

A close-up, top-down view of a person's hands holding a white ceramic cup filled with a golden-brown liquid, likely tea. The person is wearing a light-colored, textured sweater. The background is softly blurred, showing an open book with text on the pages. The overall lighting is warm and intimate, with soft shadows and highlights on the person's skin and the cup.

# KNOT YOUR EX

JADED OMEGAS PART FIVE

USA TODAY BEST SELLING AUTHOR  
**JARICA JAMES**

# **KNOT YOUR EX**

JADED OMEGAS BOOK FIVE

**JARICA JAMES**

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# BLURB

*Tori has always been terrified of commitment, can they change her mind?*

As the favored omega daughter of a narcissistic pack, I was set up with more potential alphas than I could count. My only job was to smile, be a lady, and let them claim me.

There was no way that was ever going to happen.

I'd seen how packs manipulated, lied, and cheated. I wanted no part of pack life. Being a lone omega who visits clinics during her heat and enjoys the perks of single life is enough for me.

Yet the scent match I found by accident and ran from isn't about to let me go.

And the men my sister hired to protect me from him? They're my scent matches, too.

It seems fate is no longer letting me run, but I don't know if I can let go of my defenses and truly let them in...

*This is book five in the Jaded Omegas series. Triggers tba*

# TRIGGER WARNING

This book contains mentions of childhood abuse, emotional and physical, mentions of childhood trauma including drug use, stalking, and threats of violence and mentions of SA (No on page SA)

This book is about broken characters finding love and healing in each other. It ends with a HEA.

Please only read if you feel comfortable with these topics.

## CHAPTER

# ONE

### *Tori*

The man sitting across from me was talking but I'd tuned him out after his third sexist remark.

Now I couldn't seem to stop looking at the mole on his nose.

It was right there on the middle of his face and he kept scrunching his nose with each grimace, making it stand out even more.

"Now, for a bit of housekeeping information," he droned on. "You'll be required to sign a heat waiver, meaning if we choose to replace you during your heat, you cannot retaliate. I have to put the business first, I'm sure you understand."

"Waiver or not, that's illegal, meaning it's completely unenforceable," I said, not bothering to hide the distaste in my tone. This man was a piece of work.

Why the hell did I think it was a good idea to drive down to Lancaster for a 'city job'?

"Then I think this interview is concluded, don't you?" he said, rising from his seat and glaring down at me. His voice was cold and I stood stiffly, not bothering with niceties as I headed out the door.

"I'm sure you'll be visited by the labor board, do better," I huffed and made my way out, the door banging loudly behind me as I left.

The smell of something sweet hit me and I headed for the pretzel shop next door. I deserved a treat after that awful interview.

It was my fifth in two weeks and I was no closer to making my own money. Of course, I still had the money Mom had put in my account over the years and it would last, but I wanted to do more than just live off of her funds.

That money felt tainted anyway.

Though I fucking earned it.

The thought of the deals we made and the bullshit I'd endured for them sent a wave of nausea through me.

Even the pretzel coated in butter and cinnamon and sugar couldn't chase away the bad mood.

What I needed was an escape. I pulled out my phone and opened the group chat.

Tori: Another shitty interview. Drinks tonight?

Serenity: It's wild out there. Another creep?

Tori: He had illegal offers and misogyny coming out of his pores.

Ellie: Gross. Everyone is busy tonight but Bear and I are here if you want to come over. We can order pizza and I can send him out for some drinks.

Tori: I'll grab them on my way, heading your way now.

My sour mood was starting to fall away now that I had plans. I'd get to snuggle with my sweet niece, and then I could vent to my best friends over a glass of wine.

Tossing my pretzel in the trash as I passed, I hurried to my car and got in, ready to make the half-hour drive back to Lockwood.



Honestly, I needed to stop running from Lockwood. In my mind, it was such a small town that I'd never find work there, but I had no intention of leaving.

Now that Micah and Ellie had both established themselves there, there was nowhere else I'd rather be.

Yet, I didn't have a pack waiting for me like they did, nor did I want one. I was better off on my own.

Anytime my heat hit, I could just head back to the city to ride it out in one of the facilities. The rest of the time, I could just be me—no one to answer to, no bitching to deal with, and no alphas trying to control my life.

No alphas to crash into my life and try to change my mind. Like my ex.

Thoughts of Warren had my relief fading away and turning to guilt.

Meeting my scent match a few months ago was never supposed to be the plan. I'd met him a few times on dates, and he had fallen hard and fast, but I was too guarded. He deserved better than me.

The alpha was relentless. He tried to talk to me, sending me reassuring messages, trying to find answers to why I ghosted him. He even went as far as posing as a hookup on my dating app, luring me to a date to talk to me, though that blew up in his face when I hightailed it out of that restaurant like my ass was on fire.

On the exterior, everyone saw the cute blonde who always had a sassy quip or a quick smile for anyone. But what they didn't know was that my parents had made sure I could never cut them out completely, and that broke me in ways no one could see or understand.

It felt so dramatic to say, but it was getting easier as time went on.

My therapist made sure that I understood that not all trauma was created equal, and it was okay to be frustrated. Comparing trauma was a losing game—just because someone suffered worse didn't mean I hadn't suffered at all.

Ironic since Ellie was the one who was openly the scapegoat for my parents. She was the wild child in their eyes, even though she wasn't crazy or rebellious in the slightest .

She was sweet but confident, their manipulation never worked on her.

I was the weak one letting them do what they wanted. Sure, I got spoiled to some extent. We always had more money than I knew what to do with. From a young age, I had been pampered.

But none of it meant anything—not the moment that they chased off the person I cared about, not the moment that they arranged a date with an alpha that didn't know how to take the word 'no,' not when they didn't protect me when he came knocking on my door and then climbing in my window.

A single tear tracked down my cheek, and I tried my best to shove all those feelings aside. I wanted nothing to do with self-loathing and the impending pity party. They were not healthy coping mechanisms.

Honestly, I still needed to find a new therapist here in Lockwood, but I was putting it off.

A notification dinged on my dashboard, and I started to read it, my heart sinking further—a message from Warren Avery.

Warren: Tori, please, can we just talk? I don't understand. If you just tell me what's wrong, we can work through it. You don't even know me. We could be amazing together.

“Delete,” I said out loud, the sound of the message swooshing to the trash can, the last sound before only my shaky breathing filled the car.

Deep down, I knew I was a terrible person, that I was robbing him of the only chance he'd have for a true scent match, but just because we were fated didn't mean I had to agree.

The universe may have thought we were perfect for each other, but I still had to consent. Right now, I'd rather drive this car off a cliff than pack up.

I had about twenty minutes to get my shit together, stop for the wine, and make it back to my sister's place.

With a deep breath, I turned on my favorite heavy metal playlist, screaming along until my emotions were handled.

By the time I pulled up outside of Ellie's place, my throat was a little scratchy, but I no longer felt like I was going to drown in the bullshit causing tidal waves in my head.

Ellie was on the porch rocking in the swing as she waited for me. I knew that's exactly what she was doing, she didn't just sit out here for fun.

If she was needing a moment to breathe, I'd find her in her greenhouse.

"I could tell in those texts that something was wrong," she said, pausing the swing long enough for me to sit down. I sat my bags down and flopped down next to her before she kicked off again. I let my head fall back and the breeze wash over me.

"I'm just getting frustrated. I keep going for these shitty entry-level jobs. I should have finished my degree like you did. There was so much more I should have done, and now here I am, floundering to make it in the real fucking world. If it wasn't for our father's tainted money, then I'd be fucked."

"You are way too hard on yourself," she said as she wrapped her hand around mine, giving it a quick squeeze before letting go. Even with my siblings, I'd never been overly touchy. That was more her and Micah's style. I just pretended for them.

"Am I, though?" I countered. My voice was hollow and she gave me a worried glance.

"This isn't like you, Tori," she growled. I couldn't even find the words to argue. She didn't know me as well as she thought she did.

No one did.

I didn't fault them for that. We had all been really close before everyone left the house. When it was just me left in my parents' clutches, that's when it all went downhill. Fast.

My dad threatened to disown me if I didn't drop out of school, and when I did, it was date after date that he'd arranged. I wasn't just a daughter to him, I was a business deal in the end.

Ellie told me about my mom after things with Morgan had quieted down. I wasn't surprised, and now that the family was broken up, I had no reason to go back home.

Not that my father didn't try. Everyone was always trying to get a hold of me, and I was avoiding them all like the plague—everyone except the people here in this town.

Lockwood had been a sanctuary for Micah and then for Ellie, and now for me. I just wished it truly felt like I'd escaped, that I had started over fresh. All I'd managed to do so far was fail at every turn.

"Hey, it's okay," Ellie soothed, gently wiping at the tears that had started falling from my eyes. I didn't even realize I was crying. I started blinking them away and swiped angrily at my face.

"It's not," I said. "And I don't want to get just an entry-level job. I want to make something of myself. I want to do more, be more, and I don't want anyone's help doing it."

"I get it," Ellie said, "but I think you're approaching this wrong. Go finish your degree, do what you want to do, Tori. There's nothing holding you back now, nothing but you."

The conversation ended as Kat and Shaye pulled up.

