

Claimed by the Alpha's Love - Love Demands Real Courage Author: Michael Anderson 201

Chapter 201

Tori's POV:

Lucas and I returned from the hospital in comfortable silence, his hand never leaving mine during the drive back to our residence.

Once home, he guided me upstairs with gentle hands, and we found solace in each other's arms—a wordless reassurance that whatever complications lay ahead, we would face them together.

Afterward, as I lay against his chest listening to his steady heartbeat, I should have felt at peace.

But I didn't.

77%1

The Luna ceremony was close. Every time I closed my eyes, I saw myself standing before the entire Grayson Pack, hundreds of eyes judging whether an Omega with my past was worthy of being their Luna.

Lucas seemed to sense the anxiety building in me even before I fully acknowledged it myself.

He didn't push me to talk about it, didn't demand explanations for the moments when I'd drift away mid-conversation, my mind spinning through worst-case scenarios.

Instead, he simply... stayed.

The next afternoon, Morgan's cheerful voice echoed through the residence before she'd even fully entered.

"Tori! I brought sustenance for the pregnant Luna-to-be!"

I looked up from the book on wolf pack dynamics I'd been studying—determined to be the best Luna I could be—as Morgan breezed into the

living room.

She carried an enormous basket overflowing with flowers and what smelled like her mother's famous chicken soup.

“Morgan?” I blinked in surprise, setting the book aside. “What are you doing here? Don’t you have classes today?”

“Called in sick,” she said cheerfully, completely unapologetic. “A certain Altha was worried his Luna might anxiety herself into an early grave before the ceremony, so he asked me to come provide some much-needed distraction and moral support.”

Heat flooded my cheeks. “Lucas sent you?”

“Who else?” Morgan grinned, setting the basket on the coffee table. “He called me this morning, all serious Alpha voice, saying-and I quote – Morgan, Tori needs a friend today. Can you be with her? Like I wouldn’t drop everything for my best friend anyway.”

I pressed my hands to my burning face. “I can’t believe he did that.”

“I can.” Morgan plopped down beside me, already unpacking the basket. “The man is completely gone for you. It’s actually kind of adorable, in a

terrifying Alpha sort of way.”

The afternoon drifted by in a haze of warmth and laughter, the kind I’d dreamed of during those long, lonely years in Silver Fang.

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Morgan’s presence was like sunshine, bright and uncomplicated, chasing away the shadows that had been clinging to me since the hospital

encounter with Susan.

As evening fell and Morgan was gathering her things to leave, Martha appeared in the doorway with a carefully wrapped package.

“Miss Tori, this arrived for you earlier,” she said gently, her knowing eyes soft with understanding.

My heart stuttered when I saw the return label-Susan Shepherd’s studio dress.

I carefully unwrapped the package. Inside was a painting, and my breath caught in my throat.

It was me-in the wedding dress from that day at the boutique. But this wasn't the photograph Susan had taken.

This was painted, every brushstroke filled with such tenderness and care that tears immediately blurred my vision. The way she'd captured the light on the fabric, the uncertain hope in my expression, the delicate flowers in my hair-it was beautiful in a way that made my chest ache.

A letter was tucked beneath the frame. My hands trembled as I unfolded it

Dear Tori,

I owe you an apology for my behavior that day. For one moment, seeing you that dress, I forgot myself and saw someone else-my little girl, I lost long ago. That wasn't fair to you, and I'm deeply sorry for any distress I caused.

I wanted to paint this for you properly, the way you deserve to be seen.

I hope this ceremony brings you all the happiness you deserve. May you be the happiest Luna Moonhaven has ever known.

With sincere wishes,

Susan Shepherd

I finished reading the letter with tears streaming down my face, the careful script blurring before my eyes.

If only I could be her daughter, I thought, the wish rising unbidden from somewhere deep in my chest.

I carefully lifted the painting, holding it up to catch the lamplight.

The girl in the wedding dress looked back at me with hope in her silver eyes-hope that maybe, just maybe, she could become someone worthy

of being loved.

Thank you, I whispered to the painted image, to Susan wherever she was, the universe that had brought such unexpected kindness into my

life. Thank you for seeing me.

The evening before the Luna ceremony arrived faster than I'd expected, bringing with it a tradition I hadn't known existed.

“The future Luna and her Alpha aren’t supposed to see each other the night before the ceremony,” Elizabeth explained when she’d called earlier. ‘It’s considered bad luck. Old superstition.”

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So Lucas had reluctantly agreed to spend the night at the main Grayson estate with his family, while I remained at our private residence with

Morgan and Martha for company

Except I couldn’t sleep.

I’d tried everything-warm milk, lavender oil, counting backwards from a thousand in multiples of seven.

Nothing worked.

I hadn’t realized when it had happened-when Lucas’s presence had become more of a necessity. When the sound of his breathing had

transformed from something that kept me awake to something I needed to fall asleep. When his scent had stopped being overwhelming and

started being... home.

The bed felt too big without him. Too cold. Too empty.

I rolled over for what felt like the hundredth time, punching the pillow into a different shape as if that would somehow make a difference.

I was lying in bed, staring at the ceiling and trying to calm my racing heart, when I heard it-a soft thump against the window.

I sat up, heart leaping into my throat. Another thump, followed by what sounded suspiciously like a muttered curse.

Moving to the window, I pulled back the curtain and nearly laughed at what I saw

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Tori's POV

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Lucas stood in the garden below, dressed in dark clothes, his hair gleaming in the moonlight. He'd clearly been throwing pebbles at my window

like some character from a romantic movie.

When he saw me, he grinned, transformed his usually stern features into something breathtaking.

I opened the window, leaning out. "What are you doing?" I whispered loudly. "You're supposed to be at the estate!"

“I couldn’t stay away,” he called back, not bothering to lower his voice.

“Lucas, the tradition-”

“To hell with tradition.” His eyes glowed silver in the darkness, his Alpha mature close to the surface. “I need to see you.”

My heart hammered against my ribs.

Part of me knew I should send him away. The ceremony was sacred, the separation meant to test our bond before the final commitment.

But another part of me, the part that had been aching since he left the estate, desperately wanted him here.

“Tori.” His voice dropped lower, intimate despite the distance between us. Either you let me in right now, or I’m spending the night down here.

Your choice.”

I could picture him perfectly-arms crossed, jaw set in that stubborn line come to know so well.

He wasn’t bluffing.

“You’re impossible,” I whispered, but my hands were already moving to unlatch the window.

He was inside in seconds, moving with that fluid grace that marked him as Alpha. The moonlight caught the silver in his hair as he crossed to

me, and then his arms were around me, pulling me close.

“Better,” he murmured against my hair, breathing in my scent. “Much better.”

I should have protested more. Should have reminded him about Elder Council expectations and proper ceremony protocols. Instead, I melted into his embrace, letting his warmth chase away the lonely chill that had settled over me.

