

Claimed by the Alpha's Love - Love Demands Real Courage Author: Michael Anderson 181

Chapter 181

Fiona's POV:

The memory flooded back with crystalline clarity.

The wedding night. Ethan had been so drunk, barely conscious.

I'd tried to rouse him, tried to make him consummate our marriage, but he'd pushed me away.

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And yet, the next morning, my body had ached. There were marks on my skin-bruises on my hips, scratches on my back. Physical evidence

that something had happened.

Ethan had woken late, groggy and disoriented.

When I'd asked him about the night before, he'd smiled that lazy smile and brushed his thumb across my nose. "You can't hold your liquor, can

you? You were completely out of it."

I'd laughed it off, relieved that he seemed to remember us being together. But now...

Oh God.

Every time after that, it had been the same pattern. Ethan would drink heavily before coming to bed. I'd wake up with vague, fragmented

memories and a body that told me we'd been intimate.

But I never remembered the details. Never remembered his touch, his kiss, the sound of his voice.

Because it hadn't been Ethan at all.

"It was you." I turned to face Ethan, my voice barely audible. "You planned this from the beginning, didn't you? This is your revenge. For Tori."

Ethan's expression remained cold, impassive. "Fiona, this is karma. This is what happens when you do terrible things."

He didn't confirm it. Didn't deny it either. And that silence was answer enough.

"It really was you!" Even though I'd suspected, having the truth confirmed felt like being gutted. "From that day in the bar when you asked me

to date you-you were setting me up the whole time, weren't you?"

My voice rose, shrill with hysteria. "How touching, Ethan! You sacrificed your own marriage to get revenge for Tori. How noble! How heroic!"

I laughed, the sound brittle and broken. "But here's the thing-you went through all this trouble, destroyed both our lives, and for what? She

doesn't love you anymore. She's never coming back to you."

I stepped closer, my voice dropping to a venomous whisper. "And when she marries Lucas, you'll have to call her 'Aunt. You'll have to bow your

head and show her respect as your elder. Won't that be delicious?"

I saw him flinch, saw the flash of pain in his eyes, and it gave me savage satisfaction.

"You're just as pathetic as I am. I'll enjoy watching you suffer in your own private hell, never getting what you want."

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"Noof of that matters anymore Ethan's voice was flat, emotionless. What matters is that I helped her get justice. That I made you pay for

whatrat dakid tedier,"

He Hiretort myesy end nd there was sothething alnost peaceful in his expression.

Someters inside so snapped.

What does she hate that doesn't Ny voice rose to a shriek, all pretense of dignity abandoned. "Tell me! What makes her so special? I'm

pretentious and foreverly gave you everything-*

I grabbed his wrist. I think he believed I would have done anything for you! But it was never enough, was it? Because I wasn't her!"

Tears streamed down my face then he better you threw away everything for someone who doesn't even want you. It's not worth it. She's not

worth destroying yourself over

I released him with a violent shove my chest he tested me with hysteria.

You will never be like Ethan Gravenor Not by anyone you'll die alone and empty, and it will be exactly what you deserve.

Several days later news of Ethan and my divorce swept through the city like wildfire.

Our wedding ceremony had been the social event of the season or divorce was equally spectacular, but for all the wrong reasons.

I remembered the magazine spread from our engagement. The headline had read, featuring that photo of

me tossing my hair back as I sat in Ethan's limited-edition car.

Now the headlines read differently: From Grace to Disgrace The Fall of a Vicious Woman Exposed

Less than two years. That's all it took for everything to crumble. The irony of it all.

But fate wasn't finished with me yet. 1

Zane came to the Price mansion, and Alexander agreed to the marriage without consulting his father, he said coldly. You

have no other choice.

The thought of binding myself to the man who had destroyed everything-1 couldn't bear it. it.

When Zane came to persuade me, something inside me snapped.

Get out.

“Your father already gave us his blessing. We can-

11 said get out! I hurled a crystal vase at him. It shattered against the door, missing his head by inches.

He didn't leave. Just kept talking, kept pushing, kept insisting that we belonged together. That this was fate. That our son deserved that.

Every word was a knife twisting in my gut. This man-this nobody-had destroyed everything I'd worked for. Had stolen my future, my life.

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my dignity.

And now he wanted to marry me? To trap me in a life of mediocrity?

“I'll never marry you.” My voice was deadly calm. “I'll never let you mean nothing. You're nothing, Zane. You've always been nothing.”

His expression hardened. “I'm the baby's father, Fiona. The DNA test proves it. You can't keep me away.”

I snapped.

The knife was in my hand before I consciously decided to pick it up.

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I lunged. The blade caught him in the shoulder, then the arm as he tried to defend himself. Blood bloomed across his shirt, bright and red and satisfying.

“You ruined my life!” I screamed, striking again. “You took everything from me!”

Mia's screams brought security running. They pulled me off him, but not before I'd gotten in several more cuts.

Unfortunately, none of the wounds was fatal. But it didn't matter.

The Council's judgment was swift: multiple offenses, exile, effective immediately.

Before they took me away, they allowed me one final phone call.

My fingers trembled as I dialed the number I'd memorized years ago. The number I'd called countless times when we were friends, before everything fell apart.

She answered on the third ring.

Tori." My voice was hoarse from screaming. I suppose you're happy now You won. Completely and utterly."

Silence on the other end.

"What a grand love story, I continued, my laugh brittle. "Ethan sacrificed his entire marriage just to get revenge for you. How romantic. How epic.

My grip tightened on the phone. If I could go back, if I could change on thing... I wish I'd never met you."

"Fions." Tori's voice was quiet, steady. "Everything that happened to you you brought it on yourself. Every choice, every lie, every betrayal. This is the consequence of your own actions."

The line went dead.

I stood there, phone still pressed to my ear, as the guards approached to escort me to the city limits.

No future. No redemption. No second chances.

Exile meant becoming a Rogue-stripped of pack protection, hunted by other wolves, surviving on scraps in the wilderness,

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Chapter 182

Tori's POV:

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I stood at the edge of the rooftop terrace, the setting sun painting the sky in shades of orange and crimson.

The light caught in my silver eyes, turning them molten, reflective.

Below, Moonhaven spread out like a living organism-buildings rising from the forest, the distant mountains creating a natural barrier that

kept our world separate, hidden.

Fiona Price has been permanently exiled.

The words echoed in my mind, but they brought no satisfaction. No relief. Just a strange, hollow feeling that settled in my chest like a stone.

Tracy? I reached out to my wolf through our bond.

She paced restlessly in the back of my consciousness.

Is this what you wanted? I asked her silently.

Tracy's pacing slowed. Her silver eyes met mine in the space of our shared consciousness.