Shaye was still new to the group and pretty shy around us still, but I liked having her around. She was good for Micah, and now that she'd been here and worked through some of her own demons, she fit right in.

"Don't worry, I grabbed some sparkling juice for you," I teased Shaye. Her hand went to her belly, and she smiled up at me. "Thanks, Tori. That was sweet."

“How goes the campground life?” I asked. We’d all stayed out at Camp Willow, the old campground that they’d redone for not only themselves but family gatherings. It was nice out there, even though I wasn’t really into the rustic life. Then again the home they built was anything but rustic. It was gorgeous and had one hell of a view.

“Exhausting,” she admitted. “They don’t let me help with anything now, and I’ve been pouring myself into this new game venture.”

“Details,” Ellie demanded, and they were off discussing the intricacies of designing video games and the new levels they were adding to Locked Inn, the one her mate created for her before he died.

Kat narrowed her eyes at me, clearly detecting my mood without me having to say anything. I just gave a quick shake of my head and grabbed the wine before heading inside.

Bear was walking down the stairs with the baby monitor in his hand, smiling down at it.

“Is she out?” I asked, my smile falling. He nodded, setting it on the counter.

“Sprawled out like a starfish,” he chuckled, turning the monitor my way. My chest warmed at the sight of my sweet niece sprawled out just like he said. She was perfect.

“Then I’d say you earned this wine, Papa Bear,” I teased as I went to the cabinet and grabbed out a collection of wine glasses.

Though, I grabbed one without a stem for Shaye so we didn’t risk her getting it mixed up with the others.

Everyone filed in and we started sipping our wine while Ellie and Bear handled the pizza order.

The moment the conversation stalled, Kat was looking back at me.

“So, Tori, any more stalker problems?”

“I deleted another message today,” I admitted, taking a long pull of my wine. “He’s relentless.”

“He’s your scent match,” Ellie countered. “He isn’t just going to let you go like that.”

“Does he know where you live?” Bear asked. I could see the concern already etching along his face, and I shook my head, reassuring him quickly. “No, he doesn’t, thank god. Right now, it’s just social media and the crashing of my dates, but I stopped using that app, so I’m safe for now.”

“You haven’t blocked him?” Ellie asked.

“Oh, I did on at least ten profiles now. This number is new as well but it doesn’t matter.”

“Have you ever told him that you’re just not interested? Can he just not take a hint?” Shaye questioned.

“No,” I admitted. I left the ‘I’m a coward’ unsaid. They didn’t need to know that I’d barely said a few words to my scent match after those first few dates, that I said I’d give it a shot before I simply tucked tail and ran.

It was even harder to admit that I was simply terrified, not just of commitment but of trusting another alpha in my life.

## CHAPTER

# TWO

### *Warren*

**A**nother message left on read with no reply. My jaw tensed as I started to pace. How was I going to get through to this woman when she wouldn't even give me a chance to speak?

If she just told me what I was doing wrong, then maybe I could accept her rejection.

My hand went to my chest, and I rubbed the ache that was forming there at the mere thought of being rejected. My omega hated me, and I had no idea why.

Without her, I knew there'd never be anyone else. That grapefruit and champagne scent was etched into my brain. Her green eyes and sweet laughter haunted my dreams like she was a siren.

A low growl escaped me before I realized it. The alpha inside of me unsettled at the thought of our mate—the one who wouldn't give us the time of day.

My phone rang. For a moment, hope bloomed in my chest before being squashed completely as Felix's name scrolled across the screen.

"What?" my word was an angry bark, and I could almost picture him flinching on the other side. I quickly softened it, apologizing before the damage could get worse. "I'm so sorry."

“Is it her again?” he questioned. His voice was the quiet calm that I’d grown used to. Felix and I had been brothers and best friends for a long time before he moved away on me. “Are you getting ready to head to work?”

Work... yet another rejection.

I’d gotten fired a few days ago because I couldn’t stop checking my phone and focus on the job. Everything in me was focused on the omega that wouldn’t even talk to me. I was hurt. There was no denying that. Hurt was the base feeling at all of this, but there was also worry—wondering what happened to her to make her push everyone away, especially someone that she *knew* was her mate.

“No job anymore,” I admitted, sitting down with a huff, rubbing my hand over my temple. A headache was starting to form, but then again, one had been aching at the back of my skull for days now.

“Are you serious?” he gasped. “What the hell, Warren?”

“My life is falling apart, Felix,” I said with a heavy sigh.

“Come stay with me. Maybe Lockwood is exactly what you need. The flower shop could use some extra hands on deck for a bit. I was planning to hire someone anyway. I can’t say the pay is amazing, but it’ll be something for now.”

My chest ached at his offer. I’d always been laughed at for being an emotional alpha. I wasn’t hard and crazy like some of them were, and here I was getting sappy over my best friend.

Then again, Felix was never just a friend. He was family. In fact, he was my only family for a long time. When his family took me in, it was the first time I really saw what a family should be.

Then he’d moved away.

I hated it, but he saw the storefront that they were selling and fell in love and moved. He always wanted me to come but knew I was too stubborn.

At one point in our lives, we thought we’d be a pack, but he was under the impression that it wasn’t possible. He needed



an alpha and I wasn't his, we couldn't make it work. More than one alpha happened, but not often enough to be reassuring.

I was planning to prove him wrong when Tori ran away from me. Now maybe I needed to take a few breaths, get my wits, and try again in a few weeks.

“Alright.”

“What, really?” he gasped. Clearly, he didn't believe me. Then again, I'd been more than a little difficult in the last few weeks.

He'd received more than one phone call of me freaking out over this. In my defense, I was being rejected by the one person in the world who was supposed to be mine. That would take down anyone's ego a few notches.

It was a blow I wasn't expecting either.

“Our lease is up in the apartment anyway. You may as well come join me,” he hurried before I could change my mind. “It's got one more month left, right? Do you need me to cover that rent?”

“No, I paid up last month,” I admitted.

“See, fate at work again,” he said excitedly.

“You're such a romantic,” I laughed, the sound strained even to my ears.

“Just wait and see. I'm going to let you go, close up shop early, and get your room ready. I knew my place above the shop would come in handy.”

He sounded so smug I couldn't help but laugh.

“Someday, I'll finally accept that you're always right, Felix. See you soon.”

The phone call ended, and I flopped back on my bed. I was a mess, and I knew it.

I drank way too much yesterday and I needed a good shower. I also had nothing packed.

My chest was tight at the thought of leaving. Lockwood was only an hour away, but it felt like I'd have less of a chance to meet Tori when I went.

Then again, would it change anything?

I knew the answer was no.

With a sigh, I forced myself to get up, grab fresh clothes, and head for the shower. The only issue was the moment that I closed my eyes and leaned my head back, the warm water cascading over me, all I could picture was her sweet smile, those gorgeous green eyes, and the scent of grapefruit and champagne.

My body lit up at just the memory of her. For the first time, I locked it down, shoving those thoughts away and focusing instead on Felix.

He'd always been the calm to my storm, the reason and logic to my spontaneity. We were a good duo. It would be nice to share a place with him again.

There were plenty of boxes left behind when Felix moved out, and I insisted he took most of the furniture with him since he bought it. That meant all I had to do was pack my personal things and leave.

By the time I loaded my meager possessions into the boxes, I was ready to go. Whatever I left behind could stay. They could have my security deposit as long as I could get the hell out of this town.

At least for a little while.

I knew I'd be coming back.

I'd walk to the end of the Earth for my omega, and I just prayed that one day she'd give me a chance.

## CHAPTER

# THREE

### *Tori*

**M**y heart stopped when something crashed nearby. The apartment complex wasn't huge, but I'd always felt safer surrounded by people.

I sat up in bed and strained to listen. It only took a few breaths before another loud noise crashed outside my window. Biting back a scream, I tucked myself into the space between my bed and the wall, obscuring myself from view.

Panic started to rise, clawing its way up my chest. *Fuck, this can't be happening again.* I leaned up long enough to snatch my phone and call my brother.

"Hello?" Micah's voice was clouded with sleep.

"Micah, I think somebody's breaking in."

"Shit, Tori," I could already hear Micah moving something, something crashing in the background before he muffled the phone. Whispered voices came through before he was back. "Riven and I are on the way. Call the cops, Tori."

"Okay," I whispered. He continued talking, but at this point, my voice was lost. My panic was so bad that I could barely suck in a breath, and my head was swimming. Something was scratching outside the window still and I prayed the safety locks held strong.

Eventually, I dropped the phone next to me, covering my head with my hands and trying to breathe through the panic

attack. Every single sound outside had me tensing further and the panic swelling from a small burst to a full-on storm.

It felt like hours were passing but I couldn't move.

"Please hurry, Micah," I muttered to myself as a sob escaped.

A loud banging on the door had a scream tearing from my throat.

"Tori, let us in!"

At the sound of Micah's voice, I was up and on my feet, racing across the apartment and throwing open the front door. Micah pulled me into his arms, and Riven barreled into the room.

"Why are there no cops here?" he demanded.

Riven wasn't exactly a gentle soul, and I cowered into Micah, needing his caring side right about now.

"She panicked on the phone," Micah explained, his face studying me. I didn't even have to say it, my brother knew me too well.

"The door was locked when we got here," Riven pointed out. "I'm going to go check the windows."