“Just for tonight,” I said softly. “Then you follow tradition.”

“Whatever you want, Luna.” His lips brushed my temple. “As long as I’m with you.”

We settled onto the bed, and he wrapped himself around me like a shield. His heartbeat was steady beneath my ear, his presence solid and real.

“Sleep,” he commanded gently, his Alpha voice washing over me like a war tide. ‘I’ve got you.’”

And I did. Deeply, dreamlessly, better than I had in years.

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“Tori! Wake up! We need to start getting you ready—we’re running out of time!”

Morgan’s voice pulled me from sleep. I sat up, disoriented, to find her busting around the room, laying out makeup brushes and hair

accessories on the vanity.

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“Come on, sleepyhead! We’ve only got four hours, and Sarah said the stylist, needs at least two just for your hair. She turned to me with an

excited grin. “Can you believe it? Today’s the day!”

I looked around groggily. The bed beside me was empty, the sheets cool to the touch.

For a moment, I wondered if I’d dreamed the whole thing.

Then I saw it—a small stone on the nightstand, its surface catching the morning light. The same stone Lucas had thrown at my window last

night.

I reached for it, my fingers closing around the cool surface. His warmth was gone, his scent already faded from the room. But the stone was

real, solid proof in my palm.

He’d really been here.

“Tori? You okay?” Morgan paused, noticing my distraction.

“Yeah.” I slipped the stone into my pocket, feeling its weight settle against my hip.
“Just... nervous, I guess.”

“That’s totally normal!” She bounded over and pulled me to my feet. “But trust me, once you see yourself all done up, you’re going to feel like

the Luna you were meant to be. Now come on-bathroom, now!”

As she dragged me toward the bathroom, chattering about the schedule for the day, I kept one hand in my pocket, fingers wrapped around the

stone.

By the time Morgan and the stylist finished with me, it was already noon.

My hair had been swept into an elegant updo, silver pins catching the light like stars. The dress-a flowing creation of ivory silk that seemed to

shimmer with every movement-fit perfectly.

“Ready?” Morgan appeared at my door, her eyes bright with emotion. “The car’s waiting.”

The drive to the ceremony grounds felt both endless and far too short. When we finally arrived, I stepped out of the car and froze.

The venue was breathtaking.

White silk canopies billowed in the gentle breeze, strung with thousands of tiny lights that would glow like fireflies once evening fell.

Moonflowers lined the aisle in silver urns. An arch of twisted willow branches stood at the altar, woven through with more lights and trailing

vines.

It looked exactly like the wedding I’d dreamed of as a girl. Down to the smallest detail.

Lucas.

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“Tori?” Morgan touched my arm gently. “Everyone’s waiting.

I nodded, unable to speak past the tightness in my throat.

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The grounds were already filled with guests-Alphas and Lunas from packs across the region, dressed in their finest. I recognized several members of the Elder Council, their presence lending weight and legitimacy to the ceremony.

But my attention caught on the faces that mattered most.

Grandma Eileen sat in the front row, Janet beside her, both dabbing at their eyes. Anna bounced excitedly in her seat, waving when she spotted

1.

And then I saw him.

Ethan.

He stood off to the side, away from the main gathering but clearly present. He looked just as I remembered from that first day at Moonridge.

High-clean-cut, composed, that gentle smile on his face.

Our eyes met across the distance, and he gave me a small nod.

No bitterness. No regret. Just genuine happiness for me.

Something in my chest loosened. Whatever had happened between us, whatever pain the past had held, he’d let it go. He was here to witness

my happiness, nothing more.

“It’s time, Morgan whispered.

The music began a haunting melody played on strings that seemed to echo through the trees. The guests rose to their feet.

And there, at the end of the aisle, stood Lucas.

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Tori's POV:

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Lucas wore traditional ceremonial robes in deep charcoal, embroidered with silver thread that traced the ancient patterns of the Grayson Pack.

His eyes were fixed on me with an intensity that made my knees weak.

Breathe, I reminded myself. Just breathe.

The officiant, an elder wolf with pure white fur in his wolf form, stepped rward. His voice carried across the grounds, rich with ceremony and

tradition.

“We gather under the moon’s blessing to witness the sacred union of Alpha Lucas Grayson and Tori Sullivan. By ancient rite and pack law, we

honor the bond between Alpha and Luna, leader and heart.”

Our eyes met. In that moment, the world narrowed to just us.

“Who presents this woman to be joined with this Alpha?” the elder asked.

Grandma Eileen stepped forward, her hand resting on my shoulder. When she spoke, her voice trembled but held firm.

“I do. Eileen Sullivan, grandmother and guardian, presents Tori to the Grayson Pack.

A murmur still rippled through the crowd at that—curious, speculative whispers about why no parents stood with me.

“...no family to speak of...”

“...that Omega who killed the Morris boy...”

“...Elder Council cleared her, but still...”

Once, those words would have shattered

and disappear.

1. Once, I would have felt each whisper like a physical blow, would have wanted to shrink into myself

But not now.

”

Grandma heard them, too. Her grip tightened on my shoulder.

She leaned close, her weathered hand cupping my cheek as she whispered words meant only for me. “You’ve chosen your path, my darling girl.

So cover your ears to the noise, and walk forward with your head high.”

Tears blurred my vision as she pressed a kiss to my forehead, then gently guided my hand fully into Lucas’s.

“Be happy,” she whispered one last time, before stepping back.

Lucas’s fingers closed around mine, warm and strong.

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He pulled me closer, until we stood face to face beneath the willow arch. The elder began the traditional words, but I barely heard them.

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All my focus was on Lucas, on the way he looked at me like I was the only person in the world.

Then he lifted the microphone, and the ceremonial words paused.

Before we continue, Lucas said, his voice carrying across the grounds with Alpha authority, “there’s something I need to say.”

Confusion flickered through me. This wasn’t part of the traditional ceremony.

Lucas’s eyes never left mine as he spoke, but his words were clearly meant for everyone present.

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“My Luna,” he began, and my heart stuttered at the possessive warmth in those two words. “Five years ago, you faced an injustice that should never have happened. You were accused, condemned, and exiled-and I did nothing.”

The crowd went silent. Even the breeze seemed to still.

“I stood by,” Lucas continued, his voice roughening with emotion. “I let prejudice blind me to the truth. I let an innocent Omega suffer because I believed the lies society told me about your rank, your worth.”

His hand tightened on mine, and I saw the flash of pain in his eyes.

“That was the greatest mistake of my thirty-two years. And I’m sorry, Tori I’m so deeply, profoundly sorry for not being the Alpha you deserved

back then.”

Tears blurred my vision.

