



Such a Tempting Omega (His Alpha Desires #7)

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Category: LGBT+

Description: I have always enjoyed time spent in the wilderness, but I love even more coaxing beauty from inner city lots—replacing hard-packed dirt with trees and shrubs and edible plants of all kinds. I derive joy from Mother Earth's bounty.

I don't need an omega. Never have. My wolf, on the other hand, is starving for his mate. My parents never took care of me. I took care of myself—still do.

I've been given the opportunity to do landscaping for the expansion of Cuffed, a club I've been toying with joining, and then I learn there is an opportunity to invest, to become an owner. As if all this isn't enough, while at the club one evening, I catch a glimpse of an omega heading out into the night.

A member. And he's stunning. I try to forget him. Plunge myself into working even harder. My wolf howls louder. The omega is simply too tempting.

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Liam

The view from the marble expanse of the back steps made the months of planning and execution worth every minute.

And the fat check tucked in my wallet didn't hurt.

I couldn't be sad about the appreciation I received from the couple whose estate I had transformed, either.

The next project was already underway, as well.

Success had many satisfying aspects, but it didn't fix loneliness.

When I came to this city, I worked on a landscaping crew, a typical young mow-and-blow guy with minimal skills and no true knowledge of plants.

Riding in the back of the van from suburban home to small apartment house to trailer parks, we swarmed out at each location and butchered their HOA approved lawns with a mower, I now knew, set far too low and rife with weed seeds from other yards.

Pruning? We did it, but at least I had no idea what I was doing.

Even after so many years, I cringed at the memory.

But as bad as my work was, I learned to appreciate plants and how to better care for them.

I watched videos and took online courses, even a few horticulture classes at the community college.

And I chased and friended experts on social media.

A mediocre high school student who barely graduated, plants and how to use them awakened a hunger for knowledge in me.

In the end, my efforts cost me my job. My boss did not have time for me to apply what I was learning in a business that relied on speed.

But a strange thing happened. After I was dismissed, my phone began to ring.

With calls from my former boss's clients who wanted me to be their new gardener and even some of my fellow mow-and-blow guys who, it turned out, also wanted to do more than the basics.

So, I put a magnetic sign on my truck door and used up my savings to buy some equipment. I didn't charge the same as Rico had, but then, I didn't give the same type of service. Anyone who hired me wanted to make the most of their yard, whether it was handkerchief size or a half-acre.

Since that day, I'd never taken on a single job that was not a referral from a current client, and it seemed each one was a bigger property or a fancier home.

I still took care of the original customers, although it wasn't me who pushed a mower, changed out their suburban grass for native landscaping, or pruned their topiaries.

Those first guys who came over with me were all trained now and capable of caring for anything I designed.

This estate had been my biggest challenge so far, a dilapidated property owned by a family that almost forgot they owned it until a wildfire encroached on it and they were forced to deal with it.

The new owners hired me to transform the gardens, and my team and I had done that.

As far as the eye could see around the mansion, there were colorful flowers, healthy shrubs, and trees and ground covers that were far more sustainable than standard grass.

They had even requested a vegetable garden and herb beds.

And that I help them find a full-time gardener to maintain it all.

My favorite kind of client, indeed.

Each job had challenges I enjoyed overcoming, but this one had been a doozie.

I shook the owner's hands and chatted with them for a few minutes, while allowing my eyes to rest on the work we'd completed.

For decades to come, this young wealthy couple and their children would be able to enjoy this.

To stroll the pathways and smell the flowers.

To sit on the swing cleverly tucked away in the flower garden or swim in the pool.

I hadn't put that in, but I had landscaped around it.

There was always a sadness to completing a project. I might never see it again, and

only the couple who owned the home would determine who would. Like a work of art in a private collection instead of a museum where anyone could enjoy it.

I'd considered some public contracts, but they never had the budget required. It was a puzzle. How to bring my dreams to reality, pay my team appropriately for their work, and create vistas like this in a way they could be shared by more than just a couple of people.

Be that as it may, I took a pic on my phone of the view and went inside to say goodbye to the clients before moving on to the next very wealthy customers.

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Hirsch

Every time my phone rang, my stomach tangled up in a knot and my heart slammed against my rib cage.

I shoved the phone away making it slide along the mahogany desk.

It reached the edge but didn't topple over.

Honestly, I would've been relieved if the damned thing had broken.

As much as Kyle wanted to get away from me, he sure did call and text a lot. His control issues knew no boundaries.

Once the lease was up on the apartment, his number would be blocked.

Leaning back in the plush leather desk chair, another thing he'd "graciously" left me—his word, not mine, I scrubbed my hands over my face. How did it come to this? Where had I gone wrong? How had I not seen the red flags early on.

Because I thought I was in love with him.

And now, I slept on an air mattress I bought in Aldi's "aisle of shame" for five dollars.

A humorless chuckle burst from my mouth.

Man, Kyle must've seen me coming from a mile away.

I'd been tossed out of my family home on my ass five minutes after my high school graduation cap landed on my bed.

Not because my parents didn't love me or because I was a bad kid but because I was eighteen, and in their book, that meant it was time to go.

Very unlike any other pack I had ever heard of.

They said it would be good for me. I'd learn to stand on my own two feet. Grow a thicker skin.

What my minimum wage jobs—two of them—got me was a studio apartment that had stealthy roaches and questionable plumbing. I ate the cheapest of food and got by on three hours of sleep.

Kyle slipped right into my life and promised me the world.

And like the hungry, lonely omega I was, I lunged for the carrot he dangled in front of me.

No more working seemed like a dream.

No more lack of sleep.

Goodbye roaches and haunting sounds of dripping hot water at night.

He promised me the good life.

What a fool I'd been. Nothing is truly free and Kyle proved that over and over.

He villainized my family and friends until I no longer spoke to any of them. Aligned me with his friends so that everyone in my circle defended him on the off chance I gathered the courage to talk back.

Not only did I not have to work, but after I'd rested up and wanted to get a job, he insisted I not work. That whatever I needed he would provide, heavy on the need part.

It took me years to recognize the invisible prison I'd participated in building while kneeling at the base of the pedestal I'd put Kyle on.

When I caught him cheating, he blamed me.

Left me with nothing but this fucking chair and the giant ridiculous desk. At least the lease was paid for another three months. He left me that and similar time left on an annual pass to Cuffed, the club where he'd met his new boy toy, who was barely out of high school.

Now I had to go back to the beginning. Find a job that would support me with no education but my high school diploma.

My only experience was some jobs waiting tables and a small stint at a coffee shop.

There was no way I could afford this penthouse. Maybe I could sell this damned desk and chair for enough to afford a deposit at a new place.

I applied for everything I was qualified for and some that I wasn't. Couldn't hurt to take a chance but with a big gap in my employment, I knew some were longshots.

I even went so far as to reach out to some of my old friends to see if they knew of any jobs available, but only a few responded.

I didn't blame them. I'd abandoned them, not because of who I was or who they were but because it was easier than listening listen to Kyle drone on about how he didn't like me going out and claim they were bad influences.

I'd sold myself for temporary security. I probably deserved what I got.

Sliding the chair back, I got up and went to the kitchen. My hunger had vanished the night Kyle left me, but I had to take care of myself. I was far too thin.

My food intake was another thing he'd controlled, all in the name of caring about my health and not wanting me to let myself go.

I didn't have the energy to cook a whole meal, so I opened the refrigerator and retrieved eggs. I would fry them up in butter and have them with toast. The meal that always satisfied in my opinion.

Kyle had cut me down to egg whites. I shuddered at the memory.

After my simple dinner, I stared at the walls. Ruminating. Overthinking until all my stupid made-up scenarios made my head hurt.

I didn't have friends to go out with anymore. The ones he'd inserted in my life left when he did.

But I did have a membership to Cuffed. Kyle was into some things I wasn't but told me that his participating in them with others wasn't cheating. Even if it tipped toward sex, as long as it didn't cross a line that was constantly shifting. When I disagreed, he called me silly and overemotional.

Maybe I was.

Cuffed was the first club I'd ever been to. I didn't know the rules, only what was right in my heart.

I watched Kyle participate in all kinds of bondage and other kinks I considered intimate and personal.

He scoffed at my concerns.

Then again, he was constantly cheating on me, so why would he care?

Maybe it was time to explore what I liked.

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Liam

“You up?”

Considering I knew who the call came from and we were definitely not sexual partners, I laughed at the choice of words. “Yep! Are you hitting on me?”

“What?” Andreas went silent for a moment before he joined me in laughter. “Gods no. You can’t possibly think I’d trade Julian for your ugly face.”

“That’s cold. But I have to agree your omega is pretty adorable, and you scored there. I’ll never understand...wait, he’s your fated, right?”

“Yes, of course.”

“I guess he’s stuck with you, then.”

His deep sigh was heartfelt. “Thank the Goddess and Fate because I don’t deserve him.”

“Don’t take it that far. You two are a great couple, and if you’re calling to invite me over to dinner, I’m glad to come just to soak up the good vibes. How is little Amelia Jane?”

“Fine, thanks. Has both her daddies wrapped around her little finger, and I’ll check with Julian and figure out a good day to have you to the house, but that’s not why I’m calling.”

“Whatever day is good for you, I’m in. I just need enough time to shop for a gift for Amelia. I can’t show up empty-handed.”

“You do not have to bring her a gift.”

“Yes I do. So why are you calling at midnight if it’s not a dinner invite?”

Muffled talking in the background and then he said, “Julian says hi.”

“Hi, Julian.” I was never going to find out why this guy called. If I’d actually been asleep, I might be annoyed, but I did my best landscape planning in the wee small hours. And he knew that.

“Are you available tomorrow night to come visit Cuffed as my guest?” He’d been a member for a few years, I believed, and had been trying to get me to join the whole time.

Anticipating my reply, he said, “This isn’t part of a membership drive...

we have a waiting list anyway. It’s about a project I think you’d be perfect for. ”

Intrigued at the fact he wanted this meeting at the club instead of either of our offices, I was tempted to ask for details, but the fact it was after midnight and their daughter would be up with the sun, stopped me.

Unless they were at the club, both of these daddies went to bed early.

Plus, I welcomed the opportunity to visit Cuffed.

The only thing that had held me back from joining was a lack of time.

When my business took off, it occupied every moment I was awake, leaving no free hours for clubbing.

The only place I ever went to relax was when Andreas and Julian invited me to dinner once a month or so.

Even though my friends had an ownership stake in the club, I still had to be “approved” just to cross the threshold, so I went to the link I received from Andreas and filled out the form then returned to my plans.

The clients had an unhealthy attachment to roses, but if I did things the way they wanted, they’d fill the neighborhood with a scent no one could escape.

Thousands of blooms known for their strong bouquet was too much, and my task was to give them the roses they worshiped as part of a more balanced landscape.

Sometime around three, when I couldn’t keep my eyes open any longer, I gave up and went to bed to sleep for a few hours. But, as my eyes closed, I wondered what kind of project Andreas had and whether it might be something closer to what I dreamed of doing.

I arrived at Cuffed the next night at nine, as scheduled, and the omega sitting at the front desk took my phone and locked it up, asking if I needed an explanation.

I didn’t—the approval for the visit having come with all the information a person could need.

But from his question, I guessed not everyone read the rules.

“Nope. I understand the need for privacy in a club such as this one.” I offered a friendly smile, wanting to indicate there were no hard feelings.

Honestly, I was less attached to the device than many others I knew, and I had set it on silent mode before leaving the car so it wouldn't go off and disturb anyone from wherever it was placed. "Do I just go in or..."

"I texted Alpha Andreas as soon as you arrived. He'll be right here to take you back, if you don't mind waiting a moment?" The young omega was so polite, and I wasn't sure if waiting was a rule, since it wasn't mentioned in the file, but I was glad to agree.

"Thank you."

I stepped back out of the way of the flow of people coming and going, and not more than five minutes later, Andreas appeared.

He took me to a booth where we had a good view of all the stations but far enough back that we could speak without the music and other sounds interfering with our ability to hear one another.

"Before we get too involved, here, what would you like to drink? The servers look pretty busy, so I'll go to the bar and get us something." Andreas moved to stand, but I waved him back down.

"It's on me. This place is fabulous. Why haven't you invited me before." Only a hundred times. The difference here was that he'd bribed me to discuss a project.

His lip quirked, but he nodded and I headed to the crowded bar area, where I learned the reason for his mirth. "Sorry, but Andreas says your money is no good here. What can I get you?"

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Hirsch

My idea was a total and complete bust. I'd come here to blow off some steam. To clear my head and maybe have a bit of fun.

Instead, reality punched me in the gut. While watching a fire display by two of the owners, a mated couple, I overheard two omegas talking. They mentioned a huge event being planned. Some huge unveiling of a project, along with specialized events and displays.