"Hey, Tori, I need you to breathe," Micah demanded. Look at me." I turned my eyes toward his familiar green orbs. He did exaggerated hand motions with each breath, and I followed suit, trying to let it calm me.

"You can't stay here alone anymore," he finally said after I calmed a little. "Maybe this was a bad idea."

"I'm not staying with you and your pack or Ellie and her pack," I told him stubbornly. "I'm sorry I just freaked out. It's stupid of me."

Riven stomped back into the room, a scowl on his face as he tore past us.

"I'm not seeing any of the windows messed with. They're all locked down tight. I'm going to go check outside, though."

He was gone for maybe five minutes before coming back.

“Raccoons,” he chuckled. The sound half amused, half exasperated. “They knocked over one of the trash cans outside. There’s trash everywhere. That’s probably what you heard. There’s some broken glass, too.”

“Anyone would have panicked with that sound,” Micah reassured me. “Are you sure you won’t just come back with us? We’ve got plenty of room out at the camp.”

“No, thanks,” I said. “Thanks for being here for me, guys.”

“You need a security system,” Riven said.

“I’ll look into it.”

We said a quick goodbye before they were out the door. I knew by morning Ellie would know, and I’d be hearing a lecture from her as well.

For now, I was exhausted, but I knew I’d get no sleep. Instead of heading for my bed, I grabbed my favorite fuzzy blanket from the couch and curled up, sitting with just one side lamp on, casting the room in a warm light.

It should have been cozy, but right now, it felt lonely.

Moments like this were always the ones where I questioned if I was being stupid, if I should just give in to my mates and trust fate. Then I’d have a nightmare or a rabid thought, and all that would fall away.

At some point I must have given into my exhaustion. The next thing I knew, sun was streaming in on my face and my body hurt something fierce.

A pained whimper escaped me as I stretched out my body. Falling asleep at an odd angle was a terrible plan. Then again, I hadn’t planned to sleep here at all.

My phone was still in my room and I winced when I picked it up to find the entire screen full of notifications.

I wasn’t caffeinated enough to deal with my sister and her concerns.

It would be another round of questions about why I was so nervous and that I should come stay with her. The last thing I needed was to be surrounded by a pack. That kind of dynamic left me twitchy.

Today wasn't the day for getting all dolled up to do a coffee run. Instead I threw on an oversized sweater and boots and brushed through my hair. I decided against makeup altogether.

Lockwood would just get me in my dark-circled glory. Lucky them.

The Raven's Nest was busy when I got there and I groaned as I moved to the back of the stupidly long line.

"Shit," someone cursed behind me as they stepped closer. I turned to commiserate with them until the scent hit me.

My eyes widened as I recognized the omega. He was a florist in town. We'd seen each other in passing but clearly had never gotten close enough.

He was wearing a floral bow tie and a button down shirt. He was petite, like me, fitting of his designation. The dark, fluffy hair on his head was an adorable mess of curls. His eyes were a soft blue that was calming and full of the same shock that was rocking through me.

"Tori, isn't it?" he stuttered out as his cheeks flamed.

"Yeah," I managed to whisper out. "Fuck, I need coffee for this."

He let out a nervous sound that was a mix between a laugh and a gasp of horror.

"Sorry, it was a rough night," I rushed to explain. "It's not you, Felix, it's me."

"Is this you letting me down softly?" he asked. His eyes were wide and full of desperation.

He reminded me of a baby deer and I couldn't find it in me to break his heart.

“Come on, let me buy you a coffee,” I suggested as the line moved forward. He shifted from behind me to next to me and let out a relieved breath.

It was strange, his timid outlook had me wanting to pull him closer and reassure him. The difference in reactions I had to him versus Warren, the alpha that wouldn't let me go, was insane.

Warren was an alpha. That made all the difference in the world.

“Hey, Tori!” Kat said when she spotted me. Then she winced. “You look like shit. Bad night?”

“Understatement,” I breathed out while Felix let out a startled noise at her boldness.

“Hey, Felix, the usual?”

“Yeah,” he said, eyes wide and out of his depth.

“Make it two, just add like, seventeen shots of espresso to mine,” I tacked on.

“You got it,” she snorted before hurrying off to prepare the drinks.

“She's not actually giving you seventeen shots, right?” he asked, alarmed.

“Doubt it,” I said with a huff. “If I could IV coffee today, I would.”

“What happened?” he asked. Felix seemed to be a mix of timid, but blunt. It was a strange combo and it left me reeling.

“Um, just some raccoons breaking into the cans outside my apartment last night. It kept me up,” I said quickly in a version of the truth. We had just officially met, the last thing I was going to do was spill my darkest insecurities.

That was at least third date material. And no one had made it that far yet, so I was safe.

“Here you go,” Kat said as she slid the coffees over. Before he could pay I handed her cash.

“Keep the change.”

“I knew you were my favorite Winters sibling,” she said cheerfully as she cashed it out and put the extra money in the tip jar.

“Look, I’m awkward on a good day, so I don’t know if I’m getting too ahead of myself, but I have to get back to the shop. Can we talk soon, though? Exchange numbers, maybe.”

“Yeah, we can do that,” I said, surprising myself.

Who was I and what did I do with Tori?

Even in the craziness of a busy coffee shop and finding a new scent-match, he had been so obviously startled that it kept my own at bay. It was strange, but nice.

Yet I knew how I was and I couldn’t find it in me to set him up for heartbreak.

“Come on, I’ll walk you back to the flower shop,” I offered as I headed for the door. He gave me a small, cute smile as he followed along, those pale cheeks flushing again.

He was so sweet. The timid, adorable way he reacted to me was a nice change. It made me feel like I was in control. That was something I’d never felt around any man before.

Our arms brushed against each other as we walked and a zap of heat went through me. Usually omegas didn’t scent-match, but it seemed we were breaking the rules.

“Let me see your phone?” I asked. He looked at my outstretched palm before he pulled his phone out of his pocket and placed it in my hand. I noticed a slight tremble in his fingers and I bit back the urge to wrap my fingers around his and offer reassurance.

Instead, I focused on putting my number in his phone and sending myself a text before handing it back.

“Can I take you out on a date?” he asked quietly. It took me a few seconds to come up with the words. The refusal was on the tip of my tongue but then Ellie’s face flashed in my mind.



She always told me I couldn't run forever. Maybe I was just running from the wrong kind of match.

Felix felt different and maybe giving him a chance would be worth the risk. He wasn't an alpha and wouldn't try and use me. The trust I had for alphas was nonexistent, but his doe eyes and sweet curls were already winning me over.

"This isn't a no, but can I be honest?"

"Of course," he said in a shaky voice as his shoulders hunched. The omega was preparing for the worst and I just couldn't fucking do it. But lying wasn't an option either.

"I'm terrible at this. I've had some shitty experiences with alphas and I avoid dating and packs at all costs. I'm not sure what kind of future you'd be able to have with me, but for some reason, you don't scare me as much as others do. I'm willing to try if you still want to, though."

My words came out in a quick ramble but his eyes softened with understanding when I got them out and I knew I'd made the right call.

"I say we see how it goes," he said. "Just be honest with me if you need space so I don't overthink, okay?"

"Done," I promised. "Commitment isn't something I'm up for but a date can't hurt, right?"

"Right," he agreed with a blinding smile that lit his face up. His skin was glowing in the sun and showcased the soft smattering of freckles over his nose and cheeks. "I'll text you details. I need time to plan."

"Sounds good. Have a good rest of your day, Felix," I said with a smile. He was about to speak when a rumbling engine pulled up next to us on the curb. The pickup truck was old enough the scent of exhaust filled the air and I stepped back a few paces and coughed.

"Gross," Felix muttered before the engine cut off and someone stepped up. He fanned his hand in front of his face to dissipate the stench.

“I’ll leave you to your customer...shit, I have to go.” My words cut off as Warren stepped around the truck, his eyes wide and excited.

*No. Not here. This was my safe space.*

Fuck.

I turned and ran, not stopping when Felix’s voice called out to me in surprise. There weren’t any footsteps behind me but I didn’t stop until my lungs were screaming in pain and I was covered in sweat.

Fuck. Warren had found me in Lockwood.

## CHAPTER

# FOUR

### *Felix*

“**W**hat the hell just happened?” I asked my brother as he walked up in complete shock. She couldn’t be...

“She’s the one I’ve been telling you about. What was she doing here?” he gasped. Apparently, the shock made his brain sluggish. He blinked slowly at me, mouth still gaping as he stared after her.

Tori was already out of sight and my brain was now just as broken as his.

“No, the mate who won’t give you the time of day?”

“Ouch, Felix,” he muttered. The pain in his voice was raw and vulnerable. I knew about his issues with his family in the past. That was how he ended up living with me and my parents.

That was why he’d spiraled and lost his job and I was always willing to help him out if I could. We always had each others’ backs.

“Sorry, it’s just...” Her words hit me and I knew they couldn’t be about him. Warren was just about the gentlest alpha I’d ever met. There was no way her bad experience was because of him.

Sure, he was too persistent, I’d called him on that, but the fear in her eyes as she told me that small glimpse of her past, told me this went much deeper than persistently showing up for her.

“Come upstairs,” I managed with a sigh. We’d need a better place to talk this over.