What I wanted doesn't matter anymore, she said finally, her mental voice carrying a weight I'd never heard before. She chose her path.

The wisdom in her words settled over me like a heavy cloak. Tracy was right. Fiona had built her own cage, bar by bar, choice by choice.

An old saying my grandmother used to repeat surfaced in my mind, the Mandarin words flowing through my thoughts with bitter poetry: "All

schemes and machinations lead only to one's own downfall.”

My phone buzzed. Lucas.

Finishing up here. I will pick you up in 20 minutes.

I'm on the research institute rooftop. And yes, I'll wait.

Good girl.

Those two words sent warmth through me, chasing away some of the chill

I was about to head downstairs when I heard rapid footsteps. A figure burst through the rooftop door, stumbling slightly.

Mia Price.

She looked terrible. Her eyes were red and swollen, her designer clothes rumpled. The scent of desperation and fear rolled off her in waves.

“Tori.” She gasped my name like a drowning person gasping for air.

I tensed, every instinct screaming at me to be cautious. Mia had never shown me anything but contempt and cruelty. Whatever brought her here couldn't be good.

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“What do you want, Mia?”

She took a shaky step forward. The moonlight was beginning to rise, casting silver shadows across the rooftop. In that light, she looked younger, more vulnerable than I'd ever seen her.

“Please.” Her voice broke. “I need to talk to you. About Fiona.”

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Of course. Everything always came back to Fiona.

“There's nothing to discuss,” I said coldly. “The Council has made their decision.”

“But you could change it!” Mia moved closer, her hands clasped in front of her like a supplicant. “You could ask Alpha Lucas to intervene. Everyone knows he’d do anything for you.”

The presumption in her words sparked anger in my chest. “Why would I do that? After everything Fiona did to me?”

“Because-Mia’s face crumpled. “Because she’s my sister. The only famil I have left.”

I stared at her, unmoved. You have your father. Your mother.”

“My father?” Mia laughed bitterly. “Price Enterprises declared bankruptcy this morning. Did you know that? We’re ruined. And Hannah-* She stopped, swallowing hard. Hannah has gambling debts. Serious ones. And Alexander has a mistress. The whole family is falling apart.”

Good, Tracy growled. They deserve it.

But even as my wolf celebrated, I felt a flicker of something else.

Not quite pity-I wasn’t that generous. But perhaps... recognition. I knew what it felt like to watch your family crumble. To stand helpless as

everything you knew dissolved around you.

“That’s not my problem,” I said, keeping my voice steady.

“I know!” Mia’s composure shattered. She dropped to her knees on the cold rooftop concrete, her hands reaching toward me in desperate

supplication. “I know we treated you horribly. I know we don’t deserve your help. But please-please don’t let them exile her forever. Tori. She

has a baby.”

‘Had,” I corrected, my voice like ice. The baby was Zanes, remember? And he will bring him up.”

“She made mistakes! Tears streamed down Mia’s face, catching the mocklight. Terrible mistakes. But exile is a death sentence. You know that Rogues don’t survive long out there.”

I looked down at her, this girl who had made my life miserable for years.

Who had locked me in a bathroom and doused me with ice water. Who he sneered at my Omega status and done everything in her power to make me feel small.

Now she knelt before me, begging.

The symmetry was almost poetic.

“Get up, Mia.”

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She looked up at me, hope flickering in her eyes. “Does that mean-”

“It means I’m not going to stand here while you grovel.” I kept my distance, my arms crossed.

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“You want me to show mercy?” I stepped closer, letting her see the steel in my eyes.

“You want me to save Fiona from the consequences of her

actions? Then tell me, Mia-where was your mercy when I was locked in Saver Fang? Where was your compassion when I was being injected

with suppressants that made me violently ill? Where was your sister’s kindness when she set me up to be attacked?”

“So you’ll just let her die out there?” Mia’s voice rose, desperate. “You’ll condemn her to-”

“I’m not condemning anyone.” I looked back at her, my expression cold. “Those were her decisions. Not mine.”

“Please.” Mia was crying again, her composure completely shattered. “I’m begging you. Sister to sister-”

“We’re not sisters.” The words came out flat, final. “We never were.”

“Tori-

“Leave, Mia.” I didn’t raise my voice. Didn’t need to. “There’s nothing more to say.”

She stood there for a long moment, tears streaming down her face. Then, slowly, she turned and walked toward the door. At the threshold, she

paused.

“I hope you never regret this,” she said, her voice thick with emotion. “I hope you never know what it’s like to beg for mercy and be denied.”

“I already know what that’s like,” I replied. “I learned it from your family.”

She froze, and then the door behind her closed softly.

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Tori's POV:

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The research institute's glass doors slid open with a soft hiss as I stepped to the cool evening air.

Nine-thirty. The parking lot was nearly empty, most researchers having le hours ago.

Street lamps cast pools of amber light across the pavement, and I pulled my jacket tighter against the autumn chill.

Then I saw it-Lucas's custom Maybach, its sleek black form unmistakable even in the dim lighting.

My heart did that stupid flutter it always did when I knew he was near. The driver's side door opened, and Lucas himself emerged, not Jack.

He was still in his business suit, the charcoal fabric perfectly tailored to his frame, but he'd loosened his tie and rolled up his sleeves.

"You didn't have to come yourself," I said as I approached, though warmth bloomed in my chest at the sight of him.

His silver eyes caught mine, that familiar intensity making my breath hitch. "I wanted to."

The interior of the Maybach enveloped me in leather and Lucas's cedar scent as I slid into the passenger seat.

He pulled out of the parking lot with practiced ease, one hand on the wheel, the other resting on the center console between us-close enough to touch, but not quite touching.

We'd been driving for maybe five minutes when I couldn't hold back anymore. "You don't seem surprised about today's chaos."

Lucas's lips quirked slightly. "Should I be?"

I turned in my seat to face him better. "Lucas. The entire party was a circus. Fiona's cheating, Ethan's revenge, the media coverage-it was orchestrated chaos. And you're acting like you expected every second of it

He was quiet for a moment, his jaw working as he considered his words. Then: "I knew."

"You knew?" I repeated, my voice rising slightly. "For how long?"

"Since the night I learned about Ethan and Fiona's marriage being revenge His fingers tightened almost imperceptibly on the steering wheel. "I've been helping him. Can't let him have all the credit for taking down the woman who destroyed my mate's life."

The word 'mate' still sent shivers through me, even after everything. But his casual admission left me momentarily speechless. "When exactly did you know?"

"The night I found out you were Ethan's ex-girlfriend." His voice was matter-of-fact, but I caught the edge of something darker beneath it. "The same night I realized how deeply Fiona's betrayal had cut you."

