could I? I put my makeshift weapon back in the drawer.

This man... I didn’t deserve him, but I would do everything I could to earn him.

I came up behind him, pressing kisses up his neck as he plated the scrambled eggs. “Do you have any plans for today?” he asked, wiggling his backside into my lap.

“Nope. For the first time in months, I’m taking a day off. I think I’ve earned it. What about you? Any plans?” I nibbled down his neck, teasing my erection against his ass.

“I have a doctor’s appointment to check on the baby,” he said, then paused. “Would you like to come?” he asked shyly. Did he really think I would say no?

“What time is your appointment?” I asked, skating my fingers up his bare thighs and over his hips.

“Not until two.” He shivered at the gentle tease, goosebumps rising.

“Well, then I guess we have some time to kill...” I spun him around and grabbed him under the ass to boost him onto the counter, then I nudged his knees apart so I could nestle myself between them. He was soft in all the right places, hard where it counted

the most, his erection bobbing against his stomach. And knowing that he was pregnant with my child, that his body was going to change each day, and I would get to witness it firsthand, it felt like a godsdamn privilege.

He watched as I used my thumb to trace the pulsing vein on the underside of his shaft, pausing long enough to collect the bead of precum from the tip. I brought it up to my mouth, sucking that perfect droplet from my skin. With the flavor still lingering on my tongue, I kissed Roland, sharing it with him with a sweep of my tongue. He moaned into my mouth.

We were interrupted by my phone ringing, and I hesitated. The only person I wanted to talk to was right here, so I knew nothing good awaited me on the other end of that call. “You’d better answer it,” Roland said, but I could tell by the pinch of his brow that he felt just as much dread as I did.

I heaved a sigh and walked to where I’d dropped my phone on the table beside the front door. I froze when I saw the call display. “It’s Sawyer.” I looked up and shared a wary look with Roland as I accepted the call and lifted the phone to my ear. “Hello?”

Bypassing any polite chitchat, he went straight to, “You need to see the Chatter site.”

I frowned. “Am I supposed to know what you’re talking about?”

He grumbled something about me being old and out of touch, then explained, “Chatter Magazine is a gossip rag. They usually print articles about celebrities, but today, they aimed a little closer to home—as in sharing some hearsay about our beloved mayor.”

“What?!” I gasped.

Roland was waving at me to tell him what was going on, so I switched the call over to speakerphone, then opened up my search engine and found the site Sawyer was talking about. Sure enough, there on their home page was a candid picture of the one and only Eva Ward, standing next to convicted mob boss Bruno Santana. The headline said: CORRUPTION IN CITY HALL—brIBERY, EXTORTION... MURDER?

Roland gasped and grabbed the phone from me. “She killed somebody?”

“Hey, Roland,” Sawyer greeted him. “I hear congratulations are in order.” Was he talking about the wedding or the pregnancy?

“Thanks...?” Roland frowned at me in accusation. I just shrugged. Either way, Sawyer hadn’t heard anything from me. In fact, I hadn’t told anyone anything. My own father didn’t even know about the wedding yet.

“And no,” Sawyer continued, back on topic, “she didn’t kill anyone. At least, not that we know of. We still don’t have proof that she’s committed any crimes, but the good thing about tabloids is they don’t have to follow the same rules as serious journalism. They can make the wildest claims, tag an anonymous source, and call it a day. Ethics and evidence aren’t really a necessity. She could probably sue for defamation, but the damage will be done.”

“Who’s this we you keep referring to?” I asked. “Did you have your hand in this?”

He chuckled. “Let’s just say I made some interesting connections at that fundraiser. Your doorman, Gerald, introduced me to that actor friend of his, Max Shepherd, and he mentioned how he’d met his husband thanks to a sketchy tabloid article, and it got me thinking. And then, I met Lee Black—”

“Black... as in Phillip Black, the last mayor?” Roland interrupted.

“Yes, Lee is his son,” Sawyer confirmed. “Turns out, there’s no love lost between those two. Anyway, he hinted that he might have some interesting information for me, forwarded me a few photos. So I made a few calls, and presto! You see the result.” He made it sound so simple. “Do you think Eva will be upset?” He giggled.

I was scanning the article, and it didn’t read like fiction. “Sawyer, this is…”

“Awesome, I know.”

“The word I was thinking of was dangerous,” I corrected him. “People have been killed for less, Sawyer. If even half of this article is true, Eva won’t just be mad. She’ll be looking to get even.”

Sawyer’s snort was distorted over my phone’s speaker. “What’s she gonna do? Once Pandora’s box is open, there’s no shoving it all back in.” I wished I had his faith.

We said our goodbyes, now feeling significantly less buoyant than we had a few minutes ago. Neither of us felt terribly frisky anymore. “Come on, love,” I said, “let’s have some breakfast. You’re eating for two now.”

“Can we eat it snuggled up in bed?” he asked, sounding vulnerable.

“Of course, but your cockroach friends aren’t invited, sorry.”

He laughed, but there wasn’t much humor in it. We were both thinking about the possible retribution that Eva might rain down on us. On the plus side, we hadn’t been involved in getting that article published, so there was no way she could blame either of us, right? Roland and our baby were safe.

I grabbed our plates and led the way back to bed, where we propped ourselves up against the headboard, shoulder to shoulder, talking and eating until it was time to get

ready for his doctor's appointment.

A shower did wonders to lighten the mood that had descended on us. I massaged Roland's back, building up suds, while we chatted about possible baby names and nursery colors. "I haven't done much planning," he admitted with an embarrassed shrug. "I didn't want to make any important decisions on my own, in case you wanted to..." He drifted off.

"I want to," I assured him, kissing him gently before I guided him under the spray to rinse away the soap and shampoo. I wanted to be involved in every step of this pregnancy. "Thank you."

"What for?" he asked, looping his arms around my neck, and when he found my skin cold because I'd been letting him have all the warm water, he turned us sideways so we could share.

"For... everything. For being patient; you've given me far more second chances than I deserved. Thank you for loving me, and for giving me the greatest gifts I ever could've dreamed of."

As far as gifts were concerned, it turned out that Roland was in a particularly generous mood. After double-checking the time, he decided we at least had time for a blowjob. I suggested that in theory, we could 69 and get two for the price of one, and he agreed with my solid logic.

By the time we got to the doctor's office, we were both feeling infinitely more relaxed. When the doctor came in to greet us, he seemed more nervous than we did.

"Hey, hi, uh... Mr. Stohl?" he said in greeting, checking the tablet in his hand.

"It's Mr. Holland," Roland said, beaming up at me, though technically we hadn't

filed for the name change yet.

The doctor got flustered and froze. “Shit, I’m in the wrong room again. I’m sorry...” He made to leave, but I called him back.

