



Such a Feisty Omega (His Alpha Desires #6)

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Category: LGBT+

Description: My faith in omegas died a few years ago when my husband left me for one he called his fated mate. I haven't heard from him since he packed up and walked out the door. His new mate wants nothing to remind him of the life we shared. Not even our child.

I invested in Cuffed, too busy with my family to do more than visit occasionally, but since Damon left, I need something to do. A distraction. Something to make me feel useful.

On monitor duty one night, I see an omega helping another omega who isn't doing so well. I will ignore my wolf's insistence that we've found our mate. I will never fall in love again, but this kind, caring omega could be a dad to my son. I must put his needs first.

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Andreas

“Okay, Reed. Daddy has to go to work, but Lilianne is here to take care of you. Be a good boy and we’ll have a special breakfast before preschool tomorrow.”

“Pancakes!” His crow of joy made it so hard for me to leave. That little face with his big grin, and the knowledge I was the only daddy in his life often had me torn between love and worry.

Our sitter was wonderful, and since it was mostly evenings and late into the night that she was there, the college student often stayed over. She would entertain my son and put him to bed then study, usually. She swore evenings away from her beloved but large and noisy family kept her from flunking out of school.

And I needed to work. First because if I didn’t, one day I’d run out of money, and Reed and I liked sleeping indoors and eating regularly. And second because the time I’d spent sitting at home had done neither of us any good.

“Andreas?” Lilianne looked up from where she was setting up the trains that my son loved to play with. “Tomorrow, I have a date.” Her cheeks flushed, and her gaze darted down to the miniature engine she held.

“That’s great. I hope you have a wonderful time. Just be careful.” My mind started flipping through the possible replacements. Of course, as an owner of Cuffed, nobody was having me punch in and out, but if I didn’t do the assignments I’d taken on, someone else would have to. “Anyone in particular free to take your place?”

“Roger.” She reached into the tote and pulled out a handful of miniature trees. “Reed? Are you going to help plant the forest?”

“Bye, Daddy.” Reed wrapped his arms around my leg and gave me a squeeze then ran to the coffee table and dropped to his knees.

“Bye, Reed. Umm, Lilianne, anyone else available?”

“No, just Roger.” She handed my son a tree and jerked her chin toward the door, her eyes widening.

I nodded and grabbed my keys and wallet before scooting out the door and closing it quietly behind me. My son was glad to hang out with Lilianne, and we’d have pancakes in the morning, but there was only a small window of distraction time when he let me leave without tears. And his sitter was good reminding me about that.

Unfortunately, during the short drive to the club, I was dreading the next night when I’d have to tolerate Roger. The omega was very good with Reed, and the other dads who used him didn’t seem to have any issues at all, but as the only single dad on his roster, he targeted me for flirting. It wasn’t anything terrible, just cute expressions and body language, the occasional hint that he might be willing to go out on a date or more.

I’d decided not to use him anymore, but with just one day’s notice, I could probably deal with it. In trying to be nice and not hurt his feelings, I had made my position clear. Avoidance was cowardice. There were not that many great sitters to be had, and if Roger could not understand that I was not interested in him, then I’d have to make tomorrow the last night he worked for us. Which would be a shame since Reed liked him a lot.

I parked in my space at the club, still very lost in thought about omegas and flirting

and raising a child alone... There was an awful lot to deal with every day. I'd never seen myself as a single dad, so sure my ex and I had a good relationship. And he was so excited about the baby. He had no fewer than three showers: work, our families, and his friend group. There had never been a nicer nursery than the one he put together with all the gifts we received.

He never had any of the sickness I heard about from so many omegas, just seemed to sail through early pregnancy glowing with pride at what "he" was doing. All our friends commented on how carrying a child suited him, and he preened under all the attention. I was very glad he felt so good, would never have wanted him to suffer, and foolishly allowed him to go to healer appointments without me on a couple of occasions. It was all going well and just a matter of form, or so he said.

But, as I stood in the hallway outside the operating room where our child was about to be brought into the world far too early, he'd been warned about some issues and put on bed rest. He just chose to ignore that medical advice because it would have cut into his good times.

How did I never know he was so selfish?

Sighing, I locked the truck and headed into the club through the back door, ready to spend an evening thinking about something other than the mistakes of my past. I would be staying single and focusing on my work and my son from now on.

Omegas couldn't be trusted.

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Julian

“We’ll take good care of her. See you tomorrow.” I hung up the phone with the last family on my list and blew out a long breath. It had to be hard for parents who couldn’t visit as much as they wanted, usually because of other children at home. They relied on our timely reports to let them know how their baby was doing and for answers to the question they all had: when can the baby come home?

Some days were rough, but today, all our tiny patients had good reports. No negative changes in their statuses. No respiratory distresses. No surgeries. We got a new baby, Gracie, today but other than being tiny, she was a spunky one and would only need some time to grow and flourish before being sent home. Her daddy was recovering from the birth, but he and her alpha papa were eager to hold her already.

“Is that it for you?” Peaches asked me. We called her that because she always wore peach-colored scrubs and also because it was her given name. Maybe she wore those scrubs because of her name? Probably so. Ugh, my brain was fried on the last few minutes of a double shift after one of the other NICU nurses called in sick. Some people went on into work with some degree of illness, but, in the NICU, a common, mild respiratory illness could end a baby’s life.

“It is. I’ve checked off all the lists, but do you need help with any of yours?” I really wanted to help, especially if it benefitted the babies, but I also desperately wanted to go home. But that

meant being alone and, over the last year or so, my beloved privacy was beginning to sway toward lonely.

My wolf, in particular, wasn't pleased about the endless nights I slept alone. He longed for his mate as did I, but his was more of a desperation.

Maybe mine had evolved to that as well.

Peaches whirled on me and planted her hands on her ample hips. "Do you think I'm unable to complete my tasks alone?" One of her eyebrows was cocked and her lips pursed. "Is there a competency issue I should be aware of?"

"No." I snorted and shook my head. Peaches was one of the most capable nurses I knew. Every nurse and healer at the hospital where I worked was dedicated and smart as a whip. Not only that, but they sincerely cared about the patients and wanted health for them, not just sickness care.

Peaches had also been a NICU nurse for ten years longer than me. She taught me things almost every day that made me a better caregiver. I just wanted to make her day easier if I could.

"Go home, Julian. Run yourself a bath. Eat something delicious. Go on a date."

That last one stung. She didn't mean for it to. Peaches was one of the few humans on staff here. She also knew we had mates. She read a lot of shifter romance novels, even on her lunch break. "I wish I could. I work and then go home, rinse and repeat."

"Maybe you should do something about that." She put her hand over mine. "You deserve someone amazing."

"Don't get sappy," I said as one of the incubator alarms went off.

Rushing to take care of the issue, she called over her shoulder, "Get on one of those apps and find yourself a mate."

I packed up my things and stopped by the break room to get my lunch bag and jacket out of my locker but, once I arrived at my car, I hesitated. Going home meant facing my wishes for more. Sure, I loved my life, but I wanted a mate. Not just any one either; I wanted my fated. It made my stomach turn to think of the what-ifs, but they flowed through my mind anyway.

What if my mate has passed on already?

What if they live on the other side of the world?

What if they already have a chosen mate?

What if I've encountered them already and we missed the chance Fate gave us?

I got into my car and started up some loud music hoping the blaring tunes would push away the negative thoughts.

My dads were an age-gap couple, so I knew that Fate took a while sometimes.

I called for Thai food delivery and by the time I got to my apartment, the delivery guy was coming down the stairs, my dinner in a white paper bag by the door.

I kicked my shoes from my aching feet as soon as I stepped inside. I could afford a bigger or fancier place, but having a nest egg, ample savings I could count on, gave me peace of mind. Plus, a smaller place was easier to clean.

I went through my nightly routine, even though it was early morning. Shower. Put clothes into the hamper. Set up my dinner and eat in front of the TV. I considered a mating app but decided in the end that I wanted to meet my mate the old-fashioned way. Have him bump into me on the street. Laugh over a coffee order mix-up. See him with a family member in the labor and delivery unit. At this point, I would take

any quirky scenario Fate chose to throw at me as long as I found my mate soon.

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Andreas

A year into our relationship, my ex told me he found impact play repugnant. Quite a switch from his sweet enthusiasm of the first few months. I gave up participating in any form of kink when he rejected participation. We were not fated mates, but at first, we'd had a lot of fun together, in and out of the bedroom, and we'd made a commitment to one another that I intended to honor. Some couples could separate kink from their actual relationship, but I had never felt comfortable with that. As a single, fine, do what you want with anyone, but I couldn't be comfortable in the intimacy of my kink while someone else held my heart and loyalty.

It was not cheating for anyone in a partnership that allowed for it or whose comfort level was not breached. I judged nobody for their choices. But I had to make mine. Even when he said go ahead, I didn't. He found what I did—something we'd shared many times—disgusting?

It was a hard pill to swallow, but I forced it down for the duration of our time together and for a while afterward as well. As a new father with a full-time job, there simply wasn't time.

I sold my construction company to buy into Cuffed, hoping it would be a good thing both for me and for my family. Reed would be asleep most of the time when I was at work, and other than his few hours of preschool in the mornings, we could be together. He was growing like a weed, and I didn't want to miss a moment of it.

I did have a bit of sleep deprivation but worth it.

And while I had enjoyed being a contractor, owning a share of Cuffed was like being paid to do what I would have been doing in my spare time anyway. Not long after I joined, I overheard some members talking about an upcoming expansion. My ears pricked up, and I edged my way into the conversation.

“Did I hear you mention an expansion?”

“Yeah.” I didn’t know the two omegas who were speaking, but as an established dom and alpha, I could count on a polite response. “It’s exciting, isn’t it?”

“Very.” I looked around the crowded space. “Looks needed.”

“I know, right?” the other omega agreed. They were both littles if I wasn’t mistaken, but currently big—meaning, not in little head space. “I hope they have a giant toy room.” Yep, little for sure.

“Wouldn’t that be great?” I didn’t have to be a daddy to appreciate someone else’s good time. “What would you like to have there?” I chatted with them for a few and left while they were debating whether the train village should be inside or in a garden outdoors for extra excitement. With a glitter waterfall. Littles knew how to enjoy themselves, and it was easy to be swept up in their fun.

But I had an idea coming together in my mind, and I had to find one of the club owners and see if there was an opening for an investor with my particular skills.

“Talon?” I had met him when I joined. “I wonder if I might make an appointment with you and your partners regarding your planned expansion?”

His brows drew together. “I wasn’t aware we were telling people about that yet. But it’s not a big secret.”

“Let me give you this much. I am a general contractor who builds custom homes and business buildings for some of the most affluent in this city. I would show you some pictures, but, of course, my phone is locked up at the front desk.” Members and guests alike left their cells there to protect the privacy of the others.

“Come with me.” Talon led me to the edge of the room and down a hallway. “My office is this way.”

There were a number of doors, and I wondered how many owners there were. Following Talon into a roomy office, I sat opposite him at his desk and he turned his screen toward me and passed me the keyboard.

An hour later, the office was crowded with his fellow owners while I showed them projects I’d completed for clients. They told me about their plans and I made suggestions.

“When we’re ready to entertain bids, I think we’ll be glad to ask you for one,” Talon said.

“How do you feel about an investor?”

Turned out, there was room for another owner, and after we had a chance to get to know one another, I accepted the offer I’d been considering for my company. Until that night, I’d been prepared to say no, but everything came together, and now I was in charge of the expansion project. I’d retained my contractor’s license, and soon we’d begin demo on the buildings on either side.

But until then, I tried to fill in with whatever needed doing. Sometimes I was a dungeon monitor, I’d learned to order for the bar, the kitchen...if someone needed time off. I enjoyed learning all the different positions. And I felt more at home than even when I owned my company all by myself. Cuffed nurtured so much more of me

than my kink. Although that part, the impact play, was there and important as well.

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Julian

Sitting in the break room, staring down at my striped lunch bag, I suddenly had the ick.