After Tori had torn off down the sidewalk more than a few residents of Lockwood were staring our way and gossiping.

“I don’t have much,” Warren admitted. “You know me, always living light.” He reached into the truck bed and handed over one suitcase while he grabbed two duffel bags.

“This is it?” I mused, raising my eyebrows. He didn’t have a pillow or blanket in the mix.

“That’s it,” he said with a shrug.

“Good thing I have a guest room with bedding,” I chuckled as I started walking inside, pausing for a moment to put a note on the door.

Warren followed me to the back hall and up the stairs to my apartment. It was bigger than it seemed with an open living room and kitchen layout, then two rooms and a bathroom. The master had a walk-in closet at least, so I had some storage.

“You made it nice up here,” Warren said as he looked around and dropped his bags on the ground. I tried to look around with fresh eyes and smiled.

He was right.

I’d finally had a place I wanted to make feel like a home. Instead of letting the walls stay bare I’d decorated them with art and random wall decor, giving it a cozy, cluttered feel.

I was *not* a minimalist.

Being able to see that I had a safe and secure home was my priority. I’d put my heart into this place, painting the walls a nice soft gray and letting the art and furniture add the color.

My armchair was a burnt orange and well worn. I’d put it in the corner with some green plants and a bookshelf.

The couch was navy blue and soft as a cloud. I’d added a slew of throw pillows in every color and design I could find, always adding new ones.

My gallery wall was a mix of cozy prints, pictures of me and Warren over the years, and random plants.

Flowers were scattered throughout the space and I replaced them as often as I needed so it was always airy and fresh in here.

None of it should have matched but it did in its own cozy, chaotic way.

“I like it,” I said. It was meant to be said in a casual way but clearly I’d failed as he gave me a soft, meaningful look.

“So, why was Tori outside the shop,” he demanded, his face going from serene to frustrated.

Shoot. Now I was going to have to admit to him that I was her mate, too. And even worse of a blow... that she hadn’t outright rejected me.

“Honestly, I just met her at the coffee shop,” I started, only then realizing I sat it down on the ledge of the front window to hand her my phone and left it there. “She walked me back here after buying me a coffee.”

He smiled softly. “I knew she was sweet. God, I wish she would give me a chance, I don’t know what the hell I did to offend her.”

“There’s more,” I said as I sat down on the sofa with a sigh.

His brows furrowed as he sat next to me, his body angled my way. My heart clenched as I started talking, knowing this wouldn’t go well.

“We’re scent matches, too. I didn’t know until I was right next to her. She was just giving me her number so we could go on a date,” I said in a quick rush.

He didn’t get angry but his broken smile was even worse.

“She’d be crazy not to like you,” he said quickly. “I’m happy for you, Felix. You deserve happiness.”

“Don’t go there. She told me that she had some bad experiences with alphas, Warren. She looked scared as she

spoke, something happened to our mate, Warren. I truly don't think it's you."

"Fuck," he cursed, rubbing at his chest absently. "Somehow that's even worse."

We both fell silent as we thought it over and my phone dinged in my pocket. My heart rate spiked at Tori's name on my screen.

It was so surreal knowing the depths of Warren's anguish over this omega, and mixing it with my own easy encounter with her.

Tori had as many layers as we did and I knew in my soul this was meant to be. Warren was my favorite person in this world and I knew if she gave him a chance, she'd see it, too.

Tori: Sorry for running... I just. Fuck, I don't know how to say it.

My chest ached for my mate and I knew I had to be up front.

Felix: I hope this doesn't ruin my own chances, but Warren and I are brothers. Not by blood but we shared a foster home. He's my person, Tori.

The bubbles popped up and disappeared so many times that bile was rising in my throat. Warren was shifting uncomfortably next to me and I was gripping my phone tight enough my knuckles were turning white.

Finally her answer came through and I felt all my hopes shatter into a million tiny pieces.

Tori: I'm sorry, Felix. I can't be what you guys need.

Not able to put it into words, I handed my phone over to Warren before I got up and stalked across my apartment to my room and closed the door behind me.

The walk-in was converted into my nest and I tucked myself into the corner of the cozy space, wrapping my favorite

blanket around myself and hugging my stuffed otter to my chest.

It was the only thing I still had from my childhood and it had seen more tears than it should.

Yet, here I was adding a few more. I snuggled into the well-loved stuffed animal and cried.

Today had been a roller coaster and I didn't have it in me to fight the feelings overwhelming me.

Tomorrow, I'd try again, figure out how to move forward and talk to her.

Warren walked in and found me, sliding down to the floor and tucking me into his side. He didn't offer words, he didn't have to, our pain was now a shared one.

His hand found mine and he held on. He'd never been scared of sharing touches and hugs, even if they were strictly platonic between us. I wish she could see that he wasn't like the other alphas she'd encountered.

"We'll figure it out," he said gently. "Fate doesn't miss."

"Omegas still have the right to reject their mates," I said miserably. "Fate can't always be right."

"Give her time," he repeated the words I'd said to him plenty of times. "We live in the same town as her. I won't have to seek her out, she'll end up running into us anyway. We'll become a part of this town she finds safe and hopefully our chances will change."

"Is that patience I hear?" I teased. Warren wasn't the patient type, he went into everything with more than a little enthusiasm.

"My omega doesn't need me to go all in just yet," he said with a sigh. "Life is about adapting and it seems we need to pivot again."

"That's what we do," I said with a solemn nod. We did it when he was kicked out and my parents took him in.

Again when he needed to be on his own at eighteen and I'd followed. We had jobs and a meager savings and we managed to make it for a while.

Then when Warren lost his job, we moved and tried again.

All of our lives we'd been hit with obstacles and made it out on top. This wouldn't be any different.

We'd survive, that's what we did.

“So, what's the plan?”



## CHAPTER

# FIVE

### *Tori*

“Tori Rose Winters!” Ellie screeched as she barreled into my apartment. She was all redheaded fury and glared up at me as she crossed her arms. “Care to tell me what the hell is going on? First you call Micah in the middle of the damn night over raccoons, and now you’re running through town. Are you having a mental breakdown?”

Her voice had softened for the last part but it didn’t really help.

“Those are not comparable,” I muttered as I closed the door behind her. She shrugged out of her coat and shook her head.

“Spill. You’re keeping shit from me. If you do, I’ll order takeout and wine.”

“Can you even drink again?”

“I’m not pregnant,” she said with an eyeroll. “Just because I said I wanted more babies didn’t mean there was a rush. Quit deflecting, brat.”

“So, you know the mate I ran from?”

I winced as she narrowed her eyes.

“You know I think you’re an idiot for that,” she said. Leave it to my sister to not hold back. Once she left that damned show, I swear she grew a spine of steel. The mates only helped build that confidence.

“I do,” I said with a sigh. “But can you blame me? Mates is an insane thing. Like here, meet this stranger and then commit to them without question...”

She didn't argue this time as she watched me flop down on the couch. When her face went from frustrated to gentle, I knew it was about to get more serious and I wanted nothing to do with it.

“Is there something you're not telling me?”

I gave her a look that said ‘I don't want to talk about this’ but she didn't relent. She squared her shoulders and shoved her hair in a messy bun, something she did anytime she was about to face something, be it emotional or physical.

“Tori. Stop running and tell me what the fuck is going on.”

“It's just my preference. Why isn't that enough for everyone?”

She raised her eyebrows at my tone. It was sharp and I didn't usually get this worked up with them. My siblings were normally the exception to every rule.

I was giving myself away without even trying.

“That is enough, Tori,” Ellie said as she shifted closer to me on the couch. I hated that her eyes were full of compassion.

Why did everyone care so damn much?

“It would be if I thought that was all there is to this. If you want to keep it to yourself, that's your right, I won't push anymore,” she said with a defeated sigh. “I just don't want you to regret this. You can take however long you need to get to know your mates, though, you don't have to jump right into bed with them.”

She was right here, begging me to let her help me solve whatever problems I had. Yet I couldn't make myself tell the secrets I'd kept to myself. The most I'd said to anyone was telling Felix I had bad experiences with alphas.

No one but me knew how deep they went.

Me and my father who didn't care.

They would, though, that was the craziest part. Micah and Ellie know our parents and how they are, they'd be horrified, but would believe me without hesitation.

"I don't want to talk about it and I don't want to defend myself anymore," I managed to say. "I have to go."

"Okay," Ellie said, giving me a quick hug and taking the hint. She gave me one last sad look before leaving.

Fuck. Now I felt like garbage. In the process of protecting myself, I was hurting my sister and pushing her away.

My phone dinged and I blinked away the tears gathering in my eyes to read the text coming in.

Felix: I'm giving you space, but I don't want you to take that like I'm not going to keep trying, Tori. We don't have to rush anything but I would really love it if you'd give me a chance. Even if it's just in text.

I could picture the anxious omega worrying over the text and how to send it. Then likely panicking after it was sent.

The tears tracked down my cheeks as I answered so he didn't have to suffer with it.

Tori: Why would you still want to try? If you haven't figured it out, I'm not pack material.

Felix: I refuse to believe that fate makes mistakes. There's a reason that we were put together in this world. I'd like to find out what that reason is.

