

Claimed by the Alpha's Love - Love Demands Real Courage

Chapter 151

Tori's POV:

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"I wasn't- I started to protest, then sighed, abandoning the pointless denial.

"Yes, actually. She can be quite... protective."

Lucas moved closer, his scent wrapping around me like a familiar blanket.

"She has every right to be," he said softly. "But I think we've reached an understanding."

I stood up, smoothing down my sweater. "That was fast. What did you say to her?"

"Nothing special, Lucas replied with a gentle smile. "Just helped ease some of her worries."

His expression softened as he glanced at his watch. "But your grandmother reminded me I shouldn't stay too long."

A mischievous gleam appeared in his eyes. "Which means I need to make the most of every second to recharge my energy with hugs and kisses

before I go."

Before I could protest, he pulled me closer, his lips finding mine in a tender kiss that made my heart race.

When we finally separated, I felt my cheeks burning.

"That should keep me going until tomorrow," he whispered, brushing his thumb across my lower lip.

I stepped back, trying to compose myself, smoothing my hair and clothes while Lucas straightened his jacket.

Once we both looked presentable again, we headed downstairs, me first with Lucas following a respectful distance behind.

As we passed the living room, my grandmother looked up from her knitting, her expression surprisingly neutral.

"I'll be back tomorrow morning to collect Tori, Mrs. Eileen," Lucas said respectfully. "The hearing preparations require her presence."

To my astonishment, Grandma Eileen nodded. "Very well, Alpha Lucas. I trust you'll ensure her safety."

Lucas inclined his head. "With my life."

After seeing him to the door, I couldn't contain my curiosity any longer. "What did you do?" I whispered. "She hated you twenty minutes ago."

Lucas smiled, tucking a strand of hair behind my ear.

"Perhaps she was simply moved by how much I love you." He brushed his os against my forehead. "Rest well, little wolf. Tomorrow will be a

long day."

I watched him walk to his car where Roman waited, my hand unconsciously touching the spot his lips had just warmed.

When I turned back inside, Grandma was watching me from her armchair, her expression unreadable.

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"You're not going to fight this anymore?" I asked cautiously, settling on the ottoman near her feet.

She sighed deeply, placing her knitting in her lap.

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“I’m an old woman, Tori. I can’t dictate your life forever. Her weathered fingers traced the pattern of her work. “Maybe he truly is an exception after all.”

I leaned forward, taking her hands in mine. I really want your blessing, Grandma,” I whispered, emotion thick in my throat. “It means everything to me.”

She reached out, stroking my head gently, her fingers threading through my hair the way she’d done since I was small. The familiar gesture brought tears to my eyes. “Just be happy, child. That’s all I’ve ever wanted for you.”

The next morning came too quickly.

Lucas arrived precisely when promised, dressed impeccably in a charcoal suit that emphasized his broad shoulders and commanding presence.

My grandmother stood at the door as we prepared to leave, her expression a mixture of resignation and hope.

“The truth will prevail,” she said, gripping my hands firmly. “Remember who you are, Tori. No matter what they say in that chamber.”

I hugged her tightly, inhaling the comforting scent of lavender and home that had sustained me through my darkest days. “I love you,” I whispered.

Roman waited beside a sleek silver vehicle, opening the door as we approached

The drive to the city center was quiet, my mind racing with all the possibilities that

Vindication or more shame.

morrow might bring. Freedom or further condemnation.

“You’re thinking too loudly,” Lucas murmured, his fingers interlacing with mine.

“Trust

me, Tori. won’t let you lose.”

After a day of preparation, we approached the Elder Council Hall, its massive stone structure loomed against the morning sky.

Intricate moon phase carvings adorned the columns flanking the entrance a reminder of the ancient laws that governed our kind.

I’d been here once before, four years ago, shackled and defeated.

The memory made my wolf, Tracy, whimper inside me.

It’s different this time, I reminded myself. I’m not alone.

Lucas guided me through the silver-carpeted corridor, past clusters of pack members who whispered as we passed. I kept my head high, though

my heart hammered against my ribs.

“Wait here,” Lucas said, showing me to a preparation room. ” Roman will go through the final details with you. I need to make a phone call.”

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I nodded, trying to project confidence.

After Lucas left, I decided to stretch my legs, the nervous energy making impossible to sit still.

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The moment I stepped out, my wolf Tracy tensed inside me. There they were- Fiona and Ethan standing together near the arched entrance to the witness waiting area.

My heart stuttered.

Ethan was wearing formal pack advocate robes-he was serving as Fiona's defense representative for the hearing. Although pack members could represent family during trials, seeing him standing firmly beside her sent wave of betrayal crashing through me all over again.

Five years ago, Fiona had used my feelings for Ethan to lure me into Noah's trap. Now, Ethan was her official defender.

The irony was almost too painful to bear.

Ethan looked up, catching my gaze. Something flickered in his eyes but he quickly lowered his head, unable to maintain eye contact.

Fiona noticed our silent exchange and deliberately stroked her swollen belly.

Despite her obviously exhausted appearance, her eyes gleamed with unmistakable triumph when they met mine.

She wrapped her arm possessively around Ethan's, her voice carrying clearly across the hallway.

"Ethan, darling, you must use all your skills to defend me today," she purred. "Show everyone what an excellent advocate you are."

Tracy growled inside me, the sound almost reaching my throat before I swallowed it back.

Turning away, I retreated to the preparation room, my fingernails digging resents into my palms.

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Fiona's POV:

I watched Tori walking toward the Elder Council Hall, the silver moonlight catching in her irritatingly beautiful hair.

Something about those rare silver-gray eyes always made her look ethereal-like she belonged somewhere better than the rest of us.

Disgusting.

"Remember what's at stake," I whispered, deliberately guiding Ethan's hand to rest on my barely-showing belly.

The Grayson blood growing inside me was my most powerful weapon. "Our child needs you to defend me today."

Ethan's jaw tightened as his eyes followed Tori's retreating figure.

I could practically smell the longing coming off him in waves, making my wolf bristle with jealousy.

"Focus, Ethan," I hissed, digging my nails into his forearm. "The Elders need to see complete dedication to me-to us."

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I deliberately raised my voice as we approached the entrance, making sure Tori could hear. "After all, what judge wouldn't sympathize with a pregnant mother and her devoted mate?"

I watched with satisfaction as her shoulders stiffened, though she didn't turn around. Perfect.

"I know what I need to do," Ethan muttered, adjusting his formal advocate robes. "You don't need to remind me of my responsibilities."

“Don’t I?” I stroked my belly again, remembering the day I’d accidentally fallen on the stairs and showed signs of possible miscarriage. Ethan had been beside himself with panic, canceling meetings and staying by my side. That was the moment I realized what my chips were.