I poured a second cup of coffee and drank a bottle of water with some electrolytes and, by the time I was done with those, I was ready to dig into my chicken salad on a croissant with gusto. I usually kept on top of hydration, but sometimes I didn't make enough of an effort.

About halfway through my sandwich, a few other nurses came in and sat at a table in the middle of the room. I occupied a table near the window, trying to soak up some of the filtered sunlight any way I could. Since we worked mixed shifts, sometimes day and night got mixed up in my brain. It was less than ideal.

The group of nurses from a department I didn't have much to do with, geriatrics, immediately began sharing pictures with each other, playing musical phones, oohing and aahing over the screens. I tried to mind my own business, but all their chatter caught my attention. I knew a couple of them casually but didn't know most.

"We can't just walk in," one of them—I thought his name was Finn—said. "You have to buy a membership."

"For how long?" another asked. "A year? I don't know if I want to invest in a whole year. What if I don't like it? What if it's not my thing?"

A year's membership? Were they talking about a gym? A country club? Their

expressions were excited and most of them were blushing. No one in my circle blushed over a country club membership. Then again, my circle was small, and I liked it that way.

“All I can find are pictures of the outside and of people in their club wear going in and coming out. What if the inside is disappointing? We all make pretty good money, but this is an investment in something we don’t even know if we will be into.”

Club wear?

The first nurse whose cheeks were reddest, Finn, added, “I heard a rumor that soon there will be a waiting list. A waiting list. Only incredible places have waiting lists. I’ve even heard a rumor that they bought the properties on either side and are about to expand.” He sure seemed to know a lot about the place.

“What’s the website?” someone asked.

I shouldn’t have eavesdropped, but the conversation was intriguing.

“Let’s look it up. The place is called Cuffed.”

“Oh, and the owners...” Finn winked at the others with a know-it-all smirk. “I hear there are a lot of them, each mysterious, and they pass through the club like shadows. They will know exactly what they are doing with an omega.”

Another nurse, a middle-aged omega, patted the table and grinned. “I say we go. All of us. We can see if we can get a visitor’s pass. Let’s go. Have a good time.”

I picked up my phone to look up the website. A glance showed my break was over. I stuffed the last bite of my croissant in my mouth while I tucked my granola bar and apple into the bag for later. If my circle was larger, maybe I could have asked to go

with them, but I didn't even know what the place was, much less if I wanted to go.

So why was I intrigued? So much so, that on my break a few hours later, I stepped out to the waiting room and looked up Cuffed.

Oh.

No wonder they were blushing.

An adult club. A place that promised freedom. From judgement. To explore. Freedom to be who you were.

I soon found a forum-style website where there was a lot of conversation about the place and the owners. Maybe this was where Finn got all his information. There was something for everyone, one commenter stated. Were they a member or just trying to sound like they knew more than they did?

What might that something be for me? It had been years since I'd had a partner or even a night of sex. All my experience was pure vanilla. Not even a slap on the ass.

I'd always secretly wanted more in the bedroom but never had the time or the reason to explore it. And my partners never suggested anything outside the ordinary to me. Maybe that's why they hadn't lasted? Did I want something more...kink? Now I was blushing.

By the time I finished my shift and got home, my mind was filled with ideas. One idea. I would request a guest pass and go. For myself. To see what else was out there. My days off for the past few months or so had been spent laying around doing not a lot of anything besides chores and laundry and catching up on TV shows, but those things didn't accomplish much, social-wise.

None of it helped me find my mate.

I put my phone down for a while, thinking the matter over before I picked up my laptop and took the leap. Either I would go into Cuffed and find something new about myself, or I would hate it. Either way, at least I would gain some life experience.

In three days, I had a night off. Actually a whole forty-eight hours off, at least, on paper. The club had varying hours, but the pass had to be used in thirty days. I made a promise to myself.

I would get to Cuffed one way or another, but in my gut, I felt like the sooner I got there, the better. Strange instinct in regard to a sex club, but I couldn't deny it.

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Andreas

My office was every bit as nice as any of the other owners, but it was still not large enough for everything it had to contain, and I'd gradually taken over the conference room. Although I'd sold my company and the building it inhabited, I'd had many supplies at home, like easels. The long, glossy table was ringed with them. Even though the demo had not begun, we were well along in the planning of the new wings of the club. By taking the adjacent structures down to the meter walls, we were able to avoid a lot of the nightmares involved in "new construction." Instead, our work would be classified as a remodel, saving us tens or maybe even hundreds of thousands of dollars. And we were connecting only with pathways and elevated walkways, giving us space for some really special spaces our members were dreaming of.

"What are you working on now?" Jabez, our resident healer stood in the conference room doorway, a small grin ticking up his lips. "You know the club is jumping, and you could be out there enjoying yourself."

"Hmmm?" I stepped back from the easel I'd been studying. "I wish I knew more about landscaping, but I do know some who are great at it."

"Don't we need to get the demo part done and maybe the building and remodeling before we worry about that?" Jabez came in and stood beside me and took in the drawings. "Wait, that's not landscaping."

"No." I contemplated the drawing some more. "It's a challenge to get playground equipment for our littles, but I think it will be worth the effort, don't you?"

“Genius.” He stepped back a couple of feet. “How did you come up with the idea?”

“They asked.” I shrugged. “And I thought, why not? But it took me a while to find someone who makes custom playground equipment locally.”

“Oh, yeah, I imagine. Bronson and Tate are going to be blown away.”

“Tate has been giving me input.” His daddy, Bronson, was another owner here. “Actually, they both have.”

“That explains the glitter motif in the powder coating. Must have been hard finding the right size for our big littles.”

“It wasn’t that I couldn’t find anything that would support full-sized boys and girls; it was just that they were all so boring. Basically porch swings when I wanted, well, what you see here. Slides and monkey bars, all kinds of things for climbing on and real swings that can send the rider up into the sky.”

“Is that a zipline?”

We talked for a few more minutes before Jabez was called away to deal with something, and I decided to shut down the plans for the night and go out to the floor myself. It was a standing joke that my kink was construction—and I couldn’t blame anyone for thinking that. But it was easy to get caught up in this project. Other than my home and the building I’d handed over to the new owners of my company, this was the first time I’d gotten to do something I had a real stake in. All the buildings I’d worked on for my customers had been to their tastes, and my partners here had been very good about letting me run with my ideas.

We’d have the little playground on one side of the existing one, and a more mature sort of outdoor space on the other side. All would be protected by high stone walls

from prying eyes and nosy passersby. It was going to be so good.

Closing the door behind me, I headed for the main floor. Not on duty at the moment, I could watch for an empty station or even skip the line for one as an owner—not that I would take a member's time. But it was kind of nice to know I could... The crowd tonight was lighter than usual, and I strolled around taking in the various activities, considering whether I wanted to play or not. As I paused near each couple or threesome, I was aware of the eyes of various single omegas watching me. I'd been here long enough that they knew I wouldn't welcome being approached, preferring to invite someone to play myself, but the longer I wandered, the less likely it became that I would be doing that this evening.

Each scene was being played out by people who seemed so in harmony with one another. Not all of them were couples, but many were. And the others had a rhythm and feel indicating they were regular partners for their particular kinks.

Pausing by the spiderweb, which was unoccupied and one of my favorite stations, I tried to summon the interest to pick an omega to pass the time with, but I just couldn't. I'd heard a vanilla friend say once that she got no satisfaction from sex unless there was a strong emotional component, and I wondered if that was starting to be me as well.

Certainly it made things better, more intense, but it had never been a deal-breaker for me when I was not in a relationship before. With zero mates on the horizon, if this was more than a one-night grumpiness, it was going to be a real problem.

And even if I did find someone, what guarantee did I have that they wouldn't leave? What guarantee did any of these couples and throuples have?

None.

Turning on a heel, I went to my office and slumped behind my desk, waiting to get the energy together to go home. I didn't even feel like working on the plans for the expansion. Nobody at Cuffed needed a downer like me around tonight.

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Julian

Luck was on my side. I had my phone on all day expecting to be called into work. If I made plans, the goddess would intervene on most occasions but not today. Maybe she wanted me to go to this club.

I hung my outfit for the night on the outside of my closet.

All that was left to do was eat.

I sat down at the table for a BLT and some chips and an electrolyte drink. My nervousness built up as I showered and got ready to go. Once I had my clothes on, I checked myself out in the mirror. The man who'd helped me at the specialty shop told me that I looked hot. He was mated, he said, but he still had eyes.

I thought it was strange. I was sure that when I found my alpha, they would be the only one I'd have eyes for.

I put a coat on over my outfit and met the driver outside. I didn't like to pay for a rideshare, but I also didn't want to drive home in the middle of the night—assuming I stayed long enough.

My guest pass was in my phone. Of course, after tonight, it would expire but for now, it was my secret. By the time I arrived at Cuffed, my stomach was twisted. My breaths were shallow. Mind spiraling in a hundred ways.

“Gonna get out?” the driver grumbled after we'd been stopped in front of the building

for over a minute. I didn't know why I was stalling. I usually dove headfirst into new things.

Coming to Cuffed felt like a shift in my life.

"Thank you." I completed the payment and got out. I'd barely shut the door when he drove away. Perhaps he wasn't so happy about driving someone to a sex club. Didn't matter. I was here now.

"Good evening, Mr. Alonso," a man said as I walked in. He wore a leather vest over a white shirt and black pants.

"How did you know my name?" I asked.

"Ah, we receive a list of our new members and passholders. You filled out paperwork, correct?"

I nodded. "Yes."

"Excellent. May I see your visitor's pass?" He held out his hand.

"If you know who I am, why do you need to see the code?"

"To scan it." He accepted my phone, ran it over a scanner, and turned around, unlocking a cubby where he placed my device. "You're all set."

"My phone?" Unease prickled at the base of my spine. Was this some kind of scam?

"Did you read the information we sent?" He cast a severe glance my way.

"Yes...well, most...some..."

“If you’d read it all, you would know that all phones belonging to members and guests are locked up during your visit. For privacy reasons.”

My cheeks warmed then burned. What a way to make an impression. “Can I get my phone back long enough to read the attachment more carefully?” I didn’t want to make a gaffe that would have me out the door due to carelessness.

“Of course.” He retrieved it and handed it back to me. “Why don’t you go sit down on the chair in the corner there and I’ll wait in case you have any questions.”

I did as he suggested then stood up. “Thank you for your patience, sir.” Because one of the things I’d just read mentioned calling doms and/or alphas sir or maybe master so and so, if you knew their name. “I appreciate your consideration.

“Would you like a guided tour, or would you prefer to wander and explore on your own?”

He wasn’t flirting. All business.

“I think I’d like to explore on my own if that’s okay.”

“Absolutely.” His smile lit up. “I hope you have a wonderful night. Please don’t hesitate to find an employee or a dungeon monitor if you have any questions or concerns.”

I nodded and moved from the foyer into the club. Subtle lighting came from fixtures on the walls, and the music was loud around the bar. I didn’t do alcohol. Wouldn’t touch the stuff with a ten-foot pole. Not only had I grown up with one alcoholic father, but I watched my other one suffer the life of a husband of a drinker. Add that to the number of babies I saw at work who were born addicted or had issues caused by drinking during pregnancy and, to me, liquor was nothing but poison.

Taking a right, I entered a large open space. There were couches and low tables, booths and other seating, but I followed the flow of people past them. The first was a fire display. Interesting, but didn't tickle my fancy. Then there were the spanking benches. This time, I was intrigued but felt like I wanted to move around more.

I sucked in a breath when I came to the St. Andrew's cross, but I was soon distracted by the sounds of whimpers coming from a nearby corner. I followed the sounds to an omega without a shirt, crouched down and crying.

Nurse instincts kicking in, I crouched to be eye level. "Are you okay? What's your name?"

He squinted at me, eyes red, tears streaming down his face. "Rhys. Do you work here?"

"No, but I saw you. Do you need help?"

He shrugged. "Right now, I..." He shook his head. "I said the safe word. I swear I did. He ignored me. He promised he would stop if I said the safe word."