Tori: What if I can't give Warren a chance? You said yourself that he's part of your life and you won't leave him behind.

Tori: That means we won't work either

Felix: What if you get to know me and then through me, can get to know him. I'd be the neutral ground. A slow introduction that you don't have to face alone

This sweet omega was willing to act like a shield for his alpha. It had me fighting with myself to just give in but I couldn't do it.

Tori: I'll think about it.

Felix: Thank you

Here I was being a stubborn mess and he was thanking me. My mate was definitely out of the norm.

Needing a distraction I put my phone on the charger and started making dinner. Instead of the usual quick meal I started the process of making a homemade soup. Chicken tortellini was my favorite so I set about cutting up the veggies and getting the chicken seared then cooking in the broth.

Soon the room was filled with the hearty scent of herbs and chicken though my mind was anything but quiet.

When the soup was simmering I started gathering up the garbage and slipped on my shoes to run out to the cans before dark. The last thing my frayed nerves needed was to run into the rogue raccoons who were terrorizing me the other night.

I locked the door behind me and hurried down the sidewalk. If anyone was watching I probably looked like a psycho kicking the cans first to test for wild critters before tossing the bag inside.

Once I'd made it back to my door I froze at the sight of flower petals on the ground in front of my door.

Were those there before?

No, they couldn't have been. I'd sat the bag down on the ground to lock my door. I would have seen them.

My hands shook as I unlocked my door and slipped inside and slammed it shut, locking it quickly behind me.

Footsteps in the hall had me standing and peering through the peephole. I only caught a glimpse of dark-blond hair and a long, black coat but it was enough.

Why was Warren here? How did he find where I lived so soon?

Did he think this was romantic? Things were slipping from desperate to downright creepy with him. I thought Felix and I were on the same page, that I wasn't ready.

Leave it to an alpha to not listen. It wouldn't be the first time.

Kat: SOS I have to go birthday shopping for Grant. Please tell me someone is available.

Bear: We're out, Ellie is currently asleep with Adelyn.

Serenity: I'm out to sea

Serenity: If you go get margaritas and queso without me we can't be friends

Kat: We would never

Serenity: I feel the sarcasm from here

Kat: don't act like you have no queso at those fancy coastal spots you stop

Serenity: I'm innocent

Tori: Bet. I'm in.

Shaye: Count me in too, I could use some girl time. There's too much building happening over here, my head needs a break.

Kat: You guys are the best. Meet me at Raven's nest at five? I'll drive us over to Lancaster.

That gave me an hour to get ready. At least it was a nice distraction from the alpha who couldn't take no for an answer.

Walking to my car after getting dressed had me tense all over again but thankfully, Warren was nowhere in sight. I slipped into my car and breathed a bit easier, letting my worries fall away as I drove to the coffee shop.

Kat was already waiting outside with Shaye when I parked. She held out an extra coffee cup for me.

"Thanks for saving my ass, guys. I hate shopping alone," Kat said with a heavy sigh that blew her auburn hair out of her face.

"Do you have any ideas yet?" Shaye asked as Kat started walking to her little red Ford Focus. She climbed inside before answering, waiting for us to get in, too. I slid into the front when Shaye insisted and she sat behind me.

"None. He's not exactly hard up for money and he's so freaking easy to please," Kat said. "If he really wants something he gets it for himself and honestly is just a minimalist in general."

"Then what's something he secretly wants to indulge in?" I asked, hoping we could narrow something down. Otherwise we'd be wandering around the mall for hours like we did at Christmas time.

"He gardens, fucks me like a pro, and drinks tea," she grumbled. "He's a silver fox who knows what he wants."

"We'll just browse then, and maybe something will jump out at you," Shaye said easily.

"Good plan," Kat agreed as she turned the music up. We drove toward the mall and sang along, my mood a whole lot lighter than it was before she texted.

Shopping with Kat ended up being exhausting. She was tireless and found something new to drag us to every few

minutes. Halfway through the ground floor of the two story mall and she already had some things for her and for Grant.

We were just passing a candy shop when I started to turn inside and froze. Shaye ran into me and cursed, managing to keep us both on our toes.

“What’s wrong?”

My mouth opened to answer her but the man I had zoned in on was turning, his dark coat and brown hair nearly sending me into a tailspin until I saw he was a different person.

She looked at me like I lost my mind when I sagged in relief.

“What’s going on, Tori?” she asked in a low voice. It was full of concern and I swallowed hard, not sure what to say.

Deep down I knew it wasn’t fair to think Warren was at every turn just because he’d tricked me into a date. Or that he kept messaging. But at the end of the day, his persistence had me on edge.

“I keep thinking I see my ex,” I admitted before shaking my head.

“That’s not just seeing him at a distance,” Shaye said. From the way she was narrowing her brown eyes on me, I knew she was way too perceptive.

“I’m just in my head. After the raccoon incident, I was taking trash down and came back to rose petals outside my door. It’s not Felix. I saw a man in a dark coat walking away after and he was broad with dark hair.”

“Do you think it was Warren?” She was frowning now and I had to look away from the concern in her voice. It only amped up my own internal panic.

“It could be.”

## CHAPTER

# SIX

### *Easton*

When my old buddy Ezra heard I was coming home he asked if there was anything we needed. I'd told him a bit about our plans.

Switching from military life to a civilian would be a strange transition but Theo, Jordan, and I were all ready. It was time.

What I didn't expect was for him to call me within a week with an empty apartment and a job.

So, here we were, driving across the state to settle into the smallest town I'd seen in a while. But maybe small town life was exactly what we needed to adjust.

"I'm not sure about this," Theo said as he stared intently at his phone. His dark hair had shifted forward to hide him from view, something he'd done a lot more often lately. I hated that he felt the need to be invisible now.

"What's wrong with it?" Jordan asked, clearing his throat since it had been two hours since he'd had to speak. He preferred to listen and watch, just as invisible in his own way, though it was impossible to hide his alpha stature in a crowd. He stuck out whether he wanted to or not.

"It's just... cute. This is the kind of town they write country songs about." Theo's nose wrinkled at the idea and I bit back a laugh.



“We’re safe here and we have a job,” I offered. Money was important, our meager savings wouldn’t last us long without something to supplement.

“It’s temporary,” Theo argued. It was so strange to hear him be the pessimistic one.

That was my job.

“We have a month to find the next one,” I said. “We just watch this rich princess for thirty days then we’ll find something a bit better. Even we can’t turn down that money, we could cover rent for a few months with it.

All I wanted was to buy us time to adjust to the town and life here.

“So, what do we know about this girl?” Jordan asked in his usual raspy tone. It was strange to hear his voice so hoarse, he used to be open and talkative.

We’d all changed.

I lacked trust, he lacked words, and Theo lacked his optimism.

We were a mess of a pack. Hopefully, we could get our shit together before we found our omega otherwise she’d reject us the first chance she could.

The thought had my stomach churning. We’d dedicated our lives to the country for ten years. It was time to live for us.

I just fucking wish I knew how.

“She’s got an ex that’s stalking her and her family is worried. They pooled together to hire us as security. Our apartment is next to hers and we need one of us on her door at all times. He’s left some presents outside the door.”

“How much of a threat is he? Are we talking *presents*... like serial killer trophies, or presents as in he’s trying to court her?”

“It doesn’t matter. They’re unwanted,” I answered with a shrug.

“So, what happens in a month?” Theo asked, finally putting his phone down to focus on me. The uncertainty in that gaze reminded me that I was the one who needed to have the answers.

“I’m going to put feelers out once we’re in town. Maybe we can find something new to focus on. We need a change and if all else fails, Lancaster is a small city that’s only about thirty minutes out. It’ll be fine, Theo. Trust me.”

“Okay,” he said as he let out a long breath. His brown eyes were molten-golden pools in the afternoon light. It was the first time I saw the softness in his face that used to be there.

We were about to face the unknown but I knew this was the right decision for my pack.

I just hoped this girl wasn’t a problem. We needed some time to adjust, not fight with this girl.

As I pulled into the lot of the apartment complex, I pulled out my phone to text Ezra, since he was the one arranging all this for us.

Easton: We just pulled in.

Ezra: She’s out, but the landlord is expecting you. Let me know if you guys need anything.

Easton: Thanks, Ez. We don’t know how to repay you. This is too much.

Ezra: Any friend of Stephen’s is family. We’ve got your back. You keep my omega’s sister safe and we’re even.

Easton: That we can do

An older man walked outside, a limp in his gait and a cigarette hanging from his mouth.

“You the new renters?” he asked in a harsh voice. His expression was almost a scowl but I had a feeling he was all

bark.

“We are,” I confirmed. “Do we need to sign anything?”

“Nah, they handled it for the next three months. You’ll just need it if you stay longer,” he promised with a wave of his gnarled hand. His gray hair was sticking up at odd angles and he smelled like old smoke. Despite how rough around the edges he seemed, the apartment complex and grounds were nice enough.

We’d never lived in a nice home so maybe this would be our first chance at making one.

But as Theo said... this was temporary.

“Here are the keys, quiet hours after ten, trash pickup is on Wednesdays. Need anything, there’s a packet with important numbers on the kitchen counter,” he offered before tossing the keys and turning back to the little office that was nestled between the two apartment buildings.

