

Read Novel Alpha Male

Alpha Male Chapter 8-Willow

“There are leftovers you’re welcome to eat in the fridge. I ... have no idea what time I’ll be back. But thank you again for taking the kids on short notice.” I squeezed my hands together and prayed nothing would go wrong. The boys—all five—settled straight to sleep at their regular bedtime. They shouldn’t shift without a reason. Leaving them with a regular person was ... nerve-wracking. But I adjusted to it, as I had all the changes of the last year, until it became my new normal. I sucked in a long breath, wishing for Rafe to be a part of that. “If something happens, I’ll be on my cell.”

Unless Rafe ties me up and... My cheeks heated. That was a distinct possibility. I smoothed the red and white polka dot baby doll dress where the fabric swirled around my legs. My hair was pinned into a messy chignon at my nape. Tiny seed pearls decorated an antique comb that glowed amongst the darker strands.

“You look beautiful. And we will be fine,” Margot Chaseman, my landlady and best friend, assured me. “Completely, utterly fine. They know me, and if they do anything odd ... well. We’ll wait for you to come home and deal with it. Or I’ll call you.” She held out her arms, and I rushed into them for a tight hug. “I’m so excited you’re dating. And he’s even someone like you.”

Apparently she meant it as a compliment, but my cheeks ached from holding up my fading smile. “Yes. He is.” Sort of, and sort of not. “I’m excited too.”

Rafe had his own reasons for not committing to me yet, but after a week with him, I’d fallen head over heels for the wedge-tailed eagle shifter.

“You deserve to be happy. You know that, right?”

“I know that.” I squeezed her back and grabbed for my purse, rifling through its meager contents to check I had everything I needed. “I’ll be back—”

“Like Arnold Schwarzenegger. You come home whenever you feel like coming home, Willow. I’ll be on the couch. And no, I don’t mind at all,” Margot added, waving a book in my direction.

“Thank you.” I kissed her cheek and dashed out the door, hesitating as it closed behind me. I stole a look back, but I’d already kissed the boys several times. Any more and I risked disturbing their sleep and Margot’s quiet time.

Getting a sitter was still a new experience for us. Both the boys and I knew and trusted her, and she’d looked out for us through the entire kerfuffle when Byron passed. With little family on either side, I had no one to call, and no community support ... except for Rafe, and our scant hours together were too new to be anything more. Yet.

I spent the trip across the city center distracted, tugging at the hem of my dress, hoping it came under the heading of cute. Fray came up, and too soon I stood outside the door. The club was closed on a Tuesday night, though I’d learned Rafe often held seminars and workshops for a smaller crowd. That he wanted to help the shifter community warmed my heart.

For all his pomp and swagger—he possessed ample of both—a cute little marshmallow resided inside him, covered by stunning black and golden feathers and talons he knew how to use to deter others from prying too far into his life and exposing his secret.

Others treated him with deference on the nights he walked me through the club to make sure I got home safely.

Intimidating, intense, and se*xy as sin, that he cared and wasn’t narcissistic at all gave me hope. I’d made myself a promise to speak to him about what sort of relationship we had, or wanted, but my courage failed me in broaching the topic. Yet. Tonight. I made myself the promise. Tonight there would be no distractions. Tonight, I’d find out if he wanted to risk his reputation being seen with someone like me.

I could still be pushed aside as a casual playmate, if he chose, or brushed off as a short-term obsession. But after the way he’d spoken to me and from the few dark looks I’d received walking through the club on open nights, I knew I wasn’t the sort of person everyone who mattered to him expected to date.

My smile trembled as I stood outside the doors, my hand raised to knock. They opened swiftly enough when I wrapped frozen knuckles on the painted wood, and a girl I didn’t recognize ushered me in. She passed me a key to one of the downstairs playrooms and pointed me toward the locker rooms to drop off my things.

Standing at the top of the stairs to the lower level, I clutched my key in a tight grip. Memories of our first night together rushed over me in a heady mix of fear and pleasure. My introduction to Rafe had been in that same room. Did that mean he had something serious planned? My heart clattered against my chest as I descended the dim stairwell and unlocked the door.

A small table stood in the middle of the room. I checked around, but the space in front of me was empty. Trying to disguise my eager step and failing, I picked up the note on the table, ignoring the remaining items on it for the time being.

Str!p.

I swallowed, staring at the lone word. The paper trembled in my grip as I struggled to focus. My attention shifted to the table. A black blindfold remained on the chipped table beneath where the note sat.

The black case to the right lay open. Row after row of small needles graduating to longer ones lined the foam-filled case. My breath puffed between my lips and stopped, my heart hitching painfully in my chest.

This isn't right.

Belatedly, I remembered Rafe's instruction not to use the lower-level rooms after my last experience there. I'd been so wrapped up in what he might have planned for tonight and seeing him, what to say to him, that I hadn't considered the implications of the key I'd been given.

Str!p.

I stared at the shaking paper for too long. I didn't know Rafe's handwriting well enough yet, but I knew he hadn't left me the message. It wasn't his style. No playful notes, no underlying sensual threat. The note held nothing that screamed Rafe Astor at me.

Get out.

A sharp thud behind me removed the possibility of escape.

It's okay. It's Rafe's sh!tty idea of a joke to remind me who he is.

I threw the paper aside and whirled for the door. A figure dressed in all black, including a full hood, stood between me and the closed door. My mouth opened. I tried to scream, emitting a pathetic wail that sickened me. He was all the wrong shapes. Not tall enough, not broad enough. Too bulky.

My throat constricted in panic, and my world dimmed a little at the edges.

“Scream on, little rat. Let it out.” He strode toward me, a slow step at a time, a smile in his voice. “By the time we’re done, you won’t have any screams left. I’m sure Rafe told you what I like to do with my toys.”

He likes to break his toys.

Rafe’s voice echoed in my head. He’d told me more about the man I’d been paired with on that first night, about the girls who often never came back. That the forms were vetted by him and a few others. That I’d slipped through the cracks.

That Martin Lansdown had a passion for vengeance, and that he ... clashed with Rafe.

I knew who stood in the hood before me.

“No.” I stepped back into the small table and sent it scooting off the edge. The case and its contents crashed to the floor, spilling everywhere.

I twisted on my bare heel, unwilling to stand on any of the needles, tottering as my foot hovered over one. The moment paused, each movement playing out in slow motion. Then I stood the right way up, my balance braced by hard, inescapable leather-covered arms.

“There you are.”

Gooseflesh erupted over my skin in a horrific crawling sensation. “Get off me!” I shrieked, launching sideways, but that was as effective as a child attempting to escape their adult. “Stop! I— He wanted—” Words caught in my throat, overridden by his laughter.

“To spend the night with him? Astor can have your ruined carcass when I’m done.” He shoved me in the back, his hand hitting hard right between my shoulder blades.

I hit the ground face-first, the floor rushing up to me in a nauseating fashion. My cheek slammed into the hard surface. I lay there, stunned. Cold fingers leached into my skin as I tried to work out what came next, which room I was in. Then hands touched me, removing my choice.

I kicked and lashed out, my body reacting on pure instinct while my brain scrambled to play catch up. A needle pierced delicate skin behind my ear, and the world got a whole lot larger.

While I shrank, my weak, minuscule slaps and kicks meant nothing at all.