Some alphas were assholes. They were few and far between, but in instances like this, I was reminded they lurked in places that were supposed to be safe.

"How about some water? Maybe there's a healer here who can look you over."

"What I need is another cocktail and not to be attracted to assholes." The first wouldn't help. The last...yeah.

"Let's get you a water and find a healer or a first aid station."

"Thank you. What's your name?" he asked.

“I’m Julian. I’m a nurse. I’ve got you.” I helped him up and, after he cried for a few minutes on my shoulder, I scanned the room for an employee but couldn’t find one. I sighed. “Did you come with friends or alone?”

“With my boyfriend.”

Oh, right. The asshole.

“Come on. We’ll find someone to help.”

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Andreas

I sat in my office, head buried in my arms on my desk, for a good ten minutes before Jabez' voice cut through my pity party. "What's going on in here?"

"Oh, hi." I lifted my face to meet his stern healer mien. "Just feeling sorry for myself. No need for a healer's services."

"Really?" He stepped into the office and pointed at the guest chair in front of my desk. "May I?"

"Take a load off. How is your evening going since we last spoke?"

He sat down and crossed his leg over his knee, leaning back in a relaxed stance I envied. Although I felt great about a lot of things in my life, and I knew I'd made progress since my former partner left me, I was always just a little on edge, hoping I was doing the best for my son and building our life together. "I'm great, but you were so enthusiastic and having a great time just a little while ago. What happened?"

"Are you psychic?" Some shifters had a greater or lesser level of this ability.

"No, I saw you wandering around out there with a thundercloud over your head before you came in here."

"As I said, it's just a mood. I don't need you to waste your valuable time on me."

"I have nothing better to do. My omega is busy with his friends having a snack, and

I'm not hungry. Technically, I'm not on duty, and I am not feeling especially inspired to play anyway. So, why don't you tell me a little about what made you go from the happy alpha working on a playground for littles to the puddle of gloom I see before me? These are also for anyone else who wants to use them, right?"

I nodded. "Of course. I think there is enough child in most of us to enjoy what we are building. After all, most people like rides at amusement parks, don't they?"

"Exactly. I didn't realize we were going to have that feature in our gardens, and just hearing your plans put a spring in my step, too. You are so good for us, here. Let me offer you help when you need it."

"I-I am afraid that there will never be another significant person for me. Reed's dad, as you know, left when he was so tiny, and other than scenes with omegas, I haven't had anything more than that."

Jabez nodded but didn't interrupt. For which I was grateful.

"For a while it was enough, to spend those short times with the omegas, to experience what we both need in the moment without any long-term commitments."

"But now it's not?" he added when I didn't say anything more.

"Right. Seeing those people out there, they all seemed to have connections beyond what I'd experienced. And they aren't all in relationships, so why does it seem better?"

"I can only share with you what I feel. And you can do with it what you would like." He uncrossed his legs and sat up straighter, eying me with seriousness. "Would you like to hear?"

“I found myself wondering how many of those happy alphas and omegas were going to rip one another’s hearts out. I know it’s not common with mates or even playmates, but it did happen to me, and it hurt so much.”

Jabez’ eyes clouded, and he drew a deep breath before speaking. “You don’t know my story, do you?”

“Did you have an omega leave, too?”

“My friend, it’s not your fault that you don’t know because you have haven’t been here long, and it’s probably not common knowledge among the general membership. My omega didn’t tell me he wasn’t ever supposed to get pregnant. He’d known this almost all his life, but he chose to take a chance without allowing me input into that decision.”

“I take it this was not Beale.” I chewed my lower lip, afraid of what he had to share.

“No.” His voice was so low, I had to strain to hear it. “It wasn’t.”

“What happened? You don’t have to say if you don’t want, if it’s too hard.”

“My omega died because of that decision, taking our child with him.” He swallowed hard. “And I thought I could never find any kind of happiness again. That I could never trust again because it was a lie of omission that cost me my family.”

‘Oh, Jabez, I am so sorry. My omega left, but if I’d lost our baby...how do you go on? How did you ever let Beale into your heart?’

This brought a dry chuckle. “You know Beale. How could I have resisted him? The Goddess had mercy on my broken heart and sent me someone to help it heal. But it wasn’t easy, and it was a near thing. I was terrified of being hurt again. I knew I’d

never survive it.”

We sat in silence for a few minutes before I processed what he’d said, enough to say, “I can see the love and peace between you and Beale.”

“Yes, I was very fortunate to have a second chance at happiness.”

“And you don’t worry about him leaving you, umm, one way or another?”

“It took me some time to accept the gift of Fate because I was very afraid, but at some point, I just couldn’t reject happiness.”

He gave me a lot to think about before he left me to myself, and I decided to do my mulling while wandering the club floor. It was more crowded now than earlier, but not too bad, and I worked my way around, exchanging bits of conversation with the members and staff. Although I wasn’t ready to be with anyone at the moment, the company of friends felt good.

Everything seemed fine until I heard someone crying and came upon an omega comforting another who seemed very upset. I started over to see what was going on and try to help, but my helpful instincts were submerged beneath my wolf’s calls of mate . He was focused on one of the omegas...and I didn’t have to ask which one.

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Julian

I scented the alpha before I saw him. He was all apples and cardamom, an apple pie and a chai latte mixed together into the most delicious dessert.

But when I looked to my right to find the owner of all my favorite scents, a god approached.

I turned my focus back on Rhys who now had his arm around my waist and his head resting on my shoulder. We were in a low-light area and even with my shifter sight, I couldn't tell exactly where he was injured.

"Can I be of assistance?" The alpha's bass tone wrapped around my torso and squeezed, giving me a hug I didn't know I needed.

"Is this the alpha?" I asked Rhys, ignoring my body's reaction. "Is this your boyfriend?"

Rhys shook his head. "No. That's not him."

The alpha put his palms up. "Here. Let me help. I'm Andreas. I...work here." Before I could register everything, Andreas scooped up Rhys, honeymoon style, and ticked his head, which I assumed was an order to follow him.

I followed the two of them through the main room and down a plain hallway to a door built into the wall. Andreas pressed on a slit in the wall that no one would notice if they weren't looking. The door opened slowly and he walked inside a room that

reminded me of the nurse's office at school, outfitted with a modified exam table and a wall of cabinets as well as a desk occupied by another alpha. "Jabez, you busy?" he called.

The alpha looked up from a computer screen. "Not at this moment. Bring him in."

"What's your name?" Andreas asked Rhys, but somewhere along the line, the omega had fallen asleep or passed out. Which one, I wasn't sure.

"His name is Rhys," I provided once Andreas put his limp body on a bed. "Are you the healer?"

"I am." Jabez went over to the omega and spoke to him, patting his cheeks until he awoke. He asked him some questions then nodded at the answers. "I think he is okay. He just needs rest and water. Andreas, can you order him a ride, please?"

When I looked over at the alpha who had brought Rhys in, his eyes were trained on me. Eventually, he cleared his throat and pulled out his phone and then put it back. Had he been checking me out? I didn't have a problem with it, of course. I had been checking him out since the moment I saw him. He was tall but lean. Strong jaw. Full lips. Piercing green eyes. Not at all my type before tonight, but seeing him changed my mind. Maybe I'd been wrong about my type all along.

"You two can go on and enjoy the club. I promise I'll take care of him."

Rhys was drinking a bottle of cold water from the fridge in tiny sips as Jabez directed. From a nurse's standpoint, he seemed good. He might have been physically hurt a bit, but most of it was emotional. Nothing but time and maybe therapy could cure that.

I walked over to the bed and put my hand over his. "Take care of yourself, okay?"

“Thank you, Julian. I really appreciate your help.”

I nodded and began to walk out with the intention of going home. I was intrigued by the different visuals and ways people explored their sexuality, but I didn't know where to begin. I wanted to do more than watch.

“Julian?” Andreas' voice resounded behind me. “Wait up, please.”

Pausing, I turned around. “Is he okay?”

“Rhys? Yes, Jabez will take care of him. I was wondering if you wanted a tour?”

I shrugged. A tour from this tower of an alpha? “I told the man at the front that I would explore on my own, but are you offering to give me one?”

He smiled but soon after, killed it, his lips pulling down as though he remembered he wasn't supposed to be smiling. “I would love to give you a tour. After all, you are here on a guest pass. Might as well get your evening's worth.”

“How did you know?” I asked.

“Our membership is not so large that we don't know if there is a guest or a new member on the property.” The alpha extended an arm, and I thought for a second he was reaching for me. Time slowed. My stomach became a knot of nerves and yet, a new hunger rose, one that wanted his touch. Needed him to embrace me. Craved it like my next breath.

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Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 7:47 am

Andreas

I sent a message to the omega so he would have my phone number, but I hadn't heard from him. Not that he'd said he would call or text, but I had hoped for at least a got it reply. Things were busy at home, with a parents' event at preschool and a field trip to the local children's museum. A pediatrician's appointment and meetings with multiple subcontractors and the architect as well.

Although most of my working hours were at night while the club was closed, all of these things took place during the day, throwing off my whole schedule. And it didn't help that when I did lie down to try to catnap, the image of that sweet, sweet omega helping the one in trouble bloomed in my mind.

Would it be all right to call him?

We knew one another only from the club, which was a work situation for me, and I'd always followed the adage, don't shit where you eat. But there was a big difference between dating an employee in an ordinary business and going out with a member, or guest, at a club geared toward interpersonal interactions of the kink kind. Sometimes I thought Cuffed did a better job of matchmaking than any online dating app. And most of my fellow owners had met their mate here in one way or another.

So it was all right to call or text and ask him out.

Right?

Wrong?

I wasn't even sure anymore.

Especially because I was willing to live alone forever, but I was not willing to deprive my son of an omega father. His own wanted nothing to do with us, and I often felt like he missed out on aspects of parenting with just me.

My wolf might be chanting that he was our true mate, our fated, but Reed was the important person in this equation. And I wanted him to have everything I could give him, including the love of two fathers if I could find the right one. This was something I did not share with others and tried not to think about too much myself because it had sounded like an impossible dream. But the moment I saw that omega, saw Julian, helping the other omega who was in distress, his kindness shone through. He stayed with him while I got him to the healer's area adjacent to Jabez' office, concerned and kind and calm.

In comparison to Reed's dad...well, there was no comparison. He'd run at the first sign of trouble, leaving the hospital after our child's birth without even waiting for the healer to release him. By the time I found out he'd gone and rushed home to check on him, he'd packed up his clothes and left.

I called him over and over until he finally answered the phone and told me it was all too much for him.

"You are probably tired. And you should still be in the hospital. Tell me where you are, and I'll come and pick you up." He'd just given birth and while it was not a C-section, it was also not remotely in the realm of the birth plan he'd spent so many hours working on. That had to be a disappointment.

The ex, as I thought of him now, the omega who had been so into having this child that he'd gone on paternity leave in his fourth month said, "It's all too real for me. I'll be in touch." And he disconnected.

Stunned, confused, and heartbroken, I returned to the hospital to be with our son. Ordinarily, I might have pursued the omega. We lived together, were in a relationship, and he'd never indicated in any way that he didn't find happiness in our life.

I had been under the impression—one given to me by the omega—that he was on suppressors, so the pregnancy had been a surprise to me, but I'd been swept up in his whole journey of carrying our child.

And now, it was real .

We'd had some rough days and nights, Reed and I, after his birth, so I had to let his other daddy go his own way. On some level, I'd always known he was a very imaginative male, and his whole pregnancy had been a little over the top, but I'd never seen him taking a powder hours after our very tiny baby made his entrance. Maybe it made it easier to say goodbye because my love for Reed was instant, intense, and he needed me.

My personal life went on hold.

And he was still my priority. Julian had real daddy potential, and I hoped that even if my wolf was wrong and he was not my mate, his reaction was due do the fact that he was a perfect fit for our little family.

I called up and asked him out to dinner.

And he said yes.