I sat back, processing this.

All those months, Lucas had been working behind the scenes while I'd been struggling to rebuild my life. The thought made my chest tight with complicated emotions-gratitude, certainly, but also a strange sense of inadequacy.

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"You're thinking too hard," Lucas observed, glancing at me briefly before turning his attention to the road. "I can practically hear the gears

turning."

"I'm thinking," I said slowly, "that Ethan's approach was like... hurting the enemy a thousand while damaging himself eight hundred."

Lucas's expression darkened slightly.

"Ethan made his choices. I made mine. He reached over then, his large and finding mine and threading our fingers together. "But you should

know something, Tori."

"What?"

His thumb traced circles on the back of my hand, the gesture both soothing and possessive.

"Whatever Ethan gave up, whatever he sacrificed-I'll make sure he gets back. But you?"

He lifted our joined hands, pressing a kiss to my knuckles that made my breath catch. "You're mine now. I have you, and I'm never letting go.

Whatever Ethan thinks you owe him, I'll settle that debt. But you're mine.

The fierce certainty in his voice made something warm and secure settle in my chest.
“Lucas-”

“I don’t regret this,” I said quietly, but with absolute conviction. “Not for second. Whatever happened with Ethan was in the past. You’re my choice. You’ll always be my choice.”

I brought our joined hands to my lips, pressing a soft kiss to his knuckles the way he’d done to mine moments before.” That’s not going to change.”

His lips curved into that rare, genuine smile that always made my breath catch. “I believe you.”

As we drove through Moonhaven’s illuminated streets toward his private estate, I told him about the lunar phase calculations I’d been working on, the breakthrough I’d had with the tidal influence patterns.

He listened intently, asking questions that showed he actually understood the complex mathematics involved.

The house was quiet as we entered, most of the staff having retired for the evening.

Inside, he released my hand only to guide me toward the bathroom. “Shower first. You’ve had a long day.”

I didn’t argue, too tired and too content to protest his care.

The hot water felt amazing on my tired muscles, washing away the stress of the day. When I emerged in my robe, Lucas had already showered

in the guest bathroom and was waiting in loose sleep pants, a towel in his hands.

“Sit,” he said, gesturing to the vanity chair.

I obeyed, settling into the plush seat as he moved behind me.

The hairdryer hummed to life, and Lucas’s fingers worked through my damp hair with surprising gentleness.

I watched him in the mirror-the concentration on his face, the careful way he sectioned my hair, the tenderness in every touch.

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This powerful Alpha, who commanded respect and fear in equal measure throughout Moonhaven, was blow-drying my hair with the patience of

a saint.

The domesticity of it made my chest tight with emotion.

“You’re staring,” Lucas murmured, his eyes meeting mine in the mirror.

That familiar smirk played at his lips. “See something you like?” Lucas murmured against my ear, his breath hot on my skin.

I met his eyes in the mirror, seeing the wolf lurking just beneath the surface. “Maybe.”

“Just maybe?” His hands slid down to my hips, pulling me flush against him.

“Lucas-” But whatever protest I’d been about to make died as he kissed me, slow and deep and thorough. The mate bond sang between us, that invisible tether pulling tighter, stronger.

What followed was tender and passionate, Lucas taking his time to worship every inch of me as if I were something precious and fragile.

The mate bond amplified every touch, every kiss, until I was lost in sensation and emotion. When he finally claimed me, it felt like coming

home.

Afterward, we lay tangled together, Lucas’s hand tracing lazy patterns on my bare shoulder. An Alpha’s stamina seemed inexhaustible. Lucas

pressed soft kisses to my temple, my cheek, anywhere he could reach.

I must have drifted off at some point, lulled by his warmth and the steady rhythm of his heartbeat. But sleep didn't last long.

Sharp pain lanced through my abdomen, jolting me awake with a gasp. My hand flew to my stomach, and I curled instinctively against the

discomfort.

"Tori?" Lucas was instantly alert, his body tensing beside me. "What's wrong?"

"I don't- Another cramp cut off my words, sharper this time.

I pressed harder against my lower abdomen, trying to breathe through it.

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Tori's POV:

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Lucas didn't hesitate. In one fluid motion, he was out of bed, pulling on clothes with practiced speed. "We're going to the medical center. Now."

"Lucas, it's four in the morning-

"I don't care." His voice held that Alpha command that made my wolf instinctively submit.

He was already helping me into a soft dress, his hands gentle despite the urgency in his movements. "Don't worry. Matthew will meet us there."

The drive to Moontouch Medical Center was a blur of streetlights and Lucas's hand gripping mine.

Matthew was waiting at the VIP entrance when we arrived, his hair disheveled and his eyes heavy with interrupted sleep.

He crossed his arms, leaning against the doorframe with a raised eyebrow.

"This better be good, Lucas. You know how I feel about being woken up at four in the morning."

"Tori's in pain," Lucas said tersely, his arm tightening around my waist. "Abdominal cramping. It started suddenly."

Matthew's demeanor shifted instantly, the teasing edge vanishing. "How long ago?"

"About twenty minutes," I managed, another dull ache making me wince.

"Any bleeding?" Matthew was already moving, leading us down the hallway toward the private exam rooms.

"No," Lucas answered when I hesitated. "Just pain."

"Severity? One to ten."

"Five?" I offered. "Maybe six when it spikes."

Matthew nodded, gesturing us into exam room three. "Alright. Let's figure out what's going on."

The examination was thorough but gentle. Matthew asked questions about the pain, when it started, how severe it was. Lucas stood at my side the entire time, his jaw tight with worry.

Finally, Matthew sat back, his expression a mixture of exasperation and amusement.

“Well, I found your problem.”

“What is it?” Lucas demanded, his hand tightening on mine.

Matthew fixed Lucas with a pointed look. “When was the last time you two.. took a break?”

Lucas blinked. “What?”

“From sexual activity,” Matthew clarified bluntly. “Because from what I’m seeing, Tori’s body is showing signs of strain. Omegas are more

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delicate than Alphas, Lucas. Their bodies need recovery time, especially when dealing with an Alpha of your... intensity.”

Heat flooded my face as understanding dawned. Lucas looked stunned, then guilty.

“How long?” Matthew pressed.

“We haven’t really...” Lucas cleared his throat. “Since the mate bond solidied, we’ve been... frequent.”

“Daily?” Matthew’s eyebrow arched. “Multiple times daily?”

The silence was answer enough.

Matthew sighed, running a hand through his hair.

“Lucas, you need to exercise some restraint. I know the mate bond is strong, especially in the early stages, but Tori’s body needs time to recover between... sessions.”