“No, no! He just means we got married yesterday, and his name is changing. It’s the right room,” I promised him, but he frowned as if he thought I might be lying in order to be seen faster.

After confirming Roland’s birthdate, he introduced himself as Dr. Zappek. He looked too young to be a doctor, all fresh and baby-faced. “Sorry for the confusion. I’m kind of new at this.” He chuckled awkwardly. “I took over the practice from Dr. Saber recently... He’s my grandfather,” he explained.

My eyebrows rose. “Uh, how many babies have you delivered so far?”

“Oh... loads, don’t worry. I’m very qualified.” He wouldn’t meet my eye when he said that.

Roland and I exchanged a look. I was seriously about to throw him over my shoulder and carry him straight out the door. But then the doctor said something that demanded we get answers. Like, now.

He clapped his hands together. “So, shall we take a look at the babies today?”

Roland’s hand clamped down on mine with bruising force. “Excuse me? Did you just say... babies? As in, more than one?”

“Oh... Did I not mention that already?” Dr. Zappek glanced down at the tablet again, likely confirming he still had the right patient and we hadn’t pulled a switcheroo when his back was turned. “Surprise!” He laughed weakly.

*Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 2:43 pm*

Over the past several months, my life had become unrecognizable. I'd broken every rule with my boss, quit my job, found out I was pregnant, demanded my job back, raised millions of dollars in a last-minute fundraiser, all because the mob had set their sights on the love of my life, then got married. And just when I didn't think anything could get more insane... twins.

Dr. Zappek had explained that the elevated hormone levels in my blood work had strongly hinted that there was more than one baby, and an ultrasound had confirmed twins.

At least there's a reason I'm already showing, I thought, rubbing my hand in a slow circle over my itty-bitty baby bump. I wondered if they were boys or girls, maybe one of each, and if they would have my warmer complexion or Emerson's cooler shade to their eyes and hair.

When I looked sideways at my husband, I found him already looking back with familiar heat. He reached out and set his hand on top of mine on my stomach, dropping a kiss on my shoulder, and I swore I could feel it even through the layers of clothing.

I finally turned my attention back to where Sawyer was setting up a laptop on Emerson's desk. "You could've used my computer," Emerson said with a hint of impatience.

"I told you," Sawyer grumbled, "your computer isn't secure. This one has hardware and software to keep any hackers out." He rolled his eyes, as if he were explaining something simple.



I put my hand up. “Actually... I don’t really understand either. Why the cloak-and-dagger stuff?”

Sawyer held a finger up to forestall while a video chat came to life on the screen to show two men, one with dark hair and a kind smile, the other with copper-colored hair and a pair of glasses, which he pressed up the bridge of his nose with one finger. I wasn’t certain, but I thought they looked a little familiar, and I wondered if maybe they’d been guests in the hotel before. “Behold,” Sawyer said with a wave of his hand like a game show host presenting a prize. “My unnamed source.”

“This is the guy you know?” Emerson asked, brows raised. “I thought you were making that up to cover up the fact that you don’t have any friends.” He smirked, and I loved to see that he was relaxed enough to make jokes. In fact, I didn’t think I’d ever seen him so calm. He was drawing patterns on my thigh with his finger, tickling me and making me forever aware of his presence.

The man on the left with the darker hair laughed. “I might be real in theory, but according to the internet, I do not exist. We may have attracted the wrong kind of attention a few years back, so I hope we can trust you both to keep this meeting under wraps. For today, you can call me Sander, and this is Drake.”

I leaned forward in my seat. “Um, hi. I’m Roland, and this is my husband, Emerson.” I was just looking for excuses to say husband now. “I appreciate all the help you’ve been giving us, but... I guess I’m wondering why you wanted to meet with us now?”

The two men exchanged a look, then Sawyer fidgeted awkwardly, which told me he knew what was going on and hadn’t warned us for whatever was about to happen. I instinctively laced my fingers with Emerson’s, searching for comfort to the foreboding feelings hanging over our heads.

Finally, the dark-haired Sander said, “Not to brag, but my husband here is a bit of a

computer genius.” The redhead blushed and ducked his head down. “He’s the one who’s been keeping an eye on things at the hotel for you through your cameras.”

“Th-the cameras, you say? You can do that?” I asked, my voice pitched higher. My brain immediately scanned back through every dirty thing Emerson and I had done in the hotel. Were there cameras in his office? In the supply closet? I discreetly checked the corners of the room, but I didn’t see anything.

“Yeah, of course,” Drake took over. “As soon as Sawyer reached out and mentioned that something fishy was going on, we couldn’t just ignore it. Bruno Santana hurt too many innocent people, and we’ve been expecting someone to try to take his place. Seems like this mayor is just the next in a long line of corrupt officials.”

“Drake has done everything he could to find dirt on the mayor, but beyond those hard copies of the pictures of her meeting with Santana that Lee Black handed over, it looks like she’s had all trace of any mob connection erased from existence. Whoever she hired was damn good, too.”

“Even better than me,” the redhead grumbled, pouting. “Sorry.”

“You don’t have to apologize,” Emerson said. “It’s not your fault. We’ll handle her... somehow.”

Sander’s lips thinned out. “Well, that’s what I wanted to talk to you about. I was wondering if you would be willing to wear a wire the next time you meet with her.”

“Absolutely not,” I snapped before anyone else could answer, and four sets of eyes landed on me. I blushed under their attention, but I refused to back down. “I have no doubt that she’ll be pissed, and while I don’t know her very well, I do know that a cornered animal is more dangerous. Who knows what she’s liable to do when she finds out all her plans have gone south.”

“Which,” Sander said, speaking slowly and calmly, “is why I want him to wear a wire. Angry means unstable, and that means she’ll be more likely to slip up. If we can get her to confess to something, we can hopefully lay charges and get her out of her position as mayor.”

All I heard were the words angry and unstable. What kind of slipup was he planning for? What kind of charges were they going to lay—murder? When she fucking killed my husband?

I could feel sweat dripping down my spine, and I clenched my eyes shut against the encroaching darkness. Pregnant omegas got hot flashes, right? That was probably what this was. It absolutely wasn’t a panic attack. Shit, it felt like the walls were closing in. My throat got tight, my breath whistling through my pursed lips.

“Hey, Ro, you’re okay,” Emerson said softly, but his voice sounded distant. “Put your head down between your knees. Breathe deep. In, out. Slow it down. I’ve got you.” I focused on the steady heat from his palm as he rubbed soothing circles over my back.

When I was finally able to get my bearing, I sat up carefully and turned in my seat, pulling at Emerson’s jacket. “Em, I don’t want you to put yourself at risk. She’s too unpredictable.” A ragged sob broke out, all my emotions spilling over my cheeks in the form of tears. “Please, I finally got you. She’s going to take you away from me, I just know it.”