I got excited and giddy hearing the news until I realized...

my membership would be over in late summer.

The event would happen way after that, and even if I managed to find a job, there was no way I could pay the annual fee.

Membership at Cuffed was exclusive and expensive. They didn't let just anybody in.

Wilting, I made my way through the crowd, away from the omegas bobbing up and down, bubbling with excitement. A heaviness dragged me down the steps toward the bar. I'd never been much of a drinker, but tonight, I would enjoy this place and not worry about the cost.

I asked the bartender to surprise me with whatever was his specialty. Kyle only let me drink vodka shots. They didn't fatten me. And I didn't like them enough to get drunk on them. The last thing he wanted was for me to embarrass him in front of his friends

or the public in general.

I'd never gotten drunk, not even once.

The bartender handed me the drink. Something golden-yellow with a lemon slice perched on the rim of the glass. "You look like you could use some sunshine in your life."

"Thank you."

Forgetting my willingness to pay for my own drinks, I put it on Kyle's tab. It was the least he could do.

Sights set on an unoccupied table, I ran right into someone. Someone tall. Someone who smelled like home.

"I'm sorry." The words tumbled from my mouth with such ease. I apologized so much to Kyle, I wondered sometimes how I could form other words.

"No. I'm sorry. My fault. Please excuse me. Let me get you another drink. Did you spill on your outfit?"

I looked down. There was nothing on me. Not a drop. "I'm fine. But I think I spilled on you."

He chuckled. "It's no problem. That's why black is such a great color. Or lack of color. A few drops will be our secret."

Before I could say anything, the man ordered me another drink in a deep voice that somehow drowned out the bass of the music and the dull roar of the crowd around us. Each word echoed in my head and stoked my wolf's interest.

By scent, I deciphered he was an alpha. Although he was gorgeous and my wolf was panting over him, I stepped back physically as he gave me my second drink and took my empty. “I really do apologize. Have fun tonight, omega.”

He walked away with two drinks in hand. My body swayed in his direction even though I was determined to keep my distance.

I had bigger things to attend to. Like my fifty-bucks balance in my checking account, very little groceries, and in a month or so, no refrigerator to put them in.

So I shouldn't be wondering who that other drink was for.

I stood at one of the tall tables and let myself relax a bit. I could do nothing in that moment to save myself. Job interviews didn't happen at night. I'd checked every employment website thrice over and applied for everything.

Tonight, I would people watch and enjoy being here.

My membership would expire soon enough, but, for now, I was here.

Life would be waiting for me on the other side of the door.

While I sipped on my lemon pie cocktail, I pushed those thoughts aside and focused on the sexy alpha I'd run into. He'd spoken to the bartender as though they'd met before. Or interacted before. He had an ease and a strength about him. Even in the few words we'd exchanged, I was magnetized.

With a chuckle, I shook my head. Not again. Getting attached too quickly to a man who I knew nothing about and who might not be available. He probably was happily mated.

Somehow, I was always attracted to men who were unavailable—emotionally, physically, all of the above.

Time to refocus on myself.

I downed the rest of the drink and walked out after getting my coat and slipping it over my club attire. Walking was the best option for me these days. Our apartment, my apartment, wasn't far from the club, and I saved money by not using gas or my car.

It was exercise, at least.

On the way home, I wondered about the alpha. Did he come there often? I thought so since he seemed at ease. Would I see him again? Did I want to see him again? What was his kink? It could be almost anything—maybe something I didn't like. But somehow, I didn't think so.

My mind kept veering to him. His dark hair. That killer smile.

The way he took charge of the situation in a way that didn't make me feel small.

He'd know how to care for an omega. He probably made some omega a very lucky mate.

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Liam

He bumped right into me. The omega turned around from the bar and splattered me with that lemony drink, and I wasn't even mad about it.

I set him up with another, making a mental note to repay Andreas since the bartender still wouldn't let me pay for anything, even when I explained one wasn't for me.

On my way to our booth, I saw the omega gulp his drink and head for the door, looking so stressed, I wanted to veer off and catch him, find out what was wrong and fix it.

My wolf agreed that was the perfect idea.

But it made no sense. I didn't know the guy, and he hadn't acted as if he wanted to change that.

Besides, I was here only for the meeting, not to meet someone.

If only my wolf hadn't awakened and wanted to spend more time with the omega. Like me, he was also worried about what had the omega sad. He wanted to do whatever it took to make him smile.

"Earth to Liam?" Andreas was looking up at me from the leather seat. "You've been standing there for at least two minutes holding our drinks. Unless they're both for you?"

“No.” I set the two glasses down and slid onto the bench across from him. “Sorry, woolgathering.”

“This place can have that effect. After we talk, if you like, I’ll give you the grand tour.”

“I’d appreciate that. Just the stations I can see from here are intriguing. The clubs I have visited over the years were not anything like this.”

“Right? This one is pretty extraordinary, and that’s why I bought into it instead of just being a member. That’s great, too, but it’s so well managed that my investment is already paying.”

I sipped my whiskey, considering what he’d just said. As my business thrived, I was putting away a nice chunk of change. “Interesting.”

“So, about the project I brought you here to discuss. If you haven’t guessed, it’s club-related.”

Pushing the omega and an inkling of another idea to the back of my mind, I pulled out my phone and prepared to listen. “Go on.”

“We’ve purchased the buildings on either side of this one and are expanding the club.

That’s going very well, but we find ourselves with open space, essentially the side yards of each building, which we can adapt to our needs.

The other owners have tasked me with finding someone to design and execute two outdoor spaces to meet our members’ needs. ”

“Can I see the spaces we’re discussing?” I asked, doing my best to sit and not bounce

out of my seat. “You can show me what I have to work with and explain what you have in mind.”

“Now?” Andreas paused with his glass halfway to his lips. “In the dark?”

“Yeah?” I was already looking for a door that might take me where I wanted to go. “Is that a problem?”

“There aren’t exactly any lights out there, and I thought you’d enjoy seeing all the stations, what we get up to around here. It’s pretty much why people come here.”

“No lights? I don’t suppose you have a flashlight? Headlamps?”

His laughter washed over me. “This is why I always enjoy hanging out with you. You have a one-track mind.”

“And you need to let me redo your yard.”

“Julian agrees with you. But right this moment, that’s not what we’re talking about. Maybe we can stay inside for tonight and I’ll send you some notes in the morning—then we’ll pick a time to walk the property and discuss everything. Deal?”

“I think I have a headlamp in the car...”

“Liam, really?” He tossed back his drink and stood. “Meeting over. Now I’ll show you what people around here do for fun and stress relief.”

“Fun? I’ve heard of this concept.” I followed him out of the booth. “But I don’t really have time for it.”

“Starting to think you need someone to tie you up and whip you until you relax.”

Andreas led me through the club, showing me the various stations, most of which were occupied.

Cries of pain and ecstasy accompanied the crack of whips, slap of palms, and all the other sounds that made me feel comfortable and welcome.

There were other areas separated from the main dungeon with various functions, but Andreas stopped by one with wide observation windows.

Inside, littles and their caregivers were playing games and reading stories and generally appeared to be having a great time with glitter art.

“Nice room, but not my thing,” I told him.

“I know. That’s not why I wanted you to get a good look. One of the outside areas is geared toward this type of play. We’ve ordered swing sets and slides and other equipment in appropriate sizes already. What do you think?”

“First, when I arrived, I wasn’t really paying close attention, but those side and backyards are not private, are they?”

“Not yet, but they will be. Can you create a little paradise?”

I watched a little on his hands and knees pushing a toy train around a track. “Do you think they’d like a real ride-on train?”

He held up his hand and high-fived me. “Does a bear shifter shit in the woods?”

“Probably, but I’ve never wanted to know for sure.”

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Hirsch

I woke that morning panicked. None of the jobs I'd applied for had contacted me. No new leads. No follow-up emails. Nothing.

The morning light filtered through the windows. It should've made for a bright and sunny mood but instead, I groaned and kicked my legs a bit at my predicament.

I had to find a job and move.

Not yesterday but now.

Sure, I could wait things out and stay here for the rest of the time on the lease, but waking up to the aftermath of what was Kyle and me became more depressing by the day. The sparse walls that once held pictures of us. The empty half of the closet. The opposite side of the bed always cold.

It was time to take action. More than online applications and waiting.

Today was the day I took charge of my life again.

I flung the covers off my body and headed for the shower. After that and a couple of cups of coffee, I set out with a stack of resumes in hand—even though most of the page was blank.

Today, I would find a job. Period.

I didn't skip a single place of business on my day's journey. Convenience stores, gas stations, a yogurt shop, and even a bakery—I stopped at all of them and inquired about availability.

“Anything?” I asked one of the managers at the end of my journey. “I'll stock or mop or clean the bathrooms. Please. In few months, I won't have a place to live.”

“I'm sorry,” the man said as a woman approached his side and hugged him. “We can't afford any employees right now. We are barely paying ourselves a salary as it is. We're really sorry.”

I nodded. There was so much love between them. Anyone could see it. Everyone in this world was surviving something. Even them. Even me.

“Thank you. I appreciate it. I'll stop by here instead of the other store from now on. Your prices are cheaper anyway.”

Leaving, I felt more and more defeated by the second. I didn't have time for defeat. My time in the apartment dwindled.

Crossing the street, I started up the other side. Fast-food places weren't my first choice, but beggars couldn't be choosers. By the time I was done, I'd become a nuisance to the city. No place within walking distance of the apartment had been missed.

Not a one.

Even the dry-cleaning place that ruined my favorite shirt. I may or may not have acted like a bit of a Karen when that happened. Good thing it didn't look like the owner remembered. Or if she did, she had the kindness not to say anything.

On the walk home, I mulled over the situation.

Perhaps when I found a job and a cheaper place to live, I could get a roommate.

Put an ad on social media or something like that.

That would make any rent more palatable, but there was that fear that I would get a roommate who belonged on one of those true crime documentaries.

Even with a roommate, a minimum wage job would leave me eating beans and rice and not much else. I could sell some of the expensive things at a carport sale, but the money made from that would be temporary.

Man, I was in deep shit and there was no paddle. Hell, there wasn't even a boat.

My feet were sore, but I knew I had more in me. I had to go to sleep that night knowing I'd done the best I could.

If I failed, it wouldn't be because I didn't put in the effort.

I walked even farther this time. I applied everywhere. Talked to managers and owners. Some of them suggested other places —knew people who were hiring. It was a start but no bites. I decided to go on the other side of the city and do the same thing.

I was only a few blocks from the club when a car pulled over to the curb.

I gasped when I saw who it was. The alpha from the club. That one I'd spilled my lemony drink all over.

What was he doing here?

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Liam

My schedule was already jam-packed, but I was determined to eke out whatever time it took for Cuffed's new gardens.

And while the owners had ideas, and a lot of playground equipment, a quick download of original plans for all three addresses revealed far more space available than Andreas had indicated.

In addition to the yards between the club and the neighboring properties, which were generous now and would be doubled in size when the fences separating them came down, there were backyards as well, and the spaces on the opposite sides of the two new properties.

But as I worked, I had kept finding myself sitting with the pen limp in my hand while my mind replayed the moment I'd spent with the omega who looked so upset.

Logic told me he wouldn't be there when I went to meet Andreas in the afternoon, but a guy could dream.

I'd missed a chance there, and I hoped whatever had him so unhappy had cleared up by now.

I had made some sketches of ideas on my tablet, but every time I thought about it, I had more.

Unlike the estates and other homes I'd been designing for, these would be used and

appreciated by all the members and visitors to the club.

Presumably, with more floor space, they'd be able to add many of those on their waiting list to the membership as well.

My work was going to be so useful to all of them as well as beautiful.

If I could have, I'd have canceled every other job in favor of this one.

But I didn't build my business by being unreliable, so I'd have to balance what I already had on my plate with Cuffed's needs.

Not that I'd been awarded the contract yet anyway. Until I had a proposal prepared—until I actually knew their needs and desires—I wouldn't know if we were a good match. My tour of the inside had shown me that the owners preferred quality and were not shy about spending what it took to have it.

Information like that helped me with my designs, as did the notes I'd received, but I still had a lot more questions and hoped to get them answered in order to proceed.

People I'd worked for in the past wanted flowers, shrubs, and sometimes even native plantings, but basically straightforward "gardens." In this case, I was being tasked with designing a more active space.

I hardly knew where to begin or, more aptly, where to stop.

And I needed to discuss the membership Andreas had been trying to get me to sign up for as well as something more.

A few blocks from the club, I saw someone walking along. Even from the back and in a whole different lighting, my wolf's reaction, as well as my body's, told me who it

was, and without a second thought, I pulled over to the curb and rolled down the passenger window.