“Which one is ours?” Jordan asked. I held up the keys to show him the old-style motel keychain that had a silver printed 5D printed on it.

“Then let’s grab our stuff,” Theo offered as he opened the trunk and started handing out our duffel bags. Outside of that, we each had a backpack and that was it.

The furniture came with the unit and we didn’t have much outside of that. We hadn’t ever truly called anywhere home long enough to accumulate much outside of the clothes on our backs and a few extras.

“The building on the left is D,” Jordan pointed out as we reached the main door. We pushed it open and I let a sigh of relief out at how clean and quiet it was.

We made our way up to the first floor and walked through until we found our unit. Theo plucked the key from my hands and unlocked the door. His hand hovered on the knob, hesitating to push it open.

“Come on,” Jordan said. His voice had a gentle edge and he put a hand on the beta’s shoulder, encouraging him to take

that step.

Theo still didn't move and when his brown eyes turned on me they were full of panic. On instinct, I took over, pulling him back gently and pushing it open before grabbing his wrist and pulling him inside.

The breath of relief he let out reassured me that it was the right choice to make.

We all moved forward to inspect the place. It was only a one bedroom but it wouldn't be an issue for us, we were used to close quarters.

The kitchen had new appliances even if it was a bit small, there was a kitchen table already in place, and the living room was small but cozy.

"This works," Jordan said, a smile finally peeking through his stoic expression. His eyes met mine for a moment before he looked back at Theo who was dropping his bag down and looking around.

"I'll take the couch. I know whatever bed is in there isn't big enough," he offered.

"We'll see," I said. "We haven't even gone in there yet."

Theo gave me a look but pushed open a door on the far side of the room. It led to a bathroom.

"You're going to have to duck to wash your hair, Eas," he laughed before moving onto the next door.

This time, it was a bedroom, two full-sized beds pushed against the walls with a night stand between them. It wasn't ideal, but it would fit us all.

"No couch for you," Jordan said firmly. "We can share. Easton can have his own."

"That's fair," Theo said, eyeing me then the bed and nodding before choosing one and stretching out.

For the first time since we walked in, a smile spread across his face. The tension bled from my body and I turned around to head for the kitchen.

“When do we introduce ourselves to the girl?” Jordan asked as he followed me, Theo on his heels.

“Tori. We start tomorrow,” I said. “Tonight we get to settle in and adjust. I’m thinking pizza.”

“Chinese,” Theo said, giving me his best puppy-dog eyes. He looked away before I even agreed and pulled his sketchbook out of his backpack. It was no use arguing now, he’d be lost to the world until we put food in front of him.

“No use going against it,” Jordan huffed out a laugh. “I swear he’s half omega.”

“He just needs to feel taken care of once in a while,” I mumbled as we walked out. Jordan didn’t argue. Of the three of us, Theo was the most fragile. We at least were alphas, we could defend ourselves against older alphas when we needed to.

He couldn’t.

Anger sparked as I wrenched open the kitchen drawers, searching for the takeout menus. I found one next to the fridge and grabbed out the stack, flipping through them until I found what he wanted.

“Here, you call it in,” I said to Jordan, holding it out. He took my phone without complaint, knowing me biting off the poor workers’ heads on the phone wouldn’t do us any favors in this town.

“Take a breather. You did good, alpha.”

I nodded and stalked over to the couch. It was softer than it looked and a groan escaped as I shifted into a more comfortable position.

Yeah, this place would do.

Until a shrill scream broke through the silence.

CHAPTER

SEVEN

*Tori*

**M**y heart slammed in my chest as the man in a ski mask dropped the bag he was holding and ran.

Neighbors next door flew out of their apartment before looking around with wild eyes. The huge lumberjack in front was the first to recover, his eyebrows furrowing as I stared at them, my mouth still open though my scream had died out.

“What?” he demanded. His voice was rich and deep, though rough around the edges.

“He... it..” I glanced the way he’d gone and felt embarrassment color my cheeks and chest. “It’s fine.”

Reaching down, I grabbed the bag where he’d left it. But, apparently, I didn’t mask my suspicion at what was inside.

“What is it?” The lumberjack demanded. I blinked up at his obvious annoyance.

“Don’t worry about it,” I shot back, matching his tone.

“You’re obviously—” He’d stepped forward then froze, his nostrils flaring as he stared down at me.

Then it hit me.

The scent.

He smelled like juniper, pine, and sage. It was earthy and masculine, his alpha musk hitting me square in the chest.

Then the panic hit and I let out an undignified squeak and retreated into my apartment.

I half expected him to pound at the door and demand answers but their footsteps thudded away.

Slipping down to the floor I opened the bag with shaking hands.

For the sweetest omega

This time there was a box of chocolates wrapped in heart-themed tissue paper.

What the hell?

I had my doubts that *he* was coming back for me. This was nothing like his behavior before.

Which left Warren.

A sick feeling twisted in my gut. This was exactly why I avoided alphas like the plague. They didn't know how to give space or hear the word no.

Ellie's words echoed in my head, reminding me it wasn't his fault he was mated to someone who despised the entire idea of a pack, either.

Fuck, fate had done us all dirty.

Unease swirled in my stomach. I genuinely hated that I was hurting innocent people for my own issues, but wouldn't lying to them every day be worse?

My text tone rang out and I tensed as I pulled it out.

Father: I'm done with this charade, Victoria Winters. You need to come home now. Your alpha is getting restless.

I should have kept my new number to myself, but there was still that little girl inside of me that refused to believe her strong and protective daddy could be the one doing all this harm.

It didn't take deep diving into my trauma to know he was at the center of it.

Tori: He's not my alpha. I won't let him hurt me again.

Father: I know where you are, Victoria. Don't make me come there. You won't like the result.

Tori: I'm no longer a child and I haven't been for a long time. I'm happy where I am.

Lies. My mind was a bitch but she wasn't wrong. I wasn't happy here and I wouldn't be happy anywhere until I figured out how to fucking take care of myself.

I'd spent my life with maids and private cooks, tutors and privilege. Though, it never came without a price.

Right now my father was hellbent on making me pay that debt and I was doing anything I could to avoid it.

I needed a distraction and when my stomach let out a loud rumble, I clung to that and grabbed my keys, heading into town. Grocery shopping wasn't my idea of fun but it was necessary.

Now that I was living off just my savings and what Mom put into my account, I knew that I needed to get a job fast and buy cheaper things.

Reality fucking sucked and so did being an adult.

I'd barely made it into the busy store when Felix's timid voice was calling out.

"Tori," he called as gently as he could. I turned and offered him a smile, surprising myself when it was genuine.

"Hey, Felix," I said as I stepped out of the way.

"How are you holding up?"

"Listen... are you or Warren leaving things at my door?"

My voice shook and his eyes widened, the hazel depths full of concern.



“No, in fact, I roped him into helping me in the shop for the past few days. Is everything okay?”

I waved it off and put on my usual mask that hid anything real behind it.

“Yeah, I’m good, someone just probably had the wrong door. I need to...” I trailed off and gestured to the row of carts.

“Could we shop together?” he asked, biting his plump lip as he waited for the rejection. I felt my answer before it fell from my lips and I kept my inward sigh of frustration at bay. I shouldn’t be giving into him, it was dangerous and unfair to both of us.

“Sure,” I said instead of listening to my inner voice. His smile was blinding and his hazel eyes sparkled behind his black-rimmed glasses. He was honestly adorable and I loved how easy it was to be around him.

But he came with Warren. An alpha. Something that doomed him from the start.

“Is it weird that I usually start in the back? I feel like it’s easier to pick out produce if I know what I’m cooking,” he said with a crooked smile.

“Lead the way. I could use all the shopping pointers,” I admitted with a grimace. “I’m still working on this whole independence thing. Ellie said it was freeing doing all this when she left home but I stuck around longer and let me tell you... it’s not.”

“I’ve got you,” he said easily, turning his cart and heading deeper into the store. “I’ve always been a bit of a caretaker and my parents were always working, so this was my job pretty early on.”

“Did you have to cook, too?” My cheeks flushed. He was already leagues ahead of me and I was starting to feel even more intimidated.

“I did, but it was because I wanted to. They weren’t bad parents, just busy, they would have cooked but I liked being able to help in my own way. Mom changed after retirement,

she's like this now too," he admitted with a soft smile. "Do you cook?"

"No," I admitted. "My family was wealthy, we had staff to do all that. My job was grades until my father pulled me out of school."

His smile dropped at the exhaustion in my voice.

"I'm sorry, Tori, why would he do that?"

The fact there was no judgment in his voice had me talking still. We'd come to a stop outside of the frozen section and he snagged a few cold bags, handing me two and keeping two for himself.

"He had other plans for me. I was the daughter of a prominent businessman. He had contacts in every avenue of life and I was supposed to forge one for him, mates be damned."

Felix froze with his hand on a freezer door, his hazel eyes flashing with fury.

"You mean he forced you to..." he couldn't even finish but my lack of answer told him everything he needed to know.

Good. Maybe knowing I was damaged goods would make him run.

Instead, Felix abandoned the freezer and pulled me into a hug. At first I was tense, unsure how to handle this from anyone but Micah or Ellie. But as I breathed in his scent of oranges, vanilla, and cream, I felt my entire body and soul relax.