Emerson looked torn, his gaze flicking over to the screen, then to Sawyer, before settling back on me with a searing intensity I felt right down to my core. “Nobody is ever going to keep us apart. Never again. Do you understand?” He waited for me to nod. “But... I think they’re right. She’s never going to leave us alone as long as she’s in a position of power. She owns businesses, housing complexes—I hate to imagine what she could do to our friends or family if she was in the mood for retribution. She needs to be stopped.”

I knew he had a point, but I couldn't help feeling selfish. I didn't care about what happened to anyone else. All I wanted was for the two of us to be safe and happy, to raise our children in peace. But then I thought about how Emerson had been willing to marry her in order to protect me. To protect all his staff. He was a protector at heart, and that was part of what I loved so much about him. I couldn't ask him to abandon his responsibilities.

My tears dripped off my face and onto my lap. "Okay," I whispered, even as I felt like my heart was being split in two.

"Roland, I promise your husband will be safe," Sander reassured me. "There will be FBI agents waiting just out of sight, listening in and ready to move in at the slightest hint of danger."

I just kept nodding, trying not to think of all the ways this could go wrong. It was times like these that my overactive imagination was a curse.

Sander began to outline the logistics of how this was going to work, but we were interrupted by a high-pitched voice calling from somewhere in the background. "Daaaaddy, Andrew's hogging the fishy crackers!"

It was so out of place in our current conversation that a startled laugh burst out. I hadn't imagined these two as parents, as well as agents working against the mob.

Drake winced and leaned off to the side out of view of the camera. "Hang on, Petra. Daddy's on a phone call." He reappeared and smiled. "Sorry, I think I'm needed elsewhere, so if you don't need anything else from me, I'll say my goodbyes," the redhead said.

"Yeah, hey, thanks, Decker," Sawyer said, and everyone's eyes widened at his slip.

“Uh, I think you meant Drake,” he muttered, giving us a tight smile.

“Drake, right. Sorry. I don’t know how I forgot your… name…” Sawyer chuckled awkwardly, then glanced at me and Emerson. “Any chance you guys can forget I said that?” Then he waved us away with a flick of his hand. “Never mind, they won’t tell anyone. You’re all good.”

Drake—or Decker—frowned then stormed off, mumbling something about how he’d just gotten used to the name, and now he’d have to delete this one too.

Sander called after him, “It’s fine, dear. They don’t know anything important. You can keep your name.”

“Sorry,” Sawyer said, looking thoroughly miserable for causing them so much trouble.

The man shrugged. “It’s okay, really. He’s gotten us this far by being cautious, not to mention brilliant, but my skills lie more in the ability to read people. I’m not concerned about you guys.”

We stayed on the call for a few more minutes, but Decker never came back. Sander’s attention kept straying over to where his husband had disappeared, and I knew he wanted to go make things right.

“Go on,” Emerson said, nodding to him. “We all have arrangements to make, but we can do it on our own. I’ll set up a meeting with Eva and let you know the time. Is tomorrow too soon? The faster we can get this taken care of, the better.”

He nodded. “We’ll make it happen. Line it up.”

Once the call was over and Sawyer had packed up the secure laptop once more, he

paused on his way out the door. “Hey, Emerson?” he called. “Thanks for doing this. You too, Roland. It’s been hard to watch my friend lose his identity, but he did it without question to protect his husband. I know it’s important to them to see this through.”

“Yeah, of course,” Emerson said like it was no big deal.

Once Sawyer left and it was just the two of us in the office, Emerson reached across and pulled me onto his lap, cradling me as if I were the most precious gem. I curled up and rested my head on his shoulder, breathing him in, watching the steady pulse of his heart along the arch of his neck.

“Promise me,” I whispered, breaking the silence. “Nothing will go wrong tomorrow.”

He hesitated a beat too long before he said, “I promise.”

*Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 2:43 pm*

“Promise me. Nothing will go wrong tomorrow.” Roland’s words kept ringing in my ears as I walked laps around my desk. I had told him that I did, even as my brain outlined the risks of meeting with Eva alone, of turning her down and taking away every avenue of escape. I had no doubt she was dangerous, and my promise to Roland tasted like ashes on my tongue.

I had spent most of the night watching Roland sleep, held tight in my arms. Even in sleep, his face looked tense, a crease between his eyebrows, lips turned down. How could I resist telling him whatever he needed to hear, in order to set his mind at ease? I would just have to do whatever it took not to be made a liar.

When I called Eva to set up an appointment, her assistant relayed that she would be over shortly, as though Eva had dropped everything. It was no wonder; we had a lot to talk about, more than she knew. She was on her way to the hotel now, would be here any moment. Warrants came through in record time, and there were now a dozen FBI agents just down the hall, listening to the microphone taped to my chest, watching on a tiny camera hidden under the lip of my desk.

Roland was here somewhere as well, refusing to be left out of the event. If I really focused, I swore I could hear the steady beat of his heart through the walls, and his presence, even from this distance, was reassuring.

My stomach was sour and twisted, acid crawling up my throat. When her familiar rap came on the door, I somehow managed to regain some sense of calm—outwardly, at least. I wound around my desk and lowered into the chair. “Come in,” I called in a steady voice.

When she entered, I swore it was like she slithered, this snake of a woman, straight from Hell. She smiled, looking triumphant. She truly believed she had won. “Have a seat,” I offered, gesturing to the chair I’d placed in an ideal location to be recorded.

She sat down, crossing her legs in a smooth glide, her skirt inching up her thigh as she placed her purse in her lap. “I’m so glad you called,” she purred. “This whole thing has gotten out of hand.”

“The Chatter article—” I began, but she cut me off.

“Was not your doing, I know,” she said, her eyes glittering. “It was all hearsay. There’s no proof that I’ve done anything wrong, I’ve made sure of it, and when reelection time comes around, people will vote for me because they know what’s good for them. For now, that article changes nothing. The wedding will go on as planned. This will be a lot less painful for the both of us if we learn to get along. We don’t need to be enemies.”

“I’m afraid that won’t be possible,” I said, trying to keep my voice level.

She had an incredible poker face. I could see no trace of what she was thinking. “Did you think I wouldn’t hear about your fundraiser? So you raised a little money, so what? It will only delay the inevitable. Why do you keep fighting me? You’ll get to keep your hotel, your staff will keep their jobs. Your little cutie pie with the dark eyes will keep his apartment. Even your father has given his blessing. You will live comfortably for the rest of your life. If you want children, I’m sure we can come to some kind of agreement.”

My hands shook until I forced them into fists. My mouth was so dry that when I tried to swallow, the sides of my throat stuck together. “The wedding is off,” I finally managed to get out, “because the hotel no longer belongs to my family. My father sold it.”