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Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 7:47 am

Julian

It had been three days since I saw Andreas in person, but I had seen him plenty in my mind. He played a starring role in my fantasies and had since that night at Cuffed. Dreaming of all kinds of things he would do to me and vice versa.

His broad hand slapping my ass hard.

The sting of a crop whipping against my bare skin.

But first, dinner.

I didn't dress for the club. Instead, I wore a button-down dark-navy shirt along with some dark-gray pants that fit me well. Not too dressed up but not completely casual either. The night I'd met Andreas, he was wearing all black, which the employees tended to do, but black looked so much better on him than most. Perhaps it was the way the inky shirt set off his green eyes or maybe it fit so well with his demeanor. Either way, I hoped he'd wear black again tonight.

We agreed to meet at the restaurant because I wanted to drive myself. I had a feeling the date with Andreas would go well, but I'd been wrong before.

Then again, my wolf was giving me signals. Signals I didn't want to face yet. It seemed soon for that kind of talk he was pushing at me but then again, every sign was proving him right.

Andreas might just be my mate.

According to my wolf, he was.

Tonight was the night I would hopefully find out.

I arrived at the restaurant right on time, and Andreas stood outside, looking in the opposite direction from where I came. He had his arms crossed over his tight chest and one of his feet tapped against the sidewalk. He had glasses on tonight which, although it seemed impossible, made him appear even sexier.

“Looking for someone?” I asked as I approached him. He turned and I got the best gift, a genuine smile, though it disappeared as soon as it came. He seemed determined not to be happy. I would’ve loved to get to the bottom of that.

“I was, but I found him, or he found me. Good evening, Julian. You look lovely.”

Heat rushed to my cheeks and to other parts of my body. “Thank you. You look devilishly handsome.”

He chuckled low and deep, tugging on my heartstrings. “Devilishly, huh? We’ll see how naughty we can get later on, but let’s go eat. You’ll need your strength.”

Goddess, that promise sent shivers down my spine.

We went in and, to my surprise, Andreas had made a reservation. It wasn’t a fancy place, but it had soft lighting and private tables spaced out enough so that no one felt crowded. I hadn’t dined there before, but I had passed it several times driving around the city.

The waiter went over the specials, and we decided to start with the bruschetta. Andreas ordered a glass of wine but I asked for water.

“Should I change my order of wine?” he asked. “The last thing I want is to make you uncomfortable if it’s an issue.”

“I don’t personally have an issue with drinking. I’ve seen the repercussions of alcoholism in my life and in my work. It’s a choice I made a long time ago. Please, enjoy your wine.”

He flagged down the waiter and asked for water instead before returning his attention to me. “You said in your work. What do you do for a living?”

I was nervous, but Andreas seemed completely cool and confident. He looked me in the eye. Really listened to me as I told him about my work as a nurse, but I left out the specifics. My work was heavy, and sometimes I waited until I knew people a bit more before sharing all of that.

“That’s admirable, but I bet there’s a lot of heartache that goes along with it. I imagine you get attached sometimes.”

No one else got that. They thought there was no way I could get attached to a child who wasn’t mine or was only in the NICU for a few weeks or days, but my heart got invested as soon as I laid eyes on the little ones. Being brought into this world and in a new place was hard enough without adding medical issues or feeding or breathing problems.

Then again, he simply meant patients. He didn’t know he was speaking of the precious babies.

“My patients mean a lot to me.”

He nodded. “Oh, I wanted to let you know that Rhys reported back once he got home. He told Jabez he’s okay.”

I had to admit, it was the update I wanted. I'd let go, thinking I would never know unless I saw him at the club again, but I was happy to hear it. "That's great. He was with someone not kind. He deserves better." I paused. "Tell me about yourself, Andreas. You work at Cuffed, that I know. What else?"

"I more than work there, actually. I'm an owner. There are several of us."

"Oh." I reflected back to the conversation from the break room and how the guys were talking about the elusive owners. And here I was, sitting across from one of them. "But you were monitoring, right?"

"No. I just happened to be on the floor. I didn't see the abuse your friend endured or I would've stopped it. We try but we can't see everything."

"I'm sure you would've stopped it." Those weren't just words; I felt like he would. He might be strong and had a powerful presence, but it was in a way where he was a protector, not an abuser.

We ordered steaks and talked more about his work at the club and my nursing, but I felt like we were only scraping the surface. Like there was a big part of Andreas that he was purposefully holding back. I respected it, of course. I wouldn't pressure him. Some people were more private than others. He would tell me in time.

At least, I hoped we'd reached that level of trust because as the night went on, I was falling for Andreas. Hard.

We planned to go to the club in a few days, when we were both free. And this time, I agreed to let him pick me up.

Andreas

I tried not to let it be such a big deal, but after his preference to drive himself before, I was very pleased that Julian agreed to allow me to pick him up for our evening at the club. I appreciated his independence but wanted to spend as much time with the omega as possible. He had a busy working schedule as a nurse, and, of course, I had the club in the evening and sometimes during the day as well as my son and all being a dad entailed.

I so enjoyed our dinner together, and it half killed me not to go in when Julian invited me, but I had Roger again for a babysitter and unlike Lilianne, he did not sleep over. Funny, I'd always thought if I did stay at someone's place for obvious reasons, she'd be fine with my not coming home. I had a long talk with Roger before letting him sit with Reed that night, and I'd promised to be home at a decent hour so he could get a good night's rest before an early exam.

Besides, while a night in a hot omega's bed was great, there was nothing light and unimportant about Julian's company. I wanted to take our time a bit and spend at least one evening together at the club. Reed came first, and I would be fine with someone who was not perfect for me, but not if they found my kink repugnant. It was a big part of myself, and giving it up meant shutting down a very important piece of my soul. And a partial alpha did neither my son nor a potential partner any good.

For me, the club was an investment, a great place to exercise my skills as a contractor, and where I could let free a part of me that needed an outlet.

As I drove toward Julian's home, I took comfort from the fact that he had indicated

an interest in trying out some impact play with me, and he had spent a little time at Cuffed and seen others play. But until he had a bit of experience himself, he couldn't know how he would react. I wanted him to have that before we proceeded any further with our relationship.

Julian was waiting outside his apartment for me, and by the time I climbed out of the truck and opened the passenger door, he was ready to climb in. I would have preferred to knock on his door and escort him to the truck, but this omega had an independence I admired, and I'd do nothing to defeat that.

I patted his hand before shutting him inside and taking my place behind the wheel. We didn't have a long drive, but we exchanged pleasant conversation as we went. If we kept going the way we were, I'd have to introduce him to Reed, but not quite yet.

We were fairly early for the club, but I figured that way, we could spend a little time in the conversation area before things got too lively. But ,no sooner did we come in the door than I was called into the office to speak with someone about the demo. Julian came with me and waited on my office couch, and by the time I finished the call, the main floor was jumping. Figuratively and literally.

"Is that a trampoline?" Julian stopped by a new and likely setup. This station often had a real variety of things going on. Sometimes visitors from other clubs would come and show something they enjoyed. We'd had the makers of unique dungeon furniture showing off their creations with live models. All sorts of things.

"Seems like it." I bent to read a placard on a small easel in front of the trampoline, confirming what I thought. "Seems they are going to be demonstrating some very athletic sex moves you can do on the equipment. Interesting?"

He wrinkled his nose. "Honestly, that sounds terrifying. Did you want to watch?"

I shrugged. “I’ve seen something similar before, and all I kept thinking was that I’d wrench my back and end up in traction. I think it’s best saved for gymnasts. Walking on?”

“Absolutely.”

I reached for his hand and tugged him into my side before wrapping an arm around his waist and guiding him from one station to another, explaining if he had questions and generally having the best time I’d ever had in the club because he was with me. “What do you think about the spiderweb?” I pointed to the device, currently occupied by a middle-aged omega wearing only boxer shorts. “It’s something I like using.”

We watched the dom plying a whip on the buttocks and thighs of the omega, his shorts shredding with each lick to reveal a surprisingly firm bottom considering the rest of the omega. Finally, Julian said, “Would it have to be a whip?”

“No.” I was firm on that. “Nothing has to be anything. Play is just that, a scene we agree on and we both want to do. If you’d like to try some things, can I make a suggestion?”

His gaze was still fixed on the scene. “Mm-hmm.”

“Omega, look at me.”

He jerked his head toward me, blinking fast. “Sorry, sir.”

“I reserved one of the private rooms with a few pieces of furniture in it. We can go there, and you can explore the items up close and then, if you’re comfortable, maybe try a little?”

“Okay.” He spoke so fast, I chuckled in response. “I mean, okay, sir.”

“Very eager, omega.” I gave him a squeeze. “Come with me.”

I led him out of the main area where the heavy beat of the music from the bar filtered in, punctuated by the crack of whips, slap of floggers against taut skin, cries of pain and pleasure. As soon as we stepped into the hallway at the back, we passed some of the areas like the little room and the pet play arena then climbed a flight of stairs to where the nicest of the private rooms lay at the very top of the building.

“This way.” I opened the last door and allowed him to go inside first.

“It’s so quiet here,” he marveled as I closed the door behind us. “You’d never know there’s a whole club down there with a live band.”

“Some of the rooms are well soundproofed. The little room, for one. They have their own soundtracks for their playful times. But we have a system in here, and we can listen to the band and the activities below or jazz or rock or lounge music, classical... Feel like music?”

“I don’t, sir.” He offered me a faint smile. “I’d rather just hear your voice.”

“Then why don’t you take your shirt off and I’ll give you a little bit of the impact play we discussed. If you’re still up for it?”

This particular room was more of a bedroom than a dungeon, and I hoped it was making him comfortable. It was nice for a beginner, I thought.

“Just my shirt?”

“Naughty omega, are you trying to tell me how to set up a scene?”

“No, because that would be bad, right, sir?”

“Not so much bad as not how things work. It’s called topping from the bottom. But before we do anything else, sit here on the edge of the bed and let’s talk about what we might do tonight and what you are willing to try or would rather wait on. At first, we’ll always do that because I need to know what your hard passes are, etc.”

He still had his shirt on, but I let that pass while I talked to him about different kinds of floggers and canes and all sorts of toys. But the only one I actually got out of the chest at the foot of the bed was a very soft-tailed flogger that was more pleasure than pain. A first experience was critical to an omega’s life in our world. It didn’t mean there wouldn’t be pain later, but we could build up to it. Once we’d agreed on what our scene tonight would consist of and I’d ensured he knew about safe words and when to use them, I helped him out of his shirt and had him lie face-down on the bed.

“Ready, omega?” I stroked my palms down his back, a gentle massage that grew firmer. “Good?”

“Amazing.” He rolled his shoulders and buried his face in the pillows. “But I thought you were going to flog me.”

“With this?” I trailed the soft leather over his bare skin, feeling him shiver under its caress. “It’s just a gentle touch.”

Gradually I moved from stroking to tapping. “Let me help you lower your jeans.”

I worked the flogger with finesse, gradually easing his shorts down so I could see the rosy color rise on his ass cheeks. He was trembling with arousal by the end, but I couldn’t let the inevitable happen. Not now. Not yet.

Even if it was killing me.

But he took what I gave him and told me on the way home that he was looking

forward to more. “I liked it when there was that little sting toward the end.”

“I like that your skin takes color beautifully.”

“Does it?” He giggled. “You’re going to have to find a way for me to see that next time. Like a mirror.”

Julian

“Thank you for such an amazing evening,” I said. My fingers ached, wanting to reach over and hold his hand. Tonight had been incredible. One minute, I’d fantasized about all the things I wanted Andreas to do to me, and the other, they were happening. He was gentle yet commanding, and I’d been more turned on than I’d been in my entire life as he drove through the streets of the city like it was his second or third job.

“Thank you for trusting me, Julian. I enjoyed myself as well.”

Enjoyed himself? In my mind, we’d shared an earth-shaking experience. My body still buzzed from the aftermath of the impact and ached for more from him. Ached for all of him, actually. “Oh. Good.”

He glanced over at me, restraint in his eyes. He kept them on the road for the rest of the trip.