“Hey,” I called. “Want a ride?”

He glanced in my direction and, at first, I thought he was going to continue walking. Who could blame him? He probably had no idea who I was, and an omega that cute must have to deal with mashers all the time.

“I...” I began, at a loss for words.

“Wait, do I know you?” The omega came to the passenger door and leaned in the window. “From the club, of course. I splashed my drink all over you.” His cheeks pinkened, but he went on. “I hope it came out of your shirt.”

“Black, remember? It’s fine. Now, where can I take you?”

“That’s very kind, but I’m not going far. I can manage.” He moved to stand, but I reached across the car and opened the door.

“It’s over ninety degrees out there today. Please allow me to keep you from melting into the sidewalk.”

Since dots of sweat beaded his forehead, he could not deny being on the verge of overheating. A smile lifted the corners of his lips and he slipped into the seat. “You win. But I’m just going about three blocks down to the convenience store.”

“Convenience store, it is.” I waited until his seat belt was fastened before pulling back out into traffic. “I’m Liam, by the way.”

“Hirsch. Are you a new member? I haven’t seen you at the club before.”

“Just a guest. Andreas has been urging me to join.”

“What did you think?” He leaned back in the seat at an angle to look at me. “Gonna sign up?”

“I’m leaning in that direction. Do you go often?”

We were already approaching our destination, but I wanted to extend the conversation if I could, reluctant to let him leave without something more...maybe a commitment to meet at Cuffed one night if I could get another pass? Or if I joined, which I was very likely going to do.

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Hirsch

My feet were killing me. That was the excuse I gave myself for getting in with a virtual stranger.

The other reason was...my wolf was practically begging me. He howled so loudly that my human ears hurt from the volume of it.

He wanted in that car. In that alpha's arms. Hearing him purr into my ear. Feeling him writhe above me.

Stopping the car, Liam, I now knew his name, got out and opened my door for me. He was parked on the curb in a no-parking zone, but it didn't seem to faze him.

"I used to go often. My former partner signed us up for an annual pass but it expires in a few months. After that, I won't...it won't be in my budget anymore."

He nodded. "I see. Where were you headed again? Your...I seem to have lost my train of thought."

I let out a small laugh. Could there be a chance this alpha was as affected by me as I was him? My wolf tore at my insides, wanting to get out and show off for this alpha. He'd never acted this way before. Certainly not around Kyle.

"Just a few blocks over. The convenience store on the corner of 7th and Main."

"Ah, yeah. They have one of those milkshake machines. I know the place."

I snickered. “I’ve never tried one. Are they good?”

“Never tried one? Well, you must in my opinion. It’s one of my guilty pleasures.” He shook his head. “Gas station milkshakes. My granola dads would throw a fit if they knew.”

“My...well, I haven’t had one in years.”

I moved the air-conditioner vent so it was pointing directly at my face. The cool air was heaven. My feet were also glad for the break.

We stopped at a red light, and Liam turned to me. “Your former partner?”

My cheeks filled with heat. “Yes. Former.”

He chuckled low and deep. Every part of my body alerted to it. I wondered if he laughed like that in bed? If he was playful or more serious. Either way, I would love to find out.

But no. I had real-life problems, and Liam could make none of them go away. What right did I have to seek out a relationship or even a one-night stand with this beautiful man when my life was riddled with more problems than answers?

I barely had a relationship with myself.

“That was very nosey of me, Hirsch. I apologize and yet, I don’t feel sorry. Imagine that. I can give you a ride home, too if you like.”

I sighed. The last thing I wanted was for this man to bring me home in some walk of shame, knowing I’d applied everywhere but gotten nowhere. “It’s only a short walk home. But thank you.”

“I don’t mind,” he said. His hand flexed. Into a fist and then relaxed again. It reminded me of that period movie where there was all the hand flexing. And pride. And prejudice.

“And I appreciate it. I do. What were you doing around here? May I ask?”

“You can ask me anything,” he said. “It’s not as nosey as my question.

” Another chuckle. God, it made tingles break out along my skin.

It was hard to stay in my passenger seat and not crawl over the console and straddle him.

He smelled so delicious, like carrot cake and spices I’d never known existed until this moment.

“Well, then...”

“I’m a landscape artist.”

“And you’re working somewhere near the club?”

Liam sighed. “It’s something for the club, but I can’t say what yet.”

“Oh, there’s the convenience store. Thank you for giving me a lift. It was a nice reprieve from the heat.”

“You’re welcome. Are you sure you don’t want me to wait?”

“I’m sure. Thank you again.”

“Hey,” he said as I was getting out of the car.

Liam put his hand on mine. A thousand visions of him and me flooded my mind, all procured by my wolf.

He fussed at me, begging me to get back into the car.

Have him take me to the first flat surface we could find.

Or the back seat. Anywhere would do. “Will I see you at the club?”

I shrugged. “I don’t know. I hope so.”

Instead of waiting for him to drive away, I forced my feet in the direction of the convenience store. Saying a little prayer to whatever god would hear me, I walked in and hoped for the best.

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Liam

I waited in the car for a couple of minutes after the omega got out, thinking he might be right back.

After all, how long did it take to buy things at a convenience store?

But, to my surprise, I could see through the plate glass windows as the guy behind the counter came out and accompanied Hirsch through the employees-only door at the rear of the shop.

He hadn't mentioned being on his way to work.

Hopefully he wasn't embarrassed by it—honest labor was never something to be ashamed of.

But, for now, sitting out here would only make me look like a stalker. Maybe even be one. I put the car in gear again and drove out of the parking lot. Always allowing a little extra time for appointments, my detour with Hirsch would put me just on time.

I parked in the employee lot in the rear as directed and entered Cuffed through the back entrance, which led through the kitchen.

Even at this time of day, with hours to go before any self-respecting nightclub would open its doors, there were cooks bustling around preparing delicious-smelling food.

A couple of workers sat at a round table in the corner with thick roast beef

sandwiches and fresh-cooked potato chips in front of them.

My mouth watered, and I regretted skipping lunch.

One of the chefs looked up from some salmon he was slicing paper thin and arched a brow in my direction. “Are you lost?”

“Maybe so. I have a meeting with Andreas, and while he told me to use this entrance, that’s as far as it got—or maybe that I remember.”

“Let me have one of the dishwashers take you to his office,” he said, looking around.

“No need.” Andreas entered the kitchen at that moment. “Cliff, could you please send some lunch to the conference room.” He waved at the employees in the corner. “Whatever they have is fine.”

It looked better than fine to me. It looked amazing.

“This way.” Andreas led me through a club that appeared very different in the daytime without all the subtle lighting and soft music. And people. The St. Andrew’s cross, spiderweb, spanking benches...all of it waiting for the night’s influx. “I’m excited to hear what you have in mind for us.”

We settled at one end of a big table in the conference room, and I pulled out my laptop, noticing a screen suspended over the other end. “Mind if I cast my notes on there?”

“Not at all. Let me see who else is around, if you don’t mind?”

“That would be great. I’m very interested in getting input on what I have so far as well as learning how I can gear my approach to best suit your needs.

” I grinned as a white-coated cook came in with a platter of sandwiches, followed by two others with pitchers of iced tea and water, plates, a large bowl of the chips, cookies...

A lot for two people. Had the chef realized it would be more than two, since we were using this room?

Two more owners came in and sat down, and when I offered to begin my presentation while they ate, they refused, insisting I enjoy my lunch first. It was great from sandwiches to chips to cookies and fruit, and I ate more than my share before pushing my plate away with a groan.

“The kink clubs I’ve been to in the past didn’t have anything like this to eat. Usually drinks and perhaps bar snacks.”

“Our members expect the best of everything, and that’s what we give them,” Bronson said. “Which is where you come in. Andreas is working on the building, but he says you’re the best to make our outdoor spaces just right.”

“You make him sound like Goldilocks,” Samuel, the other owner chided. “Sorry. We’re used to speaking frankly around one another.”

“I like that.” I opened my laptop and, with two more cookies on a napkin beside it, cast my presentation onto the screen.

“If you ever have an opening for more investment, please keep me in mind.” The words tumbled out from a place in my mind where I’d only half formed the idea, but I meant them, even if my timing was not perhaps ideal. “So, let’s begin.”

At this preliminary stage, I wanted to show the clients the basic outline of their space and a variety of plantings and hardscapes they could choose from.

Usually, I included some examples of my work, but in this instance, I did not.

I used my time to share my ideas, some that might be too out there even for this case.

When I finished, I sat back and waited for their comments.

Instead, I got applause.

“Does that mean you’d like me to proceed?” I asked, when the three owners settled down. “Because I’m more excited about this project than any I’ve done before.”

The three exchanged a glance and then Samuel said, “We will need the final specs, and cost, of course, but I feel good about giving you the go-ahead to do those things, and we will need to know when you can start. Most of the external work that would affect you will be done within the month.”

“I’ll get started and have finals to you by week’s end,” I said, “And I will see how I can rearrange my schedule to begin as soon as you’re ready for me.

” It was going to take some major rearranging and hiring of additional staff, but they didn’t need to know that.

Closing my laptop I stood up. “Thank you for your time, gentlemen, and for lunch.”

Our lunch had been late, verging onto teatime if we’d been in another country, and while we discussed my plans, the sun had set outside, and I was glad I hadn’t made any other appointments for the afternoon.

“Do you have to leave?” Andreas asked. “I was going into the club to hang out for a while, if you’re free.”

I waved at my pale-blue button-down and gray slacks. Not exactly club wear. “I should probably go home and change...”

“No need. You probably didn’t notice, but people wear all kinds of things.” Bronson stood as well and came around to shake my hand. “We’ll need to schedule another meeting soon.”

“Of course, as soon as I get everything ready, I—”

“No. I mean about your investment. With the expansion, we have been talking about taking on another party, and Andreas has already vouched for you.”

He hadn’t even been able to get me to join, and he’d anticipated my interest in investing.

I tried to remember if I’d said anything to give him that impression—had I called it “interesting”?

No matter. “Let me know when it’s convenient, and if you have any paperwork I can show my lawyer and accountant, that would be a good start. Do you need me to sign an NDA?”

After a bit more back-and-forth, I accompanied Andreas to the main floor where we sat and had drinks and spoke with various members—and I kept an eagle eye out for a certain omega who was probably still at work at a convenience store.

How could he afford membership here if he had a minimum wage job?

Was there an alpha in the picture, a better earner?

My wolf’s and my interest had not, somehow, led me to find out if he was single.

Hirsch

After a full day of applications and walking, I should've been dead on my feet. I watched some videos on my phone and read a bit of a book, but my thoughts were constantly interrupted by Liam.

The way he spoke to me. There was no one else on the earth when he looked into my eyes. No other people. No whisper of not having a job or a life. Kyle didn't even exist on the same plane as him.

I put my phone down and wondered if he was at the club tonight.

One way to find out.

In less than an hour, I'd showered and got into my club attire. I had the best of the best, thanks to Kyle even though I didn't participate in any of his pleasures or preferences.

I used the excuse of not liking them to get out of it but the truth was, Kyle liked to play with other people. In front of me. Behind my back. All of the above.

I thought he never really liked me. In fact, there was a part of me that thought Kyle hated me. That's why he played with my emotions, my heart. He never cared for me. I was something he could manipulate and puppeteer. A toy.

I threw a light jacket over my outfit and headed toward the club. This time, my walk wasn't fueled by survival, but instead, great want. Desire. Passion.

Despite my hesitations, I wanted to see if Liam was there. Get to know him better.

What made him tick. In life. In the club. In love.

All the ticking.

I arrived at the club more nervous than when I'd left my house. I wanted a drink and maybe a snack, but the guilt of putting those things on Kyle's tab made me sick, even after everything he'd done to me. Stealing was stealing.

"I was hoping to see you here tonight." Liam's velvet voice dragged over my skin from behind me. My heart thrummed. He was here and he'd been drawn to me like a moth to a flame.

"Hello." I turned. "I just got here."

"Good. No one has tried to scoop you up yet." His eyes roamed my form.

My wolf preened inside me, wishing he was the one being inspected.

From the smile on Liam's face, I knew he liked what he saw.

In my eyes, I was skinnier than I should've been.

Could use more muscle tone. Could use a haircut. All of that.

"No one but you."

He took my hand and began to lead me away. "What a lucky man I am. I'm sitting in a booth over here with Andreas. Can I please buy you a drink?"

I nodded and let him bring me to a table that was in shadow. It was intimate and private but at the same time in the middle of the club. The lights, purple and turquoise made everything seem elusive and exciting.

I would miss this place, if for nothing else, for the atmosphere.