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He turned to me with a gentler expression. “The cramping should ease with rest. I’ll prescribe some supplements to help with recovery.”

“That’s it?” I asked, relief flooding through me. “Just... rest?”

“Well, that and-” Matthew paused, his eyes widening as he looked at something on the ultrasound screen he’d been using to check for internal damage. “Oh.”

“Oh?” Lucas’s voice sharpened. “Oh, what?”

Matthew’s expression shifted to something between shock and delight. “Congratulations. You’re pregnant, Tori. About ten weeks along.”

The world tilted.

“Pregnant,” Lucas repeated, his voice barely above a whisper.

“Which means, Matthew continued, his tone turning stern as he focused on Lucas, “you definitely need to be more careful. The first trimester is

delicate, and with your Alpha strength...”

He shook his head. “Moderation, Lucas. For both their sakes.”

Lucas nodded slowly, his hand still resting protectively on my stomach. “Understand.” His voice was rough with emotion. “I’ll be more careful. I promise.*

“Good.” Matthew’s expression softened slightly. “I’m not saying you have to be celibate- the mate bond makes that nearly impossible anyway. Just... gentler.”

He turned to me with a reassuring smile. “Your body will tell you when it’s too much. Listen to it.”

“I will,” I managed, still trying to process everything.

Heat flooded my face, and I desperately wished the exam table would just swallow me whole. Having Matthew-Lucas’s best friend and a doctor I respected discuss my sex life in such clinical detail was mortifying beyond words.

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Matthew printed out an ultrasound image and handed it to Lucas, who took it with trembling hands.

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“The fetus is healthy and developing normally. Strong heartbeat, good positioning. He glanced between us. “You’re both young and healthy. There’s no reason this pregnancy shouldn’t go smoothly, as long as you follow my instructions.”

Lucas carefully lifted me from the exam table, cradling me against his chest as if I were made of glass.

As he settled me onto the hospital bed, his touch was impossibly gentle.

“Do you...” I hesitated, suddenly uncertain. “Do you want this baby? We never talked about children, never planned-

“Tori.” Lucas sat on the edge of the bed, both hands now framing my face. I want everything with you. A home, a family, a lifetime of moments

just like this. This baby-our baby-is a gift I never knew I needed.”

His thumb brushed away a tear I hadn’t realized had fallen. “Are you happy about it?”

“Terrified,” I admitted with a watery laugh. “But yes. So happy it doesn’t feel real.”

“It’s real.” He kissed me again, slower this time, reverent. “We’re going to be parents.”

“You’re going to be a father,” I whispered against his lips, testing the words.

The door opened, cutting off his words. A nurse bustled in, her professional smile firmly in place. “Sorry to interrupt, but I need to start your

IV, Ms Sullivan.”

The nurse worked efficiently, finding a vein in my arm and securing the needle with practiced ease.

Lucas watched intently, his hand tightening on mine whenever I flinched.

“All done, the nurse announced cheerfully. “Dr. Howard prescribed some supplements and hydration. You should feel better in a few hours.”

After the nurse left, Lucas shifted to sit more comfortably on the bed beside me, one hand still resting protectively on my stomach. “Does it

still hurt?”

“Just a dull ache now. The IV is helping.” I yawned, suddenly exhausted. “Matthew said it was normal. Just need to rest.”

“Then rest.” He leaned down, pressing a kiss to my temple. “I’ll be right here.”

“Lucas...”

“Shh. His fingers traced gentle circles on my stomach, the motion soothing. “Sleep, mingyun bànlǚ. I’ve got you. Both of you.” 3

The combination of his warmth, the medication, and the emotional exhaustion of the morning pulled me under.

I woke to the sound of familiar voices-Elizabeth’s warm tones mixing with Lucas’s deeper rumble.

Blinking my eyes open, I found myself still in the hospital bed, but the room was now filled with soft morning light.

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-absolutely ridiculous, Lucas, Elizabeth was saying, though her tone was more amused than angry. “You didn’t know she was pregnant and you still-

She cut herself off as she noticed I was awake, her expression transforming into pure delight. “Tori! Oh, my dear, congratulations!”

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Chapter 185

Tori's POV:

Heat flooded my face as I realized what they'd been discussing.

Lucas appeared at my bedside immediately, his hand finding mine with practiced ease.

"How are you feeling?" His thumb traced gentle circles over my knuckles, and despite my embarrassment, I couldn't help but lean into his

touch.

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"Better," I managed, my voice still rough with sleep. "The cramping's gone

Elizabeth moved closer, settling into the chair on my other side with the grace of someone who'd spent decades commanding rooms.

Her silver-white hair was perfectly coiffed despite the early hour, and her ice-blue eyes—so like Lucas's—studied me with an intensity that

made Tracy stir nervously.

"I've arranged for Martha to prepare the guest suite in the main house," Elizabeth announced, as if the matter was already decided. "You'll need

proper care during your pregnancy, and Lucas's private residence, while lovely, lacks the support staff necessary for—"

"Mother." Lucas's voice held a warning edge. "I will take good care of Tori.

Elizabeth's lips curved into a knowing smile.

“Of course, dear. But do consider it.”

She reached into her designer handbag, producing an ornate silver box. “This is yuèhuá milù-moon-essence dew. It’s a rare supplement, harvested only during the full moon from silver birch trees in the Northern Territories. ”

She opened the box, revealing crystalline vials filled with luminescent liquid that seemed to pulse with its own inner light.

The scent that wafted out was intoxicating-like moonlight distilled into physical form, with undertones of wild honey and something indefinably other.

“It strengthens the wolf bond between mother and pup, Elizabeth continued, her voice softening. “My own mother gave it to me when I carried Lucas.

I accepted the box carefully, overwhelmed by the gesture. “Thank you, Elizabeth. I don’t know what to say.”

“Say you’ll take care of yourself.” Her hand covered mine, surprisingly warm. “And that you’ll let us help you. You’re family now, Tori. Truly.”

“I will,” I whispered. “Thank you.”

Elizabeth’s expression grew more serious. “Now, about the Luna ceremony The next full moon falls on December eighth-just three weeks away. We’ll need to begin preparations immediately. The formal recognition, the bonding ritual before the Elder Council, the presentation to the four packs-”

“Mother,” Lucas interrupted again, but this time his tone held exasperation rather than warning. “Perhaps we could let Tori recover from one medical emergency before planning the next major life event?”

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“Nonsense. Planning is precisely what she needs-something joyful to focus on.” Elizabeth turned back to me, her eyes twinkling. “Besides, the sooner we formalize your position, the sooner certain... ambitious individuals will understand that Lucas is permanently off the market.”