“It’s here.” I pointed to my apartment. I cringed internally, realizing I’d told him my personal code instead of the guest code at the complex’s entry gate. Sure, I trusted this man, but I had to be safe at the same time.

As he pulled into a spot, my cock took the cue and grew uncomfortably swollen. “Sit tight,” Andreas said and got out. He walked across the front of the truck and came over to open my door. When I got out and stood, we were only breaths apart. His green eyes burned into mine and when I reached out to touch his stomach, placing my palms against his rigid abs, he let me.

“Let’s get you inside,” he whispered, but neither of us moved. I was aware that a cool breeze nipped at me, but my body was a furnace.

“Yes, please,” I responded and moved first. Not because I wanted to break the bubble we were in but because I wanted him to get me inside, then I wanted him to get inside me.

We walked up the stairs, his hand on the small of my back. My heart raced. We spoke no words, but sometimes none were needed.

Once we got to the door, I gathered my courage and turned to him. “Want to come in?” I didn’t expect the battle in his gaze. He looked into my apartment and then to me and back again.

There was a hesitation in him that was absent in me. “I have a very early morning, Julian.”

My heartbeat slowed, and a boulder formed in my throat. He didn’t want to come in.

“An early morning. I understand.” I wasn’t asking him to move in or even spend the night. I just wanted him to be with me—to continue the intimacy we’d begun in the club.

Maybe I’d been wrong. I knew what it meant when an alpha claimed an early morning to avoid coming in.

“Can I kiss you good night?” he asked, stepping forward. The mixed signals were maddening.

“Yes.”

He bent, and his lips touched mine. It started out as a chaste kiss, but soon, his tongue was in my mouth. I let out a moan, leaning in to him, but he pulled back. The sound broke our bliss, or maybe the sound reminded him that he wasn't interested.

It sure as hell felt like he was interested.

“Good night, Julian.”

He walked away and I completely deflated. He wasn't interested. Maybe I'd done something wrong at the club, but all his signals and praise told me otherwise. Wouldn't he have told me if I had put him off?

No. I wasn't going to do that to myself. What we'd experienced together at Cuffed was real and powerful. It challenged all my ideas about what I liked and didn't like, sexually speaking. The heat between us had been real. The palpitations of passion were true.

But, for some reason, he didn't want to extend it.

The problem didn't lie with me.

Before he got back into his car, he looked up at me and, for a split second, I thought he might change his mind. My wolf howled inside me wanting him to, more than anything. I wasn't even asking for sex, though that was on the table for me. I wanted him to hold me. Touch me. Kiss me. Lie together and simply look into each other's eyes.

I watched his truck until I could see it no more and went inside. I was numb from the letdown and on the verge of tears.

Before going to bed, I showered and while doing so, debated whether or not to text

him. I decided against it, choosing to believe his words. Maybe he really did have an early morning and I was assuming too much.

I did that sometimes. I thought everyone did.

I prepared everything for the next day's work. I had a midday shift, so I didn't have to go in until almost noon.

Too bad I'd be waking up alone.

Andreas

I wanted to stay so badly, but as a responsible dad who once again had a babysitter who wasn't staying over, I couldn't. But this time, I would have stayed if I could have. Instead, I headed for home, paid the sitter, and sent them on their way and flopped onto the sofa to pout. I knew a lot of single dads who never seemed to have a hard time finding a way for casual sex to happen, but with my wolf chanting mate louder and louder, there was not a thing casual about Julian and Ime

He was everything I ever wanted, kind enough to be a dad to Reed—once I was ready to introduce them and see that for sure it would be a weight off me. But he was a tentative kinkster, so turned on by what we did together that it had taken most of my self-control not to take him right there in that bed.

In truth, we only had it for a limited time, and that helped. I wanted this male in my arms for a lot longer than the twenty minutes we had left. So, while it had been one of the most amazing, if mild, scenes of my life, and I was extremely excited to see where it would go, I was having a heck of a time with pacing myself and what was growing between me and the omega.

Whenever things got tough or I got down, I remembered how early Reed came and how fortunate I was to not only have him with me but in good health. The healers at the time had been very concerned about what types of delays or other problems he could have experienced due to his early birth. But Reed had caught up to himself quickly and was now ahead of many of the milestones the healers had me watching for.

They said his being a shifter had helped a lot, but when I was sitting with him in the NICU watching him fight, all I could think was how unfair it was that he had to do it with just one of us. What had his omega daddy been thinking?

All that time he was pregnant, he was so incredibly excited and into it, and I would never understand how he'd been able to look into that tiny face and decide to leave. I hadn't had the time or energy to mull that over much then, grateful just to be there with Reed and cuddle him when I was allowed, encourage him with words the rest of the time.

The NICU staff was the best. Of course, the healers were wonderful, but it was the nurses who had the moment-by-moment care of him. I had never seen anything like it, but I'd be so grateful to them for the rest of my life.

Pulling myself out of what was becoming an annoying habit about having pity parties, I dragged myself off the sofa and went to the kitchen to pour a glass of water before heading for bed. On the way, I stopped at the door to Reed's room and slipped inside. My son was sleeping under a light blanket, his cheeks flushed, soft snores emerging from those tiny nostrils. He rested like he did everything else. With gusto.

And every time I thought I couldn't love him any more, I did.

Julian was incredible, but would he work in our family?

Not until I got up the courage to tell him a family existed.

Once burned...

I could risk my heart again, but could I risk my child's?

I needed to think some more.

Julian

My job was filled with ups and down, and today proved the point. Gracie went home right away on my shift, having gained enough weight and showing all the signs of thriving. We gathered around while her parents left with big smiles on their faces. Not all cases were like that, but it was a fantastic start to the workday.

And for me, personally, a much-needed break from my thoughts. I hadn't heard from Andreas since the other night. Two, maybe three days? My schedule had been hectic, so the days sometimes blurred together. I'd taken two double shifts to try to distract myself, but even that didn't help. I'd overanalyzed every moment we had together. Every look. Every brush of skin on skin. Every touch.

I couldn't understand what went wrong. I shook off the thoughts that I'd done something to offend him that night, but they played in the back of my head anyway.

"Everyone, head's-up. We have a preemie coming in. Twenty-eight weeks. Delivery is happening now. Less than thirty minutes, from what I can tell."

"Julian?" Peaches said. She already had six babies, even with Gracie leaving.

"Yeah, I've got it."

After setting up the incubator, I went outside the unit to scrub my hands even though they were already clean. The nurses at the labor-and-delivery desk directed me to which room needed assistance. I opened the door to screams and put on a pair of gloves in preparation.

Baby Joshua was born a few minutes later at a little under two pounds. Dad had some high blood pressure and swelling, so I brought Joshua in a rolling cradle straight to the NICU. He already had an oxygen mask on, simply for the transport.

I focused on him. Cleaning him up. Settling him into an incubator with an IV for fluids. I would wait on the feeding tube for nutrition, giving the dad a chance to try to chest feed. Soon Joshua had a mint-green hat on his head and a clean diaper on. He was clean and his breaths had become more rhythmic. I held him for a few moments as I always did. Going from a warm place he'd stayed in, to a plastic incubator was a hard transition, so I tried to make it as calming as possible. "Here you go. It's nice and warm in here, and all you have to do is concentrate on growing while your papa gets better. You've got this."

"You always give the babies a pep talk. I love that." Peaches came to stand next to me. "We've been doing this so long, but every baby is like the first one, isn't it?"

I nodded. It was. I took care of each baby as though it was not only the first one but like they were mine. I'd always wanted kids. I even had thoughts of Andreas being the father of said babies—that was until he played the early morning card and subsequently ghosted me. It took everything in me not to text him first.

"It's their first time in this world. It has to be difficult. Everyone needs a pep talk now and again."

"That's true. Hey, I've been wanting to ask, are you okay?"

"I'm okay. Why?"

Peaches shrugged. "You seem a little different today. You're here, but you're not. I'm not saying anything negative. You always get everything done, but I can tell."

I shrugged. “I kind of got ghosted by a guy I really liked.”

“But not your mate?” Peaches was human, but she once had a shifter mate. It was rare to have a human nurse working in a shifter hospital, but she was allowed, given her history. She also had three half-shifter children. She knew our ways. It was part of her as well.

“Is it weird that I’m not sure?”

“Not sure?” Her eyebrows rose.

“My wolf was howling like he was. I’ve never had that happen before, but the alpha blew me off. I haven’t heard from him since our second date.”

One of the alarms on an incubator went off, and she rushed over instead of responding. One of her babies was desaturating, oxygen levels dropping. It happened once in a while. Sometimes babies were born without their lungs fully ready to take on the outside world for one reason or another. That’s what we were here for.

The evening was filled with healers and parent visits. Some babies were in the NICU so long that their parents went back to work and had to juggle working and visiting their babies. It had to be hard for them. Some parents came in for feedings as often as they could but had to be supplemented with bottles. As long as they were fed and were growing, it didn’t matter.

Being so busy had taken my mind off Andreas for the most part. My watch notified me that I had a text come in, but it was soon forgotten as the chaotic night went on. Part of me wished it was him, but another part of me wanted to ignore it, to forget about him.

The last part might’ve been impossible.

I got home in the wee hours of the morning, exhausted from head to toe to the point of not even caring. After a long hot shower, I went to bed and plugged my phone in the other room. No Wi-Fi. No notifications. No texts coming in.

Perhaps when I woke up, the thoughts of Andreas would be long gone, and I wouldn't find myself pining over him.

He certainly wasn't pining over me.

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Julian

I woke up the next morning thinking of Andreas. Mostly because I had a hot and sexy dream about him. That didn't help anything. Lingerin in bed, I let my hand drift down to my stiffened cock, replaying the dream in my head. Andreas on top of me, rocking his hips while his cheeks flushed with heat. Pumping myself up and down, it only took seconds until I found my release. It came hard and I cried out with the power of it.

I took another shower since I'd woken up sweaty and gotten myself even more sweaty that morning.

With a cup of hot coffee in my hand and steel cut oats on the stove, I turned my phone back on and saw I had many notifications on social media, of course, but I had only one text.

A big text. The night before on my shift. Oh yeah, I did get a text while I was working but didn't bother looking at it.

It was from Andreas. I nearly dropped my phone on the kitchen floor and my coffee along with it. Both would've been tragic.

Goddess, maybe I was wrong. Maybe he wasn't blowing me off. I took a long breath and calmed myself. There was no telling what was in the message, but I hoped it was good.

I'd really like to see you again. The club? Dinner? Pick your poison.

The last part of the message reminded me of Andreas. Dark, and yet intriguing.

I'm working nights this week, but how about a day date?

I put my phone down, thinking he would take time to respond, but the answer was immediate.

Working nights is tough. Makes you feel like a zombie. A day date sounds fun. Let me know what days work best for you, and I'll plan something.

I will. Can't wait. After replying, I sent him my schedule to which he said perfect. Perfect.

Goddess, I'd been wrong. He hadn't blown me off. Maybe he was, in fact, simply busy and had an early morning. He did mention something about being an owner of the club wasn't his only job, so there was a chance the man was crazy scheduled to the brim.

I ate my oatmeal and wished I knew more about him. He texted me around lunchtime asking about a beach date. It had been months since I'd been there.

That sounds like a lot of fun. Should I bring anything?

Don't worry. I'll handle everything, omega. A picnic sounds great. Don't you think?

I let out a giggle. Sounds fantastic to me. I could use some sun.

He sent me a smiley face. Same. Looking forward to seeing you again.

Me too.

I set my mind to getting to know Andreas better. If my wolf was way off and he wasn't my mate, then if nothing else, he was nice to hang out with, and there was definitely some romance and feelings.

My wolf growled at the notion of Andreas not being my alpha.

He also wanted out.

Since it was my day off, I drove out to a rural location where shifters usually roamed and got out of the truck. The sun was high in the sky and I took a few moments to soak it in. Vitamin D was definitely needed in my life.

I stripped off my clothes and let my wolf loose. He was eager to get out and roam, but I had to reel him in as he ran to the outer edges of the land with one thing, or one person, on his mind—Andreas.