That finally got a reaction from her, a slight tic along her jaw, as if she'd clenched her teeth, before wrestling her face back to the calm mask she usually wore. "You're lying. I would've heard if he did something so stupid." She drew in a deep breath, analyzing me. "Who did he sell it to?"

"To my new husband." I almost smiled in glee at the way she clenched her purse in a death grip. "Marrying me is now not only pointless, but it's impossible, and you can't marry him either."

She was downright livid. "You're all a bunch of morons if you think I'll be dissuaded so easily. I guess my business with you is concluded. I'll just have to deal with Mr. Stohl next, won't I?" she said, correctly guessing who I'd married. She pressed up from her chair in a rush, looping her purse strap over her shoulder as she prepared to leave.

I saw her as stepping on a warpath, headed for the man I loved, and I suddenly found myself out of my chair and rounding the desk to put myself in her way. "You don't know me very well, if you think I'll let you get anywhere near him," I seethed, blocking the door.

She threw her head back and laughed, a movie-villain cackle. "As if you'll have a choice." As she stepped toward me, she reached into her purse and came out with a gun, and my heart skipped a beat. The compact weapon shook in her tight grip, but it didn't look like it was because she was unused to handling it. She was just so furious that she was quivering with pent-up anger. "You are going to do what you're told, just like your father did before you. Your entire family is so useless! The only one who had any inspiration was your grandfather. I thought you and I could work together, all of us profit, but if you won't play nice, then I'll make sure you still lose the hotel, one way or another, even if I have to burn it to the ground myself."

My eyes fixed on the gun, I held my hands out where the camera could see them,

hoping the agents would hold off rushing in here. To Eva, it would just look like I was surrendering. I knew Roland would be urging them to charge into the room, but she hadn't given us enough information yet. We needed a solid case to keep her behind bars. Muttering threats, waving a gun around... she'd be out in a year if she had a good lawyer. I wanted to raise my children in peace, without worrying about her getting out on good behavior, only to come after us in revenge.

Eva's mouth quirked, her eyes unfocused, as if she was thinking, probably reformulating her plan. "Okay, here's what's going to happen. I'll find someone else to buy the hotel..."

I frowned, confused by her muttering. "You're not even offering to buy it yourself?"

"No, I can't be connected to it, not directly," she snapped. "That's why marrying you was so perfect. It was a believable match, without muddying up my reputation. Otherwise, I would've just bought it from your father in the first place." She brushed her hair back with her free hand, where it was beginning to dampen from her sweat, strands sticking to her skin. "No. You're going to tell your precious husband to sell this hotel to the person of my choosing, and you'll do it with a smile on your face. I'm sure he'll do it to keep you safe."

"And if he won't sell?"

Her lips twisted with a smirk. "I hear your husband is expecting."

Cold dread filled me. "Excuse me? Are you threatening my children?"

"Are you really that fucking stupid?! Of course I am!" She was falling apart at the seams, no longer put together. Her eyes were wild, and as sweat smeared her makeup, I could see the bags under her eyes she'd been trying to conceal. She wasn't mad—she was terrified. I wasn't the only one losing sleep these days. I would almost

feel sorry for her—if it weren't for her threats, her manipulation, the way she was prepared to ruin my entire life, Roland's life, threatening my unborn children. Nope, any trace of sympathy I might have felt was replaced by cold, bitter rage.

“I don't get it. Why do you even need the hotel? You're already rich, not to mention being the godsdamn mayor. You run the whole fucking city!”

“It's not me who wants the hotel, just like I'm not the one who's running this city,” she hissed, waving her gun at me. “Think bigger! Once upon a time, your grandfather's ambition connected him with Barbieri. The hotel was the perfect place to launder money. Then along came your father with his conscience.” She scoffed and offered an eye roll. “Santana had taken over after Barbieri by then, and he let your father's insolence slide, in exchange for a monthly payout. He wasn't thinking long-term. So weak and lazy, with no vision. Now that Santana's behind bars, a man named Alessio has taken his place. He was Santana's right-hand man, and he's working to build the empire back up to what it once was, to its original glory.”

“So? I don't get how you're involved.”

She growled in frustration. “He'll stop at nothing to get what he wants, and in this case, he wants this hotel—and I won't be the one who fails him.” She gulped, her eyes wild. “If I don't get this done, he'll kill me.”

I knew nothing about this Alessio guy, but I could see she was genuinely afraid for her life. Afraid enough to kill? Maybe.

“You never should've gotten involved with the mob in the first place,” I said, shaking my head in disappointment.

“Haven't you ever heard about survival of the fittest? Nice guys really do finish last—and that's only if you live that long.” She looked haggard, and seeing her now,

it was impossible to believe she was ever as poised as she'd been when she walked in just minutes ago.

I'd had just about enough of this conversation. She'd said enough to incriminate herself, as well as this Alessio. If she knew anything else important, she could work that out with the feds. It was no longer my problem.

She whimpered, trying to wrestle her composure back into place. "I'm just one branch of a much larger tree. This goes far beyond me, beyond this city, even beyond the east coast."

"Well, consider this branch pruned," I said, feeling a vicious grin stretch across my lips.

"What's that supposed to mean?" The hand holding the gun dropped to her side as she searched my face for answers. "What have you done?" she hissed.

Before I had time to answer, the door behind me burst open, and FBI agents spilled into the room, their guns trained on her. She began to raise her gun but must've thought better, faced with an arsenal. The lead agent who'd introduced herself as Amy Abadi stepped forward. "Put your gun on the ground! Eva Ward, you are under arrest."

"Have a nice time in prison," I muttered to her, looking dumbstruck, before I untucked my shirt and pulled off the mic. I handed it to an agent on the way out the door.

The entire lobby was in chaos, between the agents and the crowd of onlookers who were gathering to see what was going on. There was only one person I wanted to see right now, though.

Roland was waiting for me just around the corner, and he threw himself at me as soon as he saw me. His tight grip on me had me sagging against in him relief. I buried my face in his neck and breathed him in. It was over. Eva wouldn't bother us ever again.

"Let's go home," he whispered in my ear, fingers raking through my hair, and I nodded. There was nothing I wanted more.

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As soon as the car came to a stop, I shoved open the door and made to heave myself out of the seat, but Emerson scolded me quickly. “Don’t you dare get out by yourself. Wait for me.”

I rolled my eyes, but I didn’t say a word in complaint as he hopped out his side and ran around to help me out, little white clouds puffing from his mouth with each breath. His fussing over me had reached ridiculous heights, in direct proportion to the size of my stomach, but I secretly loved it. After so many years of pretending to ignore each other, I relished the constant attention. It made me feel loved, adored, cherished.

“Here, give me your hand,” he offered. I took his hand, and while he pulled from the front and I pushed off the seat from behind, we managed to heft my body upright. He didn’t let go of me yet, though.