Cuffed was a place where everyone could be exactly who they were.

No explanations. No hiding things or having your preferences shoved in a corner.

People could show themselves here without fear of consequences, as long as they didn't disobey the rules, of course.

Rules that were in place to protect everyone.

"I would love a drink. Thank you."

"How about a snack? Something more?"

"That would be great."

My wolf went nuts when he offered us food. Being fed by someone else was big for shifters, but in my wolf's mind, he was offering a lot more than chips and salsa. He was taking care of us.

The waiter came over and Liam asked me what I wanted instead of ordering for me. He didn't bat an eye when I asked for the sliders and another fruity drink, much like the one I had the night I spilled it on him.

We were served in no time. While we ate, Liam and I chatted. "You know where I work but where do you work, Hirsch?"

His question hit me in the gut. He meant no harm.

Liam came off as the sweetest man on the planet but at the same time strong and sexy.

He probably didn't know the depth of my embarrassment about not being employed.

"I'm in between jobs." I laughed, hearing my own lie.

"The truth is, I'm unemployed. I was in a relationship...

he didn't want me to work, and now I'm trying to find a job from scratch.

No education. Hardly any former employment.

The convenience store you dropped me off at? "

He nodded and put his hand on my thigh. It took everything I had in me to stay on my line of thought with him touching me. "Yeah?"

"I was applying for jobs all day. That was one of my last stops. I wasn't going to shop. I was trying to find a place to work."

"There's no shame in work, Hirsch. In any kind of work. A paycheck is a paycheck. Did you think I would think badly of you?"

I nodded and denied the tears welling in my eyes.

"Wanna know a secret?" he asked. Yes. I wanted to know all of his secrets.

"My parents owned a convenience store when I was younger. They were so proud of

starting their own business. They worked for themselves, and that meant they never missed any of my school functions. There were kids who made fun of me for it but I had the best, loving parents. They worked hard and were able to retire well. I would never shame anyone for work. No matter what work.”

I breathed out a sigh of relief. “Thank you.”

“I hope you find something soon. Everything will be okay.”

“How do you know?” I asked, laughing.

“Just trust me.”

We talked over all kinds of things. Parents. Upbringing. Jobs. Life. There was never a lull. I felt like I was talking to someone I’d known forever and more.

“Hirsch, would you like to play with me tonight?”

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Liam

The omega looked like I asked him to do something terrible. At a kink club, although you'd never know it from my visits so far, most people came to play. Whatever their preference was, they would hope to have time to enjoy it at Cuffed. It was a big reason why they joined.

Hirsch tugged on his hand, and I released it, not wanting him ever to feel trapped. "I-I don't know. What did you want to do to me?"

A chill ran over me at the fear in his tone.

"Omega, I don't want to do anything to you.

When I suggested playing, I meant we could discuss something we might both enjoy.

See if we have common ground in the Cuffed arena.

"I reached for his hand again, and he let me take it, smooth my thumb over the back of it.

"Should we walk around and see what everyone else is getting up to and you can show me what you like and don't? "

"That sounds okay." His words agreed but his tone held reserve. Who had made him feel this way? As if he might be forced to do something sexual or verging on that against his will.

“Omega, if you don’t want to do anything but sit here, have a drink and a snack, and get to know one another, I’d enjoy that as well. Shall we do that?”

His lips moved as if words wanted to emerge, but he wasn’t sure if he should let them. “Can we just walk around and observe and talk?”

Pretty much that was what I’d just suggested, but pointing that out was not going to help him.

Someone had done a number on his head, and likely his body.

My wolf wanted to break out and find whoever it was and rip their throat out.

Hopefully they weren’t here because if the omega should see them and point them out, I might end up in prison. Or the pound.

I suddenly noticed that Andreas had disappeared at some point.

Showing how focused on the omega I was. I hoped he understood.

Sliding out of the booth, I brought him with me, linked by our joined hands.

“I think that’s a perfect idea. And if at any point, you get uncomfortable or unhappy, I want you to promise you’ll tell me. ”

His gaze dropped to the floor. “You’ll get upset.”

Releasing his hand, I cupped his chin and gently brought his face up. “Hirsch, I promise I won’t be upset if you tell me how you honestly feel. If you don’t, I’ll be disappointed.”

“I promise to do my best, but it will be hard.”

I caressed his cheek, the slight scruff of a long day tickling my palm. “Let’s wander around casually and not make any big decisions. I’m just here to enjoy the evening with friends, and running into you again made it even better.”

We started off toward the pathway that wound through the various stations on the floor.

Electrical, wax, fire...and lots of impact play.

Impressive bondage. People who joined Cuffed generally knew what they liked, and to be a dom here required skill, especially in the more dangerous kinks.

All of them had the potential to cause harm to the careless, which was why dungeon monitors were on the floor at all times and even the private rooms were not 100 percent so.

Staff could always see inside in case of an emergency.

Andreas had told me that once, and as we passed a shibari station, I remembered that there were private rooms. Hirsch seemed shy, even a little ill at ease, and I wondered... “Omega, would you feel more comfortable in a quieter setting?”

He watched the bondage, a thing of beauty being wrought by an alpha I didn’t know. Then he nodded.

“Let me ask if we can have the use of a private room where we can do whatever you like.”

“Even if it’s just talk?” he asked.

“Of course.” I reached for my phone then remembered I didn’t have it.

But then I spotted Andreas nearby and caught his eye.

Five minutes later, we were following one of the DMs down the hallway past the little room and some others and up a staircase.

He unlocked a room and let us inside before closing the door and leaving us alone together.

I hadn’t been in any of these spaces, at Cuffed at least, although I’d been told they were all a little different from one another.

This one had a bed of sorts, an easy chair, a cabinet, a pair of padded posts, spanking bench, and mirrors.

So many mirrors. I was about to say we would see if there was another room available, thinking the omega was the shy type and wouldn’t want to have all these reflections everywhere, when I realized I was wrong.

Hirsch was staring, fascinated at the mirrors.

Naughty little omega liked to watch.

The idea made me hard. Determined to give him a good show to capture his attention.

If he wanted to play...

I sat in the big chair and gave him a minute or two to explore, wanting him to be the one to broach the subject of play, or not.

Finally, he paused in front of the cabinet. “What do you think is in there?” he asked.

I shrugged. “I couldn’t say. Why don’t you open it and satisfy both of our curiosity.”

His shoulders tensed, but he didn’t move. “Is that all right? I can do that?”

“Of course. How else are we going to find out if there’s anything in there that interests us?” And what kind of an alpha had made him afraid to peek in a cupboard?

Now he glanced over his shoulder. “Okay.” His little grin tempted me to reach out and bring him into my lap, forget about what was in any old cabinet, and kiss him senseless.

But this wasn’t about me. He twisted the knob and opened the door of the tall, antique-looking cabinet.

Now that I could see inside, I realized it was more of a wardrobe.

“There are clothes in the top part, hanging up.”

“So there are.” More like role-playing costumes. “And the drawers below?”

He opened one and froze. “Ummm...”

“Show me, omega.”

Hirsch held up a package holding a brand-new—thank heavens—butt plug. “It’s full of these.”

“I see. What else do we have?”

One drawer after another revealed various sorts of pretty mainstream sex toys, but the bottom, a low, wide drawer, had coils of rope and other types of bindings. He held up a coil of jute. “Do you...that is, would you...” His face was so red, I had to rescue him from his embarrassment.

“Omega, do you think you’d enjoy trying that out?”

He nodded, looking at the floor again. We needed to work on that.

“I like the idea, too, but you need to use your words and tell me what you like, or how will I ever be able to make you scream out my name in pleasure?”

He lifted his gaze and met mine, eyes about as wide as they could go. “You...I...what?”

“Isn’t that the idea? How about I make a suggestion, and you can guide me from there?”

Hirsch agreed to my idea, and I took the rope from his hands, setting it aside.

“Let’s keep things basic and easy. Do you have a safe word you like to use?”

“My ex didn’t believe in them.”

Rage simmered in me. No safe words? How had he gotten that past the dungeon monitors?

Hirsch must never have tried to stop him.

Because he thought it wouldn’t work? I shoved the anger down as deep as I could, wanting to use only positive emotions in our first time playing together.

“How about we use red, yellow, and green, for tonight? You can think of something you like better later on. You know how those work, right?”

“Green is everything is fine, yellow, slow down, and red...”

“You say red, everything stops. And I will not be angry or hold it against you. I need your honesty, omega.”

He chewed on his lip, considering, then finally said, “Agreed. I know Kyle was the exception, but he said in a relationship like ours, there was no need for safe words.”

I would be having a word with Andreas about that.

“There is always a need for safe words. Remember that. Part of the trust is knowing you can communicate with your alpha whether it’s to say you want more of that or less...or none. Okay?”

He nodded.

“You’re going to need to use your words,” I reminded him. “Do you promise to use your safe words?”

“Yes, sir,” he said. “I promise.”

“Then stand between the posts and we’ll get started.”

His lips moved, but no words came out, and I had to remind him again to speak.

“Yes, sir.” He positioned himself where I had indicated.

“Hold on to those handles at the top of the posts and brace your feet apart at the

base.” There were various places to attach rope cunningly concealed along the length of the posts, and I used them to anchor the bindings before winding lengths around his body.

Normally, I’d have had him strip first, but I was calling it as I saw it, and going slow.

As I walked around the omega, adding more loops and knots in pressure points and other erotically charged places, Hirsch’s eyes remained fixed on the mirror in front of him.

With the arrangement in the room, that mirror gave him the full view of himself from all sides, and his jeans were tight in the fly.

“You look nice like that, omega.” I caressed his lower belly, waiting until he thrust his hips forward to cup his bulge. “Is that all right?”

“Green,” he moaned, and I didn’t wait for more before opening his fly and drawing out his thick, hard length. “Greener.”

Technically that wasn’t the safe word, but I got the point. “Stop me anytime.” I leaned in close and spoke into his ear, telling him how sexy he looked all bound up like that, and how the mirrors enhanced his masculine beauty. “Next time, naked so I can see all of you reflected.”

“Yes, please,” he whispered as I closed my fist over his shaft and gave a firm squeeze. “Oh yes.”

He hung between the posts, bound like a spider in a web, and I rubbed my palm over his head and stroked up and down his length, careful not to block his view of the mirror until he shouted, “Liam, alpha, yes!” and emptied his balls over my fist.

Such a sweet omega.

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Hirsch

Not in a million years did I see tonight coming. Me. Coming. Tonight. Oh, boy. That was a lot.

“Can you stay here for just a minute, omega? I’ll be right back.”

I nodded, still breathless. The way he spoke to me. The mirror image of us. The dirty talk. Seeing myself in the throes of passion. The way my body reacted to being touched by him—stroked. Cared for.

I leaned back on the bed. I’d come so hard my ears rang and my sight went blurry.

Liam was one hell of an alpha.

And I was a mess. Pants down. Skin flushed. Heart still beating hard in my chest.

“Are you okay?” he murmured, coming back into the private room. A gush of cold air from the club came in, making me shiver.

I nodded again, at a loss for words. I was a bit embarrassed. This had never happened before.

“Let’s get you cleaned up. I brought some wipes. They were warmed.” The alpha kneeled in front of me and wiped my legs and my stomach. Goddess, there was cum everywhere. I’d made a mess.

He helped me get my pants back up and then he pulled a blanket from the bed and wrapped it around my shoulders before pulling me onto his lap in the armchair. “You’re shivering, Hirsch.”

“I don’t know what you must be thinking,” I admitted. I’d spent years pre-empting Kyle’s actions. Trying to keep the peace to the point where I became the manipulator, making sure he wouldn’t get upset. Or angry.

“I’m thinking you are the most lovely omega when you come. I’m thinking what a privilege it was to have this experience with you. I’m thinking I would like to do this a lot more often.”

“You’re not...you don’t think I was too much? I made a lot of noise.”

He chuckled, jostling us both. “This is a soundproof room and honestly, I was hoping that one day, I might be able to make you scream louder. Have that orgasm last a bit more. We could play with all kinds of things—see what you and I like best.”

“You and I...” I whispered, hoping that he meant what I thought he meant. We were mates. Fated.

But then again, no.

Not just no but hell no.

This was the way it started with Kyle. I didn’t see the flags until they painted my body with red. Until it was too late to back out or find help. By the time I knew what Kyle was, I’d lost myself almost completely.

“What do you mean?” My voice shook.

“I would like to date you, omega. Get to know you. Have more of us and more of this if you like.”

His words spilled over me like a bucket of ice-cold water. I jumped out of his lap and barely landed on two feet. “I can’t do this.”

“Do what?” he asked. My wolf felt the connection between us wane, and the room filled with the musty scent of disappointment.