“I can’t change the past,” he said softly, though the microphone carried his words to every corner of the grounds. “But I swear to you, before the moon and these witnesses, that I will spend the rest of my life making up for it. I will protect you. I will cherish you. I will honor the strength and courage that brought you through those dark years.”

His free hand came up to cup my face, his thumb brushing away a tear that had escaped.

“And I will protect our child with everything I am. No one will ever hurt what’s mine again.”

The possessive growl that underscored those last words sent shivers down my spine. Not from fear, but from the absolute certainty in his voice.

Around us, I heard murmurs of approval, even some snuffles from the crowd. But I couldn’t look away from Lucas to see their reactions.

“The Alpha has spoken his truth,” the elder said, approval clear in his tone “Now we continue with the true love kiss.”

But before he could proceed, a commotion erupted at the entrance,

Gasps and startled cries rippled through the crowd as security guards struggled with someone trying to force their way through. The music

faltered and died.

“Let me through! I have every right to be here! That’s my daughter!”

The voice was hoarse, ragged, barely recognizable. But something in it made my blood run cold.

The guards parted, and a figure stumbled into view.

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I didn't recognize her at first. Couldn't reconcile this... this wreck of a person with anyone I knew.

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Her clothes were filthy and torn, hanging off a frame that had grown gaun and skeletal. Her hair was matted and wild, streaked with gray. Her face was haggard, eyes sunken and wild, with the desperate look of someone who'd lost everything.

She looked like a rogue. Like a beggar.

"You!" She pointed a trembling, dirt-caked finger at me, and that's when finally recognized the voice beneath the ruin.

Hannah. My mother.

"You don't deserve this!" she shrieked, her voice cracking. "You don't deserve happiness! You don't deserve him!"

Lucas moved instantly, stepping in front of me, his body a shield. I felt Duke surge forward, a warning growl rumbling in his chest.

But Hannah wasn't deterred.

She stumbled closer, and I could smell the alcohol on her breath even from several feet away, mixed with the sour stench of unwashed skin and

desperation.

Comments

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Tori's POV:

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The woman before me bore little resemblance to the polished, calculating mother I'd known.

"Everyone back!" Hannah's voice cracked as she raised something clutched in her trembling hand—a small glass vial that caught the fairy lights strung across the garden. "Since I'm suffering, none of you will have peace either!"

My heart hammered against my ribs.

Lucas's arm tightened around my waist, and I felt Duke surge forward in his consciousness, a warning growl rumbling through Lucas's chest that made several nearby guests step back instinctively.

"Jack, Lucas murmured, his voice carrying Alpha command despite its low volume. "Get Tori to-"

"Don't you dare!" Hannah's shriek cut through the night air.

Her wild eyes fixed on me with an intensity that made my skin crawl. "She stays right where she is. Or I die right here, right now, and everyone can see what kind of despicable Omega Tori really is—one who'd let her own mother perish just to marry an Alpha!"

Her laughter erupted, sharp and unhinged, echoing across the stunned garden.

"That's right! Let them all witness it! Then she'll never wash away the blood debt, will she? Never!"

The crowd's whispers intensified, a susurrus of shock and horror that made me want to sink into the ground. I felt hundreds of eyes on me, judging, speculating—believing her twisted narrative.

This was supposed to be my moment—our moment. Lucas and I, finally united before the entire pack.

And now...

Hannah. Grandma Eileen's voice cut through the chaos as she stepped forward, her weathered face etched with pain and determination. "Please, dear. This is your daughter's most important day. Whatever grievances you have, this isn't-

"My daughter?" Hannah's laugh was sharp, brittle, edged with hysteria.

"Where was this precious daughter when her mother was being hounded by debts, so desperate I was ready to jump off a building? Where was

she then?"

My stomach dropped.

She had called me-begged me for money to pay off her debts. But I'd refused. I knew gambling debts were a bottomless pit, an endless cycle

that would devour every moonstone I'd received as compensation.

So I'd said no and blocked her number.

But hearing her say it like this, in front of everyone, made it sound like abandoned my own mother to die.

I've been living in hell!" Hannah continued, her voice rising to a fever pitch. "Hiding from debt collectors, sleeping in my car, watching

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everything I built crumble to dust. And why? Because of her!" She thrustshaking finger in my direction. Because Tori Sullivan gets to play

princess while I'm forced to the streets!"

"That's enough, Susan Shepherd's voice rang out clear and strong as she maneuvered her wheelchair forward, Charlotte immediately moving to

her side.

“Whatever your problems are, they’re not Tori’s fault. She-”

“Susan?” Hannah’s face contorted into something ugly, a twisted smile that didn’t reach her eyes. “Oh, Susan. Sweet, naive Susan. How generous

of you to defend your enemy’s daughter.”

The world seemed to stop.

Susan’s face went pale, her hands gripping the wheelchair’s armrests until her knuckles turned white. “What nonsense are you spouting?”

Hannah wiped more grime from her face, revealing the feature. “It’s me, Susan. Frost. Remember?*

She traced her fingers along her cheekbone, her jawline. “I had work done, of course, but surely you can still see the resemblance?”

The name hung in the air like a curse.

Susan’s expression shifted from anger to shock, her eyes widening as memory crashed over her. “No,” she whispered, the word barely audible.

Then louder, “No. That’s impossible. You can’t be-”

“Tori is William’s daughter,” Hannah’s-Frost’s-smile was terrible to behold. “And if you don’t believe me, we can always arrange a paternity test between Tori and William. DNA doesn’t lie, does it?”

My heart pounded so hard I thought it might burst from my chest.

Fear clawed at my throat. I could feel it building, the inevitable revelation that would shatter everything.

If I’d known it would come to this, I should have told Susan myself.

Susan’s gaze shifted between me and William, searching our faces.

Whatever she saw there-guilt, pain, confirmation-made her face crumple

“So you both knew,” she said, her voice hollow. “You already knew.*

“Tori is so fortunate, isn’t she?” Hannah’s voice dripped with false sweetness as she seized the moment. “So many people blessing her, loving her. Perhaps your daughter, resting in her grave, would be ‘happy’ for her too-

The words barely left her mouth before Susan moved.

A porcelain plate flew through the air with surprising force, striking Hannah square on the temple. The crack of impact was sickening, followed immediately by blood streaming down Hannah's face.

"You have no right!" Susan's scream was raw, primal. "No right to speak of my daughter! Never"

Hannah swayed, her hand rising to her bleeding forehead, then crumpled the ground. Lucas gestured sharply, and immediately two guards moved forward, dragging her unconscious form away.

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The silence that followed was deafening.

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I couldn't bear it-couldn't bear seeing Susan's anguish, knowing I was the cause. My feet moved before my mind caught up, carrying me

toward her.

"Susan, I'm so sorry," I whispered, reaching out to touch her hand. "I just-

My fingertips had barely grazed the back of Susan's hand when she violently wrenched away.