“We’re going to have to do something about this ice. This is downright dangerous,” he muttered, frowning as he wrapped an arm around my waist as best he could, considering I was significantly wider than I used to be—and that was before you took the puffy winter jacket into consideration. “Shuffle your feet, that way you won’t slip.”

I did as instructed, and we made our way up the curving sidewalk, one inch at a time. My heart gave a little pitter-patter as we approached. It was official—we were homeowners!

The house was absolutely adorable, blue with white shutters, a wide porch, and a garden bed buried under the snow. I had no idea what would sprout from the soil in

the spring, but I couldn't wait to see. It was gifted to us from my new father-in-law, Reinhold. Seeing as he had three million dollars from the sale of the hotel, and no more payoffs to make, thanks to us, he figured it was the least he could do. Besides, it was a wedding gift. He was still a little sore we hadn't invited him.

Emerson was still planning on a second wedding. He'd wanted to have it as soon as possible, but I had reasoned that it would be easier once the babies were born and I could fit into a normal suit and wouldn't waddle down the aisle. He had relented, but only if I agreed to let him go way over the top. I was doing my best to compromise.

"Easy... careful..." he said, guiding me up the three steps to the porch, then without letting go of me, he worked the key in the lock and got the front door open. "Welcome home." He made to pick me up to carry me over the threshold for the second time, but I speared him with a look, and he wisely decided against it. The last thing we needed was for him to throw his back out trying to hoist me up.

I stepped into the entryway and immediately fell in love. I hadn't been allowed to see the house while Emerson and some of my coworkers painted the walls, moved in the furniture, and hung photos and artwork, but it was exactly what I would've done myself. "Ohhh," I gasped, clutching my hands at my chest.

Emerson wrapped his arms around me from behind, and we rocked together for a moment, just taking in the scene. "Happy Valentine's Day, omega mine," my husband murmured into my neck, his nose and lips like ice, and his tongue very much not.

"It's not Valentine's Day yet," I reminded him.

"Valentine's week, then," Emerson replied, while helping me with my coat. He knelt at my feet to help wiggle the boots off my swollen feet. The babies were growing fast and fierce inside me, my bursting stomach the first part of me to enter any room,

sometimes by a whole ten seconds. And I was only at six months! It was hard to imagine how much bigger I would get. “Are you hungry?” he asked.

I laughed. “I’m always hungry.” My stomach gave a gurgle as proof, and I followed it up with a yawn; I was also always sleepy.

“How about you crawl into bed, and I’ll make sandwiches.”

“That sounds like heaven.” I pursed my lips. “What kind of sandwiches?”

“Hmm,” he pondered, trying to discern what I was in the mood for. “Peanut butter, the crunchy kind, and... grape jelly?”

“Ooh, you really know how to sweet talk a guy,” I teased, when in reality, food was my love language these days. Talking about food was the equivalent of dirty talk, the way it got my engine revving.

Emerson led me down the hall toward our new bedroom, showing me the other rooms along the way, including the bathroom and the room that would eventually become the nursery. We hadn’t decided on a theme yet. We still had some time to get it in order. Eight weeks, in fact, until our scheduled C-section, due to some potential complications that came up during my last ultrasound.

I looked forward to exploring the rest of the house... after my nap. Priorities, am I right?

The bedroom was painted a soothing blue-gray color and had plush carpet that seemed to hug my feet. My gaze, however, was solely focused on the queen-size bed that was currently calling my name.

“You crawl in, and I’ll go make those sandwiches. Sound good?” he asked, and I



nodded, my eyelids already getting heavy.

I'd barely managed to get my pants off before Emerson was back. He set the plate on the bed, then came over to help me with the rest of my clothes. He tried his best to keep it innocent, but his fingers kept brushing my most sensitive spots, lingering and teasing. Well, shit. Now I was hungry, sleepy, and horny!

Emerson helped me into bed with the utmost care, propping pillows up behind my back, before passing me the plate, which I rested on my stomach. I looked up at him, standing by the edge of the bed. "You're joining me, right?" I asked, licking jelly from my thumb.

He sighed dramatically. "I suppose I can, if you're feeling lonely." He undressed quickly and hopped in, far too eagerly for me to believe he was doing this as a favor to me. His thick erection was also evidence against him.

Outside, it might've been the coldest winter we'd had in the past decade, but inside, things were nice and toasty warm. In my mind, it was the perfect excuse to cuddle up in bed—as if we needed an excuse. Emerson and I had been insatiable for each other for the past few months, making up for lost time.

While I made quick work of my sandwich, satisfying one of my needs, Emerson crawled between my legs and lowered himself onto his propped elbows. "Hi, my babies," he murmured, directing his words toward my belly button, where something jutted out, either a knee or an elbow. "Are you being nice to your daddy today?"

"No," I groused. "I think they're having a wrestling match in there. Winner gets the last inch of space."

"Aww, and who's winning? I bet you it's Opal. Daddy's girl is a tough one."

“Don’t worry, Jayden can hold his own,” I said, wincing as one of them pushed against my ribs.

“Just wait until you guys see the nursery I’m planning. You’ll have plenty of room in there.” He looked up at me over the mound of my stomach. “What do you think? Should we put a wrestling mat down between the cribs?”

I laughed. “No way! If they’re going to wrestle, they’ll do it in the backyard like most siblings.”

Emerson pressed kisses across my belly, and I reached down and ran my fingers through his blond hair. How many times had I dreamed of doing exactly this?

As usually happened, listening to their papa’s soothing tone had our children falling asleep. It was a good thing, because Emerson’s hands had begun to wander, lower past my stomach, his kisses brushing his face up against my shaft. I didn’t need to be able to see my dick to know it was stiff and weeping. “I had a dream like this once, you know, with you lying between my legs...”

“Oh yeah?” he led, his voice husky. He laced our hands together, then pressed a kiss to the new wedding band on my finger. “Tell me more.”

“Mm, you took your tongue and teased around the head of my cock... yeah, just like that,” I whimpered as he reenacted my fantasies for me.

“What next?” he asked, his breath cooling my wet flesh.

“Lower,” I instructed. “Lower...” He moved down my body, kissing and licking along the way, too gentle to give me any real satisfaction. Down my shaft, over the ridges of my balls, teasing past my taint, then he hooked his arms under my legs to lift my hips enough to get a taste of my slick. I felt the vibration of his moan right

through me, bringing a rush of slick dripping from my entrance.

“Then...” I panted, “you rolled me onto my side and moved in behind me.”

“Did I?” He tongued my hole a few times for good measure, before he knelt on the bed and moved my plate to the bedside table. Then he shoved the blankets aside so he could watch me. He moved me carefully onto my side, his eyes roaming over my body. “Like this?” he asked, spooning around my backside, rubbing his cock along the slippery crack of my ass.