Too bad. I had done enough managing others’ emotions. I was only responsible for me.

“This. Dating. This.” I wasn’t even making sense, but I had to get the hell out of here. I told him so.

“Yes. Okay. Let’s go.”

I was sure he read more into that than there was, but I meant nothing sexy about the suggestion. I wanted to get out of here and back to my apartment that wasn’t my own. By myself. Because on my own was the only place I was safe and in the company of complete trust.

After Kyle, the only person I could trust in this world was myself.

“You don’t have to leave. I can get myself home.”

He took my hand and some of the ice melted. I didn’t want to hurt him but moreover, I wouldn’t get myself hurt again. “Please, let me take you home. I don’t understand. I thought we were having a good time but at least let me see you home.”

“It’s okay. It’s only a few blocks. I can take care of myself.”

“And I know that. Please, Hirsch. I want to.”

I nodded. “Okay. But I’m not trying to get you to take me home so that I can invite you inside.”

“Of course. Let’s go.”

We walked toward the entrance where I got my coat, and Liam escorted me out, his hand on the small of my back. I soaked it in, not knowing if this was the last time I would have the privilege of his touch.

Once in his car, I forced myself to look out the window and not at him, for fear I would relent.

“Here we are,” I said once we pulled up to the apartment building.

“This is a nice place,” he said.

“It’s only temporary. Thank you for the ride. I’m sorry.”

It broke my heart to see his face like this. Disappointed. Sad. Brokenhearted much like I was.

Liam

“I understand.” Hirsch was not ready for a date, and I didn’t want to make him feel pressured. Sitting in my car outside his apartment building, I didn’t want the evening to end, and the omega had not made a move to get out. “But I hope you had a nice time tonight.”

He shifted uncomfortably in his seat, looking everywhere but at me. “It was eye-opening.”

Really? I reached for his hand, having noticed that he seemed more relaxed when we held hands. “How so?” Turning his hand palm up, I lifted it to my lips and kissed it.

“I know it’s supposed to be consensual, everything that goes on at Cuffed, but my ex was less interested in what I wanted to do—or didn’t want to do—than you were tonight.”

“Do you want to talk about that?” I leaned in and caught his eye. “Or not?”

“A little, maybe.” He tried to look away, but I held his chin.

“Omega, you have reason not to feel safe with alphas, but I want you to know that I’m willing to earn your trust.” As an alpha, I normally took the lead, but this omega had been through too much.

Even as little as I knew about his situation told me so.

We were parked in front of a very nice building, in a higher rent district than my home, in fact.

He'd told me enough about his membership and home to know that he was teetering on the edge.

Going from living a luxurious life to whatever he could manage on his own.

I hated that, and my wolf was demanding we carry our mate home to our den and make sure he never had to worry about such things again.

Only, he was coming out of a bad relationship with an alpha/dom who had not followed any of the rules of kindness, decency, or even BDSM.

And that meant I'd have to tread carefully.

I settled back in my seat but did not release his hand.

The connection calmed him and I liked it far too much to give it up as long as he was okay with it.

Finally, he said, "I never saw one of the private rooms before. When I came with my ex, we always played on the main floor. In full view of everyone."

"I see."

"And it's not that I'm afraid to be seen or anything, it's more that he never asked what I might like or if I hated what we did together."

"He never asked you for hard or soft limits?" I put in.

“No. And if I tried to object, if he hurt me in a way I did not like and I complained, he mocked me or, almost worse, put me aside and made me watch him with someone else so I could see how a ‘real’ omega handled it.”

“You were in a committed relationship?” I asked.

He nodded then seemed to remember to use his words. “Yes. But so much was unspoken. And what evolved was anything but consensual on my part. He chose what we did together and who else he played with.”

“And you? Did you have the freedom or desire to play with others?”

The streetlight bleeding into the car showed his eyes shining with tears as he said, “I never wanted to do that. To me, intimacy is between two or more people who mean something to each other. I know that’s not the same for everyone, and I respect that, but it is to me.

So, when he tried to get me to be with another alpha, I dug in my heels.

It was a line I couldn’t, wouldn’t cross. ”

“I understand.” This was about him, but I wanted to be honest, to tell him where I was coming from and where I saw myself in the future.

“I’ve played in other clubs with single omegas, but never one in a relationship, even if they had an open one.

I didn’t judge what they did as wrong. It was just not something I felt comfortable doing.

“And in a relationship, I play only with my partner. Again, not because others make

bad choices but because that is mine.” I cleared my throat. “So, anyway, that’s where I stand.”

“Thank you for sharing that,” he said, brushing tears from his eyes. “I appreciate knowing that about you.”

“Just something to be said, since you were so open with your experiences.”

We sat there in silence for a few minutes before Hirsch tugged gently and I released his hand. “I’d better get going. Thanks for the ride and...and everything.”

“Let me walk you to the door.” I started to get out, but he laid a hand on my arm.

“I can make it. There’s a doorman to keep an eye on things.”

“All right.” No matter how much my wolf wanted to take him home to our den or at the very least to take him to his apartment door and make sure he was safely inside, I had to let my mate guide me in the best way to be his alpha.

No matter how long it took.

“Listen, tomorrow I’ll be a Cuffed during the afternoon, working on some sketches. Want to stop by and visit?”

“It’s not a date,” he cautioned.

“I don’t work on dates,” I said. At least, I hadn’t so far.

“All right, then. I’ll see you tomorrow. Probably.”

Hopefully.

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Hirsch

Businesses and I were at a stalemate in terms of me getting a job. I'd applied everywhere. Online. In person.

Some places twice.

No bites.

I didn't blame the companies. Or the people. I had no experience, no knowledge of half the jobs I'd applied for.

I considered going back to school, but I still had to have a roof over my head and food to eat.

Groaning and shutting the laptop, I pushed away from the desk absolutely wrung out. I had nothing else to do other than overthink jobs and my future.

Well, there was Liam, but there wasn't much to think about there either.

He wanted more from me, and I wasn't sure I was ready to give the little of me left away. To trust it with someone else.

I barely trusted myself.

My wolf already trusted Liam completely. Even I trusted him a bit, otherwise, there was no way I would've let him take me to the private room—and do what we did.

Mirrors had taken on a new definition for sure.

Last night, I'd told Liam I would see him at the club today. It was early in the afternoon, but he'd mentioned he would be there, setting things up for the big project.

He wanted me there.

And damn it all, I wanted to be next to him. Near him. Breathing the same air as him.

I'd thrown a bit of a fit the night before—freaked out—but Liam didn't flinch.

My tantrums, as Kyle called them, were unattractive and caused him to be angry. When he was mad, it was always my fault. Always.

I got dressed, not in club attire, since it was early afternoon, but in regular clothes.

Dark-wash jeans and a light-blue T-shirt I had been told set off the color of my eyes.

Not by Kyle, of course. By some stranger.

I stopped dead in my tracks as he'd said it, realizing that strangers had officially given me more compliments than the man I slept next to.

That compliment set me on my journey of looking into things. Realizing the things that had been blamed on me were actually his abuse. I had almost gotten up the bravery to leave when he beat me to the punch.

I walked to the club. The person out front already knew my name and escorted me inside, to a meeting room that looked out over the backyard area. Liam was at the head of the table. Head down. Glasses on. Absolutely absorbed by his work, his drawing.

Nothing sexier than a man serious about his passion.

“Hey,” he said, looking up with a smile. “I was waiting for you.”

“I’m sorry to interrupt your work,” I responded and approached the table. “I can sit over here. You looked so focused.”

“Now, my focus is you. Come on over and sit next to me. I’ve gotten permission from Andreas to share some of this with you, but it’s still hush-hush.”

“Of course it is.” I nearly rushed over with excitement. He was telling me his secrets. I sat in the chair next to him, and he tugged me closer until our thighs were touching under the table.

He went on to show me everything that was planned. Special areas for the littles. Another contractor would be hired to build walls to maintain privacy for the members of the club and those who might walk by.

Liam stood and pointed out where things would be.

He kept his distance, probably because I’d turned him down cold for the date and he didn’t want to cross a line, but, but eventually he warmed up until, near the end, he stood behind me and wrapped his arms around my waist, resting his head on my shoulder. “Well, what do you think?”

“I think it’s going to be incredible, Liam. You’ve thought of everything.”

He squeezed me tighter. “That means a lot to me. Your approval means something to me, omega.”

My stomach chose that moment to pop our bubble. “I’m sorry. I haven’t eaten since

breakfast.”

“At the risk of shattering my fragile ego, I’ll ask again. Can I take you to dinner?”

His scent surrounded me. His embrace so warm and gentle, strong and calming at the same time. There was no way I could say no to him. No damned way. “Yes. Can you forgive me for my freak-out last night?”

He turned me around in his embrace. “There’s nothing to forgive. Just know that I want to date you, not as something fun or fleeting, but I think you already know what we are to each other, right?”

I nodded as he kissed my cheek. “Such a good omega. So tempting and lovely. You’re everything I’ve ever dreamed of in a mate.”

My face heated up like he was a fireplace and I was standing entirely too close. “I-I struggle with compliments.”

“Is that right? Well, I’ll have to pour them on thick so you get used to them. Now, dinner? Do you have a preference?”

I shook my head. I was low on groceries, and anything sounded good. “I like food. All food, actually.”

“Great. I’m in the mood for Thai, how does that sound?”

“So good.”

“Then let’s go.”

The meal was perfect. I put down a half pound of steak like a starved wolf, which I

was, but being around Liam made me hungry for something more. Something that wasn't served on a plate, and certainly not in a restaurant.

"Are you ready to go?" the alpha asked me. He'd offered me dessert, but I had something else on my mind.

"I am."

"And when we get into the car, where should I take you, omega? It's your call, Hirsch."

"Would it be too forward if I said I wanted you to take me home. To your place?"

He smiled and tugged me close, placing a chaste kiss on my lips. "It would be my pleasure."

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Liam

I hadn't planned on company tonight, sure that after, the omega would not want to come home, and I tried to remember if I'd even made my bed. I usually did... Mostly because I didn't like sleeping in rumpled sheets.

It had been quite some time since anyone had shared them with me because I had to really care a lot for someone to bring them into my personal space. Playing at clubs was different, whether it involved sex or not, but even that had begun to pall over time without the heart connection.

And now that I'd met my mate, it made perfect sense, didn't it?

No one and nothing I'd ever experienced had my heart beating so hard and my wolf so determined.

Not every shifter even had a mate, but Fate had smiled on me with not just a mate but this mate, the best mate, and one who I vowed to care for every day of our lives together.

Even if he faced an unmade bed.

I parked in the garage and led him in through the kitchen door and right on into the living room.

At the bottom of the stairs, I pulled him into my arms for a long, deep kiss.

He melted into me, the heat of his body melding with mine, and I wanted to take him right there, but I also wanted him in my den.

There would be other times, and I'd have him on every piece of furniture, on the stairs, on the rug in the living room.

But for our mating, it had to be my bed.

So I pulled back, reluctantly, and slipped an arm around his waist, leading him upstairs. He was pliant, allowing me to take him where I would, and I felt the responsibility and honor of being at this moment.

My fathers always said when I met my mate, everything would be different, my world would change, and I'd had my doubts until my eyes landed on Hirsch.

In my bedroom, I ushered him right to the bed and kissed him again standing next to it.

His scent surrounded me, citrus and sandalwood, growing stronger as I removed his clothing one piece at a time.

At the club, I'd bound him dressed, only opening his pants to finish him off.

Now, I had him fully naked in front of me, and he was perfect.

Long lightly furred limbs, a broad chest and trim waist, and that hard cock jutting out at me again.

I turned him around and ran my hands down his back, stroking his smooth skin, palming his generous butt cheeks and reaching between to find him slick.

“You’re already ready for me, omega,” I murmured, taking his earlobe in my teeth. “So slick.”

“Yes,” he groaned. “I want you, alpha. Please don’t make me wait.”

Reaching around him, I grasped his cock and fisted it, squeezing up and down the shaft and palming his broad head. “Are you sure?”

His shudder answered more than his, “Yes!”

With a hand on his back, I bent him over the bed. “Stay there while I get ready for you.”

“But I want to watch,” he said. “Please?”

“You’re so polite, omega.” I took him around the other side of the bed and sat him down facing the dresser mirror. “You can see me behind you that way.”

He shivered. “I never knew I liked watching in mirrors before I met you. Why is it so hot?”

“We all have our things.” I made sure to undress where he could see me in his mirror then came around and pulled him up into my arms. Our cocks clashed, and I reached down and took both in my fist, stroking them a few times then releasing them. “And right now, my thing is to mate and mark you.”