Then her palm swung through the air with full force.

CRACK.

The sound echoed across the garden like a gunshot.

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Tori's POV:

"Tori! Lucas's voice seemed to come from very far away.

The world tilted

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My knees buckled, vision blurring as the metallic taste of blood filled my mouth.

Strong arms caught me before I could hit the ground-Lucas, his chest rumbling with a warning growl that made the air itself vibrate.

"Everyone back!" His voice carried Alpha command, sharp and absolute.

The crowd retreated like a receding tide, their shocked whispers filling the garden.

"Mrs. Shepherd." Lucas's voice had changed-cold, formal, stripped of the respect he'd shown her before. No longer "Susan." Now she was simply "Shepherd," a title that created distance, a barrier.

"Tori is as much a victim of this deception as you are."

His arm tightened around my waist, steadying me as I struggled to remain upright. The anger in his tone was barely contained.

Susan's face was a mask of anguish, tears streaming down her cheeks-but they weren't tears of sadness. They were blood tears, the kind that came from a wolf's deepest pain, when grief and rage mixed until they became indistinguishable.

“Victim?” Her voice cracked. “She knew! You both knew!”

Through the haze of pain, I heard Susan’s voice, each word carefully enundated:

“You are the blood of a betrayer. A fraud.”

The words cut deeper than any physical blow could have.

Wild breed. Bastard child. Omega trash.

The voices from my childhood rushed back-other wolves in the pack, whispering behind their hands when they thought I couldn’t hear. The same contempt, the same disgust, now reflected in Susan’s eyes.

My hand instinctively went to my stomach, to the small life growing there Tracy stirred anxiously, sensing my distress.

Protect the pup, she urged. Relax. Calm down.

“How could you?” Susan’s voice broke on the words. “How could you and William let me believe-let me hope- She couldn’t finish, her face contorting with fresh anguish.

“I tried to tell you,’ I managed, my voice barely above a whisper. “At the hospital, I tried-

“Lies!” Susan’s hands gripped her wheelchair’s armrests so tightly her knuckles turned white. “More lies! Did you enjoy it? Watching me embrace you, care for you, while you knew what your mother had done to my family?”

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“Susan, please William stepped forward, his face ashen.

“Don’t. The single word from Susan stopped him cold. Dont you dare speak to me.”

“Good Susan’s laugh was bitter, broken. From this moment forward, you are both dead to me. Do you hear me? Both of you-stay away from

me Stay out of my sight. I never want to see either of your faces again!

She spun her wheelchair around with surprising force, Charlotte immediately moving to her side.

The crowd parted for them like water around a stone. In their wake, the whispers intensified—speculation, judgment, pity. I felt each one like a needle prick against my skin.

“Tori.” Lucas’s hand cupped my face, his thumb gently tracing the red mark Susan had left. “Look at me.”

I forced my eyes up to meet his. In their depths, I saw fury—not at me, but for me.

“I’m sorry,” I whispered. “I ruined everything.”

“No.” His voice was fierce. “You didn’t ruin anything. This—” he gestured at the chaos around us, “this was not your fault. None of it.”

But it felt like my fault. It felt like everything was my fault.

Grandma Eileen appeared at my other side, her weathered face creased with worry. “Child, we need to get you somewhere quiet. You’re pale as moonlight.”

“The ceremony—” I started.

“Almost finished,” Lucas said firmly. “You always are my Luna.”

“I just wanted...” My voice broke. “I just wanted one day. One perfect day where I could pretend I belonged somewhere.”

“You do belong.” Lucas pulled me close, his warmth seeping into my cold skin. “You belong with me. With our family.”

I leaned into him, drawing strength from his solid presence. “I want to go home,” I whispered. “Please, Lucas. I just want to go home.”

“Of course.” His voice was gentle as he bent to lift me. “Let’s get you—”

He froze.

His hands, sliding beneath my legs, came away sticky. In the dim light of the fairy lights, I watched his expression shift from concern to horror as he stared at his palm.

Blood.

My blood.

“Tori. His voice had gone very quiet, very controlled-the kind of control that meant he was barely holding himself together. “Are you in pain?”

I...” Now that he mentioned it, there had been a dull ache in my lower back for the past few minutes. I’d attributed it to stress, to standing too

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long. But now-

A warm trickle ran down my inner thigh.

No. No, no, no.

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“Matthew! Lucas’s roar cut through the night, pure Alpha command that had several remaining guests jumping.

Matthew appeared within seconds, his medical training evident in the way his eyes immediately assessed the situation. His gaze dropped to Lucas’s bloodstained hand, then to the growing dark stain on my pale blue dress.

His face went white.

“Shit.” He moved closer, his voice dropping to urgent professionalism. “Lucas, we need to get her horizontal immediately. Keep her lower body elevated-if the cord prolapses-”

“What?” I couldn’t process his words. “What’s happening?”

“Your water broke.” Matthew’s hands were already reaching for me, checking my pulse. “But there’s too much blood. We need to get you to

Moontouch Medical Center. Now.”

Lucas didn’t need to be told twice. He swept me into his arms, cradling me against his chest as he began moving toward the parking area. But

Matthew caught his arm.

“My car. The back seat is bigger-we can keep her lying down properly. It’s crucial we prevent cord prolapse.”

“Then move!” Lucas’s voice was harsh with barely controlled panic.

As they rushed me toward Matthew’s vehicle, I felt another gush of warmth between my legs. The dull ache in my back was intensifying,

spreading around to my abdomen in waves that made me gasp.

“It’s too early,” I whispered, my hand clutching at Lucas’s shirt. “Lucas, it’s too early. The baby-”

“Will be fine.” His voice was fierce, absolute. “You’re both going to be fine. Believe me.”

But even as he said it, I saw the fear in his eyes-raw and terrible and all-consuming.

The same fear that was currently tearing me apart from the inside.

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**Claimed by the Alpha's Love - Love Demands Real
Courage Author: Michael Anderson 206**

Chapter 206

Tori's POV:

📄 ,77%

Through the haze of pain, I caught glimpses of faces-Morgan's tear-streaked cheeks, Grandma Eileen's trembling hands pressed to her mouth,

Elizabeth's fierce determination as she barked orders at the staff.

But one face stood out among the chaos.

William Sullivan.

He stood frozen at the garden's edge, his usually composed features shattered into raw anguish. When his eyes met mine, I saw something I'd

never expected-a father's terror. Suddenly he was moving, his long strides eating up the distance as he followed Lucas toward the parking

area.

Tracy whimpered in the back of my mind, her usual fierce protectiveness replaced by pure panic. The pup. We have to protect the pup.

Lucas settled me into the back seat of Matthew's vehicle with infinite care, his hands trembling slightly as he arranged the white silk from my

Luna ceremony beneath my hips, elevating them just as Matthew had instructed.