“Yesss,” I moaned, arching my back as much as I could to feel him pressed there, firm and unyielding. He lined himself up, with just his thick crown pressing against the puckered muscle, but without penetrating. He paused there and let me squirm. “Em, please, sweetheart. More!”

“The dream,” he coaxed. “What did I do next?”

“You fucked me hard!” I whined.

He tsked, nudging gently at my hole as he brushed his fingertips over my hip. “Are you sure that’s what I did?”

“Yes! Fuck me, alpha!” I demanded.

He grabbed my cock in a tight fist, then asked, “And how does the real me compare to the fantasy?” Then he drove deep, making me gasp.

With him buried inside me, stretching me, filling me, I said, “There is no comparison. You’re perfect.”

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It was a cool spring morning when we arrived at the hospital. The sun rose into a beautiful clear blue sky, the birds singing, the snow mostly melted from the ground. It was the perfect day to finally meet our babies, and I, for one, was excited.

Roland, however, was a mess.

He was fidgeting in the seat in the waiting room, his knee bouncing hard enough to shake the entire row of chairs. “Hey, Ro, how are you doing?” I asked gently. His hand was cold and clammy when I pried it off the armrest he’d been strangling in a death grip.

“Huh? Oh. Fine, I’m fine.” Two seconds later, his attention was drifting once again, his eyes glazed and focused on nothing.

There was nothing I could do to comfort him for now. I would be a nervous wreck in his shoes, but I did what I could to share the burden. I read over the forms I’d been given to fill in, checking off the right boxes and signing my name. We’d already gone over all of this with our doctor, but I forced myself to read each of the potential risks one by one—blood clots, excessive bleeding, infection, risk to future pregnancies. Things usually went smoothly, but I refused to go into this unprepared. It was pure torture thinking of anything happening to Roland or our children, but I told myself that when this was all over, the relief would make it all worth it.

We’d been told we wouldn’t have to wait long, but of course, in true hospital fashion, they were wrong. How could they already be running late? It was only 9am! Roland groaned and leaned on my shoulder. “I’m starving. If I’d known I would have to wait this long, I would’ve snuck in a snack.”

“Soon, baby, I promise,” I soothed, kissing the top of his head. I hadn’t eaten anything either, in solidarity with his fasting, but I would never dare complain about my hunger now. My discomfort was a small thing in comparison to Roland carrying our twins.

Finally, a nurse in teddy bear scrubs came to collect the paperwork and told us it was time. She led us back to a room where we could get changed, Roland into a gown, and me into a pair of blue scrubs.

Roland paused, hands cradling his belly. His hair had gotten longer as it got harder to move or even sit long enough for a haircut, and I brushed his bangs back where it hung down over his forehead. “I’m gonna miss them,” he whispered, getting teary-eyed. “The babies.”

“What do you mean? You won’t need to miss them; you can see them anytime you want, hug them and kiss them.”

His lip stuck out in a pout. “It won’t be the same. This time I got to spend with them, it was special.”

I stepped in as close as I could with his stomach between us and kissed his temple sweetly. “It’ll be even more special with them on the outside, so you can see your love shining back at you when you tell them you love them.”

He smiled slowly. “That sounds wonderful,” he admitted.

“Besides,” I added, “you can be pregnant again, you know. We can have more babies.”

Now he peeked up at me shyly. “Lots of babies?”

I chuckled. “Yes, lots of babies. As many as you want.” Now that the hotel was turning a profit, we could afford to grow our family. I wanted nothing more than to give Roland the life he deserved, and if he wanted babies, then that was what I would give him. If for whatever reason, we couldn’t have any more ourselves, then we would adopt or foster. We could get furbabies galore! Anything for my omega, the love of my life.

The same nurse from earlier came into the room to check on us. “All right, daddies,” she said in her bubbly voice. “Let’s get this show on the road.”

She had Roland get onto the bed, then got his IV started. By the time the anesthesiologist arrived to put in the epidural, the level of excitement began to ramp up. This felt like a dream. Just this morning, I’d woken up in our own bed with Roland in my arms, and in just an hour, I would be holding my babies, our family of two suddenly becoming four. It was so surreal!

We headed to the operating room as a team, with the staff pushing the bed, and I walked along beside Roland, holding his hand. He was gazing up at me with such trust and the purest love I’d ever seen. “Don’t let go, okay?” he asked.

“Never,” I replied.

They got him set up, with monitors displaying Roland’s heart rate, blood pressure, and oxygen level, as well as the fetal monitors for the twins. I was no doctor, but everything looked good to me, nice and steady. There was a drape clipped up so that we couldn’t see what was happening below the waist. I was both worried and grateful for that.

When the door swung open, we turned to watch Dr. Zappek come in, finally signaling that it was time to begin. “Good morning,” he said. “How are we—” He didn’t have a chance to finish the question before his hip caught a tray of instruments, sending

them skittering across the floor. “Oh fuck,” he muttered, stepping to the side, before his foot came down on one of the tools and he slipped, his leg jerking out at an unnatural angle. He flailed around for a second before regaining his balance. He held both gloved hands out at his sides. “I’m okay!” he declared to the roomful of people gaping at him.

And I was supposed to trust this guy with my husband’s surgery? I was about to stand up and demand a new doctor, but Roland pulled on our joined hands, reeling me back. “It’s okay, I trust him.” I stared down into those beautiful brown eyes. As nervous as he’d been all morning, there was no sign of it now.

I grudgingly sat back in my seat by Roland’s side and grumbled, “There will be another doctor on hand just in case, right?”

Dr. Zappek nodded solemnly, his usual goofy attitude set aside to let his sincerity shine through. “Always,” he assured me. “I promise, your husband is in good hands.” As clumsy and awkward as the man was, he knew his stuff, and once a fresh tray of tools was brought in and the surgery began, he was all business.

I kept my word to Roland, holding his hand through it all. He couldn’t feel anything that was going on behind the curtain, just a brief tugging sensation as they took out first one baby, then the other. Opal, in true older sister fashion, demanded to go first, soon crying loudly to announce her arrival. Jayden, however, didn’t seem to mind waiting his turn. He seemed more patient, letting out a brief bleat while he was being cleaned up, before being swaddled.

“Congrats, daddies,” Dr. Zappek said. “Your children look perfect.” I couldn’t see his grin behind his mask, but the corners of his his eyes were crinkled.

“Thank you,” I told him with genuine gratitude. While he ducked down behind the curtain again, to finish up with the surgery, I watched as the nurses took care of the

babies.

My fingers itched with the need to reach for them, but it wasn't time yet. Roland's hand tightened on mine, and I knew he was feeling that same need. His eyes were brimming with tears of joy, and when I touched my own cheeks, I found them wet.

"I love you so much," I told him, resting my forehead on his.

"I love you too."