“You’ve been distracted lately. How does it feel, seeing your former lover now standing against you in court? I need you focused, not drowning in regrets about what could have been.”

Ethan’s eyes flashed with annoyance, but he said nothing as we entered the preparation room adjacent to the main hall.

Through the glass partition, I could see Tori sitting alone at the petitioner’s bench, her eyes fixed on the four pack emblems hanging above the

Elder’s seats.

She looked different now-harder, more determined than the frightened girl I’d betrayed four years ago. The change unsettled me,

I watched as Lucas approached her, moving with that commanding presence that had once made even me take notice. He leaned down,

whispering something that made Tori’s face soften in a way.

The thought of them together made my stomach turn.

“She looks so happy with Alpha Lucas,” I remarked casually to Ethan, watching his expression darken. “Alpha Lucas and Tori—who would have thought? Soon you’ll be calling her ‘Aunt Tori,’ won’t that be sweet?”

“Shut up, Fiona,” Ethan growled, his patience clearly wearing thin.

“They say she might be his fated mate,” I continued, ignoring his warning. Imagine that—the girl you let slip away, destined for your uncle all

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along.

Ethan's eyes flashed gold, his wolf rising to the surface. "I said, shut up."

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"Does it bother you?" I pressed, unable to resist twisting the knife deeper. That she's moved on? That she smells like him now? That his scent is all over her-

His hand shot up, fingers closing around my throat with bruising force.

His wolf eyes blazed with fury, his grip tightening as his body trembled wh barely contained rage.

For a terrifying moment, I could hardly breathe.

"You've gone too far," he snarled, voice barely human.

The door burst open, and my sister Mia rushed in. "Ethan, stop!" she cried pulling at his arm. "The hearing starts in five minutes!"

Ethan stepped back, his breathing ragged.

Without another word, he stormed out, likely heading for the gardens to regain control. I smoothed my dress, satisfaction curling through me despite the momentary fear.

"What were you thinking?" Mia hissed. "Provoking him like that before he has to defend you?"

I smiled thinly, caressing my stomach with deliberate slowness. "It doesn't matter what he says or does in there, Mia. With Sophia's testimony and those recordings, I'm already convicted."

My voice dropped to a whisper. "And with Roman Pierce representing her? We never stood a chance."

"Then why antagonize Ethan?"

"If I'm going down, I'm making absolutely certain he never finds his way back to her." I looked down at my barely swollen abdomen, where the

Grayson pup grew.

"And this hearing is just a formality. The real battle begins after the verdict. And this-patted my belly meaningfully, "-is the only weapon

that matters now.”

The hearing proceeded exactly as Roman Pierce had predicted.

The Elder Council delivered their verdict: “After reviewing all evidence presented, this Council acknowledges the grave miscarriage of justice perpetrated against Tori Sullivan four years ago,” announced Elder, her voice resonating through the chamber.

“We officially declare her innocent of all charges. Her pack rights are fully restored, her record expunged, and appropriate compensation will be awarded for her years of unjust exile and the damage to her reputation. Let it be known throughout all packs that Tori Sullivan stands cleared

of any wrongdoing.”

And then my own sentence: “Fiona Price, the Council finds you guilty of conspiracy, endangerment of a minor, and obstruction of justice. The standard sentence is exile to Silver Fang for six years and eight months.”

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My heart stopped. Despite preparing myself for this outcome, the reality struck harder than I'd imagined.

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However, the head Elder continued, “given your condition and the innocent life you carry, execution of the sentence will be delayed until after the birth of your child.”

Relief flooded through me, though I kept my expression appropriately contrite.

The delay would give me time-time to find another way out, perhaps to escape entirely.

As the gallery emptied, I watched Tori stand, her expression oddly distant

She didn't look triumphant, just... free. As if a weight had been lifted. Her eyes briefly met mine across the chamber, and I was startled to see not hatred, but pity.

How dare she pity me?

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Tori's POV:

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The corridors of the Elder Council Hall seemed brighter as I walked beside Lucas, my steps lighter than they had been in years.

"You're quiet," Lucas observed, his voice low enough that only I could hear

His hand rested at the small of my back, a gentle pressure that somehow kept me grounded when everything else felt surreal.

I managed a small smile. "Just processing."

Roman Pierce caught up to us as we reached the outer courtyard, his formal demeanor softened by what appeared to be genuine satisfaction

with the outcome. "Ms. Sullivan, a moment of your time?"

I nodded.

“The compensation package has been approved,” Roman explained, handing me a document folder. “Three million five hundred thousand

moonstone, to be transferred to your account within three business days.”

I stared at the folder in my hands. Four years of my life reduced to a mathematical formula. My brother’s life

given a monetary value.

The nights I’d spent curled into myself on a cold concrete floor, trying to muffle my sobs so the guards wouldn’t have an excuse to drug me

again—all of it distilled into a tidy sum.

“Is that what justice costs these days?” The words slipped out before I could stop them.

Roman’s expression flickered with something that might have been compassion. “The monetary ion is merely symbolic, Ms. Sullivan.

No amount could adequately address what was taken from you.”

I nodded, not trusting myself to speak.

“Of course, if you have any additional requests, please feel free to make them known,” he continued.

needs.”

“We’ll do

our best to accommodate your

“That won’t be necessary,” I managed to say, my voice steadier now. “I’ll handle the rest of my journey on my own.”

The words came out with more resolve than I expected. Four years in Silver Fang had taught me self-reliance if nothing else.

As Roman departed, Lucas returned to my side, his expression carefully neutral.

“Ready to go home?”

Home. The word suddenly felt warm and comforting again on my tongue.

I nodded, a small but genuine smile forming on my lips.

My phone had been buzzing constantly since we left the Council Hall-notifications from various social media platforms where my case had apparently become the trending topic.

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My phone rang. Aunt Janet's name flashed on the screen.

I hesitated before answering.

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"Tori?" Her voice sounded different-warmer than I remembered from our last strained conversation. "I just wanted to say... congratulations. Im so glad the truth finally came out."

I swallowed past the lump in my throat. "Thank you."

"The neighbors she paused, her voice catching. "They're not talking anymore about you. And they're actually saying Ryan was a hero, protecting his sister. The way it should have been all along."

The mention of Ryan's name sent a familiar pang through my chest, but for once, it wasn't accompanied by the crushing guilt that had been my constant companion for four years.

"He was, I whispered.

After a brief conversation, I hung up and noticed Lucas watching me with an unreadable expression.