Hirsch rolled onto his belly, still facing the mirror, and thrust his bare, oh-so sexy ass high in the air. “That’s my thing, too—rather, mine is to have you inside me and your mark on my throat.”

“I think we can arrange that.” Kneeling on the bed behind him, I rubbed the head of

my cock through his slick. “Grab your cock and see if you can come when I do.”

“I can do that?” he asked.

“I’m telling you to.” I helped him close his hand around it before using mine to brace myself on the bed.

His hips moved slightly with his hand motions, and I found his slick-coated hole and drove inside, deep, tight, and encompassing.

Soon we were matching rhythm, everything about this moment so perfect, so hot, and burned into my memory.

I filled him completely, again and again, faster and faster, and before I knew it, he was shouting my name, louder than at the club, and his voice sent me over the edge, spilling my cum into his body for the first time.

My knot swelled, and I bent to bite him, to mark his throat so anyone who saw him would know he was mine.

But mostly, I would, and he would, and I tugged him close and rolled to the side to lie connected to my omega. My mate. My fated one.

Hirsch

“What in the hell is that?” I said into my pillow, which wasn’t a pillow at all. It was a warm, hard chest with a heartbeat beating underneath the surface.

“Oh, sorry. One second.”

“That was my morning alarm. I try to get up at the same time every day.” Liam turned back toward me and nuzzled his face into my chest. “Good morning, mate.”

My eyes flew open. Sure, I knew in my head he was my mate, but hearing him say it took on a whole other meaning. I pulled him in closer. “Good morning, mate. What time is it anyway?”

“A little after six.”

I raised my arms above my head and stretched head to toe. When I looked over at Liam, there was want and desire burning in his eyes. “I’ve been waking up late.”

He ran one finger down the length of my chest and paused right before reaching my pelvic bone. “You can go back to sleep, Hirsch.”

“No. I’m up now. How about a shower?” I asked.

“That sounds like a good idea. After that, I can order you some breakfast.”

“Order?” I asked. “I can cook. I don’t mind. In fact, I love cooking.”

Liam reddened. “I’m not even sure what groceries I have. I’m always on the go, and most of the time it’s more convenient.”

“I’m sure I can come up with something. Right now, I’m sticky, and I desperately need that shower.”

“Sticky, huh? I’m going to take that as a compliment. Come on. I’ve got three showerheads. I bet that will cure you.”

“It just might.”

We took a shower and despite our mutual want, it was more intimate than sexual. He washed me head to toe, even massaging shampoo and conditioner into my hair, but when I tried to reciprocate, he said he would take care of himself.

What a completely opposite scenario from my previous relationship.

I pushed away the thoughts of Kyle and any comparison.

It wasn’t fair to Liam and served me no purpose.

It didn’t even matter anymore. I had an incredible alpha in Liam, and he was the only person other than myself I would prioritize.

“I don’t know what you’re talking about,” I said, rummaging through the cabinets and the fridge and freezer. “You’ve got things to make for breakfast.”

“I do?” he asked, setting up the coffee. “Could’ve fooled me.”

While I took the lead making breakfast, Liam helped, kissing and hugging me every chance he got. He laughed when he spilled something and cleaned it up without a

single grumble.

Liam was a breath of calm, safe, fresh air. I didn't realize how long I'd gone barely breathing before him.

When we sat down with steaming bowls of oatmeal with walnuts and honey and berry sauce, he looked at me like I was the miracle in this equation. He would be wrong.

"I didn't realize my mate was magic. You took forgotten ingredients and made this incredible meal. I can't wait to see what you do when we actually go to the market regularly."

Since mating, he spoke in we's. We were going to do this. He was excited when we would go here or there. Always we. It had only been a few hours, but everything had changed.

It would take some getting used to, but I reveled in it.

"It's oatmeal, Liam. But thank you. I am kind of magic."

"Agreed."

We ate together and Liam went back for seconds. He said he hadn't had a home-cooked breakfast in a long time and wanted to savor it. What he didn't know was that if he kept treating me like he did, I would gladly get up and make breakfast for him every morning.

My cooking skills had been denigrated before. But I liked simple foods. Easy, home-cooked meals that nourished.

Liam was looking at his phone after he loaded the dishwasher.

“Am I keeping you from work?”

“Not keeping me, but I probably should get some things accomplished today. It’s not what I want to be doing though.”

“What do you want to be doing?” I teased, offering him a bashful smile.

“I would rather be here with you. Do you want to spend the day with me? I’ll be working, but...”

I could see he was torn. He had work, but we were brand new, and our wolves would want to spend as much time together as possible to strengthen the bond. “I really need to do some job hunting today, Liam. But how about tonight? Do you want to come over for dinner? I can cook again.”

He gifted me the biggest smile yet. “I would love that. Text me your apartment number and a grocery list. I’ll bring everything.”

That was a big relief since I was running low on funds. “I will do that.”

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Liam

We went from zero to a hundred miles an hour, relationship wise, so fast my head was spinning.

The omega had been reluctant, with good reason.

As we spent time together over the next few weeks, he told me more and more about his relationship with his ex, and although he insisted he didn't want anything said to club management, I couldn't help myself.

After all, I was club management. Right after I signed the contract to do the landscaping, I signed a second one for an ownership interest in Cuffed.

It was a solid investment and one that excited me.

The other owners were so exciting to work with, enthusiastic about all the expansion plans and quick to step in and work if we were shorthanded.

I'd been behind the bar more than once and worn the dungeon monitor shirt a few times. All very enjoyable.

My company was doing well, the gardens were beginning to come together at Cuffed, and the little side as well as the small native gardens on the outside of the property were looking good.

But of course, nothing compared to the time I spent with my omega, the man of my

dreams and the submissive of my fantasies.

We were so suited to one another. While I was nothing like a shibari expert, I had mastered some styles of bondage, and my omega loved watching what I did to him in a mirror or two.

On my way home from an afternoon of supervising erotic garden installation, I was so excited to share my day with Hirsch.

He spent more time at my house than his own these days, and I hoped that when his lease ended—which was coming soon—he'd make the decision to move in permanently.

He was already on my membership for Cuffed, a necessity since Kyle's had been canceled with no refund.

He'd violated so many rules, we'd had no choice, and I hadn't minded one bit.

In fact, I'd begged to be the one to inform him, but Andreas pointed out that it might be seen as problematic if he sued to get his money back.

I wasn't sure he didn't just want the pleasure of doing it himself.

The lights were all on at my house when I pulled into the garage.

So many, I was surprised that my thrifty omega was running up the energy bill because he was the thriftiest person I'd ever met.

When I started out on my own, I didn't have much money or good sense at first and survival had been as much luck as skill.

But Hirsch was the one who turned off lights when we left a room, who put a couple of tablespoons of chili left from dinner in the fridge because it was “perfectly good,” and my house’s glow visible from a satellite chilled me to the bones. Who was there?

Had his ex tracked him down? He’d mentioned that Kyle laughed at his care with money and would turn lights on for no reason other than to bother him.

Hell... I slammed the car door and made for the kitchen, prepared to deal with the repercussions of my actions at the club.

To all reports, he hadn’t been going lately anyway, but the notification of his revocation might have gotten him wound up.

Bronson and the others were angry that they hadn’t realized what he was up to and were holding a training with the DMs to work on their observation skills.

From my omega’s descriptions of what had gone on in full view on the main floor at Cuffed, they should have noticed.

But there was no going back to the past—we could only try to do better in future.

The kitchen was aglow with more lights than I realized existed there, including the one over the stove and one at the back of the pantry, but nobody was in the room.

Fingers itching to shut them off, I continued my search for my omega.

In the kitchen doorway, I paused, listening, but no sounds met my ears.

No TV or streaming music, no footsteps or voices. Was that good or bad?

The house felt off, as I checked each downstairs room before heading for the steps to

the second floor.

So quiet. Hirsch usually had at least background music on when he was waiting for me to get home.

Most days, I'd find him curled up on a chair in the library with a book or cooking dinner in the kitchen.

Facing the upstairs hallway, I considered calling out.

But if someone was there who should not be, alerting them might be a bad idea.

I glanced over the railing, looking for signs of a problem, but nothing appeared to be out of place.

Pacing down the hallway, every door was open and, again, every light I could see blazing.

I couldn't understand. Had something scared him?

The master bedroom was no different than the other rooms, with the exception that the bathroom door was closed. And no light emerged from underneath. Real fear curled up my spine. I approached and grasped the knob. Locked. My mouth dried.

"Omega, are you in there?"

At least a minute passed before his wobbly voice whispered, "Yes."

"Are you alone?"

"Uh-huh."

Hmm. “Are you all right?”

“Yes, no...I’m not sure.”

“Can I come in?” Because I wasn’t learning anything out here except that he was okay or not okay but couldn’t confirm which. “Please?”

A click preceded the twist of the knob, and the door glided inward.

To darkness. This was about as strange as anything I could imagine.

But I didn’t want to make whatever happened any worse than it already was.

So I entered the darkness carefully, not wanting to step on or bump into him.

Was he hurt? Upset? “Hirsch, where are you?”

“Here.” The voice came from the direction of the tub. “Hi, Liam.”

“Hi. Is there something you want to tell me? Like, why the house is lit up and you’re sitting here in pitch blackness?”

” The en suite was in the middle of the house and only had a skylight—which didn’t do anything to brighten the space on a moonless night like tonight.

A glance up did show a few stars, but their light was too far away to help.

“It’s hard to explain.”

As I followed his voice, I could see the faint outline of his slumped form sitting on the edge of the tub. “Can I sit with you, and we’ll figure out how to fix whatever has

you so spooked?”

“I guess.” He spoke so low, without shifter hearing, I’d never have been able to make it out.

When I was seated next to him, thighs touching, I reached for his hand and tucked it inside mine. “Now, tell your alpha what is going on. Who do I need to kill? Kyle? Has he been here?”

Despite his obvious unease, his fingers relaxed in my grasp. “No, although there was a time when I’d have been not too opposed to his demise. It’s not that.”

“Then what? I can’t fix anything if I don’t know what it is. I can’t do my job.” I kissed the top of his head and put my free arm around him. “What has my practical omega so upset that he’d spend five dollars in electricity for no good reason?”

He jerked, trying to get free. “I turned on all the lights. I don’t even know why except I was totally freaked out. I’ll pay you back. I need to go turn them off.”

I held him close, refusing to let him up until I learned what was going on.

Now that I knew nobody was here threatening him, that worry was going, but it didn’t resolve the real issue.

“No, what you need to do is let me in on the secret that has you huddled in the shadows of the bathroom before my imagination goes wild and I start looking for threats in the shower.”

“There’s nothing in the shower.” He chuckled then went silent. “But there is something I have to tell you.” He pressed a stick of some kind into my hand. “You can turn on the light.”

What on earth? But I wasn't willing to wait another second to find out why Hirsch was so upset. So I let go of his hand, reached up, and hit the light switch over the sink and then everything came clear in a flash.

The stick had come from a box on the counter. And while I'd never had reason to use one before, I knew enough to recognize that two pluses could mean only a single thing. "You're pregnant."

"I'm sorry."

I dropped to my knees in front of him and looked up at his face, eyes red and swollen, cheeks streaked with tearstains.

"Omega, why are you sorry to be having our child? Don't you want young?"

"We'd never talked about it, but I'd always assumed that we'd have children if the goddess was kind."

Maybe he would prefer not to. "I'm sorry I never asked."

I should have used protection if you would rather not have young.

I should have taken your wishes into account, or at least found out what they were."

"Aren't you mad?" He sniffled and wiped the back of his hand over his nose. "It was my responsibility to make sure nothing happened."

"I'm not sure why you feel that way."

"Kyle said—"

“I should have known. Omega, Kyle is an asshole.” I didn’t even know him in person, but I knew that. “And I want to know your wishes, your dreams, and whether you want to have a baby with me.”

“It’s my choice?”

“It’s your body and our life together.”

“I-I want this baby. But what do you think?”

I scooped him up in my arms and swung him around. “I think you’re smart and handsome and going to make the best daddy ever.”

“I’ll do my best. You’re sure you’re happy?”

Carrying him to the bedroom, I flipped off a couple of lights on the way just to avoid being blinded.

“I never thought I could be happier than I was since meeting and mating you. But you just proved me wrong. I love you so much, omega, and this baby is the icing on the cake. Who shall we tell first? I want all our friends to share this job because it’s too much to contain. ”

“Maybe we can just know ourselves for tonight?”

“If that’s what you want to do, I’ll try hard, but tomorrow, all our friends are going to know how brilliant my omega is.”

His laughter was life to me. “It’s not like I came up with the concept, Liam. I love you so much.”