It took a little while to get Roland all stitched up, but finally, all four of us were brought back to our room. The babies were asleep in little cradles, but as soon as I had Roland settled, I brought them over to the bed. I passed Opal over to Roland for her to feed, while I held Jayden skin to skin, then we traded.

Once we'd both finally had some breakfast, and the babies were fed, bathed, and napping in our arms, Roland blew out a long breath. "I can already tell you I'm not looking forward to the painkillers wearing off, but it's all worth it to bring these precious babies into the world. I can't believe they're ours."

"Believe it," I told him, laughing lightly as I perched on the bed next to him. He wiggled gently over to give me a little more room.

"I guess we should call our parents?" he asked, wincing. I could understand his reluctance; I wasn't quite ready to let the outside world in yet either, but I knew how excited they were to be grandparents for the first time. They had all wanted to be here in person, but Roland was already stressing out about the day, so we'd asked them to give us some time.

I sighed. "Okay. Five minutes, then I'm claiming there's a poop emergency and we need to go."



“Deal,” he agreed, grinning.

Pulling out my phone with my free hand, I put together a group video chat. The screen divided in half, Roland’s parents on top, my father on the bottom.

“Is it done? Are my grandbabies here?” Bethany asked, practically vibrating with giddy excitement.

Beside her, Walter wasn’t faring any better. He had his face scrunched against hers, trying to get a peek at the screen. “Beth, I can’t see,” he grumbled.

“Congratulations,” my father said, stoic as usual, but his eyes were twinkling. He already had a soft spot for these two, and I had no doubt that he would be spoiling them rotten.

I angled the phone around so they could get a view of the babies. “May I introduce you to Jayden and Opal,” I whispered. We’d kept our name choices a secret, so this was the first they were hearing them.

Bethany squealed as quietly as she could manage so she didn’t wake them up, holding a hand over her mouth. “Oh my goodness, they’re so precious. Look at those little noses... Walter, I think Jayden looks like you.” Walter said something in reply, but he’d been squeezed out of the shot, and I couldn’t hear what he said. “And Ro? How are you feeling?” Bethany asked.

“I’m okay, just tired,” Roland said, giving an exaggerated yawn, setting us up for an out from this call. I had to duck out of the camera so they didn’t see me almost losing it. Roland was a horrible actor.

“Aww, honey,” she said. “I tell you what, I’ll give you guys a few days to get acquainted, but you can expect me to be there by the weekend. I’ll help with the

laundry and dishes, fill your freezer with enough meals to last you the first month.”

“Thanks, Mom,” I told her. We’d already anticipated that she wouldn’t be able to stay away. “We’ve already got the guest room set up for you and Dad.” Roland’s parents insisted I call them Mom and Dad. My father, meanwhile, had told Roland he could do the same, but so far, he hadn’t been able to bring himself to do it. Instead, he called him Reiny—it was as casual as he’d been able to go.

Soon enough, after more fake yawns (and possibly a couple real ones too), we managed to wrap up the call. Roland really did need his rest, after all. “Get some sleep, sweetheart,” I told him, kissing his forehead.

“If you insist,” he said, his eyelids already drooping. Roland would get a few days in the hospital to recover, and to make sure the babies were doing well, and then, at long last, I could bring my family home, where they belonged.

Our lives had been entirely upended, and I was so ready for the chaos.

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Opal kicked her feet wildly, setting the ruffles of her dress bouncing, the bow clipped in her thick brown hair just barely holding on. Jayden, on the other hand, was lying on the bed calmly, watching me intently with those clear blue eyes.

Emily peeked at them over my shoulder. “You know they’re just going to spit up on those outfits like three minutes into the ceremony, right?” she asked.

“Yep, but look how cute they are right now,” I baby-talked, tickling their bellies. It was hard to tell what they were thinking, but I took the excessive amount of drool to be absolute joy—or maybe that was just me.

I was getting married! Again...

I knew how important having a real wedding was for Emerson, and while I’d said I didn’t need it, I had to admit, it was kind of fun dressing up and putting on a party for all our friends and family. It was such an utter love fest, and after we’d hidden our feelings for each other for so long, it felt only fitting to have a public declaration at last.

Since I’d been kept pretty busy with parenthood, juggling feedings and changings, and Emerson had to work at getting the hotel settled into its new more lucrative independence, he’d told me not to worry about any of the wedding preparation, that he would take care of absolutely everything. All I had to do was show up, and so far, I’d done exactly that. I’d arrived at the designated hotel room and found a white suit laid out on the bed, as well as the most adorable outfits for our twins. I had no idea what to expect next.

There was a knock at the hotel room door, and Emily went to answer it. “It’s your parents,” she called. “It’s time to go. Are you ready?”

“I’ve never been more ready for anything in my life,” I told her, adrenaline beginning to course through my veins and kicking my heart rate up a notch.

My mom took one baby, while Emily, my maid of honor, took the other. Our little procession headed down the hall to the staff elevator, usually used for housekeeping and room service carts. “Where are we going?” I asked my dad who was walking beside me.

He just offered me a sly, knowing smile, then pressed the button for the roof.

When the elevator doors opened, I was sure my eyes must’ve looked ready to pop out of their sockets. It was... magical. I’d never been up here before, but I was certain it had never looked like this. There were white fairy lights and tulle garlands wrapped around the trellises that had been set up, and there were flowers absolutely everywhere, perfuming the air with their delicate fragrance. This high up, the usual cacophony of honking horns and rumbling engines was reduced to a background hum, easily covered up by the string quartet off to the side.

The vision swam as my eyes got a little weepy with the sheer emotion of it all. Emerson hadn’t seen me yet. He was waiting down the aisle, his father standing beside him as his best man. Their relationship was stronger than it had maybe ever been, and it warmed my heart, watching them talking and laughing together.

My mom nodded to the musicians, and as they began to play, the guests stopped talking, all heads turning our way. Emerson lit up when he laid eyes on me, positively glowing with the purest happiness.

My mom headed down the aisle first, carrying Jayden, followed by Emily with a squirmy Opal. I could hear all the awws from the crowd as they took in the pre-spit-

up-covered outfits the babies were wearing.

“Your turn,” my father said, offering me his arm. He hadn’t been able to give me away at the first wedding, and I was glad I’d changed my mind about having this second ceremony. This was as much for him as it was for me.

Together, arm in arm, we walked down the aisle where Emerson was waiting for me. He was bouncing on the balls of his feet, as if he were about to run down the aisle and meet me halfway. It seemed so funny to think of him being eager to marry me, since we were already married, but it was more than that. This wedding marked the beginning of something. An affirmation that we were everything to each other.

As we reached the front, Dad unhooked my arm from his and passed my hand to Emerson’s. “I trust that you’ll take good care of my son,” he said with mock sternness.