I thought of Megan's defeated expression at Olivia's party, of Vivienne's calculating smiles. "I appreciate that."

"Good. Then it's settled. Elizabeth rose, smoothing her skirt. "Jack will coordinate with Roman Pierce for the legal documentation. Nothing too

heavy-your stomach will be sensitive for a few days."

She paused at the door, glancing back with an expression that was part stern, part affectionate. "And Lucas? Do try to exercise some restraint in

the future. Your father and I would like our grandchild to arrive healthy and on schedule."

The door clicked shut behind her, leaving us in mortified silence.

"I'm never going to live that down," Lucas muttered, but his lips twitched with suppressed amusement.

I buried my face in my hands.

He laughed then, the sound rumbling through his chest as he pulled me into his arms.

In the afternoon, Grace came to visit.

Elizabeth had entrusted her with the preparations for the Luna coronation ceremony, and she came to ask me some detailed questions.

After finishing the discussion about the ceremony arrangements, Grace didn't leave immediately. Instead, she remained seated, watching me as

I leaned against the headboard.

I could feel her gaze, the complex emotions transmitting through the mate bond to Lucas, causing his arm around me to tighten unconsciously.

"Tori, Grace finally spoke, her voice carrying a hint of hesitation, "I know this request might not be appropriate, but... Ethan hasn't been doing well emotionally lately. Could you possibly give him a call and talk to him?"

The air in the room instantly froze.

I felt Lucas's body tense, his Alpha aura beginning to seep out. Tracy issued a warning growl deep within me.

“Grace,” I said calmly, though my heart was racing, ‘since you know Lucas and I are together, you should understand that it’s not appropriate for me to have any private contact with Ethan. Besides, if he would truly listen to me, he wouldn’t be in this state now.”

I’d told Ethan many times to let go of the past. He’d never truly listened.

“I know, I know this is difficult for you,” Grace’s voice carried a mother’s desperation, “but I really have no other options. He’s locked himself in his apartment, won’t answer calls, won’t see anyone.”

“Grace. Lucas’s voice was cold and firm. “Enough.”

“Lucas, he’s your nephew-*

“He’s also a grown male who needs to take responsibility for his own choices.” Lucas cut her off. “Tori doesn’t owe him anything.”

III

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Chapter 185

Grace’s eyes reddened, but she didn’t give up, turning to me instead. “Just one phone call, Tori. Please.”

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I looked at this woman who had once been a proud Grayson matriarch, now setting aside all her pride for her son. As someone about to become a mother myself, I could understand that desperation.

But I also knew that some wounds could only be healed by time.

“Grace,” I said softly, “I understand your concern. But if I call Ethan, it will only make things worse. What he needs isn’t my comfort-it’s

accepting reality.”

My hand covered Lucas’s, feeling him relax at my words.

I continued. "It's part of his growth. Someday, he'll understand that we were never fated mates, just a youthful misunderstanding."

Grace closed her eyes, tears sliding down her cheeks. "I understand. I'm sorry, I shouldn't have asked.*"

She rose to leave, pausing at the door. "Tori, regardless of everything, welcome to this family. You're a good girl-better than my son deserves."

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Claimed by the Alpha's Love - Love Demands Real Courage Author: Michael Anderson 186

Chapter 186

William's POV:

The DNA report felt like lead in my hands.

I sat alone in my study, the afternoon light streaming through the tall windows doing nothing to warm the chill that had settled into my

bones.

Leo had delivered it personally this morning, slipping it into my hand with a knowing look.

99.9% probability of paternal relationship.

The words blurred as I read them for the third time, my wolf stirring restlessly beneath my skin.

It couldn't be real. It couldn't be.

For twenty-two years, I'd lived with Frost's (Hanna) accusation like a brand on my soul-her tearful claims that I'd gotten her pregnant.

I'd denied it. Vehemently. Absolutely. I'd never touched Hannah Sullivan, never even looked at her that way.

I'd been certain. And Hannah herself had been so erratic, so desperate for status and security, that her story had never made sense.

But now...

My eyes fixed on Tori's name in the report, and something cracked open in my chest.

That first moment I'd seen her-those silver eyes that had struck me like lightning, so familiar, so right.

The way my wolf had immediately calmed in her presence, something it never did with strangers. Her brilliant mind, her gift for lunar

calculations that mirrored my own.

78%

I'd thought it was simply recognizing a kindred spirit. A young wolf with talent who deserved support and guidance.

But it had been recognition. Blood calling to blood.

"No," I whispered, my hands trembling as I set the report down. "No, no, no..."

If this was true-if Tori was really my daughter-then Hannah hadn't lied. At least not about that. Which meant...

The room tilted. I gripped the edge of my desk, my breath coming in short gasps.

Which meant I had betrayed Susan.

"I don't remember," I said aloud, my voice breaking. "I don't remember any of it. How could I not remember?"

The guilt was crushing. All these years, I'd held my head high, secure in my innocence. I'd looked Susan in the eye and sworn I'd never strayed, never would.

The pain in my chest intensified, sharp and hot. My vision swam. This wasn't just guilt- this was something physical, something breaking

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inside me.

Alpha! my wolf howled in alarm. Alpha, breathe!

But I couldn't breathe. Couldn't think past the horrible, inescapable truth.

The weight of it all-the lies, the truth, the impossible situation-crashed down on me at once.

And then there was only darkness.

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When I woke, I was in my own bed, the familiar ceiling of my bedroom swimming into focus.

Dr. Morrison's concerned face hovered above me, his stethoscope cold against my chest.

"Welcome back, Alpha," he said with forced cheerfulness. "You gave us quite a scare."

"What happened?" My voice came out as a croak.

"Severe stress-induced cardiac event," Morrison said, straightening up. "Your blood pressure was dangerously elevated, your heart struggling under extreme emotional duress. You collapsed in your study."

He paused, his expression growing stern. "You're lucky your assistant found you when she did."

My father, Owen's face appeared beside Morrison's, tight with worry.

"You're going to rest," Owen said in a tone that brooked no argument. "Doctor's orders. I'll handle pack business until you're cleared to return

to duty."

"But-

"No arguments." Owen's hand came down on my shoulder, firm and unyielding. "The pack needs you healthy, not dead from stress. Whatever you've been dealing with, it can wait."

I wanted to protest, but the exhaustion pulling at me was too strong. I fell asleep again.

But the peace didn't last long.

The next morning, I was barely awake when my bedroom door opened with more force than necessary.

Owen strode in, his expression thunderous, a familiar manila folder clutched in his hand.

My stomach dropped.

"We need to talk," he said, his voice tight with barely controlled emotion. Now."