"My little wolf, you've suffered so much these years," he said softly, his fingers gently brushing against mine. "If only I had found you sooner."

I shook my head, looking up to meet his gaze. "I'm happy enough now," I replied, surprised by how true the words felt. "This moment... it's worth everything that came before."

Back at Lucas's private residence.

After taking a shower, I found myself in his immaculate bedroom, folding clothes while he took a business call in his study.

His closet was precisely what I would have expected-rows of tailored suits and dress shirts in black, white, and various shades of gray. Everything meticulously organized by color and type.

So different from my own haphazard approach to clothing storage.

My phone vibrated with a call from Morgan.

"You did it!" she practically squealed when I answered. "I can't believe that bitch finally got what was coming to her. The entire pack is talking

about nothing else!"

"Really?" I couldn't hide my surprise.

"Oh my god, yes. You're like, the ultimate revenge story. Wrongfully accused Omega returns and takes down her former BFF who's literally

pregnant with her ex's baby. It's like something out of a drama series."

I winced at her characterization. "It wasn't about revenge, Morgan."

"I know, I know. But still, it's pretty satisfying, right? She didn't wait for my answer. "So, what are you doing tonight? A bunch of us are going to Howling Moon to celebrate. You have to come!"

"I can't," I said, continuing to fold Lucas's shirts. "I'm at the Lucas's residence.

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There was a meaningful pause. "Ohhh, I see. With Alpha Lucas?"

Heat crept up my neck. “Yes, but it’s not-

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“Don’t even try to deny it,” Morgan interrupted with a laugh. “Everyone can smell his scent all over you. Have you two...you know...completed the bonding yet?”

“Morgan!” I hissed, nearly dropping the silk shirt I was folding.

What? I’m just asking! You know Alphas get really intense when they’ve found their mate but haven’t completed the bond. They become super possessive and clingy. And the sexual frustration makes them almost unbearable to be around—all that pent-up desire with nowhere to go.”

Her casual comment made me pause.

I’d never considered that the temporary mark Lucas had left might be affecting him.

After Morgan’s call ended with promises to meet tomorrow, I found myself opening my laptop and typing: “Alpha long-term effects of incomplete bonding

The search results made my stomach tighten.

Increased sexual desire. Heightened possessiveness. Difficulty maintaining distance from their mate. Physical discomfort when separated for long periods. Some reports even described Alphas becoming almost childishly clingy, needing constant reassurance of their mate’s affection.

I was still lost in my research when I heard the bedroom door open.

Lucas stood there, his tall frame filling the doorway, dressed in a crisp dark suit that accentuated his broad shoulders.

“Find anything interesting?” he asked, nodding toward my laptop.

I slammed it shut, my face burning. Just checking emails.*

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Lucas stood in the doorway, one eyebrow raised slightly.

I couldn't tell if he believed me or not, but there was something in his gaze that made my heart skip.

He moved into the room with that predatory grace that seemed to come naturally to him, his steps silent on the carpeted floor.

"You seem tense," he said, closing the distance between us.

I was acutely aware of my slightly elevated heartbeat, my quickened breathing. The search results were still fresh in my mind. Increased sexual desire. Heightened possessiveness. Physical discomfort when separated...

Had I been causing him pain all this time by keeping my distance?

He reached for my hand, which was trembling slightly against the closed laptop. His touch was gentle, his skin warm against mine.

"You're not very good at hiding things, little wolf," Lucas said, his voice both amused and knowing. His thumb traced along my wrist, right over my racing pulse. "What were you really looking at?"

I pressed my lips together, embarrassed to be caught. His eyes held mine, patient but persistent.

“Tori,” he said, just my name, but somehow infused with gentle command. Tell me.”

I exhaled slowly, knowing I couldn't hide from him anymore.

“I was just... I was looking up some information,” I finally admitted, my voice barely above a whisper. “About Alphas and... bonding.”

The words hung between us, charged with meaning. My cheeks grew warmer.

Lucas's expression softened as he looked down at me, his thumb tracing light circles on my palm. The simple touch sent shivers up my arm.

“You don't need to worry about any of that,” he said, his voice low and reassuring. His free hand moved to my face, fingers lightly brushing my cheek. “Everything happens at your pace. Not mine, not anyone else's.”

The moonlight streamed through the window, casting his features in silver and shadow. In that light, he looked less like the powerful Alpha that commanded the city and more like a man-a man looking at me with unmistakable desire in his eyes.

He wants us, Tracy whispered in my mind. I can feel.

I found myself leaning into his touch, my body moving of its own accord.

The distance between us seemed to shrink with each heartbeat.

“Lucas, I can,” I whispered, my voice catching.

He moved closer, his hand sliding from my cheek to cup the back of my neck.

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The gesture was possessive yet tender, making me feel both protected and desired.

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When our lips met, it was different from our previous kisses. There was no hesitation, no holding back. His lips moved against mine with a hunger that matched the growing ache inside me.

Yes, Tracy purred. Finally.

My hands found their way to his shoulders, feeling the solid strength beneath his shirt.

The laptop slid forgotten to the side as he guided me backward onto the bed. His weight above me was reassuring rather than oppressive, his body fitting against mine as if designed for this purpose.

His lips traced a path down my neck, lingering at the spot where my pulse raced beneath my skin. I gasped as he placed a gentle bite there, not breaking skin but claiming nonetheless.

The sensation sent a jolt of electricity through my entire body.

“Are you sure?” he murmured against my skin, his voice rougher than before.

His breath was warm against the sensitive spot where my neck met my shoulder, making me shiver despite the heat building between us.

In answer, I pulled him closer, my fingers threading through his dark hair. I arched into him, letting my body speak the language my lips couldn't form.

His eyes, now glowing with that primal Alpha light, held mine as our breaths intermingled, the last barrier between us dissolving.

Later, I lay nestled against Lucas's chest, listening to the steady rhythm of his heart. My body felt both exhausted and strangely energized, a pleasant soreness settling into my muscles.

“Come,” he said softly, pressing a kiss to my forehead before carefully lifting me into his arms.

I made a sound of surprise, but didn't protest as he carried me to the adjoining bathroom. He set me down gently on the edge of the oversized bathtub while he adjusted the water temperature.

Steam soon filled the room as the tub filled with warm water.

When the bath was ready, he helped me in, the warm water enveloping my sensitive skin like a gentle embrace. Lucas followed, settling behind me so I could lean back against his chest. His hands, strong and sure, began working through my long hair, untangling the strands with careful

attention.

“You’re beautiful,” he murmured, his voice a rumble I could feel against my back. “My wolf.”

I closed my eyes, savoring the feeling of being cared for.