“Always,” Emerson promised, and my dad gave Emerson a hug, then stepped back and took Opal from Emily, going to sit down with my mom in the front row.

Behind Emerson, I saw none other than Benny, his usually shaggy hair sheared right down. Emerson saw my surprised look at how nicely my coworker had cleaned himself up, and he leaned in and whispered, “I told him he was only allowed to officiate the ceremony if he got a proper haircut.”

I smothered my giggle by stealing a kiss, and Emerson grabbed the front of my shirt so I couldn’t get away, teasing the tip of his tongue along the seam of my lips. I pulled back before we could get carried away here in front of a crowd of witnesses.

“Hey, none of that,” Benny scolded. “Can’t you keep your hands to yourselves for five minutes?”

“Probably not,” I told him honestly. “You’d better talk fast.” I heard a few snickers

from the guests.

The ceremony was sweet and simple, mostly because there was no guarantee that the twins would be well-behaved for more than a few minutes.

“Friends and family, I introduce you to Mr. and Mr. Holland—again... or still? Anyway, who’s ready to party!” Benny cried, raising a fist in the air. The guests replied with hoots and hollers of agreement.

Emerson and I headed back down the aisle, hand in hand, as husbands, and instead of the old standard of rice to throw at us, the guests had been given small pouches of birdseed. I saw Cherie, wearing a mischievous smirk, wind up and pelt Emerson in the face with a handful of seed, but there was no way he could tell where it came from, what with his hand held up to shield himself from the worst of it. In fact, I was only being hit with the occasional rebound seed. Was everyone aiming for my husband? I was sure tomorrow the rooftop would be covered with birds—and therefore, bird shit—but it would all get washed away with the next storm.

Emerson had hired outside staff to work the party, so that all our coworkers had been able to attend. It was so great to have all of them in one place; they were practically family, and now they got to mingle with my actual family. It was perfect.

The chairs were cleared to the sides, and servers circulated carrying trays of champagne and sparkling cider. I saw my old neighbor Collette, dressed in a flashy silver dress. She still lived in my old apartment complex, but we found out the building had been bought by someone who was investing in cleaning it up and making it safe. Eva had managed to avoid going to prison by flipping on some integral members of the mob. Turned out, she’d had a whole folder of dirt on Alessio and his goons. I guessed it was her rainy-day blackmail material, in case the tides ever turned on her. She very quickly sold all her property and hopped on a plane out of town. Maybe she would join ex-mayor Phillip Black, wherever he was. Either way, I wasn’t too worried. Sawyer’s friends Sander and Drake were keeping a close eye on

her for us.

I watched as Collette grabbed two glasses of champagne from a passing tray, one in each hand. “Are those both for you?” I asked her, laughing. “No judgment if they are.”

“Of course not,” she chided with a chuckle. “One’s for my grandson. He’s my plus-one.”

“Oh...” I knew neither of them held any grudges that he and I hadn’t worked out, but I still felt a little awkward around Alan. There was no polite way of saying “it’s not you, it’s me” that sounded even remotely genuine.

“Oh look, here he is now...” She beamed up at Alan as he approached. He was dressed in a navy-blue suit, though I noticed she did not pass him one of the drinks.

“Hey, congratulations,” he said genuinely.

“Thanks. I really app—” I began to say, but it was like Emerson had a sixth sense for when another alpha was in my vicinity, because he appeared at my elbow within seconds, gripping me around the waist and dragging me into his side. It seemed he’d been in the middle of a discussion with Patrick, because he’d dragged the poor man along with him by the arm.

“Collette, I’m so glad you could make it,” Emerson said, reaching out with his free hand to take hers. “And you too, Alan,” he mumbled vaguely.

Alan, however, was distracted, his eyes locked with Patrick’s. “Hi, I’m Alan,” he said, half in a daze.

“Patrick,” he replied, equally smitten. They seemed slightly in shock by the instant attraction between them.

Collette picked up on something immediately, her eyes darting between the two alphas. “You know, my grandson is an architect,” she said, nudging Alan in the ribs to push him forward a step in Patrick’s direction.

“Wow, really?” Patrick sighed dreamily. “That sounds really amazing.”

Emerson, who wasn’t about to waste this opportunity, winked at Collette and joined in, saying, “Hey, Alan, did you know that Patrick is secretly a romance novelist?”

Patrick blushed right down to the roots of his hair. “You can’t just tell people that,” he hissed from the corner of his mouth, before he chuckled awkwardly. “What he meant to say was—”

“Really?” Alan said, his eyes sparking with interest. “Have you ever heard of Jordan Kepler? I’m a massive fan.”

“You are?! He’s a good friend of mine!”

Seemingly without thought, Alan reached out and took Patrick’s hand and led him off toward an empty corner of the roof.

Emerson smirked. “Wow, that worked better than I thought. Looks like everyone will get their happy ending after all.”

“Speaking of happy endings...” I said slyly, trying to segue into our wedding night. I had no clue what Emerson had planned, but it was getting late, and I was more than ready for some alone time. Twilight had begun to fall, the strings of white lights giving the entire rooftop a dreamlike quality. Our children had long ago fallen asleep, passed around for guests to hold.

“Ah, yes,” he murmured, drawing me closer. He began to rock us side to side, dancing in place to the softly playing music. “Well, after this dance, we will make our



goodbyes, and then I'm going to take you to one of our VIP suites. Your parents will be staying next door with the babies, in case we're needed, but I think it's safe to say she's got things covered. You'll be up all night being ravaged, and then I have a special breakfast in bed planned. I've taken all week off work to make sure my husband is properly taken care of."

"That's very thorough of you," I said, sliding my hands inside his suit jacket and splaying them over his stomach. "Are you sure you can afford a whole week off?" I asked cautiously. I didn't want him to think I was trying to get rid of him, but things were still a little rocky at times.

"Oh yeah, it'll be okay. I mean, Cherie's got the kitchen covered, and Emily swears she won't leave the front desk unattended. And Connor is doing an acceptable job covering your shifts while you're on pat leave."

I bit my bottom lip, wincing. I'd been thinking it over for a while, but we hadn't had a chance to discuss what came next. "Emerson, please don't take this the wrong way, but... I quit." It was the second time I'd said those words, but the sentiment was entirely different. It came from a place of love, instead of anger and fear and resentment.

He didn't look at all surprised, and instead of fighting me on it, he gave me a sad smile. "Okay. I'll miss you here, but I understand. And you know what? I think now that everything with the hotel's finances is in hand, I can afford to work a normal amount. I might even have plenty of reasons to go home early."

That word—home—sent a thrill through me every time I heard it. "And you know, I might even find a few reasons to come visit you... and your desk..."

I felt his cock give a little twitch against me, and he groaned. "Okay, that's it, time to say good night. We have a wedding night to get to!"

Not only that, we had an entire future to get to...