I peppered his face with kisses then added a few to his flat belly. “Love you, omega, and you, too, tiny baby. I can’t wait to meet you in person.”

Hirsch

A knock on my door scared the life out of me. I jumped at least a foot high and let out a not-so-wolfy scream. My hands covered my belly as I wondered if all my dramatics had scared my baby as well.

My first thought was that Kyle had come back. That he was back and was somehow going to try and talk me into letting him back into my life.

While I calmed down from the jump scare, I formulated a quick plan to get him out and make him go away. Part of that would include calling Liam immediately.

I looked through the peephole but saw nothing. As I opened the door, I scanned the hallway left and right. No one was there, and my heart was relieved.

But there was a note taped to my door.

I closed myself in my apartment and tried to breathe as I took in the bad news. I didn't have another month of my lease. I had forty-eight hours. With shaking hands, I picked up my phone and called the number on the bottom.

Kyle had paid the fee to have the lease terminated early.

Because Kyle.

I had forty-eight hours to leave the only place I had to live. I was officially in trouble.

Instead of calling Liam right away, I calmed myself, but my phone rang only seconds later. My sweet Liam. Our bond was so strong now. Of course he would know something was up.

“Hello?” I said, not able to camouflage the concern in my voice.

“Is something wrong?” he asked. “I...my wolf panicked.”

“I just received some bad news, but I’m okay.”

He sighed. “You don’t sound okay, Hirsch. I’m not in the thick of anything right now. I could come over. Let’s talk about it. Whatever it is, it will be okay.”

No matter how long we had been together, he still asked if he could come over. He let me be autonomous and I appreciated it.

“Please do. I have some things to figure out.”

Liam was at my apartment, or at Kyle’s apartment, in less than twenty minutes with a slice of cherry cheesecake he’d picked up at the bakery around the corner. “What?” he asked as I let him in. “Cheesecake makes everything better.”

“What are you, a Golden Girl?” I laughed but took the slice. Oh yeah, it made everything better.

“Tell me what the problem is,” he said, sitting at my bar.

“I have two days to move out. I don’t have any money and I’m pretty much screwed.”

He read the letter I slid across the counter and then sighed. “I have a suggestion.”

“I’m not taking money from you, Liam.”

He smiled but not out of happiness. “First of all, I’m your alpha and your mate.

I take great honor and pride in caring for you.

Giving you money would mean the world to me.

Second, no, that’s not my idea. You’re my mate, and we’re having a baby.

I was planning on asking you to move in with me anyway. ”

The cheesecake didn’t sit well anymore. “You are doing this because of this letter.”

Liam looked genuinely hurt. “I’m doing this because I’m in love with you and I feel awful when you’re not around. When I have to wake up in my bed alone. Missing you in the night. Reaching for you even though I know you’re not there.”

“You love me?” I asked. The tears rolled down my face. I hadn’t even realized I was crying.

“I do. I love you both.”

“I love you too.”

“Good. Now, will you move in with me, Hirsch? Make me stop missing you?”

He made it seem like I was doing him a favor. “Well, when you put it that way. Yes, Liam. I will move in with you and while we’re on the subject...I know sometimes I put up a fuss, but I really appreciate the ways you take care of me.”

He beamed. Brighter than the sun. “Let’s go get your things packed. I’m so excited.”

Getting up, he headed for my bedroom and brought out two suitcases. Kyle had gifted them to me, and the few friends I had left during that time thought it meant something deeper. It probably did but I was too blind to see it.

Didn’t matter anymore. Now they would be used to pack up and make this new life real. A life with someone who loved me.

“What about the desk and the chair?” Liam asked. “I can get someone to come pick it up for me in one of my trucks.”

“Leave it,” I said. “It was his. It can go to the dump for all I care.”

“Ready to go, then?”

I looked around, and in my head, I chanted a few prayers. I would leave the bad memories here, where they had occurred. All the mean words. The control. The manipulation. The lies. They would stay right here and die before someone else occupied the space.

Here, I would bury my ties to Kyle once and for all.

“I’m ready. Let’s go.”

“I have something else to talk to you about on the way home.”

Home. Our home. “What is it?”

Liam took my hand as we walked to his car. “We need to pick a color for the nursery.”

Liam

Hirsch still wanted to find a job, but his stomach had not taken well to the new inhabitant of his womb, making him quite ill well into the morning and sometimes even in the afternoon for the first few months of his pregnancy.

As a crafty alpha, I took advantage of his weakened state to get him to agree he would put off any kind of job search until after the baby's arrival.

I might have felt a little guilty if he hadn't been so utterly miserable and in no shape for pounding the pavement for a job that he might not feel well enough to do.

But a few months in, as his second trimester began, his sickness dissipated.

I came home from watching the little garden installation one afternoon to find my omega in a blue funk.

He was sitting on the sofa staring straight ahead, his lips turned down in a frown.

I glanced toward the TV, but it was on screen saver.

"Hirsch?" I set my laptop bag down on a chair and moved to stand between him and the mountain scene on the flatscreen. "Are you all right?"

He blinked, focusing as if he had just noticed my arrival. "Liam. When did you get home?"

“Just now. What are you doing?”

“Watching TV,” he said. “What else is there to do?”

Good question. He kept the house spotless, refusing to allow me to hire a housekeeper so he could relax.

And since the two of us weren’t very messy, it didn’t take much of his time.

He also did most of the cooking, but once those things were done, all he had to do was rest. Which had been great for a while though it was inevitable that restlessness would set in.

“What would you like to do?” I braced myself for him to insist on finding a job.

The trouble was, everything he was likely to get hired to do would involve being on his feet all day.

Although he was no longer nauseated, for the most part, standing made his ankles swell, and I didn’t think that was a good thing.

But to my surprise, Hirsch didn’t suggest working.

“I’d like to go back to school.” He pulled out his phone and showed me an ad for a college certificate program.

“I can go remotely, at first, and eventually get a degree in education. Since I’ve been pregnant, I’ve been thinking about how many shifter kids don’t have teachers they can identify with.

They either get an education in their pride or pack that rarely helps them learn real

world skills, or they are stuck in human schools where they rarely fit in. They bully or are bullied.”

Sitting down on the sofa next to him, I took the phone and scrolled through the website for the program he was considering. “Tell me more about what you’d like to do with this. Did you want to teach young kids? High school?”

“I’m not sure, yet, but I’ve been talking to an omega I met at the club who is already a teacher at a shifter school. It’s private, and they have a really hard time finding certified teachers.”

“I think that sounds wonderful. So, have you applied for classes?”

“I wanted to talk to you first. It’s going to be expensive and then when I start working, the school doesn’t pay nearly as much as a public school. It would be a long time before I earned enough even to cover my costs, much less pay my share of expenses around here.”

Not our first conversation along these lines.

Since he’d been kept from working by his ex, he had a hard time trusting that I only wanted him to do whatever he chose, whatever he might enjoy.

And being a full-time daddy would be more than enough if that was what he wanted.

This was the first time he’d so much as suggested he had a bigger dream than just any job he could get.

“Omega, we’re mates and what’s mine is yours. You’re already on the household bank accounts and don’t need my permission to spend money.”

He shrugged. "I know, but it's hard..."

I hugged him close. "I understand. But hear me out. Being mates means both of us have responsibilities and privileges, do you agree?"

"Yes."

"And my responsibility and privilege as your alpha is to do everything in my power to make sure you have the resources to achieve your dreams and goals. That means, if you want to stay home with the baby, I support that. If you want to take up professional yo-yoing, I'm good with that."

"I would never," he spluttered, and I laughed.

"But you could. And if you want to become a better educated person and help other shifters to achieve their dreams, I'm honored to be there for you. If this is what you really want to do, let's get you signed up today. You said it can start remotely, right?"

"Yes, the first couple of years, until I need to start putting in classroom time."

"Then it's ideal. Take as few or many classes as work for you, and tell me how I can be helpful to make sure you have the time you need. As in, we have a housekeeper starting next week. And we take turns cooking."

For a moment, I thought he was going to argue, but then he said, "Yes, alpha," in such an obedient tone, I eyed him suspiciously.

"That felt too easy."

"When someone wants to help you make your dreams come true, why argue?" He flung his arms around my neck and hugged me. "Our child will be so lucky to have

you for their dad.”

“And you, omega. And you.”

Hirsch

On the way to the healer, I was nervous, and my mate knew it. Though he had my hand and his touch helped, this visit was one for the books.

Today, we were having our ultrasound.

We would be able to see the baby and had decided to find out what the sex was because we needed as much time to prepare as possible.

My anxiety was through the roof, not just about today but about a lot of things. Being a father. This pregnancy. Making sure the birth went well.

Being. A. Father.

“Everything is going to be okay,” Liam cooed and lifted our joined hands to kiss mine. He was the sweetest thing ever even though he said that was what alphas were supposed to do.

“I know. I know it will but I can’t help but worry.”

“You are a worrywart, mate. Today is going to be great. Exciting and perfect.”

“I hope so.”

We arrived at the healer’s office right on time.

A client of Liam's recommended him as the best in town.

And he was right next to my therapist. Liam and I had discussed the issue at length and agreed it would be good for me to get some counseling after everything I went through with Kyle.

My mate insisted I deserved to be the best version, the healed version of myself.

He was right, of course. He did that all the time. Show-off.

We were shown to a room that looked more like a bedroom than the sterile doctors' offices of humans. It held the same equipment, but everything was more comfortable. Made to look homey.

My therapist convinced me to see a healer. At the very least, make sure the baby and I were in good health.

"Good morning, Hirsch, Liam. I'm Romeo. It's lovely to meet you."

We extended our greetings as well. Liam did for both of us, actually. My throat had closed up.

"It's late in the pregnancy to be seeing me for the first time. Is there a reason for today's visit that I should know of?"

Liam looked at me to answer. All of a sudden, he was quiet. Traitor.

Then I remembered how often he reminded me to use my words—my voice. "I was nervous about coming here and I put off the appointments and then I realized I was six months along and hadn't seen anyone."

“That’s okay,” Romeo said. “You’re here now. Let’s get some tummy measurements and then we’ll take a look at that baby.”

Romeo recorded everything.

“He’s not throwing up anymore,” Liam said. “I was worried for a while.”

Romeo nodded. “That’s normal. The baby will take everything it needs, even if it seems like the father isn’t eating much. I bet you’re making up for it now, huh?”

I nodded. “More than that.”

“Good. You need lots of nutrition. Are you avoiding caffeine and taking a prenatal?”

I was. Liam bought them for me, along with several books on pregnancy, the morning after we found out we were expecting.

I’d read them all, since I had nothing else to do during the day, and almost the first thing I read was about caffeine.

Although shifters were less susceptible to things like that, it was still a good idea, according to the author, to avoid it as much as possible. I filled the healer in on all of this.

“That’s good. Pregnancy books are helpful but please don’t hesitate to call me if there’s something you’re concerned about or even more so, that your wolf is concerned about. He knows what’s going on. His instincts are finely tuned to your baby. How about we see this baby now?”

I lay on the table with Liam holding my hand the entire time while Romeo put the blue gel on me and began to try and find the baby.

“It sounds so fast and...whooshy?” I couldn’t think of the right phrase.

“Very normal,” the healer said. “They’ve got a good, strong heartbeat.”

I let out a sigh. That was the best news. Girl or boy didn’t matter, but I wanted them to be okay.

Even if they weren’t, I’d love them all the same.

“Are we ready to find out if this is a boy or a girl? I always make sure before letting the parents know.”

Liam nodded. “We want to know, please.”

“Perfect.” Romeo took some screenshots and then showed us the outcome. “See there, between the legs? That’s a baby girl. Congratulations. Now you can have a name ready.”

I scoffed. “We will have a short list and then I want to see her face before we name her. She should look like an Olivia or whatever we decide.”

“Whatever you want, omega.” I didn’t realize it, but Liam was crying.

“Thank you, Romeo.”

We were given a new-parent bag from the office with some more books and coupons for more vitamins, along with some teas to try. We had other things to decide like cloth or disposable diapers. Chest feeding or bottle. I’d read about sleep training, but I had no clue what my opinion was about that.

We were fathers now.

And we had some work to do.

“Renee?” Liam started as he got us on the road.

“Sasha?”

“Maggie?”

“Athena?”

We had a lot of work to do.

Liam

With Hirsch getting closer to his due date, the healer warned us that he'd need to avoid shifting soon. Until now, we'd been going out about once a week, but after Romeo's instructions, we decided to do a shifter date night and go out with a bang.

I had some ideas, but my omega wanted to take charge, and in the interest of bolstering his rising confidence, and because I'd do anything to see his eyes sparkle the way they did when he told me, "I got this, alpha," I agreed to step back and leave the plans for our last shift before the baby's arrival in his capable hands.