“Tomorrow,” Lucas said, his hands still working gentle magic on my tired muscles, “I want to take you somewhere. To celebrate.”

“Celebrate what?” I asked, relaxing further into his embrace.

“Your freedom. Your name cleared. Us.” His arms wrapped around me, secure and protective. “Would you like that?”

“Yes,” I whispered, reaching up to touch his face, marveling at how natural it felt now. ‘I’d like that very much.’

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I awoke to soft kisses trailing along my shoulder and the gentle morning light filtering through the curtains.

The room was bathed in a warm golden glow that made everything seem dreamlike.

“Good morning, little wolf,” Lucas said, his voice a low rumble that sent pleasant shivers down my spine. He offered me a steaming mug of tea, the minty aroma rising with the steam. “I thought you might need this.”

I sat up slowly, feeling a delicious soreness in my muscles.

The silk sheet slipped slightly, and I clutched it to my chest as I accepted the mug, suddenly aware of my nakedness in the morning light.

“Thank you, I said, feeling unexpectedly shy despite the intimacy we’d shared. I tucked a strand of hair behind my ear. “What time is it? I must look a mess.”

Lucas's eyes, bright and alert despite the early hour, traveled over my face with undisguised appreciation.

"Just after ten," he answered, reaching out to brush his thumb across my cheekbone. "And you look perfect-though perhaps a little tired. I may have been... demanding last night."

There was a hint of mischief in his expression that I'd rarely seen before.

I felt heat rush to my cheeks at the memory of exactly how "demanding" he'd been, but couldn't stop the small smile that formed on my lips.

"I wasn't exactly complaining," I murmured into my tea.

As I sipped the perfectly brewed drink, I became aware of something new a warm, constant presence at the back of my mind, like a thread of golden light connecting me to him.

The mate bond, I realized with a start. Lucas and I were truly connected now in

way that

went beyond the physical.

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Lucas's fingers brushed a strand of hair from my face. "I want to take you somewhere tonight. To celebrate."

I remembered his words from last night about celebrating my freedom, my name being cleared... us. "Where?"

"The Silverstone auction," he said casually, as if suggesting a trip to the grocery store rather than Moonhaven's most exclusive social event.

"The auction house?" I nearly choked on my tea. "Isn't that where all the elite wolves gather?"

Lucas nodded, a slight smile playing at his lips.

"I saw something in their catalog I think you'd like."

"Lucas, you don't need to-

"I want to," he interrupted, his voice gentle but firm. "Consider it a gift. For everything you've been through."

I set my mug down, suddenly feeling out of my depth. "I wouldn't even know how to act at a place like that. What to wear, what to say..."

His hand found mine, his thumb tracing patterns on my palm. "You'll need to get used to these events eventually, Tori. As my..." He paused, his eyes meeting mine with an intensity that made my breath catch. "Just be yourself. That's all I ask."

I looked at his face-the genuine concern in his eyes, the patience in his expression-and realized he was right. If I was going to be with Lucas, events like this would be part of my life.

I couldn't hide forever, especially now that my name had been cleared.

“Okay, I finally said, offering him a small smile. “I’ll go with you.” I squeezed his hand.

Eight hours later, I stood before the mirror barely recognizing myself.

The dress Lucas had chosen was a masterpiece of silver-blue silk that seemed to flow like water when I moved. The bodice hugged my frame before cascading into a full skirt, giving the illusion of curves

My hair had been styled into an elegant updo by a stylist Lucas had arranged, with a few strategic tendrils left loose to soften my face.

“You look stunning,” Lucas said from the doorway, his voice rougher than usual.

I turned to face him, my heart stuttering at the sight.

He wore a perfectly tailored black suit that emphasized his broad shoulders and powerful frame. His dark hair was swept back, and the intensity of his gaze made my skin tingle.

“I feel like I’m wearing someone else’s life,” I admitted.

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He crossed the room and took my hands in his. “No. This is your life now, Tori. Get used to it.”

Tracy, my wolf, stirred within me, purring in approval at both his words and his scent. He’s right. This is ours now.

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The Silverstone auction house was even more intimidating than I had imagined.

Located in the heart of Moonhaven’s financial district, the building itself was a marvel of glass and moonstone, illuminated from within to create an ethereal glow against the night sky.

Lucas helped me from the car, his hand warm and steady at the small of my back as we approached the entrance.

Two guards nodded deferentially as we passed, their eyes widening slightly as they caught our scents-an Alpha and his mate.

The realization hit me like a physical blow, making me stumble.

Mate. We had completed the bond that any wolf with a functioning nose would instantly recognize.

“Easy,” Lucas murmured, steadying me. “Just breathe.”

I felt their stares immediately-curious, judgmental, speculative. An Omega on the arm of the most powerful Alpha in the city was bound to cause a stir, especially one with my history.

“Ignore them,” Lucas said, his voice for my ears alone. “They’ll learn to respect you, or they’ll answer to me.”

His confidence steadied me as he led me to the front row, where plush velvet seats were reserved for the highest-ranking pack members.

“Tori, a melodic female voice called from behind us. “I thought that was you.

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I turned to see an elegant young woman approaching. Behind her, a silver haired woman in a wheelchair observed us with sharp eyes.

“Charlotte,” I nodded politely. “It’s good to see you.”

Charlotte nodded before stepping aside to allow the wheelchair-bound woman a closer look at me. “Mother, this is Tori Sullivan.”

Susan Shepherd was striking despite her apparent disability.

Dressed in deep purple silk, her silver-gray hair elegantly coiled atop her head, large dark sunglasses hiding her eyes.

“Ms shepherd,” I said politely, giving a small respectful nod as I would to my elder wolf. It seemed appropriate to show deference to someone

of her standing.

She turned her face toward me, and though I couldn’t see her eyes behind the dark glasses, I felt the weight of her scrutiny as she took me in. I

maintained a polite smile, allowing her to assess me.

After a moment, she gave a slight nod in acknowledgment of my greeting

Lucas turned then, his expression calm as he addressed her. "Susan. It's been a while."

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Susan met his gaze and slowly removed her large sunglasses, revealing a face of aristocratic beauty marked by years of dignity and pain.

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"Lucas," she said, her voice carrying the refined accent of old werewolf nobility. "I've heard about your recent... romantic interests. So this is

your little mate-to-be? She's quite lovely."

As I looked at her face fully revealed, a strange sensation welled up inside me—an inexplicable feeling of sadness that lodged in my chest and made my nose tingle with the threat of tears.

Noticing my stare, Susan turned her gaze back to me while continuing her conversation with Lucas.

"Lucas, how old is your little mate?" she asked, her tone deceptively casual.