The fabric-meant to symbolize purity and new beginnings-now served a far more desperate purpose.

"I've got you," Lucas murmured, his voice rough with barely contained fear

The warm trickle of amniotic fluid continued to seep from my body, soaking through the ceremonial gown and pooling beneath me. Each

contraction that rippled through my abdomen felt wrong-too early, too intense, too violent.

"Lucas." My voice came out as barely a whisper. "The baby's moving too much. Something's wrong."

His jaw clenched, golden eyes flashing with that dangerous light that meant his wolf was close to the surface. "Matthew's the best there is. He'll

Another contraction cut off his words, this one so fierce that I couldn't contain my cry. My fingers dug into Lucas's shirt, gripping the fine

fabric as if it were the only thing anchoring me to reality.

"Talk to me, Tori. Lucas's voice was gentle now, that Alpha command stripped away to reveal the man beneath-the one who'd promised to

protect me, to love me, to build a life with me. "Tell me what you're feeling.

What was I feeling? Terror. Guilt. The crushing weight of Hannah's words still echoing in my mind: You're just like me-cold, selfish, unworthy of

love.

"Hannah was right, I heard myself say, the words tumbling out before I could stop them. Tears streamed down my face, blurring my vision. "I

refused to help her. I let her end up on the streets. And now Susan- My voice broke. "She hates me. She'll always hate me. I'm losing

everyone, Lucas. Everyone who should love me just... leaves."

"Stop." The single word carried such fierce conviction that it cut through my spiral of self-recrimination.

Lucas cupped my face with both hands, forcing me to meet his gaze. "You are not your mother. You are not responsible for Hannah's choices, or

for the lies that were told before you were even born. Susan's pain is real, but it is not your fault. Do you hear me?1

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Chapter 206

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I wanted to believe him. God, how I wanted to believe him. But the look in Susan's eyes-that mixture of betrayal and grief-was seared into my

memory.

A sharp pain lanced through my lower back, and I gasped, my body arching involuntarily. Lucas immediately shifted, supporting my weight

more fully, his presence the only thing keeping me from completely falling apart.

“How much longer?’ he called to Matthew, his voice tight with barely leashed panic.

“Ten minutes,” Matthew replied, his eyes meeting Lucas’s in the rearview mirror.

“Maybe less if I can-

The sky opened up.

Rain hammered against the roof of the SUV, so sudden and violent that it felt like the heavens themselves were weeping.

Through the rain-streaked windows, I watched the world blur into an impressionist painting of lights and shadows. The storm seemed to mirror

the chaos inside me-wild, uncontrolled, devastating.

“It’s raining,” I whispered, my voice barely audible over the downpour. “Just like that night. The night they drove me to Silver Fang.”

Lucas’s arms tightened around me, and I felt him press a kiss to my temple. “This rain is different,” he murmured against my skin. “This rain is

washing away the past. Our child will be born into a new world, Tori. A world where you are loved, protected, cherished. Where no one will ever

make you feel worthless again.”

I wanted to believe him. But another contraction ripped through me, and all I could do was bury my face in Lucas’s chest and try not to

scream.

Matthew’s voice cut through my desperate thoughts.

“We’re here. Lucas, I need you to carry her straight to the emergency entrance.”

The SUV screeched to a halt under the bright lights of Moontouch Medical Center’s emergency bay.

Lucas didn't wait for the door to be opened. He kicked it wide and gathered me into his arms in one fluid motion, his body curving protectively

over mine as rain pelted down on us.

I should have been soaked within seconds, but somehow, impossibly, my Luna gown remained dry beneath his shelter.

"Alpha Lucas," a woman in surgical scrubs called out, rushing forward with a wheelchair. Her name tag read Dr. Elena Rodriguez-Head of

Obstetrics. "We need to get her inside immediately."

"Then move," Lucas snarled, his Alpha authority making even the experienced doctor flinch.

They wheeled me through automatic doors that hissed open like the jaws of some great beast.

The fluorescent lights were too bright, making me squint even as another contraction wracked my body. I could hear Lucas beside me, his footsteps keeping pace with the gurney, his hand never leaving mine.

"Tori Sullivan-Grayson, Dr. Rodriguez was saying, her voice crisp and professional as she reviewed information on a tablet. "Twenty-two years old, Omega, first pregnancy at approximately twenty-five weeks. Premature rupture of membranes with visible bleeding. We need to-"

She stopped abruptly, her eyes widening as she looked at something on the screen. "Get her to OR-3. Now. We're initiating emergency."

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Chapter 206

"What does that mean? I managed to ask, my voice thin with pain and fear. "What's wrong?"

Dr. Rodriguez's expression softened slightly as she looked down at me.

Your baby is in distress, Luna. We need to deliver now, before the moon reaches its zenith.”

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No. No, no, no. This couldn't be happening. This was supposed to be the happiest day of my life. Lucas and I were supposed to be celebrating

our union, dancing under the stars, beginning our life together. Not this. over this.

“Lucas, I gasped, my grip on his hand tightening until my knuckles went white. “I'm scared.”

He leaned down, his forehead pressing against mine, his golden eyes boring into my soul with such intensity that everything else faded away,

“I know,” he whispered. “I'm terrified too. But you are the strongest person I've ever known, Tori. You can survive this. We can survive this.”

The gurney burst through another set of doors into a surgical suite bathed in soft blue light. Medical staff swarmed around us, their movements precise and coordinated, but all I could focus on was Lucas's face, the way his jaw clenched as they tried to separate us.

“Alpha, you can't-” a nurse began.

“I'm not leaving her. Lucas's voice dropped to a dangerous growl, his Alpha aura flooding the room with such force that several of the staff

stumbled backward. ‘My mate needs me, and I will be here.’”

Comments

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Claimed by the Alpha's Love - Love Demands Real Courage Author: Michael Anderson 207

Claimed by the Alpha's Love

Chapter 207

Susan's POV:

The wheelchair felt cold beneath my trembling hands as Charlotte guided me toward the exit of the Luna ceremony venue.

My fingers had gone numb—not from the chill in the air, but from the lingering sensation of striking Tori.

I shouldn't have done it.

77%

The rational part of my mind knew that, had known it even as my palm connected with her cheek. But when it came to my daughter, rationality abandoned me.

"Mother, you need to rest," Charlotte murmured, her voice tight with concern.

She'd been watching me with those worried eyes since we left, probably noticing how my hands wouldn't stop shaking. "Let's get you home."

Home. The word felt hollow. What was home when our family had shattered the day they told me my daughter was dead?

William and I had drifted apart like two ships unmoored, and even Charlotte couldn't fill the void that Luna's loss had carved into our lives.

The driver pulled our vehicle to the entrance, rain beginning to spatter against the windshield. The storm had come from nowhere, as if the moon itself was weeping.