He was like a balm that soothed the angry and jagged parts of me. Felix wasn't territorial or angry, he was sweet and gentle.

"I want to give into you, Felix. But I don't know how," I whispered into his neck as I clung to his black sweater for dear life.

He didn't pull away; he simply sang low under his breath, just for me to hear. His voice held a soulful rasp that wrapped around me like armor, protecting me from the world.

In his arms, I felt precious and worthy.

More than that, I wanted to be that for him.

As he pulled away I felt cold, missing his touch. He must have seen how frayed I was because he simply abandoned his cart and put his hand in mine, pushing the one we had with his hand as he helped me shop.

Our conversation was easy from there as he told me about the best deals and how to make things stretch when I needed to. He didn't question my intelligence or call me a rich brat, he saw what I needed and gave it to me without question.

By the time my cart was full, so was my heart. It was such a simple afternoon but I felt myself leaning into his touch, seeking it out.

For once in my life, I wanted to allow myself this.

“Do you want to come over?” I asked quietly. “I'm not good at cooking but you set me up with enough to try.”

His smile was blinding again and I wanted to soak it in like the sun.

Felix was good for me and the bond forming between us was already more than I'd had with anyone else in my life outside of my siblings.

I'd never had real friends, only ones focused on clout or status. He was different. Felix saw me as a person.

“I'd love to,” he said. “I'll follow behind you.”

“Wait,” I said, turning back to the store as we walked through the doors. “You didn't get anything.”

He blushed. “I'm always ahead of schedule. One more day won't kill me.”

I laughed as I brushed a finger over his warm cheek. “You're one of those 'list' people, aren't you?”

His blush deepened again.

“I am. I've got a plan for everything.”

That only piqued my curiosity.

“Is there a list for me?” My smile was wide and it only broadened as he ducked his head. “Okay, now I need to know what’s on it.”

“Finding out your favorite things, courting you, trying to make you see that we’re not all bad,” he mumbled quietly. His hazel eyes begged me to understand and not get angry.

For a moment the flecks of gold and green in his eyes captivated me. There was so much emotion in his eyes, as if he refused to hide his feelings from the world. I admired that about him.

“I love that you cared enough to make one,” I admitted. “No one has ever given me that much thought.”

This time his eyes flashed with indignation and fury.

“They’re all idiots, Tori. You’re worthy of being loved, they’re just too blind to see it.”

His declaration was said with so much passion that my chest ached and I had to fight off the sting behind my eyes.

“Thank you,” was all I could manage to choke out but he just gave me his crooked smile and helped me load my car with the bags. He seemed to know when I needed words and when I needed some time to process.

Felix was everything I wanted in a mate, I just had to let myself have him, because he was already ready for me.

“I’ll follow you to your place, Tori,” he said as he pulled me into a hug. Just like I’d done earlier he nuzzled into my neck, his scent covering my skin and settling something within me.

“It’s not far,” I managed to get out. My voice sounded strange and breathy but he didn’t call me on it. Felix was too sweet for his own good.

He nodded and stepped back, waiting for me to climb into my own car before he was jogging down the aisle to his little black Focus. For such a bright person, he had a lot of black in his life. Yet, it only seemed to make him shine more.

A smile formed on my face when he was following me home and for the first time in a long time, I was ready for something new.

Then my phone dinged, a text coming in. I didn't think anything of it until I saw that the number wasn't one I saved.

Unknown Number: I'm here, Tori. Just open your eyes.

## CHAPTER

# EIGHT

### *Felix*

Tori was everything I could have hoped for and more. Even if she tried to hide her personality from the world, I saw it underneath it all.

She had a determination to her as we started making dinner. Her kitchen was small and I could almost picture us doing this in a packhouse together, cooking for our alphas.

A pang lanced through my chest at the thought. She'd made it clear she had issues with alphas and what little she'd given me on her past only made that idea sink in.

We might never have that.

I wasn't going to give up on that hope just yet. Already she was opening up to me and I was soaking in everything there was to know about my omega mate.

She was focused on chopping peppers and onions. Her eyes were narrowed and arms tense as she made the meticulous cuts. They were a bit too big but she didn't draw away when I stepped in behind her, leaning to one side so I could see and moving my hand over hers so we could move the knife together.

Her breath hitched as I spoke into her ear, my voice soft and soothing. This was bolder than I usually would dare to be but she drew out the protective omega in me. I wanted to hide her behind me and help her take on the world.

Right now, that meant teaching her how to cook fajitas.

“Try this, make them a bit thinner then they’ll cook a bit more evenly,” I said in a quiet husk as I showed her what I meant. Each knife slice had her breath picking up and my cock was already hardening from the proximity. The mixed scent of our slick filled the air but I refused to act on it.

Finally, I stepped back and grabbed a second cutting board. At least she had the basics here though from what I understand, that was all her sister’s mate, Dean. He’d left behind the essentials when she took over his lease.

I pulled out a skillet and started heating the pan before moving onto the next step. Cooking was such a soothing, methodical process that it had my overthinking falling away.

When I pulled out the raw chicken her nose wrinkled. She took a physical step away from me as if the chicken might cluck at her in this form.

“You don’t like touching raw meat?” I teased as I pulled it out of the package and disposed of the trash.

“Does anyone?” she asked.

“It doesn’t bother me,” I said as I started cutting the chicken into pieces and dropping it in the skillet. The meat started to sizzle already and I went to the sink. “Help me out?”

She turned on the water and tested the heat before pumping soap into my hand. I washed up and dried my hands on my apron before hurrying to the skillet and turning the chicken.

Then I was moving back to disinfect the counter as she put her perfectly cut veggies in a bowl by the stove to wait their turn.

“You cut those beautifully. I knew you were a fast learner,” I said. Her cheeks pinked from the praise and she tucked her shoulder-length, blonde hair behind her ear.

“I’m stubborn,” she laughed, underplaying her accomplishments. I had a feeling she did that a lot. Most of her success was likely tied to that family name of hers and she had never had a chance to figure out who she was without it.

The fact that I was able to give her something, even as small as learning to cook something new, had pride filling me.

“You may be, but you’re also resourceful and a quick learner,” I said as I brushed my hand over hers then turned back to the food.

She made a small sound but didn’t argue. Tori hopped onto the counter just out of reach of the stove and watched me. Something was bothering her and it wasn’t something small. There was a shift in her since we came back and her green eyes lacked the warmth that was there before we got in our cars.

“Is everything alright, sweetheart?”

Her eyes widened at the name but instead of telling me it was too much, tears filled her eyes.

“What’s wrong?” I asked as I turned the heat to low and pulled her into my arms. She clung to me, her fingers fisting into my sweater and her entire body shaking. I didn’t force her to talk or tell me what was wrong, instead I held her close and whispered reassurances in her ear.

If I could help her battle her demons I would. But if all she needed was support, I could provide that, too.

I’d be whatever she needed from me as long as she didn’t pull away.

When her sobs turned to quiet sniffles she gave me one last squeeze and pulled away. Her hair was sticking up and her eyes were shining with tears still, but she looked gorgeous.

“Don’t you dare apologize to me for that, Tori. If you need me to listen, I’ll always be here, but if you need to cry, I will hold you through it.”

“Thanks,” she whispered, the sound laced in so much more than a simple show of gratitude.

I nodded once and went back to the skillet, kicking up the heat a few notches and getting back to work. She was close enough now that I reached over and put a hand on her thigh, keeping it there as I worked.



We'd created a bubble around ourselves and I didn't want to break it.

"It's done," I finally said as I took my hand away. She jumped down from her place and started to grab out plates while I started warming tortillas. Even without words we were working perfectly together, falling into a tentative synchronicity that I didn't want to lose.

"Table?" I asked.

"How about the balcony? It's nice," she said as she went to the sliding door and pushed it open. She had two chairs and a small table out there and the sun was just starting to set.

"Perfect," I said, plating our food up and letting her add her toppings before following her out.

"Water? Soda? Wine?" she offered. There was a shyness about her now that had my chest warming. My mate was sweet under all that stubbornness.

"Whatever you're having," I said. She hurried back inside, coming back with two glasses of ice and two Sprites.

She took the first bite of her fajita and a moan slipped free. I swallowed hard and willed my cock to not pay attention but it was futile. Especially when her pink tongue slid out to lick off some sour cream from her lips.

"Sorry," she muttered but I let out a soft chuckle.

"Don't apologize. I'm glad you like it," I said as that warmth spread further in my belly. She made me feel more in a simple afternoon than I'd ever felt before.

"It's nice being able to do things," she admitted. "I've been drowning trying to do this right."

"Is there really a right or wrong way?"

She gave me an eye roll. "Definitely a wrong way. Like how I've had nearly twenty fucking interviews and all of them have bombed."

"What job are you trying to land?" I asked. Part of me wished I had more need for employees at the flower shop. I'd

hire her if I didn't think it would be too much for her. She wanted to do this for herself.

"Anything," she admitted. "I've got savings thanks to my mom but I want to be able to support myself. God, that sounds so fucking entitled and lame."

"It doesn't," I reassured her. "I love that you want to be independent and find your own way. You'll be a stronger person for it."

"Not if I end up homeless," she sighed in defeat, putting her now empty plate on the table between us and taking a sip of her soda.