I struggled to sit up, my body still weak. "Father-

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"Don't." He crossed the room in three long strides, slamming the folder down on the bedside table. The DNA report. "I found this in your desk

drawer yesterday."

His ice-silver eyes-so like mine, so like Tori's-blazed with a mixture of shock and anger.

“Explain this to me, William,” he demanded, his Alpha authority saturating every syllable. “Explain how this girl-Tori Sullivan, the one Lucas

Grayson has claimed as his Luna-shows a 99.9% genetic match to you.”

I closed my eyes, shame washing over me fresh and raw. There was no point in deflecting now.

“It’s exactly what it looks like,” I said quietly. “Tori Sullivan is my daughter

The crash of shattering porcelain made my eyes snap open.

My mother stood frozen in the doorway, a silver tray tilted at a dangerous angle in her trembling hands.

Fresh fruit-sliced apples, berries, grapes she’d carefully arranged-tumbled to the floor in a cascade of color, the crystal bowl bouncing once

before rolling under the bed.

But Olivia didn’t seem to notice. Her warm brown eyes were fixed on me, wide with shock.

“Tori?” she whispered, the single word barely audible. “Tori Sullivan is... your daughter?*

I couldn’t meet her gaze. “Yes.”

“The girl with the silver eyes,” she continued, her voice trembling with emotion.

Her hand flew to her mouth. “Oh, William. That’s why I felt it.”

*From the first moment I met her, I felt this... pull. This inexplicable warmth, like I’d known her forever.” Tears spilled down her cheeks. “I

thought it was just because she reminded me of Luna and Susan, because of those eyes.*

Her voice broke on the last word, and suddenly she was moving toward me her hands reaching for mine with desperate urgency.

“We have to bring her home,” she said, her tears flowing freely now. “William, do you understand? She’s your only blood child. Your daughter. We have to-”

“No.” The word came out harder than I intended, and I pulled my hands away from her grasp. “We won’t do anything of the sort.

Olivia recoiled as if I'd struck her. "What?"

"I won't claim her," I said, forcing my voice to remain steady even as shame threatened to choke me. "I'm being very restrained by not targeting her. And Susan can never know about this. Never."

My throat tightened. "It would destroy what little remains of our bond. We'd be finished. Completely finished."

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Chapter 187

William's POV:

"Finished? Olivia's voice rose with disbelief.

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"William, your mate barely recognizes you anymore. She's been lost in grief for twenty years-

"Because of me! The words tore out of me. "Because I couldn't save Luna. Because I failed her as a mate and a father. And now you want me to tell her I betrayed her too?"

I shook my head violently. "No. Absolutely not."

"You listen to me, William Sullivan. Olivia's voice cut through the tension like a blade.

Before I could react, her hand came up and smacked the side of my head-not hard enough to hurt, but sharp enough to shock. "I did not raise you to be a coward."

“Mother-

“No.” She pointed a trembling finger at me, her tears still flowing but her expression fierce. “You don’t get to make this decision alone. That girl-our granddaughter-is not going to remain out there without her family. Without knowing where she came from. Without knowing she has people who love her.”

“She doesn’t need-”

“I don’t care what you think she needs!” Olivia’s voice cracked with emotion. “She’s my granddaughter. My blood. And I will not stand by and let her remain ignorant of her heritage because you’re too consumed with guilt to do what’s right.”

I saw the determination in her eyes, the same fierce protectiveness that had defined her as Luna for decades.

And I knew I had to find another way to make them understand.

“You want to bring Tori into this family?” I said, my voice dropping to something cold and calculated. “Then let’s talk about what that really means.”

Owen’s eyes narrowed. “William-

“Betty,” I interrupted, looking directly at my mother. “You know her better than anyone. You know what she’s been like since childhood-the jealousy, the competition, the constant need to prove she’s better than me

I leaned forward despite the pain in my chest. “She only stopped causing trouble because she believed I had no heir. Because she thought everything would eventually go to her children.”

Olivia’s expression flickered with understanding, but she said nothing.

“Now you want to suddenly introduce a competitor?” I continued. “A legitimate blood daughter who’s brilliant, accomplished, and has the lunar gift? You think Betty will just accept that gracefully?*

“Your sister- Owen started.

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“My sister has been waiting twenty-two years for this pack to be hers, I cut him off. “She’s ambitious without the skill to back it up, reckless without the wisdom to temper it. But she’s dangerous when she feels threatened.”

“Betty is just a bit willful. We can handle her,” Olivia said, but her voice had lost some of its certainty.

“Can you?” I challenged. “And what about Lucas Grayson? You think he’ll just stand aside while we drag his Luna into Sullivan pack politics?”

That gave them pause.

“Lucas keeps Tori under constant watch,” I said quietly. “The paternity tes! I commissioned? He knew the results before I did.”

I let out a bitter laugh. “The man has eyes everywhere, especially when it concerns his mate.

“He knows?” Olivia whispered, her hand flying to her chest.

“He’s Alpha Lucas,” I said flatly. “Of course, he knows. The man doesn’t miss anything, especially when it concerns his mate.”

The room fell silent.

Owen moved to the window, his hands clasped behind his back in that way he had when he was thinking deeply. Olivia sank into the chair beside my bed, her earlier fire dimming to something more like despair.

“So we do nothing?” Owen’s voice was hard. “We just let her remain ignorant?”

Olivia looked up at me, tears still glistening in her eyes.

“There has to be a way, William. Some middle ground where we can acknowledge her without-”

“Without what?” I challenged. “Without making her a Sullivan heir? Without giving her pack rights? Without explaining to the entire Council why the Alpha’s secret daughter suddenly appeared after twenty-two years

I shook my head. “There is no middle ground here, Mother. Either we claim her fully, with all the complications that brings, or we stay away.”

“What about...” Owen turned from the window, his expression thoughtful. What if we approached it differently? Not as claiming an heir, but as... acknowledging a connection. We could say you’re taking her on as a goddaughter. A protégée. Someone you want to mentor because of her lunar calculation abilities.”

I stared at him. “A goddaughter?”

“It’s not uncommon,” he continued, warming to the idea. “Alphas often take promising young wolves under their wing. Especially those with rare gifts. And it would give us a legitimate reason to have contact with her without raising too many questions.”

“Lucas would never allow it,” I said flatly.

“Then we go to him first,” Olivia said, sitting up straighter. “We approach Lucas directly. Alpha to Alpha. We explain the situation and ask his permission.”

“And if he refuses?”

“Then at least we tried,” she said softly. Her hand found mine again, gentle but insistent. “We can’t just do nothing. She’s your daughter. Our granddaughter. We owe it to her to at least try.”