Since I'd let him to the forefront of my consciousness, he'd shoved the idea at me over and over. Andreas wasn't just some sexy man that starred in my dreams—he was my true mate. My wolf proved his point with reminding us of the way the alpha smelled. How he looked at us. His very presence gave us no wiggle room to think anything else but that he was our true mate. Made for us by Fate.

Maybe Andreas realized that as well.

Once I shifted back, I drove back home with a new pep in my step. I had a date with my mate. That sentence alone fueled me like no latte could.

A beach date with my fated mate. I couldn't imagine life got any better than that.

Peaches immediately noticed my change of demeanor when I got into work. "He called you?"

I nodded. “We have a date in a few days.”

We quietly high-fived since the babies were all around us.

Yeah. I had a date with my alpha.

Andreas

Jabez was definitely on Team Julian. He felt that my wolf was smarter than I was, but then I also agreed our animals were generally more intelligent than we were on certain matters, at least. And if there was one thing they were excellent at, it was knowing who their mates were. My wolf had never been particularly vocal on the subject of Reed's dad, but he had a real soft spot for my son, so he probably was willing to tolerate the male who helped get him here.

But he wanted Julian in our life. And so did I.

"You can't be shut down forever, you know," Jabez said as I was leaving the night before our beach date. "You deserve better than that."

"Thanks for saying so. Sometimes it's hard to feel that. Or trust." Jabez of all the other owners knew the most of my story. As a healer, he had a way of getting people to open up to him. So, he knew why I had trust issues.

"Well, now that you're here with us at Cuffed, you have access to information about certain people that you would not have had otherwise. You know how strenuous our membership background checks are and while he's only been here as a visitor and as your guest, we've still done a good portion of those just to let him in the door. He's a nurse, as you know, and you've told me how kind he was to Rhys—I saw part of that myself.

"And, in the end, he's your mate, so if you do not let him in, you're rejecting your chance for happiness. I know whereof I speak. As your healer, I strongly recommend

you listen to your wolf and your heart and give this omega a chance.”

But I still wasn't planning to bring Reed with me to the beach. I thought our daytime date might be the perfect time to tell him about my son. And I rehearsed what I'd say. Something like, “I need to let you know that I have a son.” Or, “Maybe you can come over soon and meet my son.” Or even, “My son is looking forward to meeting you.”

None of those things could really make up for not telling him until now, but if he didn't understand, then maybe he wasn't the right one for us. But I tried not to think about that. Although what was between us was very intense, it was also new, and even if it seemed like he'd been a part of my life forever, in reality, it was not very long at all. So, I hoped he'd realize that as a father I didn't bring my son into things right away.

In fact, and I would let him know this as well, I had never introduced him to anyone I was romantically interested in. The fact that I had not gone on a date for more than an evening of scening at Cuffed didn't need to be mentioned. Maybe on our twentieth anniversary.

But with Jabez' good advice in mind, I was very excited to get ready for our date. Since most of my cooking was for a toddler, I had begun to think all I made was chicken nuggets and mac and cheese and such. I made up a shopping list, tucked Reed in his car seat in the truck, and headed for the store to buy some grown-up food for once.

We were singing along to his favorite album when the phone rang on our way home from the store. I pressed the dashboard button to answer it.

“Hi, this is Lilianne.” The voice of the babysitter came through the speakers. “I wanted to let you know I forgot I have a test today, so I can't come to sit with Reed until tonight. I hope that doesn't mess you up too much?”

Lilianne was my most reliable sitter and Reed's favorite person in the world. The fact that he occasionally fussed when I left for work was only because he liked having everyone he cared about around him at the same time. He'd bring his teacher home, if he could.

So what could I say?

"Oh no, it's fine. Is anyone else available, do you know?" Roger and the others who occasionally spelled Lilianne were also students, so I didn't have a lot of faith in being able to get any of them for a daytime stint without advance notice.

And her answer confirmed that. "I called around before phoning you. I'm really sorry."

"You can't miss a test." Even if she volunteered, I wouldn't allow it. "Don't worry, and get an A, all right?"

"You know me." She disconnected. I did know her. She had a 4.0 at school and was going to graduate with the highest honors. Working the nights with Reed really did make her happy because she could study.

But now, what was I going to do? I had two choices, and since I had no intention of canceling, that left bringing Reed with me on my date.

Things just got complicated.

Julian

“Hello?” I greeted them as a question because everything in front of me was a question. My wolf pranced around inside me, happy about the little boy with Andreas’ hand in his, but my human brain’s functions had halted.

“Hello, Julian.” He got closer and kissed my cheek. “Julian, this is Reed. Reed, can you say hello to Julian.”

The little boy, somewhat under three by my guess, raised his hand and waved. “Hewwo.”

“It’s nice to meet you, Reed. Is this your nephew, Andreas?” He had mentioned over dinner having two brothers.

“Let’s sit down, shall we? I’ll get Reed set up.”

Andreas moved around Reed like a pro. He set up a blow-up kiddie pool and a picnic blanket close to it. He put in some sand and ocean water with buckets and set Reed inside. He gave him toys and shovels and, in no time, the tyke was well occupied.

“Take a seat, please,” Andreas said. He pulled off his shirt, and my guess was he did that to lessen the blow of whatever he was going to tell me. Because the way he treated this child? It wasn’t his nephew.

“Daddy!” Reed screamed and threw the ball to Andreas. And there was my answer.

“I had this whole speech laid out, and he ruined it with one word,” Andreas chuckled. “I wasn’t planning to surprise you like this, but my sitter let me down.”

“Wanna explain?” I asked.

“Thank you for letting me. I thought you would run screaming the moment you knew.”

I sighed and looked at Reed. He was cute as a button and happy to entertain himself. “I’m here. Please.”

He nodded. “My omega, Reed’s father, didn’t stick around after he was born. He was all about the excitement of being pregnant, but when he was facing a tiny preemie in the NICU, he ran.”

“I’m so sorry.” I reached over and grabbed his hand, and he let me.

“I’m not, although I was.”

“And was he your mate?” I swallowed against the fear in my throat.

“No. But I know you are.”

A breath whooshed from my lungs and I nodded. “I know that too.”

He was as relieved as I was. “Reed was born early. His lungs weren’t fully formed. He was underweight. There was a question of a possible heart surgery that didn’t happen. It seemed as if there was a new thing to fear every day. I owe everything to the NICU nurses who took care of him. He was released to come home after three months.”

“And you did it all by yourself?” I asked.

“I did. I had to. My parents aren’t really around and my brothers have their own mates and lives. It was worth it. Every second with him was worth it. But I came very close to losing my business in there, too. I could only stretch so thin.”

“He’s beautiful, Andreas.” I looked at Reed who was having the time of his life, oblivious to the fact that we were having a life-impacting conversation right next to him.

“I hope you’re okay with the fact that I have a child with another omega.”

I nodded and smiled. Andreas scooted closer and wrapped his arm around my shoulders despite the heat. “It kind of makes me like you more. And I didn’t tell you before, but I love children. I told you I was a nurse, but I’m a NICU nurse, Andreas.”

“You are?” He lit up. “Do you...no, she might not even work there anymore.”

“Peaches,” I said the name. “Let me guess. Your nurse was Peaches.”

“How did you know?” he asked. “Wait, you weren’t there, were you? I don’t think I could’ve seen you and not stopped in my tracks.”

I shook my head. “No. I was in a human hospital before. I only moved to this one a year or so ago. We missed each other.”

“But you know Peaches. She was the one who stood out.”

I laughed. “Peaches is incredible. I defer to her on all my hard cases and calls. She’s brilliant. I talked to her about you, in fact.”

Andreas made a noise, something between a growl and a hum. “Is that right? What did you tell her about me?”

I watched Reed play, noticing how he had some of Andreas’ traits, including those gorgeous green eyes. He even scrunched his nose like his father. “I told her I was sad when you didn’t text me the next day. That you blew me off.”

“I didn’t mean to, Julian. I didn’t. I really do have early mornings with Reed, and I needed time to think. My wolf went wild the moment I saw you in the club. It wasn’t about you, I swear it. You were perfect that night and I wanted nothing more than to come in and prove it to you, but I wanted to be sure.”

“Okay.” I clapped my hands. My heart was light again. My mate was next to me. His son was here. We were at the beach on a beautiful day. What more could an omega ask for? Not a lot, as far as I was concerned. “How about we bring this little one into the ocean?”

“Are you sure?” Andreas asked but got up.

“Of course. It’s a perfect day.”

He scooped up Reed, who giggled and tucked his head into his daddy’s chest. “I meant about me. About us.”

“I’m more than sure. I’m not going anywhere, Andreas.”

“Thank the goddess. I was prepared to beg.”

“No need.” I leaned forward and kissed his cheek. “I’m here.”

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Andreas

I couldn't remember a more fun day at the beach. The first couple of times I brought Reed there, he hadn't been crazy about the whole experience, but a friend recommended the kiddie pool idea. Having his own mini beach was a huge plus for my picky little guy. It didn't mean that he could be unattended for so much as a second, but it did mean he was a whole lot happier. I could imagine a day when he'd happily paddle out into the water, but that was years and a whole lot of swimming lessons away from now.

On this day, he played in the pool while we sat on the beach blanket and chatted, ate the lunch I made, and took turns taking quick dips in the sea. It wasn't crowded at all, and those who were there seemed to be having a great time as well.

Overall, a wonderful atmosphere for a date at the beach.

Had the sky ever been this blue? The sea ever had such a perfect ruffle of waves right at the edge?

I hadn't managed to make the fancy picnic I'd had in mind because just getting everything ready to take my son to the beach was a major time commitment, but we did have sandwiches and chips and fruit, all of which Reed gobbled enthusiastically right along with us. What was it about the beach that made a person so hungry? The fresh air maybe?

But all good things had to come to an end, and as the sun lowered toward the horizon, I began to pack up everything to head for home. Julian lifted Reed so I could empty

and take down his pool, and when I looked up next, the two of them were walking, hand in hand, toward the edge of the water. Julian was leaning down to hear what my son was saying, and my heart swelled then squeezed at the sight. Not only had Reed refused to go anywhere near the water before, but he looked actually happy to be doing it now. I fought my urge to run down and make sure nothing happened to him. I could well see that Julian had matters in hand, and if I did do that, all I'd accomplish was making my little guy think he should be scared. We for sure didn't need that to happen just when he was getting his courage.

So instead, I merely continued putting everything away and even made a trip to the car to load some of it up, only looking over my shoulder to see what they were up to three or four times on the way.

When they returned to our little spot, I scooped Reed up and gave him a big kiss. "What do you think, Son? Should we ask Julian to come home to our house to visit some more?"

"Yes!" He returned my kiss, leaving a big wet spot on my cheek. "Julian, you come over?"

"I'd love to," Julian replied. "Thank you for inviting me, Reed."

"Follow us home?" I suggested. "We can cook out and then...see what we get up to."

Reed slept all the way home but he had a busy day, so instead of making him wait for me to cook on the grill, I made him some butter noodles and carrot sticks and then got him into the tub. He'd brought home half the beach in his diaper, and it took me a good few minutes to make sure I got all the grains out of the folds and creases of his little body. I had sunscreened him several times and had shade over his pool, but I was still glad to see that he hadn't burned at all. I always worried about that.

After getting him in his jammies, I brought him out onto the deck and handed him to Julian to hold while I started the grill. They looked so cute together, but his eyes were drooping and he was nearly asleep when I carried him off to tuck into bed. He was so tired, he never even asked for a story—an unheard-of situation.

Returning with a tray of meats, I got them on the grill and sat down in the chair next to Julian's. It was just dark, and a few stars were winking in the sky already. Nature had really contributed to our perfect day.

Julian

Andreas grilled chicken thighs and steaks as I sat at the iron table and chairs he had on the back porch. He'd pulled out a bowl of potato salad along with garlic bread that he would grill once the meat was done.

"You're really great with Reed," Andreas said, turning around and smiling at me over his shoulder.