Before Lucas could answer, I spoke up: "Twenty-two."

"Twenty-two, she repeated, her voice suddenly hollow.

Something shifted in her expression, and I realized she might be thinking of her daughter, just as Olivia had done when we met. There was that same flash of recognition and loss in her eyes, as though seeing a ghost from her past.

As the auction hall filled with attendees, Lucas sensed my discomfort.

He placed his hand gently on the back of my neck, his thumb soothingly stroking the skin along the side where he had marked me the night before. "What's wrong?" he asked quietly. "You seem upset."

I didn't know how to explain the emotions churning inside me-that looking at Susan's face had somehow triggered a profound sadness I couldn't understand. It seemed absurd even to myself.

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Claimed by the Alpha's Love - Love Demands Real Courage Author: Michael Anderson 156

Chapter 156

Tori's POV:

Charlotte noticed our exchange, her eyes narrowing as they fixed on Lucas hand at my nape.

I caught her gaze for a moment before she looked away, adjusting her elegant jade necklace with fingers that trembled slightly.

She is hostile towards us. Tracy said.

Before I could respond, a bell chimed throughout the hall, signaling the auction's beginning.

Lucas guided me back to our seats, his hand never leaving the small of my back.

63%

The auctioneer took his position at the podium, a thin Beta wolf with slicked-back hair and an air of practiced refinement.

“Ladies and gentlemen, welcome to the Silverstone Spring Auction. Our first lot this evening is an antique crystal necklace from the pre- Separation era.”

An assistant carried the piece to the display stand—a stunning cascade of silver links with teardrop crystals that caught the light and scattered

it in blue-silver fragments across the room.

My breath caught. Even from this distance, I could see the crystals pulsing with a gentle light.

“Legend claims these particular crystals can strengthen an Omega’s constitution,” the auctioneer continued. “We’ll start the bidding at five

hundred thousand moonstone.”

I must have been staring, because Lucas’s gaze shifted to me, those blue eyes missing nothing.

Without hesitation, he raised his bidding paddle. “Six hundred thousand.

“Six-fifty,” called a voice from the back.

“Eight hundred thousand,” Lucas countered smoothly.

The price climbed rapidly—one million, two million. Each time Lucas raised his paddle, his expression remained impassive, as though the

astronomical figures meant nothing to him.

By the time the bidding reached three million moonstone, my heart was racing. I grabbed Lucas’s arm, unable to stay silent any longer.

“Lucas, stop,” I whispered urgently. “It’s too much.”

He didn’t look at me, his eyes fixed on the auctioneer. “Four million,” he stated, his voice carrying effortlessly across the now-hushed room.

Panic fluttered in my chest. The amount was obscene—more money than could comprehend. I turned in my seat and wrapped both arms around his, pulling myself close enough that my lips nearly brushed his ear

“Please, don’t,” I pleaded. “I don’t need it.”

His eyes finally met mine, dark and intense. “Sit properly, Tori. Let me handle this.”

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Chapter 156

“No, I insisted, not releasing his arm. “I don’t even like it that much.”

63%

He leaned closer, his voice a low rumble meant only for me. The one thing I don’t lack is wealth, little wolf. His thumb brushed across my

knuckles in a brief, soothing gesture before he turned back to the auction

“Five million,” he called out confidently, his voice carrying across the no hushed room.

The auctioneer scanned the silent room. Five million moonstone for lote. Going once... going twice...” He paused, giving the crowd one last

chance. No one moved. “Sold to Alpha Grayson.

A collective exhale seemed to ripple through the audience, followed by a buzz of whispers.

Around us, I could hear fragments of conversation, each syllable pricking my sensitive ears.

“Five million for an Omega...”

“Did you see how he looked at her? Like she’s precious...”

To think even the always rational Alpha Lucas would have a moment where he’d spend a fortune for a beauty...”

The Alpha must be completely besotted...”

My cheeks burned with embarrassment, but Lucas seemed utterly unaffected by the commentary swirling around us, his expression calm and

satisfied, as though spending millions on me was the most natural thing in the world.

A staff member approached with a velvet-lined box containing the necklae.

Lucas accepted it with a slight nod, then turned to me.

“May I?” he asked, his voice gentle.

I hesitated, then nodded, turning slightly to allow him access. His fingers brushed the nape of my neck as he fastened the clasp, the contact

sending shivers down my spine.

“The crystals will help stabilize your energy,” he murmured, his breath warm against my ear.

His fingers lingered at my neck, adjusting the central crystal to rest perfectly in the hollow of my throat. “Besides, silver has always suited

you.”

As the cool stones settled against my skin, I felt a subtle warmth radiating from them—a gentle pulse that seemed to synchronize with my

heartbeat.

“Lucas, I... My voice caught as I met his gaze. “Thank you. It’s beautiful, and I can actually feel it working.”

I touched the central crystal gently, still hardly believing something so precious was now mine. “You shouldn’t have spent so much, but I’m

grateful.*

His eyes softened at my words, a rarely genuine smile curving his lips. “Seeing it on you makes it worth every moonstone,” he said quietly, his

thumb brushing briefly across my cheek before he returned to his usual composed demeanor.

When the next item came up for auction, I feared he might begin another bidding war, I touched his hand lightly.

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Chapter 156

“I need to freshen up,” I whispered. “I’ll be right back.”

He nodded, his eyes lingering on me as I stood. I could feel his gaze tracking my movement all the way to the door.

蚁63%

The hallway outside the main auction room was considerably quieter, with just a few attendees milling about or engaged in hushed conversations. I followed the signs toward the restrooms.

As I rounded the corner, I stopped short.

Sitting in a wheelchair just outside the ladies’ room was Susan Shepherd, with Charlotte standing behind her. Facing them was William Sullivan, the Alpha of the Sullivan Pack.

The tension in the air was palpable, like electricity before a storm.

“Is it you who told him I was here?” Susan demanded of Charlotte, her voice cold with fury and disappointment.

Charlotte’s face paled. “Mother, I didn’t-”

“It wasn’t Charlotte, William interrupted, his deep voice heavy with resignation. “I saw your name on the attendance record for tonight. We

need to talk, Susan.”

Susan cut her off with a sharp gesture. “We have nothing to discuss, William Sullivan.” The hatred in her voice made me flinch. “You made our daughter die, and you have the audacity to approach me?”

William’s face creased with pain. “What happened back then... Susan, you know that—”

“I don’t want to listen.” Tears welled in Susan’s eyes, her voice cracking. Twenty-two years, and my little Luna will never come back!”

Charlotte placed her hands on her mother’s shoulders, a gesture of support that seemed practiced and familiar.