Charlotte helped me toward the car, but I couldn't shake the unease crawling up my spine. Something felt wrong.

My wolf stirred restlessly beneath my skin, whimpering in a way she hadn't since-

"Mrs. Shepherd, Miss Charlotte." The driver's voice cut through my spiraling thoughts as he opened the door.

The car door closed with a soft thud as Charlotte settled beside me, and the driver pulled away from the venue.

Rain began to patter against the windshield, each drop like a tiny accusation. I stared out at the blurred lights of Moonhaven, my hands still trembling in my lap.

We'd barely made it two blocks when the driver's phone rang, the sharp ring cutting through the heavy silence. He glanced at the screen, his expression shifting to one of concern.

"It's coming through the pack emergency network," he said, his hand hovering over the answer button. "Ma'am, the weather's making it difficult to handle the phone safely. May I put it on speaker?"

Charlotte nodded before I could respond. "Go ahead."

The driver accepted the call, and immediately a crisp, urgent voice filled the car's interior.

"This is from Moontouch Medical Center's blood services division. We have a critical emergency requiring immediate assistance from any pack members possessing healing blood capabilities. A young Omega is experiencing severe amniotic fluid embolism during premature labor. We're offering a substantial reward-one million moonstones-to any qualified donor who can assist immediately."

My hands clenched the armrests. An Omega in labor. Premature. Dangerous.

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Chapter 207

Just like-

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'Mother? Charlotte's hand covered mine. "Mother, what's wrong? You've gone pale."

But I barely heard her. The doctor's next words seemed to echo directly in my soul.

"The patient is a silver-eyed Omega, approximately twenty-two years old. Blood type AB negative with rare healing compatibility markers. If

anyone matching these criteria is available-

Silver eyes.

Twenty-two years old.

The numbers crashed through my mind like thunder.

"Drive," I gasped, my voice barely audible. "Drive to the hospital. Now."

"Mother, you can't be serious." Charlotte's grip on my shoulder tightened. You're not well. You need to rest, not-

"NOW!" The word tore from my throat with an Alpha's authority I hadn't used in years, startling even myself. The driver jerked into motion,

tires squealing against wet pavement.

Charlotte fell silent beside me, but I could feel her worried gaze burning into the side of my face. My hands had stopped shaking. Instead,

they'd gone rigid, fingers digging into the leather armrest hard enough to leave marks.

My mind replayed the ceremony-the moment my hand had connected with her cheek, the shock in those silver eyes, the

backward.

way

she'd stumbled

Had I caused this? Had my strike triggered something? Premature labor, complications-

No. I pushed the thought away, but it clawed back with vicious persistence

I hated what she represented. The proof of betrayal, the living reminder that my husband had loved another woman enough to create a child

with her. The daughter of that woman-that mistress who had destroyed my marriage and stolen my Luna from me.

But even as hatred churned in my gut, another emotion rose to meet it. Horror.

I didn't understand it-this inability to truly wish her harm. Perhaps it was because, despite everything, the sins of the parents shouldn't fall upon the children.

The rain intensified, matching the storm raging inside me.

I had the right blood type. The healing capabilities they needed. I could save her.

Let this be my penance, then. My blood for my Luna's sake. Perhaps if I saved this girl perhaps the Moon Goddess would see fit to let my real daughter rest easier, wherever her spirit had gone.

The hospital loomed ahead, its lights cutting through the storm like beacons.

'We're here, the driver announced unnecessarily as he pulled under the emergency entrance awning.

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Chapter 207

MOB

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I was moving before the car fully stopped, my hands gripping the wheelchair's wheels and propelling myself forward with desperate urgency. Charlotte's startled cry followed me as I rolled toward the entrance, ignoring her attempts to help.

"Mother, wait! Let me-

But I couldn't wait. My arms burned with the effort, muscles protesting after years of relying on others to push me, but I ignored the pain. I had to get inside.

The automatic doors slid open, and I stumbled into a scene of controlled chaos.

Comments

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Claimed by the Alpha's Love - Love Demands Real Courage Author: Michael Anderson 208

Chapter 208

Susan's POV:

77%

Medical staff in crisp white coats moved with purposeful urgency. The sharp scent of antiseptic mixed with the underlying musk of various wolf

scents.

A nurse looked up as I entered, her expression shifting from professional courtesy to concern.

“Ma’am, are you alright? Do you need-

“The emergency call,” I gasped, gripping the reception desk for support. Charlotte appeared at my elbow, trying to steady me, but I shook her off. “The Omega in labor. I’m here to donate. I have healing blood. I-”

The nurse’s eyes flickered to me. “Third floor, hematology wing. But you’ll need to pass the screening first. We can’t accept donations from

anyone who-”

I was already moving toward the elevators.

The elevator seemed to take an eternity. I watched the numbers climb-1...2... 3-each second stretching like taffy.

My reflection in the polished doors showed a woman I barely recognized: Iver hair disheveled, eyes wild, face pale with strain.

I looked like I had twenty-two years ago, in those dark months after they took my daughter.

The doors opened to reveal a bustling corridor.

Signs directed me toward “Emergency Blood Services,” and I followed them on autopilot.

Amniotic fluid embolism. One of the most dangerous complications of childbirth. The mortality rate was horrific, even with modern medicine. The mother’s blood pressure would drop catastrophically. The heart could fail. The lungs could fill with fluid.

And the baby-

I pushed the thought away and focused on putting one foot in front of the other.

The blood services area was organized chaos.

Several wolves sat in comfortable chairs, their arms extended as medical staff drew blood into specialized collection bags. The air hummed with

low conversation and the quiet beeping of monitoring equipment.

A woman in a white coat approached me, her name tag reading “Dr. Sarah hen, Hematology Specialist.”

“Are you here for the emergency donation?” she asked, her tone professional but kind,

I nodded, not trusting my voice.

“Excellent. We’re running the standard screening process. Blood type verification, healing capability assessment, and family relation check. It

should only take about fifteen minutes. If you’ll follow me-

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Chapter 208

76%

My arms strained as I propelled my wheelchair forward, struggling to keep pace with Dr. Chen’s brisk walk. “Please, I gasped, ‘can’t we hurry? Every second-

Mrs. Shepherd. She paused, turning to face me with professional patience I understand your concern, but this patient is already our highest priority. The entire hospital is mobilized. We’re operating at maximum speed while maintaining safety protocols.”

The screening was swift but thorough. Blood drawn, samples labeled, tests initiated. Then I was directed to wait in the corridor with other

potential donors.

I positioned my wheelchair where I could watch the treatment room doors my hands gripping the armrests until my knuckles went white.

Charlotte arrived moments later, slightly breathless. She crouched beside my wheelchair, her hand covering mine. ‘Mother, it’s going to be

alright. Don’t worry.”