"I was thinking the same about you. You're a good father."

"I try every day." He came over and got the bread and had it grilled up in no time. We had a baby monitor on the table next to the food so we could see if Reed woke up.

"Everything smells delicious."

"Thanks. Please, dig in."

We ate in silence for a while. Reed wasn't the only one wiped out by the day outside. We were almost finished with our meal when Andreas put his fork and knife down. "I have to ask you something."

"You can ask me anything, Andreas."

He nodded. "Are you feeling the mate bond as well? Please tell me it's not just me."

I turned to face him more. He had scooted his chair closer and closer as the meal progressed, and I thought it was adorable. “It’s not just you, alpha. My wolf told me you were my mate almost instantly. But you didn’t seem available or willing. Then you asked me out and then froze me at the door. Even still, my wolf never wavered. I’m your mate and you are mine—100 percent.”

Without warning, Andreas grabbed me up by both arms and planted me on his lap. I laughed out loud as he peppered kisses all along my face and neck. “I can’t believe I didn’t trust the instinct. I was so afraid you’d reject me because of Reed.”

“No way. You’re not getting rid of me. You or Reed.”

“Are you sure? It’s a big commitment with me. You get a mate and an instant kid.”

I threw my head back and groaned. This guy. So I decided to seal my promise with a kiss. I leaned forward and claimed his mouth before he could say another word of nonsense. I wrapped my arms around his neck and after the shock, he planted his palms on my lower back. “I’m yours, alpha. No more questioning me. I know you have trust issues, but you don’t have to with me. Trust that my words are true. Please.”

He nodded and kissed me once more. “I’ve got an idea.”

“What?”

“What if we shift together?”

I pointed to the monitor. “What about Reed?”

“I will still be able to hear him. We won’t leave the backyard. Just stay here. Let our wolves bond. Please. It will help me accept that you’re really mine.”

“Okay.”

In a bold move, I got off his lap and stripped right there and shifted before he could change his mind. He crouched low and ran his fingers through my fur, telling me how soft I was. How I was so beautiful as a wolf. My animal soaked it all up, reveling in the praise from my mate. Andreas shifted next. His wolf mimicked his human form. His fur was thick and dark like his human hair. Even as a wolf, he kept those green eyes. He was taller than my wolf but a bit leaner.

Every part of my alpha was perfect.

We played a bit in the confines of his backyard. Nipped at legs and rubbed against one another, each marking the other with scent.

The bonding that occurred there, in his backyard, under the twinkling stars was beyond what I’d ever imagined.

Our animals solidified what our human sides had started. He was mine. And I was most definitely his.

We both stopped when Reed made a sound on the monitor, and shifted back to huddle around the screen. We were both still naked. “He’s asleep. Must’ve been dreaming.”

“Alpha?” I asked.

“Yes, mate? Yes, my beautiful mate?” He turned to me and ran his hands down the length of my arms.

“If I asked you to take me to bed, would you deny me again?”

“I don’t think I could deny you if I tried, omega mine. I’m dying to get you to the

bedroom.”

We shared a kiss. Our cocks rubbed as we got closer, exploring each other’s bodies right there under the moon and night sky. “Take me to bed, mate. Please.”

“You don’t have to beg.”

He scooped me up, much like he had Rhys the first night I met him, and carried me inside and to the bedroom along with the monitor. He closed the door and then paused, looking at me. “After this, there’s no going back. You’re mine, Julian.”

“Show me, Andreas. I’ve wanted you since the beginning. Show me I belong to you.”

Andreas

Julian wanted me to show him he was mine?

There was nothing I wanted more.

“We’ll have to be a little quiet,” I warned, “even if I want to make you yell my name to the heavens.”

“We need soundproofing like at the club,” he joked, “or you can gag me.”

Gag him? I didn’t have any bondage things immediately at hand, but I did have a way to do that. “You’re inspiring, omega.” I kissed him, trailing my lips over his cheek to his ear and biting down just hard enough to elicit a sharp intake of breath. “Let’s get you naked and on your knees so I can gag you with my cock.”

He choked on his next breath, but his heart rate ramped up and his hands went right to the hem of his shirt. “Yes, alpha.”

I batted them away. “You’re mine to unwrap.” I drew him to stand and piece by piece removed his garments, taking my time and kissing all the warm skin revealed. He was lean, as were many wolf omegas, but with a slight curve to his tummy that I found extra sexy. Who was I kidding? Everything about him was extra sexy. Unbuttoning his jeans, I tugged them down, remembering the last time I saw his rounded buttocks and the color I’d brought out in them. It was by no means the reddest I intended to see them, but I gave a few sharp slaps and admired the handprints left behind. “So sexy.” With all of his clothing removed, I pushed him to his knees and opened the

front flap of my pants.

My cock jutted out, and I stood waiting.

Julian licked his lips. “May I suck you, sir?”

“Thank you for asking so nicely, omega. You may.” Cupping the back of his head, I helped him get into position and then stroked his hair as he went to work to show me how deep he could take me into his throat. He lifted a hand and wrapped it around the base of my shaft, sucking and licking until I had to stop him. “I want to come inside your ass, omega mine, and you’re too good at this.”

I cupped him under his arms and lifted him to his feet then turned him to face the bed. “Hands and knees, omega.”

“Yes, sir.”

“Grab your cock, and show me how you jerk yourself off when you think of me.”

As he obeyed, his bottom in the air was too inspiring not to take advantage of in more ways than one, and I caressed the pale skin before drawing my palm back and renewing the handprints that had faded from earlier. His groan and shudder inspired me to continue, watching his cheeks redden as I spanked one side then the other, down to his vulnerable sit spots and back up again, one print covering another until I laid my palm on the center of one cheek and the heat throbbed against my hand. “You’re hot in all the best ways, omega.” His slick ran down his thigh, telling me how ready he was before I positioned my cock at his hole and thrust inside in one long, tight drive.

My groan came as he buried his face in a pillow and, hips jerking, came all over the bed. I drove into him again and again, holding his hips in place and telling him all the

naughty things about him I liked best and what I wanted to do to him in the future. None of that helped me hold back, so I stopped trying and let go, spilling into his body while biting my lip to keep from shouting out my release. My knot swelled, bonding us, my fangs descended and I leaned down to sink them into his shoulder, marking my mate forever with my bite.

Knees wobbling, I withdrew my fangs from his flesh and licked the wound closed. My saliva would ensure the mark stayed true, and I rolled us to the side and scooted up so we were lying on the bed, my cockhead still holding us together while we regained our normal breathing pattern and drifted slowly off to sleep.

Julian

I woke up in Andreas' bed to the sounds of his running shower. As I stretched, groaning with little aches, I heard the water shut off and the sound of my alpha opening the glass door and stepping out.

"I hear your heart, mate. Good morning," he called out from the bathroom.

"Good morning," I said but made no attempt to move. His bed was too comfortable and warm. It had been a long time since I got such a good night's sleep. Usually on my days off, I stayed up most of the night, mentally still working the late shift. Not last night, though there were several lovemaking sessions in the wee hours.

"I'm sorry I woke you, but Reed will be up soon. He's starving when he wakes." He came into the bedroom, scrubbing a towel through his wet hair. Another one was slung around his waist. If I thought we could be quick enough, I would've gotten up and licked every water droplet from his body. "Keep looking at me like that and we'll be in trouble. He can get out of his toddler bed now."

I laughed and got up and walked over to kiss him. "Maybe later, then." After a quick shower, I changed into lounge pants and a hoodie that Andreas left on the bed, and I followed the noise to the kitchen where Reed was up and chattering. Some of what was being said was like another language, but my mate soaked it up. Nodding. Gasping. Reacting as though Reed was giving the speech of a lifetime.

Fatherhood made him ten times sexier.

“What’s for breakfast?” I asked.

“A little bit of everything. I didn’t know what you would like.”

Reed reached out from his booster seat.

“May I?” I asked, nodding my head in Reed’s direction. “I don’t want to interrupt your routine.”

“You aren’t. He’s eager to bond with you, it seems. His wolf reached out for mine a bit this morning. He needs all the love he can get.”

I walked over and Reed hopped up into my embrace. We walked over to the counter and watched Andreas cook up French toast, pancakes, eggs, sausage, bacon, and every other breakfast food I could imagine and then some.

“Do you like eggs?” I asked Reed. He had fistfuls of the borrowed hoodie.

“Eggies. Bacon.”

“Ah, you’re a meat guy. Carnivore to the core. How about pancakes?”

Reed nodded. “Pampakes.”

Close enough.

“Hey, is there coffee?” I asked.

“Of course. I didn’t even offer. It’s been so long since I had someone else here.”

“Don’t worry about it. Reed, I’m going to put you back in your seat so I don’t

accidentally spill on you.”

I put Reed back, and he was pacified by sausage, bacon, and a couple of pancakes. I learned so many things that morning. Andreas had more creamer in his coffee than actual bean juice. Reed didn’t like maple syrup, even the real stuff. He only liked honey on his pancakes and French toast. The little boy said please and thank you more than most adults.

Of course, I wanted to have babies with Andreas myself, but he was also right. Our wolves were bonding the way I assumed a parent would with his pup.

“Outside!” Reed announced.

“Is this his routine?” I asked.

“It is. But he goes to preschool late today.” Andreas’ face fell. “What time do you work?”

Oh, my alpha. His entire demeanor changed in an instant. He had every right to have some fear about his omega leaving him, but unless I had no other choice, there was no way I would ever abandon him. “Let’s bring him outside,” I said. I picked up Reed and we brought him to the backyard where he ran for the mini trampoline and climbed in, bypassing the safety net. Good thing it was on grass and it was only a little kid version with a handlebar to hold onto, or I’d be afraid he would hurt himself.

“Omega?” he asked, coming over to stand by me. His tone broke my heart.

“I have to go to work at four this afternoon. I have a night shift. I’ll get off about one, if the other scheduled nurses come in. Talk to me, mate. What’s bothering you?” We would get nowhere as a couple if we weren’t open.

“I’m afraid you’re going to go to work and then change your mind. About me. About us.”

I scoffed. “Peaches would never let that happen, and neither would I. I know it’s going to take time, but when in doubt, talk to your wolf. What does he say?”

Andreas took a long, deep breath, closing his eyes. “He says you won’t leave us.”

“And he’s right.” I tugged him close and rested my head against his chest. “He’s so right, Andreas. I won’t leave you or Reed. You’re stuck with me,” I joked.

He wrapped his arms around me and held me tightly. “Happily stuck with you, Julian. And, for the record, I can’t wait to get you back to the club. That night, it took everything in me not to have my way with you.”

“Next time, don’t hesitate, mate.”

For a few hours, we watched Reed play and have a good time. I helped get him dressed and put on a backpack nearly twice his size. We rode to preschool and then came back to make love one more time before I had to go home to get ready. “I’ll text you on my lunch break, but it will be late. Don’t feel like you have to stay up to answer me.”

“Well, now I have to. I’m already eager to hear from you.”

“Me too.” I had smiled so much over the last day that my cheeks hurt.

We kissed and kissed some more before I finally had to leave. I would have to rush to get ready for my shift, but it was so worth it. Andreas was worth every second of procrastination and more.

Andreas

After that trip to the beach, everything amped up between us. We spent as much time together as our schedules allowed, and Reed, who was adorable but not one of those kids who bonded instantly with strangers, seemed to feel like he was a regular part of our life together. I wondered if it was instinct on his part.

But either way, it was good. And I especially enjoyed dinners at home together, followed by a night curled up together and making love in my bed.

“I have to go oversee the demo in the morning. They’re well along with the building to the south.” Technically I had a contractor in charge of the actual process, but as the general contractor, everything was ultimately my responsibility.

Plus, demo was fun. Something I’d always been inspired by. Taking out all the things you don’t need or want in order to make room for the new.

“I can take Reed to school, then.” Since we’d mated, I had put him on the school’s list of responsible adults who could drop off or pick him up. “If it would help.”