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Chapter 187

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I looked between them-my mother’s pleading eyes, my father’s stern determination-and felt the weight of their expectations crushing down

on me once more.

“There’s a Council dinner in two days,” Owen said quietly. “Alpha Lucas will be there.”

“You want to talk to him at a formal dinner?” I asked incredulously.

“I want to create an opportunity,” Owen corrected. “Make it seem natural. And afterward, request a private meeting with Lucas to discuss about

Tori.”

“Leave it,” Owen said. “I’ll take care of it. You should rest, William. You’re still recovering.”

Then they were gone, leaving me alone with the DNA report and the impossible weight of decisions I wasn’t ready to make.

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Chapter 188

Lucas’s POV:

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The crystal chandeliers of Moonlight Hall cast their ethereal glow across the gathered wolves, their light refracting through cut glass to create patterns that mimicked moonbeams on water.

I adjusted my cufflinks and surveyed the room with the practiced eye of an Alpha who’d attended too many of these formal dinners.

Dylan Freeman stood beside me, his posture relaxed. "Another thrilling evening of political theater," he murmured, low enough that only I could

hear.

I didn't respond. My attention was caught by Charlotte Shepherd's entrance.

She looked young-yet here she was at such a crucial gathering. So William is truly grooming her as his heir, I thought, watching as her eyes darted nervously to her father's second-in-command, where to sit, how to navigate the treacherous waters of Elder Council politics.

The seating arrangement had been carefully orchestrated, as always.

Grayson Pack at the head, Freeman Pack to my right, Shepherd Pack across from us. But it was the figure approaching the Sullivan that

made Duke stir restlessly in my mind.

Owen Sullivan.

I'd heard William was ill. When I'd discovered William had secretly commissioned a DNA test with Tori, I'd been surprised-shocked, even-to

learn he was her father. I was still deliberating whether to tell Tori.

But instead of feeling joy at discovering he had a living daughter, William apparently felt nothing but shame.

The thought stirred an irritation in my chest that surprised me with its intensity. My protective instincts flared-my girl wasn't someone for them to look down upon or feel ashamed of.

Who were they to treat her existence as an inconvenience?

Duke growled his agreement. They don't deserve her.

Owen caught my eye across the room, and the look he gave me was loaded with meaning I couldn't quite decipher.

It wasn't hostile-not exactly. But it was... significant. Purposeful.

I moved to my designated place, hyperaware of Owen's continued attention

The dinner progressed through its courses with agonizing slowness. Political discussions disguised as casual conversation. Veiled threats wrapped in compliments.

The usual dance of Pack politics that I'd been performing since I was old enough to understand what it meant to be an Alpha.

"Alpha Lucas," a server appeared at my elbow, "the moon-dew fruit essence you ordered for your Luna has been prepared for pickup."

"Thank you," I said evenly, as if the server hadn't just announced to half the Elder Council that I was providing pregnancy supplements for someone. "Have it sent to my residence."

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The server bowed and retreated.

I stood, signaling that I was ready to leave.

"Alpha Lucas."

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Owen's voice stopped me at the entrance. I turned slowly.

"Mr. Owen." I kept my tone neutral. "I didn't expect to see you tonight. I hope William is well?"

"A minor indisposition." Owen's smile didn't reach his eyes. "Nothing serious, but he felt it best to rest. I'm here in his stead."

We stood there in the entrance hall, the sounds of the dinner fading behind us.

"I know about Tori Sullivan," Owen said quietly, his words precise and deliberate. "I know she's your Luna. And I know she's my granddaughter."

"That's quite a claim, I said, my voice dropping to something dangerous.

*Based on blood that doesn't lie." Owen's expression remained calm despite the weight of my power pressing against him.

He studied my face for a moment, then seemed to reach a decision. "You already know, don't you? There's no point in dancing around it. *

"So?" I kept my voice flat, dangerous. "What exactly do you want, Owen?*

“We want Tori to come home.” Owen’s words were careful, measured. “She’s William’s only living blood. His daughter. She belongs with Sullivan

Pack, with her family.”

“And then what?” My expression remained impassive. “Drag her into your Pack’s turmoil? Deny her peace?”

Owen faltered, then bristled slightly. “You think I’d bring her back just to make her suffer? Besides, with Tori as part of Sullivan Pack, our

families would be united through marriage. A strong alliance between Grayson and Sullivan—surely that benefits you as well?”

I spoke coolly, my tone indifferent. “The advantages of a political alliance are merely icing on the cake for me.”

I paused, and something warm flickered in my eyes. Compared to that, the health and safety of my Luna and child are far more important.”

“Is it?” Owen took a step closer. “She’s Sullivan blood, Lucas. She belongs with her family, with her Pack. She deserves to know where she comes from, who her father is.”

“Her father?” The laugh that escaped me was harsh. “Where was her father when she was being abused by her mother? Where was Sullivan Pack when she was locked in Silver Fang for four years? Where was this precious family when she needed them?”

Owen’s jaw tightened. “We didn’t know-

“Exactly.” I cut him off, my patience fraying. “You didn’t know. You didn’t care to know. She overcame countless obstacles on her own to get where she is today. And now you want to disrupt the peaceful life she’s finally built for herself?”

“That’s not-

‘I don’t care what it is.’ I stepped forward, letting the full weight of my Alpha presence fill the space. “Tori is under my protection. Not Sullivan

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Pack politics. Not blood ties that were ignored for twenty-two years. Not whatever alliance or advantage you think claiming her will bring.”

*Sullivan Pack didn’t want her twenty-two years ago. You have no right to disturb her now.”

I continued, “You should know what your family situation is like. Tori is young, her heart is pure. She’s not suited to navigate Sullivan Pack’s political games and schemes. So from now on, I’d appreciate it if Sullivan Pack keeps their distance from my Luna.”

My tone sounded conversational, almost casual. But the danger beneath my words was unmistakable.

Without waiting for his response, I turned and walked toward my car, leaving Owen standing alone in the night wind, his face flushed with

frustration and indignation.

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Claimed by the Alpha’s Love

Chapter 189

Tori’s POV:

The grandfather clock in Lucas’s study chimed three times as I heard his car pull into the driveway.

I'd been waiting in the main estate's guest room, trying to read the same page of a pregnancy guide for the past hour.

My lower back had been aching since dinner, a dull throb that made it impossible to find a comfortable position.

Tracy stirred restlessly in my mind, equally uncomfortable with the changes our body was undergoing.

He's home, she murmured, relief evident in her tone.

The door opened quietly, and Lucas appeared, still in his formal dinner attire from the Elder Council meeting.

His hair was slightly disheveled, and there was a tension in his shoulders that hadn't been there this morning.