I wanted to believe her.

Nearby, a cluster of potential donors had gathered, their conversation drifting over to where I sat.

“I just asked my cousin who works here,” one man was saying, his voice carrying easily in the waiting area. “He said treating amniotic fluid embolism requires massive blood transfusions-maybe a hundred thousand milliliters or more. The husband’s spending hundreds of millions

just on blood alone.”

“Damn,” a younger wolf whistled low. “Wonder who the patient’s mate is. Must be loaded.”

The young man smirked. “Patient’s probably a stunning beauty. Otherwise her mate would’ve just let nature take its course, you know?”

“What a disgusting thing to say.” A woman in a crisp business suit turned to glare at him. “So beautiful women’s lives matter but ordinary women’s don’t? Her mate is willing to spend that money because he has responsibility and integrity. Unlike some people who have empty

pockets but still judge by appearances.”

“I was just making conversation,” the young man snapped, his face reddening. “Why are you making such a big deal out of it? What’s it to you

anyway?”

“Because attitudes like yours-”

“Enough.” An older one cut them off with a sharp gesture. “We’re here to help save a life, not argue about hypotheticals.”

The tension simmered but didn’t boil over.

I barely registered their words, my attention fixed on those closed doors, willing them to open and call my name.

Minutes dragged by like hours.

Then a nurse appeared in the doorway, clipboard in hand. “When I call your name, follow me to the collection room.”

She began reading off names. One by one, donors stood and filed through the doors.

I sat straighter in my wheelchair, waiting.

More names. More people left.

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Chapter 208

Still not mine.

The waiting area gradually emptied until only a handful of us remained. Then just Charlotte and me.

The nurse finished her list and turned to leave..

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Panic surged through me. I propelled my wheelchair forward, blocking her path. "Excuse me-nurse, please. What about me?"

She looked harried, stressed. "If your name wasn't called, you need to leave. We don't have time for-

"But I'm healthy," I insisted, my voice rising. "My blood type matches. AB negative. Why wasn't I called?"

The nurse's expression hardened with impatience. "Ma'am, if you weren't selected, there's a reason. Now please-

"I need to help!" The desperation in my voice surprised even me. "Please, just check again. There must be some mistake."

She was already turning away, clearly done with the conversation, when something made her pause. Perhaps it was the tears streaming down

my face. Perhaps it was the raw anguish in my voice.

Her expression softened slightly. With a sigh, she flipped open her tablet, crolling through the screening results.

Then her face changed.

"Susan Shepherd?" she asked, her voice sharp.

I nodded.

Her frown deepened, and when she spoke again, her tone had shifted to one of stern disapproval.

"Didn't anyone tell you? Direct blood relatives cannot donate healing blood to each other. The rejection risk is fatal. Mrs. Shepherd..." She

paused, her eyes boring into mine. “Did you really come here trying to donate blood to your own daughter? Don’t you understand you could kill

her?”

The words hit me like a physical blow.

The waiting room seemed to tilt sideways. Charlotte’s gasp barely registered through the roaring in my ears.

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My daughter.

Comments

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Claimed by the Alpha's Love - Love Demands Real Courage Author: Michael Anderson 209

Chapter 209

Susan’s POV:

76%

The nurse’s words echoed in my mind, each syllable a hammer blow against my skull.

For a moment, I couldn’t process what she’d said.

My mind went blank, refusing to accept the impossible. “What... what did you say?”

Matthew had come to the blood services area to check on the donation progress. He hadn't expected to walk into this bombshell.

He strode over in a few quick steps and took the record book from the nurse's hands. After scanning it, his eyes widened in disbelief.

"Mother?" Charlotte's hand gripped my shoulder, her voice disbelief. "How could Tori possibly be your daughter? That's absurd!"

She steadied my swaying body. "Mom, don't listen to this nonsense. A blood test isn't a paternity test."

"I'm not talking nonsense. The test results clearly show a direct blood relationship between the donor and the patient." The nurse had initially

explained out of sympathy, seeing how distraught I was.

But being challenged made her defensive. "If you don't believe me, ask Dr. Howard."

Suddenly, I grabbed Matthew's arm forcefully. He turned to meet my panic filled eyes.

"Matthew, you've always been honest. I trust you. Tell me-what does the nurse mean?"

"..." Matthew fell silent for a moment, then explained from a medical perspective.

* Direct blood relatives cannot donate blood to each other, or it triggers graft-versus-host disease with an extremely high mortality rate. Blood

compatibility testing includes a specific screening for direct relatives to prevent patients from accidentally receiving blood from their parents

or children."

Matthew tried to use simple language, but the technical terminology still left me confused.

Yet I understood the core meaning: there was a direct blood relationship between Tori and me.

"That's impossible..." My face drained of all color.

I opened my mouth, gasping for air, but still felt like I was suffocating.

Matthew said, "Blood compatibility testing isn't the same as a paternity test. The accuracy isn't that high. Don't panic yet. Wait until-"

Tori? My daughter? Hannah's daughter? William's daughter?

What on earth is going on here?

"I need to see Hanna." The words tore from my throat, raw and desperate. I need to know the truth!"

Matthew sighed heavily, recognizing there would be no reasoning with me in this state. "Come on," he said quietly. "I'll take you to the surgical

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Chapter 209

waiting area. But Susan-you need to prepare yourself."

He guided my wheelchair through the corridors, Charlotte following close behind.

The scene outside the operating room was like a gathering of the city's most powerful wolves.

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Grayson Pack elders clustered near the doors, their faces grave. Sullivan Pack representatives stood in a separate group, William among them.

And there, somewhat surprisingly, were members of the Shepherd Pack leadership-including Diana, who had always shown a particular

fondness for Tori.

But I had no time to wonder about pack politics right now.

William saw me approaching and rose from his seat, his expression shifting from weary concern to panicked alarm. He took a step forward as if

to intercept me, clearly afraid I would cause another scene.

"Where is Hannah?" I demanded, my voice cutting through the low conversations.

William froze, confusion flickering across his face. "Hannah? Why would you-"

Before he could finish, the operating room doors swung open.

Lucas emerged, his face haggard with exhaustion and stress. His eyes were bloodshot, his ceremonial clothes still stained with blood and rain.

He looked like a man who'd been to hell and barely made it back.

I propelled my wheelchair forward before anyone could stop me. "Alpha Lucas-please. How is she? How is Tori?"

Lucas's gaze snapped to me, and the fury that blazed in his silver eyes made me flinch. His Alpha presence rolled out like a physical force, pressing down on everyone in the corridor.

"You dare ask about her?" His voice was low, deadly.

The accusation hung in the air. William made a choked sound. Diana gasped softly.

"If anything happens to Tori or my pup," Lucas continued, his voice dropping to a growl that raised the hair on my arms, "I will personally

ensure that Shepherd Pack suffers consequences you cannot imagine.