Susan gripped the wheels of her chair and turned away. “Take me home, Charlotte. Now.”

As they passed, Susan paused briefly when she saw me standing there, her lips pressing into a thin line before she continued on.

Charlotte followed, her face a mask of strained composure.

William remained where he stood, shoulders slumped, looking suddenly aged by the weight of whatever history lay between them.

'I'm sorry, I didn't mean to eavesdrop. I was just heading to the restroom and...'

William waved away my apology with a weary hand.

"No need, child. Old wounds sometimes need witnesses, if only to remember they're real."

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3/4

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Claimed by the Alpha's Love - Love Demands Real Courage Author: Michael Anderson 157

Chapter 157

Tori's POV:

63%

I left William Sullivan still standing alone in the corridor.

There was something about the pain in his eyes that didn't align with Susan's accusations.

William didn't strike me as a man who would carelessly destroy his family or betray those he loved. The dignity in his bearing, even when

confronted with such raw hatred, suggested there might be more to the story.

No one mourns that deeply for something they didn't truly value.

I shook my head slightly, pushing these thoughts aside.

Whatever had happened between the Sullivans and Shepherds was their private tragedy, not my business to unravel. I had enough complications in my own life without adding someone else's decades-old heartbreak to the mix.

Lucas was scanning the crowd when I slipped back into my seat beside him, his eyes immediately finding mine. "Everything alright?" he asked,

his voice low.

"Yes," I replied. "Just needed some air."

The remaining auction items passed in a blur of polite applause and mounting bids. I tried to focus, but my thoughts kept returning to Susan

Shepherd's tear-filled accusation: "You made our daughter die." The raw pain in her voice had been unmistakable.

By the time we left the auction house, night had fallen completely over Moonhaven.

The drive home, the city lights streaming past as we wound our way through the elegant streets.

Once inside his home, Lucas's phone rang. He glanced at the screen, his expression shifting minutely. "I need to take this," he said, stepping

away into his study.

I nodded and headed upstairs. The evening had been more taxing than I'd anticipated. Between the attention from other guests, the

extravagant gift from Lucas, and overhearing the Sullivan-Shepherd conflict, I felt emotionally drained.

In the master bedroom, I carefully removed the crystal necklace, setting it on the nightstand. I took a long shower, letting the hot water wash away the tension from my shoulders.

By the time I emerged, wrapped in a soft robe, Lucas still hadn't returned upstairs.

I could hear the low murmur of his voice from his study, the tone serious and measured. His mood seemed to have darkened considerably.

I slipped into bed, the sheets cool against my skin.

The digital clock on the nightstand read 11:43 PM. I tried to read, but the words blurred together as exhaustion crept in. Eventually, I turned off the lamp and lay in darkness, listening to the distant sound of Lucas's Moice.

I must have dozed off, because the next thing I knew, the bedroom door was opening, casting a thin wedge of light across the floor. I kept my eyes closed and my breathing even, feigning sleep as Lucas moved quietly round the room.

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12:14 Thu, Feb 19 m

Chapter 157

2.63%

I felt the mattress dip as he sat on the edge of the bed. His fingers brushed a strand of hair from my face, the touch so gentle it made my heart ache.

"I know you're awake, little wolf, he whispered, his voice tinged with amusement.

I opened my eyes to find him watching me. My pulse quickened, memories of our intimacy from the previous night flooding back.

The intensity in his gaze made me suddenly nervous.

"Why did you take the necklace off?" he asked, glancing at the crystal picc resting on the nightstand.

"Oh," I touched my bare throat, "I always take jewelry off when I shower. Force of habit.

Lucas reached for the necklace, the silver links catching the moonlight. needs to be worn continuously to provide its full benefits," he said, his voice low.

I nodded and sat up, turning slightly so he could fasten it around my neck His fingers brushed against my skin, lingering perhaps longer than

necessary.

“You paid at least ten times what it’s worth, I murmured as the familiar weight settled against my collarbone. “I should definitely get my moonstone’s worth by wearing it.”

Comments

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Claimed by the Alpha's Love - Love Demands Real Courage Author: Michael Anderson 158

Chapter 158

His lips curved into a smile. “You like it then?”

“I do, I admitted.

“So what’s my reward?” Lucas asked, his eyes smiling.

I felt heat rise to my cheeks. “I’m not ready yet. I realized aloud, suddenly self-conscious.

63%

Lucas leaned closer, his scent enveloping me. “The only gift I want,” he whispered against my ear, “is right in front of me.”

My breath caught as I understood his meaning.

When his lips found mine, I didn't resist, despite the exhaustion still lingering in my muscles from the previous night's activities.

Hours later, as dawn began to creep through the curtains, I lay beside him my body pleasantly sore and utterly spent.

Lucas traced lazy patterns on my bare shoulder, seemingly energized rather than tired.

Dear Moon Goddess, I thought hazily, an Alpha who's gotten a taste is certainly different. If every night was going to be like this, I wasn't sure I'd survive the experience.

He leaned forward, and I instinctively pulled back, tucking myself against his chest instead.

"I can't," I whispered, my voice muffled against his shirt. "Lucas, I'm exhausted. I need to rest."

He chuckled, the sound rumbling through his chest as he wrapped his arm around me, pulling me closer. "Sleep then, little wolf," he

murmured, his breath warm against my hair. "I'll just hold you."

I melted into his embrace, the steady rhythm of his heartbeat beneath my ear more soothing than any lullaby. Safe in the circle of his arms, I

surrendered to exhaustion, drifting into a deep, dreamless sleep.

I woke to sunlight streaming through the partially open curtains and an empty space beside me. The clock read 11:07 AM. I sat up quickly,

surprised I'd slept so late.

A note rested on Lucas's pillow, written in his precise handwriting:

* Pack business needs handling. Have a good rest.

-L

Beneath his initial was a small, hastily drawn wolf head that made me smile despite my disappointment at his absence.

It was so unexpectedly playful, so at odds with his usual formality.

I showered and dressed in comfortable clothes, then headed downstairs.

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Chapter 158

63%

The house was quiet except for the occasional sounds of someone moving in the kitchen. I expected to find Martha, but instead, a younger

woman with caramel-colored hair was arranging a tray.

She turned when I entered, offering a quick, professional smile. "Good morning, Ms Sullivan. I'm Rose, filling in for Martha today. She needed a

personal day."

"Oh. Good morning," I replied, surprised. "Please, call me Tori.

Rose nodded, though her smile didn't quite reach her eyes.

After breakfast, Rose approached with a small box, her smile gentle and motherly. "Alpha Lucas asked me to give you these."

Morning-after pills.