"You're still awake," he said softly, crossing the room to where I sat propped against the headboard. His eyes swept over me with that careful

assessment I'd grown accustomed to-checking for any sign of discomfort or distress.

"Couldn't sleep," I admitted. "My back has been bothering me."

Lucas's expression shifted immediately from tired to concerned. He shrugged off his jacket, draping it over a chair, and rolled up his sleeves.

"Turn around."

I shifted carefully, presenting my back to him. His hands settled on my shoulders, warm and steady, before beginning a slow, methodical

massage down my spine.

"How was the dinner?" I asked, trying to keep my voice casual even as his skilled fingers found a particularly tight knot.

"Political theater, as always." His tone was deliberately light, but I could hear the edge beneath it. "Nothing you need to worry about."

His hands moved lower, applying gentle pressure to my lower back. The relief was immediate and profound. I couldn't help the small sound of contentment that escaped me.

"That bad?" I murmured, my eyes drifting closed.

“Dylan made his usual inappropriate jokes. Charlotte Shepherd looked like a nervous rabbit. The food was acceptable.” His thumbs worked in circular motions along my spine. “The company was tedious.”

I smiled slightly.

Lucas had a way of dismissing the complex politics of Pack leadership with a few dry observations.

“You’re worried about something,” I said quietly.

His hands stilled for a moment before resuming their massage. “I’m always worried about something. It’s an occupational hazard of being an Alpha.”

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“Lucas.”

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He sighed, his breath warm against the back of my neck. “Nothing that cant wait until morning. Right now, I’m more concerned about you and our pup.

Our pup. The words still sent a thrill through me every time he said them Ten weeks pregnant, and it still felt surreal.

“The ache is better,” I told him, leaning back slightly into his touch. “Thank you.”

“You should have called me if you were uncomfortable. His voice held a note of reproach. “I would have come back earlier.”

“You had important Pack business.”

“You and our child are more important than any Pack business.” He said it with such absolute certainty that my chest tightened. “Always.”

His arms came around me, pulling me back against his chest. I could feel his heartbeat, steady and strong, and the familiar scent of him-pine and winter frost-wrapped around me like a blanket.

“How are you feeling otherwise?” he asked, his lips brushing my temple.

“Tired. A little queasy in the mornings still. But Martha’s ginger tea helps. I paused, then added, “I have a checkup at Moontouch Medical Center tomorrow afternoon.”

I’ll take you.”

I nodded, too exhausted to argue. The warmth of his embrace and the steady rhythm of his heartbeat were already pulling me under.

I burrowed deeper into his arms, letting his familiar scent-pine and winter frost-wrap around me like a blanket.

*Sleep, little wolf,” he murmured against my hair, his hand moving in slow soothing circles on my back.

Within moments, I was drifting, the ache in my lower back finally easing as I sank into the comfort of his presence.

The next morning, Lucas drove me to Moontouch Medical Center for my checkup.

The building gleamed in the sunlight, all glass and steel designed to catch and reflect the moon’s phases even during the day.

‘I’ll go take care of the payment,” Lucas said after we checked in, pressing kiss to my forehead. “Wait here. I won’t be long.”

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I nodded and settled into one of the plush waiting room chairs, idly flipping through a magazine about wolf pup development. The medical

center was quiet this morning, with only a few other patients scattered throughout the lobby.

“Tori?”

I looked up to find Susan Shepherd seated in a wheelchair beside me, a small pharmacy bag resting in her lap. She looked elegant as always, her dark hair pulled back in a simple style, though there was a weariness around her eyes that spoke of old sorrows.

Alarm shot through me as I quickly stood. “Ms. Shepherd, are you alright? Are you ill?”

“Oh, no, nothing like that.” Susan’s smile faltered for a moment, surprise flickering across her features at my concern.

Then something shifted in her expression—a softening, a warmth that seemed to catch her off guard.

She gestured to the pharmacy bag. “I’m just here picking up some burn ointment for Charlotte.”

Relief washed over me. “Thank God you’re alright.”

There was a brief pause, and Susan seemed to be studying me with an odd expression. Her hands fidgeted slightly with the pharmacy bag in her lap.

Finally, she seemed to come to a decision.

“Tori,” she began, her voice softer now, almost hesitant, “You see, I’m having a personal art exhibition soon.” She paused, her gaze searching my face as if looking for something. “I would be glad if you would attend. It’s next Friday evening at the Moonlight Gallery.”

My eyes widened in surprise and delight. ‘Really? I-I would love to! I don’t know much about art, but I’d be honored to come.’”

I’d sensed a certain distance in Susan during our previous encounters—a careful reserve that kept people at arm’s length. I liked her, admired her quiet strength, but I’d assumed that wall would always be there. To receive a personal invitation from her felt unexpectedly special.

“Great,” Susan’s smile grew warmer.

But before I could analyze it further, she glanced at her watch.

“I should go—Charlotte will be wondering what’s taking so long.”

She left before I could respond, and I stood there feeling oddly touched.

‘Ready?’”

I turned to find Lucas approaching, his expression neutral but his eyes sharp. He must have seen Susan leaving.

“All set,” I said, unable to contain my smile. “You’ll never guess who I just ran into.”

His hand settled on the small of my back as he guided me toward the exit Susan Shepherd.”

“How did you—” I shook my head. “Of course you saw. Lucas, she invited me to her art exhibition! Next Friday at the Moonlight Gallery. Isn’t

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that wonderful?”

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Something flickered across his face—so quickly I almost missed it.

“That’s great.” He answered absentmindedly.

The drive back to the estate was quiet. Lucas’s jaw was set, his eyes fixed on the road with unusual intensity. Through our bond, I could feel a complex tangle of emotions.

When we pulled through the estate gates, he helped me out of the car with his usual attentiveness.

Inside, he guided me to the living room and sat beside me on the couch, his hand finding mine. “Tori,” he said carefully, “how do you feel about

Susan Shepherd?”

The question surprised me. “I... I like her. She seems kind. Sad, but kind.

I paused, trying to articulate the feeling that had been nagging at me since our brief encounter. “There’s something about her that feels... I

don’t know how to explain it. Familiar? Like there’s some kind of connection, even though we barely know each other.”

Lucas’s expression tightened almost imperceptibly. His thumb traced patterns on my hand, a gesture I’d learned meant he was thinking

carefully about his words.

“Lucas?” I said softly, a thread of worry creeping into my voice. His reaction was making me nervous. “Is something wrong? Do you not want

me to go to the exhibition?”

“It’s not that.” He was silent for a long moment, his blue eyes studying my face with an intensity that made my heart race. “Tori, I need you to

know something.”

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