Consider this a declaration: as of this moment, any alliance between Grayson Pack and Shepherd Pack is severed. We are enemies."

The pronouncement sent shock waves through the assembled wolves. Elizabeth Grayson rose from her seat, her face pale. "Lucas-

"This is not a discussion, Mother." Lucas cut her off, his voice brooking no argument. His Alpha authority radiated outward, silencing any

further protest from his family.

The reaction from the assembled elders was immediate and volatile.

Owen Sullivan stepped forward, his weathered face tight with alarm. "Alpha Lucas, you cannot make such a declaration lightly. The four great packs have maintained peace and stability for generations. To sever an alliance will create chaos. The balance we've maintained-

"Lucas, please." Diana Shepherd's voice was steady despite the tremor in her hands. "We understand your anger, but-

I propelled my wheelchair forward, ignoring Charlotte's restraining hand.

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Chapter 209

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"I will accept any punishment you deem fit, Alpha Lucas. Do not implicate others. Any consequence, any retribution. I will submit to Grayson

Pack's judgment without resistance."

Lucas's gaze snapped to me, cold and assessing.

"But please, I continued, my voice breaking, tell me where Hannah Sullivan is. I know you had your people remove her from the ceremony.

"And why," Lucas said softly, dangerously, "would I grant you anything? What makes you think you deserve my cooperation after what you've

done?"

Comments

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Claimed by the Alpha's Love - Love Demands Real Courage Author: Michael Anderson 210

Chapter 210

Susan's POV:

↻ .76%

"Lucas." Matthew's voice cut through the tension. "Let her go. Let her find her answers."

Lucas's head whipped around. "Stay out of this, Matthew."

Matthew moved to stand beside my wheelchair, his golden eyes steady on his friend's face. "You're right-Tori is what matters. And having Susan here, in this state, creating this scene outside the operating room-'s not helping anyone."

Lucas's jaw clenched, a muscle ticking in his cheek.

The assembled wolves held their collective breath, waiting for his decision

Finally, Lucas's gaze shifted to Jack Green. He didn't speak, but the slight jerk of his head was unmistakable.

Jack stepped forward immediately. "Mrs. Shepherd, if you'll come with me.

Relief flooded through me so intensely that I felt dizzy.

"Thank you," I whispered.

Lucas turned his back on me, dismissing me as thoroughly as if I'd ceased to exist. He returned to his vigil by the operating room doors, his shoulders rigid with tension.

As Jack began wheeling me toward the elevator, I heard Diana's voice behind us, concern threading through her words.

"What's wrong with Susan? Why is she so desperate to find Hannah Sullivan?"

I wanted to turn back, to explain, to make them understand. But my throat had closed up, and even if I could speak, what would I say?

I just discovered the daughter I mourned for twenty-two years has been alive all this time, and I nearly killed her tonight?

Matthew's response was carefully measured. "She's probably furious about Being manipulated by Hannah at the ceremony. The more she thinks about it, the angrier she gets. She wants to confront her."

A lie. A kind lie, meant to protect me-or perhaps to protect them from auth too devastating to process right now.

Whether or not Tori was truly my daughter, revealing that information now would help no one.

If the blood test was wrong, it would be cruel false hope.

But if it was right... if Tori really was my daughter, and she didn't survive.

The pain would be unbearable.

The elevator descended, and I felt like I was falling with it, spiraling down into a darkness that had no bottom.

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10:24 Wed, Feb 25 M

Chapter 210

In a shabby rental apartment, I finally found her.

Hannah lay slumped on a worn sofa, her body still and her eyes unfocused. The apartment reeked of despair and stale air.

"Hannah! My voice came out stronger than I felt.

She recognized my voice immediately. A slow, bitter smile curved her lips as she forced her battered body to sit up.

76%

Jack pushed my wheelchair through the doorway. I knew I must have looked like hell-soaked through from the rain, my hair plastered wetly against my face and neck, water streaming down my cheeks.

I couldn't tell anymore where the rain ended and my tears began.

Seeing me in such a wretched state brought a spark of life back to Hannah's dead eyes. "Well, well. Mrs. Shepherd. To what do I owe this pleasure?"

My hands gripped the armrests so tightly my knuckles went white, nails digging into my palms hard enough to draw blood. Through the sharp pain, I forced out each word.

"Whose child is Tori? Tell me. Whose child is she really?"

Hannah went still.

Then, slowly, she began to laugh. The sound started soft but grew louder more unhinged, until she was laughing with wild abandon—a sound of triumph mixed with madness.

"You know?" she gasped between fits of laughter. "You finally know!"

She laughed until she could barely breathe, then pushed herself up from the sofa. She circled my wheelchair like a predator.

"What a pity," Hannah said, leaning close to my ear. Her voice dropped to a whisper-soft, poisonous, deliberately cruel. "You figured it out too

late."

She pulled back slightly, her lips curling into a vicious smile. "I heard the hospital broadcast. Critical condition, they said. Massive hemorrhaging."

She paused, savoring each word like a fine wine. "The medical staff were running around like headless chickens. You know what that means, don't you, Susan?"

My hands trembled on the wheelchair armrests.

"It means she's dying," Hannah continued, her voice taking on a sing-song quality that made my skin crawl. "Oh, wait—I'm wrong. She's probably already dead by now."

The words hit like physical blows. My breath caught, my vision swimming

"No," I whispered. "No, that's not-

“Not true?” Hannah straightened, her smile widening. “Why wouldn’t it be true? They say you caused all this yourself. How does it feel?”

“Stop. The word came out as a broken sob.

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Chapter 210

76%

“Why should I stop? Hannah’s voice rose, sharp and vicious. “Don’t you want the truth? You came here demanding answers. Well, here’s your answer: Tori Sullivan is your daughter, and now she’s dying.”

The confirmation-hearing it spoken aloud from Hannah’s own lips-hit me like a physical blow.

The room tilted sideways. Black spots danced across my vision.

Breathe, I commanded myself. Breathe. Don’t pass out.”

Through sheer force of will, I kept myself conscious, kept myself upright in the chair even as my body screamed to collapse.

Hannah watched my struggle with undisguised satisfaction. Her eyes glittered with cruel delight as she observed every tremor, every gasp, every

visible sign of my anguish.

“You must be so curious,” she said, her voice dripping with mock sympathy. “How did your precious baby girl end up as my daughter?”

I couldn’t answer. My throat had closed completely.

Hannah circled my wheelchair again, slower this time, savoring the moment.

“Well, since she’s dying anyway, I suppose I can be merciful. I’ll tell you everything.”

She settled back onto the sofa, arranging herself like a queen preparing to hold court.

“Where should I begin? ”

Comments

∞ 1

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Editorial board

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