I stared at the box briefly, a wave of conflicted emotions washing over me. Maybe Lucas wasn't ready for pup.

Without a word, I accepted them and swallowed the pills.

By the time I finished, a strange heaviness had settled in my limbs.

I gripped the edge of the counter, trying to steady myself. My lungs felt constricted, each breath shallower than the last.

Something's wrong. Tracy growled, her presence surging forward protectively. The pill. It was the pill.

The doorbell rang, cutting through the buzzing that had begun in my ears

Rose hesitated, then moved to answer it, leaving me struggling to breathe on the kitchen floor.

“Tori? Where are you? I brought those notes you wanted!” Morgan’s cheerful voice echoed from the foyer.

I tried to call out, but my throat had closed to a pinhole.

“Tori?” Morgan’s voice came closer. I heard her enter the kitchen, then a sharp intake of breath. “Oh my God! Tori!”

Comments

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2/2

12:14 Thu, Feb 19 m

Claimed by the Alpha’s Love

Chapter 159

Lucas’s POV:

63%

I was halfway through my notes for the Alpha Alliance meeting when my phone vibrated against the conference table.

Matthew’s name flashed on the screen. I frowned, silently excusing myself from the table with a brief nod to the other Alphas.

“This better be important,” I said, stepping into the hallway.

“Oh, it is,” Matthew’s voice came through with that casual tone he used when delivering serious news. “Your little Omega is currently in my medical center. Allergic reaction to morning-after pills.”

My grip tightened on the phone, shock and tension coursing through me. What are you talking about?"

"I'm saying your mate is in a hospital bed because she had an allergic reaction to emergency contraception." His voice turned accusatory. "Seriously, old friend? You're an Alpha who can't be bothered with protection? Just give the girl morning-after pills?"

I felt Duke stirring inside me, a low growl building in my chest. "I never gave her any pills."

"Well, someone did. In your name," Matthew said. "And now she's here, looking like hell. Thought you'd want to know."

I was already walking toward the exit. "I'm on my way. Which room?"

"317. Third floor, west wing," Matthew replied.

"I'll be there in fifteen minutes," I said, ending the call.

I returned briefly to the conference room, informing that an emergency required my immediate attention. The meeting would need to be rescheduled.

The antiseptic smell of Moontouch Medical Center hit me as soon as I stepped off the elevator.

Through the partially open door, I could hear Morgan's voice. "Why are you still here anyway? Don't you have doctor things to do?"

"I'm on duty," Matthew responded, his tone flippant. "Considering my friendship with Lucas, I thought I should stay until she stabilized.*"

"I'm here, and that's enough," Morgan retorted. "I can take care of her just fine without you hovering around."

Matthew's response was cut short as I pushed the door open. His eyes met mine first, relief evident in his expression.

"Lucas," he acknowledged, then glanced at Morgan whose entire demeanor had shifted from confrontational to nervous in an instant.

Her shoulders hunched slightly, and she seemed to make herself smaller in my presence.

My attention turned immediately to Tori lying in the hospital bed.

“How is she?” I asked, my voice tight.

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Chapter 159

63%

Matthew stepped closer, switching to his professional demeanor. “We go to her in time. Stomach pumped, antihistamines administered. The allergic reaction is under control now. She’ll be weak when she wakes up but there won’t be any lasting damage.”

“Thank you,” I said, the words inadequate for the relief I felt.

Matthew’s lips quirked into a half-smile. “As if you two don’t give me enough trouble already. You know what would be real gratitude? Fewer emergency visits to my hospital.

He turned to Morgan, placing a hand on her shoulder. “Come on, let’s give them some space.”

Morgan looked reluctant but followed Matthew out, the door closing softly behind them.

Alone with Tori, I moved to her bedside and took her hand in mine. Her eyes fluttered open, focusing on me with visible effort.

“Sorry, baby,” I said quietly, the words feeling strange on my tongue. Apologies weren’t something I offered often. “This shouldn’t have happened.”

Confusion clouded her expression. “What...?” Her voice was hoarse, barely above a whisper.

I tightened my grip on her hand, anger and guilt warring inside me. “I never asked Rose to give you morning-after contraceptives.”

Understanding slowly dawned in her eyes.

“I failed to properly screen the staff,” I continued, jaw clenching. “This is my responsibility.”

“It’s just an allergic reaction,” she replied, her voice hoarse. “Not your fault.”

I gently pulled her into my arms and cradled her against my chest. My hand moved to her shoulder and neck, stroking gently, an instinctive gesture to comfort my mate.

Jack arrived with a tray of hospital-approved Omega recovery foods, setting it on the side table with a nod before discreetly leaving. I watched as Tori picked at the food, managing only a few bites before setting the prk down.

“You need to eat more,” I said, but didn’t push.

I’m okay, Tori murmured, her silver eyes meeting mine with unexpected steadiness. “Please don’t worry.”

She took a few more small bites to appease me, then her eyelids began to droop. Within minutes, her breathing deepened as sleep claimed her.

I stood watching her for several moments. This would never happen again.

Morgan returned, hovering uncertainly in the doorway. I beckoned her in

“Stay with her,” I said, my tone making it clear this wasn’t a request. “Call me immediately if anything changes with her condition.”

Morgan nodded quickly. Of course.”

With one last look at Tori’s sleeping form, I left the room.

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12:14 Thu, Feb 19 m.

Chapter 159

Later, I stood in my living room, a cigarette between my fingers, waiting.

The smoke curled lazily upward as I heard hesitant footsteps approach.

Rose entered, her forehead beaded with sweat, fingers trembling slightly.

“You wanted to see me, Alpha Grayson?*

“Using my name,” I said quietly, the calmness of my voice more terrifying than any shouting could be, “to trick my mate into taking contraceptives.” I took a long drag from my cigarette. “You’ve really outdone yourself, Rose.”

She stood stiffly by the doorway. “I just thought... an Omega like her shouldn’t bear an Alpha’s-*

“An Omega like her?” I cut her off, my voice still deadly calm. “You mean the woman who carries my mark? The one I’ve chosen?”

Rose flinched, her eyes dropping to the floor. “I didn’t mean to harm her. just thought you also didn’t want-

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“Enough!” I cut her off, my quiet tone more terrifying than a shout. “You’re an Omega too, Rose,” I reminded her, watching her flinch at my words.

“You should understand better than anyone the struggles of being at the bottom of our hierarchy. Yet here you are, poisoning one of your own.”

I stood, extinguishing my cigarette. “Pack your things. You’re done here. And let me make this perfectly clear-no pack in Moonhaven will hire

you after this. Not a single one.”

Her face crumpled, but I felt nothing.