He stayed over most nights when neither of us was working. I still had Lilianne babysitting, but she’d be graduating soon, and then she’d be off to have a career in child development, and I’d need to find a regular sitter to replace her. But one thing at a time.

“That would be a big help.” I leaned over and kissed him. “You look a little tired.”

“Oh, thanks for that.” He rolled his eyes. “It’s nice to hear I look like something the cat dragged in. I’ve worked two extra shifts this week, you know.”

“I didn’t say you looked bad. Just a little tired. And you haven’t touched your dinner.” He had touched it, pushing food around, but he certainly had not put anything in his mouth.

“My stomach is a little off.” He lifted his fork, with a miniscule amount of mashed potatoes on it, toward his mouth but put it down again. “Maybe I am tired.”

“Can you try not to take so many extra shifts?” It was a big ask, since his work was so important to him. “I hate to see you working yourself into the ground.”

“We’re awfully shorthanded, and it seems like every time we start to get enough nurses, someone leaves. We have two out on paternity leave right now.”

“Paternity leave?” That made me think. “How upset is your stomach?”

“Don’t start. I’m not pregnant. How could I be?”

I arched a brow. If I had to explain to a NICU nurse where babies came from, I was concerned for their department.

“Andreas, you don’t really think...”

“Well, you are tired, yes?”

He nodded.

“And sick to your stomach?”

He closed his eyes. “And a little bloated and cranky.”

“We need to pick up a test.” I stood up. “In fact, I’m going to get one now.” Before he could argue, I was tucking my wallet in my pocket on my way out the door. I didn’t want to wait to find out if we were having a child. Reed’s bio dad had taken full control of everything and blown it all out of proportion until a real and important thing happened. While I didn’t see how I could have been more helpful, if Julian was having our child, I wanted to be part of everything.

I knew he’d be an amazing father, too, and hopefully would welcome my help.

When I got back from the store, I heard him reading a book to Reed, and my heart swelled. My family.

I left the bag holding the pregnancy test in the master bath and went in to kiss Reed good night. After he was all tucked in, I read him another book while Julian took the test, and then it was time to read it.

“Before we do,” he said, “will you be upset if I’m pregnant?”

“Oh, omega, I would love to have a child with you, now, later, anytime if the Goddess grants us one. How do you feel about it?”

“We haven’t tried not to have one,” he mused. “So, I guess we opened the door to the possibility from the first night together. I’d be thrilled.”

“Okay, ready to look?” I took his hand and led him into the bathroom. “Let’s look on three.”

We counted down together. “One, two, three...we’re pregnant!”

We hugged and kissed and cried, but it was all happy tears.

Julian

“You’re sure you don’t want your furniture?” Andreas stood in my mostly bare living room with his hands on his hips. Since finding out I was pregnant and now moving into his home, he wouldn’t let me pick up anything. It was cute.

“The couch I got from the thrift store and the chair I got from the side of the road? I think I can say goodbye to them in good conscience.”

“You don’t have a lot.” He had counted the boxes. Twenty-three of them.

“I’ve been single, and I’m frugal. I buy what I need and things that will last. It’s okay. I’m not lacking for anything. You look like you feel sorry for me or something.”

He smiled and walked over to wrap me up in his arms. “I don’t. But I might spoil you for a while once you’re all moved in.”

“But with kindness, right? I don’t like a lot of things.”

He growled. “Fine. Then I’ll spoil you with breakfast in bed and candlelit dinners and date nights and flowers.”

“That sounds wonderful. And we can spoil Reed together.”

“And our baby.” His hands roamed down until they were on either side of my belly, and he leaned down to nuzzle my neck.

“Oh, I can’t wait to meet them.”

“Same. I’m excited for Reed to have a sibling too.”

“How do you think he’s going to react? I mean, he’s had you to himself for so long, alpha.”

“I think he’s going to love it.”

“It’s time to go, then. Are you going to let me help?” I asked, laughing. “There are some smaller boxes.”

Andreas sighed. “I suppose that would be okay. Are you still feeling nauseated?”

“Not right now.”

“But this morning?” he asked. The thing was, he already knew I was. When I stumbled into the kitchen after throwing up my guts, he simply cocked his eyebrow and offered me a hot tea instead of coffee.

“Is there any point in saying no?” I asked.

“There’s not. I wonder how much longer this is going to last? I hate seeing you sick.”

“Should be over any day now. It’s just the influx of new hormones. But I wouldn’t protest too much if you stopped to buy me a burger after we move these boxes.”

“I think I could make that happen. Let’s go.”

We made quick work of getting all the boxes out and into his house. We’d talked to Reed about me moving in and, while I was sure he understood, his reaction was to go

get his wooden blocks and build a tower.

When we got into the truck stuffed with boxes, I reached across the console and threaded my fingers through his. “Do you think Reed is okay with this? I know we talked to him, but he’s not old enough to express himself. If he didn’t want me in your lives, would we know?”

“Ah, omega. Reed loves you. I know he does. Do you know the way he scrunches his nose at cucumbers?”

I did know. It was adorable. Andreas did it as well. I nodded in response.

“You would see some of that if he didn’t like you. Want to know what I see?”

“Please,” I said on the verge of tears. I already loved him like he was my own son. The last thing I wanted to hear was that he didn’t like me or was rejecting me in their lives.

“When I tell him that you are coming over, his smile is undeniable. He beams. And when you walk into a room, he lights up. He does those adorable grabby hands at you. I think you carry him around more than I do. He adores you, Julian. Almost as much as I do.”

My chest warmed. I loved both of them but hadn’t said it out loud. “Andreas, I have to tell you something.”

He nodded. “You can tell me anything.”

“I love you. I know we’re mated and I’m moving in, but I wanted you to know that I love you. We haven’t said it before, but...”

In seconds, Andreas pulled onto the side of the road and threw the truck into park. “What did you say?” The smile on his face told me everything I wanted to know.

“I said I love you. It’s not that big a deal.” The lie flowed out of my mouth.

“It’s a very big deal. I was going to tell you tonight. I was nervous about it and wondering if it was too soon but at the same time not soon enough. I love you, Julian. I have since the night I first saw you and it grows every day.”

We shared several kisses and the rest of the way home, we basked in the aftermath of our confessions.

When we pulled into the driveway, Andreas turned to me. “Welcome home, omega. I’m so glad you’re mine.”

Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 7:47 am

Andreas

Having my mate under my roof held a satisfaction I hadn't anticipated. Reed's bio dad had never had this effect on me, but as I sat at the dinner table with Julian and my son, I wanted to puff out my chest like a banty rooster in pride at my little pack.

"More noodles peeze," Reed asked. He still had so many cute toddler mispronunciations, although some of them were fading as he grew up. When I remembered that little baby who wasn't much bigger than my hand, it was hard to imagine he'd grown up to be such a big boy, feeding himself with his little fork and spoon set.

I served him the noodles and he dug in, shoveling them as fast as he could. "Having a growth spurt, are you, Son?"

He nodded, and Julian added some more broccoli too.

"Then you'd better have more veggies, so you can get as tall as Daddy."

"Thank you, Papa Julian," he said, spraying a little food, but I was so tickled to hear him say that, I didn't tell him to finish eating before talking. It was adorable and it was a thank-you as well, so extra points for courtesy.

Broccoli was a veggie he'd eat without complaint, too. He loved dipping the little trees in ketchup for some reason. I knew his preschool friends used ranch, but Reed was a unique fellow. I was just glad he was eating something besides noodles and nuggets.

“What do you guys say, after dinner, we go shopping for baby furniture?” I asked. “I think we’ll need Reed’s input since they will be sharing a room.”

His idea. We had planned to put together a separate nursery, but Reed wanted his brother to share with him. Although we did not know the sex, Julian was sure it was a boy. And so was Reed. I didn’t have an opinion or a guess. As long as they were healthy and happy, I’d be more than satisfied.

I cleared away the table, waving off Julian’s insistence on helping. “You’re working hard growing a baby. The least I can do is load the dishwasher.”

“You know I’m supposed to exercise,” he protested.

“Then do that walking around the showroom.” I put the last plate in the dishwasher and came back in to round up my brood. “You guys ready?”

They were, more or less. But getting out of the house with a toddler and a pregnant omega could be a challenge, so it was about a half hour later before we were actually on the road to the baby store.

It was quite the place, and we’d browsed it early in the pregnancy, unsure which way we wanted to go. White? Wood? Primary colors? And what style?

But with baby coming soon, it was time to make decisions. Maybe our mistake the last time was not bringing Reed because he knew exactly what he liked, and it was the matching set that went with his toddler bed. It was one of those convertible models that grew with your child, and if I’d been thinking, I would have suggested it to Julian right away. Pricey but so great. We wandered the store a bit more and bought bedding and some other items. The store would have everything delivered in a few days. I really felt prepared now.

“Who wants ice cream?” I herded my little family out onto the sidewalk. “There’s a great place right down the block.”

Of course, Reed did, and Julian agreed, although not quite as enthusiastically. He had been slowing down on eating as he traversed the third trimester, but he did order a scoop of vanilla in a bowl, Reed got a gummy bear sundae, I chose a double chocolate cone, and we sat down to enjoy our treats. Just as I popped the last bit of the cone into my mouth, I saw Julian’s eyes squint and a hand flatten on his belly.

Uh-oh.

“How long have you been having pains, mate?” I didn’t give him a chance to deny it. We just needed to time the pains and then figure out if it was real labor or more false.

He smiled, but I could see the pain in his eyes and my concern ramped up another notch. “Since this afternoon, but they just got stronger and closer together in the last half hour or so.”

“Why didn’t you say something before we came here?”

“Was I going to deny a little boy ice cream?”

Reed looked back and forth between us, and I didn’t want to alarm him. “Mate, how close together are the pains?”

“Close enough, we need to go now.”

Turned out, that meant about four minutes, which became three by the time we got in the truck, and I had him call Talon and his mate to bring his bag from our house and take care of Reed. There was no time to go home first.

None at all.

Julian

“Where are we?” a familiar voice asked, and I heard the sound of someone grabbing gloves from the box near the door to the hospital room.

“You are off today,” I groaned as another contraction gripped my back and sent me into a pain spiral.

“I know, but my bestie needed me.”

Her bestie? I didn’t know I was Peaches’ bestie, but sure. I accepted it.

“I need an epidural and to have this baby out of me.” I smiled as completely unhinged as I could.

“But it’s too late. You waited until the absolute last minute to come up here, and now you have to go au naturel. Not a fan myself but to each his own.”

I opened my eyes to see Andreas and Peaches hugging. We had invited her over for dinner, giving the three of them a chance to reunite. Since then, Peaches and Andreas texted each other more than Peaches did me. Then again, I saw her for full shifts.

“Okay.” The nurse-midwife rose to standing after checking me out. “We’re fully dilated. It’s time to have this baby. The next time you have a contraction, if you have the urge, let’s start pushing.”

“Oh, goddess.” I considered myself a pretty stable person, but in that moment, terror

struck my entire body. That was when my wolf kicked in.

We know how to do this. This is our pup. Let me birth them. Let me take the lead.

And so I did. Four pushes and no complications later, we had a baby who was, in the words of Peaches, perfect. They laid them across my chest, and there wasn't a dry eye in the place. Talon and his mate were taking care of Reed for us but would bring him up as soon as we were ready.

"It's a girl," Peaches said as I reached for the blankets.

"A girl," I whispered. She could still share with Reed until they were much older. I hoped he wouldn't be too shocked she was a girl, though.

"What do you want to name her?" Andreas asked.

"Why don't you two talk about it while I do the assessment and clean this sweet girl up?"

I let Peaches take her while Andreas leaned down and pressed his forehead to mine. "You did so well, mate. You are so brave and strong. Feisty omega if there ever was one."

"I thought feisty meant smart-ass," I laughed.

Andreas stood up. "It means lively. Courageous. Determined. That's you, Julian. Now what's our daughter's name?"

The truth was, I hadn't planned on a girl. "Amelia," I said. "Amelia Jane."

His smile made everything okay. "Amelia is lovely. Just like you."