"And it has to be a surprise," he insisted. "So don't try to trick me into telling you where we're going."

I didn't point out that I never tried to trick him because he was practically bouncing off the ceiling with excitement, and as he'd gotten rounder, he'd done very little bouncing. "No tricking, wolf's honor."

That was two days ago, and as the appointed time to leave for our shifting date grew close, my omega made a few trips out to stash things in the trunk of the car while I pretended not to notice. I hadn't asked what the dress code was, since we'd be wearing fur for most of the evening.

When he shifted, he carried his pregnancy bump in a different way that barely showed, and he seemed to move more freely and comfortably. He'd miss these evenings, mini vacations from the waddling caused by his altered shape, but I hoped knowing the baby was coming soon would help.

“Ready!” Hirsch made his way down the stairs. “If you are.”

“Absolutely. I assume we’re driving somewhere?” Which meant me because he’d lost his ability to fit comfortably behind the steering wheel the week before.

“Yes, but I’m only giving you one instruction at a time, for secrecy purposes.”

“As long as I have time to safely make the turn or exist the highway or whatever, I’m intrigued.

” I helped him out to the car and into the passenger seat.

The belt still fit over him, but I had bought an extender—without telling him for fear of hurting his feelings—in case it became necessary in the near future.

He guided me onto the highway leading toward the mountains, but he did not have me take the road upward.

Instead, we exited on a small two lane that wound between them.

We were just about the only vehicles on it, only passing two others coming toward us as we followed a stream and crossed a bridge before Hirsch had me park at a trailhead.

This time of year, it was cold in the higher altitudes, but down here, our fur would be more than adequate.

I might not be in charge of the planning of this date, but I did have my omega’s welfare in mind.

We exited the car, and Hirsch went around back where he withdrew two sets of wolf-

sized saddlebags.

“They’re set up so we can wriggle into them after we shift, and out before we shift back,” he asserted proudly. “It’s fur time!” He pulled his shirt over his head and flexed his shoulders. “This is going to feel great.”

“Can I ask questions now that we’re here?” I inquired, always concerned about safety.

“This is a place I’ve only been once,” Hirsch told me. “Right after I moved to the area, I heard that it was special, and I ventured out by myself. I’ve never been here with anyone else, and never wanted to bring anyone until now. Will you trust me to take us the rest of the way?”

“As long as there’s nothing dangerous that I need to be aware of in advance.”

“Not really. Nothing our wolves won’t be comfortable with.

” He stepped out of his expando-waist paternity pants, kicking off his shoes at the same time.

When he was completely undressed, he tucked his clothing in the trunk and donned his fur, a sight I always loved.

He was magnificent in both forms, more so now that he carried our young.

Then, he demonstrated how he indeed could get into the harness before sitting on his haunches while I joined him in fur and managed to don the saddlebags as well.

With less grace than he had.

We trotted along the trail that continued to follow the stream, but after twenty minutes or so, he took a side path following a much narrower trickle of water up and around a series of boulders.

I was getting more and more curious about our ultimate destination and how much longer we'd be traveling.

Hirsch was moving easily, and I wouldn't deny him this freedom for anything, but if we went too much longer, we'd be out here all night just traveling.

And then, I followed him past a flat-topped rock that towered over us and came into a place of magic.

Steam rose from pools that glowed in the moonlight.

Or maybe from within themselves because the colors were extraordinary.

We weren't in a cave, but the boulders all around, just leaving enough of an opening at the top for the moon to show herself, gave an underground feeling.

My wolf tipped back his head and howled at the sorcery of the Goddess to create such beauty.

My omega dropped his harness on the ground and shifted back to human, and I followed. "This is extraordinary. How have I never heard of it?"

He grinned. "Good surprise?"

"Wonderful surprise."

"It's a hot spring, but some of the pools are a bit hotter than others. I checked with

Romeo, before you ask. He said humans might have a problem, but as long as I didn't spend hours in the very hottest water, it would only be good for me. So, let's get wet.

We moved from pool to pool, the mini currents and varying temperatures working on muscles I didn't even know were tight, and I was having a wonderful time in one of the deepest of the pools when I glanced over to see Hirsch sitting on the edge, rubbing his belly.

"I think it's time we called it, omega," I said, wading over to him. "At least as far as swimming and running around go. We need to take a little rest so we can get back to the car."

"My wolf will be fine," he said. "But I would like to relax a bit."

"How tired are you?" I asked, noting that at least one part of him was anything but drooping.

He followed my gaze. "What did you have in mind?"

I didn't waste time with words, instead showing him how much I appreciated his planning of our date by using my mouth to suck him dry while my fingers played in his copious slick.

Then we ate the picnic he'd brought in the saddlebags and took a rest on a flat rock in wolf form before wandering back to the car. His wolf might be fine, but I was glad it was downhill. By the time we got home and tumbled into bed, we were two mighty tired shifters. But happy—oh-so happy.

Hirsch

I was hot.

Not that kind of hot.

Okay, that kind too. I didn't understand or want to understand how Liam worked all the time in this heat. It never stopped and yet, hovered in the air like waves of blasting sunlight. Unseasonal weather for sure, but that didn't make it any cooler.

The night before, I'd slept with nothing on, smack in the middle of the bed, with three fans all pointed at me.

Liam said it was the sexiest thing he'd ever seen in his life. He would be wrong. I probably looked like a beached manatee.

The freezer at the big-box store had become my best friend. Liam would run around doing the shopping while I found a pallet and made myself comfortable in the company of the milk and butter. I got some looks but I also got high fives. Mostly, other pregnant people and older omegas.

They knew what I was going through.

Liam would come back with samples for me to try and treats in the cart. I had the best mate.

Dinner for tonight was in the slow cooker. Loaded baked potatoes. I found a social

media post where someone made baked potatoes in one so you didn't have to turn the oven on. Anything not to make this place heat up was a winner in my book.

"I'm home," Liam announced just as I was dreaming of sour cream, cheese, bacon bits, and chives. Usually I waited until he got home to eat, but the smell of the potatoes was almost too good to resist.

"Perfect timing." I opened the fridge and got out loads of toppings.

"Are those the baked potatoes you were talking about?" Liam took off his shoes and placed his keys in the bowl and his bag on the hook. I never had to pick up anything after him. Not that he would expect me to, but he took care of himself for the most part.

"They are. How was your day?"

My alpha came over and kissed me so hard and well that I dropped the bag of cheese and couldn't give a care about it. His strong arms held me tightly against him as he moved his tongue with mine, making me want him even more than before, and that was saying something.

When he released me, it took a second to remember my name.

"It's so much better now. I missed you today. How about we have dinner on the couch? Watch that movie you've been wanting to see? About the unicorns?"

"That sounds great, actually."

"Good. You go get comfortable, and I'll set everything up."

I sighed. "I can help."

He gave me that smile. The one that meant he was about to say something ultra sweet. “Hirsch, you are doing everything right now. You have a part of our family growing in your belly. That’s a lot. Now, let me spoil you a little. Go on.”

I walked away, pouting of course, when he swatted me on the backside.

He would continue that later, and I couldn’t wait.

“I almost forgot. I picked you up an apple spice cake on the way home.”

“Great!” I yelled back. “Now I can get fatter.”

“Hirsch, are you talking badly about my mate again? Or are you purposefully trying to get in trouble so I take you over my knee?”

I scrambled for words. This man made me think all kinds of things. “The second one,” I replied.

“Well, keep it up and I’ll spank you but give you no release. You are beautiful and yes, your body is changing, but that’s no reason for name-calling. Right?”

Growling, I nodded. “I know.”

“Let’s enjoy this meal you made and the movie. Then we’ll play.”

Liam

It felt like we'd been together forever.

Hirsch said it felt like he'd been pregnant forever, but in fact, we weren't quite to the due date the healer had given us, so we might have a bit longer to wait.

As we drew closer, Hirsch was sleeping more, or rather trying to.

He was getting up to use the restroom so many times a night that he was exhausted all day.

This having a baby thing was not for wimps.

And I did everything I could to make it easier for him.

Unfortunately, that wasn't a whole heck of a lot.

He'd had a big appetite for food and other things until about a week ago, but now he said there wasn't any room for food inside him, and he'd also lost interest in sex.

We'd managed to find a few positions that kept things interesting and comfortable, but now he was so uncomfortable, all he could think of was the time when his insides were no longer squashed into a tiny corner of his body to make room for our little girl.

We still didn't have a name for her, but we agreed we would decide when we met her

which of the several we'd narrowed it down to seemed to suit her best. Or, if none of them did, then we'd continue the search.

A name was very important, we believed, and sometimes I wondered if my parents had felt that way or if they just picked my name out of thin air.

I didn't want to know.

Hirsch had gone upstairs to bed right after dinner tonight, and I was just finishing up the dishes when I heard him groan.

Or maybe my wolf heard it because it wasn't that loud.

But it had me dropping a plate to shatter on the floor before racing up the stairs calling, "I'm coming, omega. Don't have the baby until I get there."

As if.

Yes, he was in the earliest stages of labor, but we had plenty of time to put the birth plan in motion.

Romeo was at another birth, and he offered to send someone else if we wanted, but from the information we gave him, he believed there was plenty of time.

He arrived at midnight and declared we had hours to go before we were going to meet sweet Glenda or Julie or Anya.

"I'm starting to doubt my plan," Hirsch panted on his way through yet another contraction at about four in the morning. "Maybe it would be a better idea to go to the birthing center."

"Let's check you out again," Romeo said, rising from the chair in the corner where he

was sitting when not needed. He'd been at the other birth for twenty-four hours and had to be exhausted. He took a look and shook his head. "It's too late for moving. Too risky."

"But I could get some serious pain relief there," my brave omega whined, also beyond tired. "And I don't want to hurt anymore."

I was holding his hand and trying to lend support. In all our months together, that had been the key to calming him, but I had a feeling we were past that now. He was so close to delivering, and his face was pale, lines of pain bracketing his mouth. "I'd take the pain for you if I could."

"I know you would, alpha." He tried to smile, failed. "But it doesn't work that way."

"It should." When he found out he was pregnant, he felt guilty as if he'd done it on purpose when we both should have been aware of the possibility.

But I'd had nothing but joy about the baby on the way, never somehow recognizing just how hard this would be for him at the end. "I'm so sorry I did this to you."

He was deep into a contraction, but as it started to fade, he said, "I'm supposed to say you did this to me in an accusatory way, but even though I could really use some pain meds about now, I am so glad you did this to me."

Now, if you don't mind, I think I'm going to need to concentrate here, and you can grovel at my feet later, okay? "

"Love you, omega." I didn't say more, gave him the space he needed to bring our daughter into the world. But I prayed hard because another thing that hadn't been in my mind for the whole pregnancy was that on rare occasions, an omega or the baby or both did not make it through the birthing process.

Something in my face must have given me away because Romeo beckoned me to come with him into the hallway, out of earshot of my omega. He closed the door behind us. “You’re scared.”

“Yes, isn’t that normal?” The tremor in my voice wouldn’t give anyone confidence.

“It is, but as the alpha, you need to give your omega your strength this morning, make him know that everything is going to be fine. Can you do that when we go back in there?”

“Of course, but...is there something wrong?” Please let them be okay.

“It’s just going a little slower than I like, and sometimes with a first baby, that can cause complications.

” He held up a hand before I could speak.

“Not that there are any at this point. I just need you to promise that no matter what happens, you’ll stay strong for Hirsch and your baby.

Because if you’re going to fall apart, you need to step out right away.

His state of mind can make all the difference. ”

I was a whole lot more scared, now, but also resolved.

How could I let my omega go through something like this alone?

I couldn’t bear his pain for him, but I could be his rock.

He’d been let down before and I’d be damned if it was going to happen again.

I looked directly in Romeo's eyes and said, "Count on me." Then I turned and reentered the room.

Hirsch had been by himself long enough. He was probably worried about what we were talking about.

When I returned to his side, he asked me, and I said, "He was just giving me a pep talk, reminding me to be as brave as my omega."

Before he could reply, a contraction doubled him over and then things moved fast. Romeo stood at the foot of the bed, monitoring, adjusting his position, and then he said, "Ready to push?"

I don't think I breathed from that moment until our daughter's first cry split the air.

I watched Romeo's face, hoping his expression would tell me if things were not going as they should, but he never gave a clue.

She came quickly, and after he cleaned her up and wrapped Chari in a blanket, he handed her to me.

"Your omega needs a couple of stitches, but everything went fine."

My legs wobbled, but I was not going to fall down with our daughter in my arms. I had to be strong a bit longer, then I could go to the bathroom and collapse. Or maybe I'd wait until she was grown up and left home. Because I had a feeling I'd be busy until then.