“Get out of my sight,” I said, turning away from her tears. “You have one hour.”

As Rose backed out of the room, a cold fury settled deep in my bones. The thought of Tori suffering in my own home-a place where she

should have been safest-was something I could never forgive.

The cigarette burned down to my fingers, but I barely felt it.

I would make sure it never happened again. Reaching for my phone, I called Jack.

*I want every staff member thoroughly vetted,” I ordered without preamble. “And make it explicitly clear to everyone-Tori Sullivan is to be

treated with the same respect they would show me. She is my mate and will be my Luna. Anyone who can't accept that needs to be removed

immediately.”

Comments

61

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3/3

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Claimed by the Alpha's Love - Love Demands Real Courage Author: Michael Anderson 160

Chapter 160

Tori's POV:

After a day of rest, I felt completely recovered from the allergic reaction to those morning-after pills.

Dr. Matthew recommended only that I stick to bland foods for the next couple of days.

63%

I sat at the kitchen counter, flipping through the elegant cream-colored invitation to Olivia Sullivan's birthday celebration.

I still couldn't believe I'd been included on the guest list. What do you even buy for someone of her status? A woman who'd likely received

every luxury gift imaginable over her long life.

Whatever I chose would probably pale in comparison to what other guests would bring, but showing up empty-handed wasn't an option either.

The silver embossed lettering caught the light as I examined it.

Just at the moment, my phone buzzed beside me. Morgan's name flashed on the screen.

"Hey, feeling better?" Her voice was bright and cheerful.

"Much better," I replied, setting the invitation down. "I was just about to call you."

"Aww, did you miss me that much?" Morgan teased, her smile evident in her voice.

I rolled my eyes despite the small smile tugging at my lips. "Don't flatter yourself. I actually have a problem I need help with."

"Hit me."

"I received an invitation to Olivia Sullivan's birthday celebration, and I have absolutely no idea what to get her."

Morgan gasped. "No way! I was literally calling to ask if you wanted to go shopping. Talk about perfect timing."

"So we're going shopping today. Meet me at Howling Plaza in an hour?"

"Okay, I'll be there."

After hanging up, I took a quick shower and changed into jeans and a light sweater.

I was eager to get out after being cooped up for days. Just as I finished getting ready, my phone chimed with a text from Jack:

The car is ready whenever you are, Miss Sullivan.

Jack dropped me off at the main entrance to Howling Plaza.

The upscale shopping center was bustling with activity, wolves of all ranks browsing the boutiques and enjoying the sunny day.

I spotted Morgan waving at me from outside the Moon Leaf Café, two cups in her hands.

‘Special healing tea,’ she announced, handing me the larger cup. ‘Matthew said it would help restore your energy after... you know.’

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Chapter 160

The tea had a pleasant herbal scent with hints of lavender and mint. I took a grateful sip, feeling its warmth spread through me.

63%

‘So,’ Morgan wiggled her eyebrows suggestively as we started walking. ‘You look different. That certain glow about you... seems like you and

our Frost King Alpha are getting along quite well behind closed doors, aren’t you?’

I nearly choked on my tea, heat rushing to my face. ‘Morgan!’

‘What?’ She laughed, nudging my shoulder. ‘Don’t even try to deny it. Besides, why else would someone need those morning-after pills that

caused all that trouble?’

She continued.

‘And you two are practically attached at the hip now. Well, attached somewhere-’

‘I’m leaving,’ I threatened, my face burning.

Morgan grabbed my arm, still giggling. ‘Okay, okay, I’ll stop. But seriously I’ve never seen him look at anyone the way he looks at you.’

I couldn’t help the small smile that tugged at my lips. ‘Let’s just focus on shopping, okay?’

We spent the next hour browsing through stores.

Finally, in a small artisan shop, I found a hand-carved wooden box inlaid with silver moon phases. It was beautiful but still within my budget

from the settlement money I'd received after being cleared of charges.

"This is perfect," I murmured, running my fingers over the smooth surface

The shopkeeper wrapped it carefully in silver paper with a delicate ribbon

As we left the store, my stomach growled audibly.

"Lunch time, Morgan declared. "There's a nice place just around the corner.

We were headed toward the restaurant when a commotion caught my attention. A woman's voice, sharp with fury, cut through the ambient

noise of the plaza.

"I'll kill you, you bitch! How dare you steal my mate!"

Morgan and I exchanged glances before hurrying toward the sound.

In a small courtyard outside an upscale restaurant, a well-dressed woman was being physically restrained as she tried to attack another woman

covering on the ground.

With a jolt, I recognized my mother, Hannah- her face contorted with rage Alexander Price stood between her and the woman on the ground,

his expression thunderous.

"Hannah, stop it!" Alexander's voice was low but commanding. "You're making a scene."

"A scene?" Hannah's laugh was borderline hysterical. "You're worried about a scene when I catch you with her?"

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12:14 Thu, Feb 19 m.

Chapter 160

63%

The woman on the ground was sobbing, her blonde hair falling over her face. Alexander turned to help her up, his touch gentle, concerned. The tenderness in his eyes made Hannah's fury spike visibly.

"Is this how you repay me, Alexander? Hannah's voice cracked with emotion. "After everything I've done for you? Taking care of your home, your daughters, your social obligations while you-"

"While I what, Hannah?" Alexander's voice had gone dangerously quiet. "Work myself to exhaustion to maintain the lifestyle you demand? Look the other way when you gamble away thousands?"

Hannah's face paled. "You swore you'd never see her again. You promised me when you asked me to be your mate-"

"I promised many things, Alexander interrupted, helping the blonde woman to her feet. "But I never promised to be miserable forever."

The female raised her head, and I caught my breath.

Though older now, with fine lines around her eyes and mouth, there was no mistaking her resemblance to photos I'd seen of Alexander's first wife – Fiona and Mia's mother.

Hannah lunged forward again, but this time Alexander caught her wrist. Enough."

"Let go of me!" Hannah twisted in his grip.

The crack of Alexander's palm against Hannah's cheek silenced the entire courtyard.

My mother staggered back, her hand flying to her face in shock. Alexander had never struck her.

"I said enough." His voice was ice.

Alexander turned away from Hannah, gently placing his arm around the blonde woman's shoulders. "Come on, Serena. I'm taking you to the

hospital."

The woman leaned into him, trembling as he guided her toward the parking lot. Alexander didn't spare Hannah another glance as they walked

away.

Hannah stood frozen, her hand still pressed against her reddened cheek. Her eyes, filled with hatred and humiliation, followed them until they

disappeared from sight.

The murderous look on her face sent a chill down my spine.

*Should we... should we go somewhere else?" Morgan whispered beside me

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