"That'll never happen to you, Tori. You always have me now," I said softly, pulling her into my lap. She tensed for a moment before snuggling into me. Even though I knew she was scared and holding herself back, I seemed to be doing these things on instinct alone. At least she wasn't kicking me out for it.

"I know, but I want to do this myself."

Her easy admission that she had me, had my chest tightening. It felt like she was finally starting to give in to me.

It may not be perfect and she may not be giving Warren a chance yet, but I had no doubt in my mind that if she slowly started warming up to the idea of a pack, she might see how great we could all be together.

Warren was not the monster she seemed to think he was. In fact, it hurt my soul that she thought that way at all. Warren was my brother and I'd do anything to protect him, and he'd do the same for me.

Her idea of alphas being terrible was embedded in trauma and abuse. She had no idea what a true alpha was like. One who wasn't twisted by greed and status.

I also knew that Warren was strong enough to handle Tori pushing him away. He may be stubborn, but when I told him she needed time, he gave it to her. Maybe it was reluctant, but he did it all the same.

Yet he couldn't hold it together forever. He'd lost sleep and his job over this. Moving to Lockwood had helped in some ways, but was torture in others.

He knew she was close but he couldn't go to her. For an alpha, one that knew his mate was struggling, it was pure torment.

Warren threw himself into helping me do work in the flower shop. It was just remodeled, but I needed to make my own. He'd always been good with his hands, from building me a new counter to painting the walls with meticulous care.

I shook myself out of my head. Right now I should be focused on my mate.

“What was your degree in?” I asked, “or would it have been, rather?”

Her cheeks turned pink again, something I was quickly loving. But I also hated that she felt embarrassed by something that clearly had made her happy at one time.

“It's stupid,” she muttered.

“No, it's not. Not if you care about it.”

She met my eyes, and I tried to put everything into my gaze, telling her that I saw her, that I didn't want her to hide from me.

“It was business and hospitality,” she admitted. “I've always had this dream of running an elaborate bed and breakfast, somewhere people could come and feel cared for, escape the world around them. Maybe it was my way of knowing that I needed that escape, but it's something I've always wanted to do.”

“Until he ruined it,” I finished for her when she trailed off. Tori nodded and I saw the tears glistening in her eyes again.

“He said that he'd never have a daughter who turned into a servant,” she said bitterly.

“He sounds insufferable.”

She let out a chuckle at that. “He really is. Even my mother couldn’t stand him, but then again, we recently learned he was laying hands on her. She escaped to Lockwood for a while, tried and failed to make amends with Ellie.”

“I saw all that drama on TV with Ellie and Morgan,” I admitted. The show had made my blood boil, but when her parents were on screen they definitely took that title. Even before Tori told me all this, I hated them.

No parenting should come with strings attached.

“Yeah, Mom took Morgan in as her little pet. It was so strange. She’s still trying to get in contact with us but she couldn’t with her tagging along. The whole world turning on Morgan had humbled her a bit, but I still want nothing to do with her... or my mom, really. They can live their delusional lives together. She can be the daughter that I never could be.”

“I’m sorry your family was so terrible.”

She gave a little shrug of indifference. It seemed the pain of it still lingered on the surface, but she’d come to terms with it in some ways.

“Tell me your family at least doesn’t suck.”

“They don’t,” I admitted as a soft smile took over. She stared up at me, green eyes soaking in my expression as I spoke. “Warren is actually my foster brother. We took him in when we were still in high school. His parents were deadbeats and just disappeared one day. My dad is a lawyer and managed to get temporary custody of him. We only needed six months before he turned eighteen anyway.”

“Oh,” was all she managed to get out. Her eyes were sparkling with empathy. Even though she wanted nothing to do with alphas, she had compassion for him.

I couldn’t wait to see all the facets of her personality. I was only getting glimpses right now, but I knew there was so much more to my mate than met the eye.

I just had to figure out how to get her to realize that having a pack was not a bad thing, that Warren would be just as good for her as I am.

The three of us could be happy.

## CHAPTER

# NINE

### *Tori*

**A** loud pounding on the door woke me from a dead sleep. It was the first time I'd gotten any rest in a long time, thanks to a really good night with Felix. He hadn't even kissed me when he left, solidifying that letting him in might not be a bad idea.

Still groggy, I blinked away the fog from my eyes as I pulled myself out of bed, heading for the door. I knew I looked like a mess, but I didn't care.

In my sleep-deprived state, I didn't even think about opening the door until it was too late, and three hulking men were standing on the other side. I felt the blood drain from my face and took a step back, trying to shut the door on their faces, but the red-headed Alpha in front stuck his foot out, stopping me.

"Tori, your sister sent us," he said. His voice was gruff, and now that he was in my proximity, his scent washed over me, my heart slamming in my chest as juniper, pine, and sage swirled around me. He was my scent match.

His nostrils flared, and it only seemed to make him angrier. My hand shook as my eyes narrowed, and I tried to keep my voice steady. "You need to leave. I don't care who sent you; I don't want you here."

"I'm afraid you don't get that choice, Princess," he said, his tone like a curse. "This is strictly professional."

There was a challenge there, like he was daring me to admit that we were mates. If he wasn't going to, I wasn't going to. The last thing I needed was more complications in my life or another Alpha.

“Let me close my door before I call the police.”

“And tell them what? That your neighbor came over to talk to you?”

“If you're only here to talk, you wouldn't be blocking my door like this,” I growled, letting the anger swell in my chest. It didn't matter how gorgeous this Alpha was. I never gave a second thought to hair colors, but his red hair made him stand out, his pale skin dotted with freckles, a contrast to the mountain of a man that stood before me—tall, wide, and imposing, muscles bulging at his clothes.

But all that didn't matter since he had a scowl firmly placed on his face, and his blue eyes were staring into me as if he could kill me on the spot with just a glare alone.

“We were hired to protect you. I'm merely giving you the courtesy of introducing ourselves.”

“What the hell are you talking about?” I asked.

“Your sister and your brother hired us for one month to protect you.”

“A month?” He was saying that he was going to be here a month, looming over me every step of the way. Absolutely not.

“Ellie has lost her mind,” I said. “I'm calling her now. Get the hell out of my apartment.”

“No,” he said as he pushed in, following me further in. Maybe it was stupid to turn my back to him, but I didn't think he was going to hurt me.

I had my phone in hand in seconds, dialing Ellie's number. She answered before it even rang once. “What the hell, Ellie?” I bit out instead of giving her a hello.

“Listen, you are not safe. You are terrified, Tori. You're freaking out about sounds outside. This has to be done. You

need someone there to protect you. You're not as good at hiding things as you think you are. Do you think we don't notice how jumpy you are, how your eyes are wide with fear, how you have dark circles under your eyes all the time? I'm just worried about you."

"Then talk to me. You don't hire some mountain men to come to my house. There's a full-on lumberjack who won't leave."

He let out a humorless laugh as he glared at me. "Look, Princess, I'm getting paid either way. We can either do this easy or we can do it hard. We just need to check your apartment, and then we'll be out of your hair. We'll be right next door. There's no getting rid of us."

Ellie's hand muffled the phone before she was yelling for Ezra. "You told me they were nice. This guy sounds like a psycho."

I could hear her hand being taken away, and Ezra's voice filled the receiver. "Let me talk to Easton."

I took the phone away from my face and looked at the three men standing before me. "Which one of you is Easton?"

The redhead snatched the phone from my hand, his touch practically burning as his fingers brushed mine in a not-so-gentle way. My anxiety was so bad right now, panic clawing at my chest, and I had to swallow it down every step of the way.

If Ezra sent him, they couldn't be that bad, right? But honestly, it couldn't be any worse. He was my scent match, and from the easy camaraderie the guys had and the ease they were at around his fire, they were likely matches, too.

I couldn't do this. "Get out of my house," I growled again.

He ignored me and grunted into the phone. Easton was quiet as Ezra talked, but nothing changed on his face. He just looked permanently pissed off, and nothing else could pass through.

"She's being difficult," he argued. His blue eyes narrowed on me again, and I could hear Ezra's voice through the phone,



barking right back at him. “How am I supposed to keep her safe if she doesn’t even let me look around this apartment?”

He let out one more grunt before handing the phone back, even the gesture hostile. I snatched my phone from his hand and put it back to my ear.

“Ezra, what the actual hell is happening?”

“Look, he’s a friend of an old friend. I’ve known him for a long time. He’s been through some shit. They just got out of the military, but they’re safe, I promise you. Just let them look around your apartment, make sure it’s safe, and then they’ll get out. They’re going to make sure that someone is nearby if you get broken into again. They’re going to be there if something happens.”

“I don’t like this.” My voice was barely audible, but he let out a long sigh.

“I’m sorry, but we have to keep you safe, and you won’t come stay with any of us. This was the only alternative. They’re only here for thirty days. You can stick it out for us, right? For Ellie? She’s freaking out over here all the time. We all know there’s stuff you’re not telling us, and unless you’re willing to come over and have a good old talk, this is your solution.”

My eyes ran over the three men as I soaked in his words. The Beta had long, dark braids, warm brown skin, and a nose piercing. His clothes were covered in something that looked like charcoal. Everything about him seemed a contrast of soft and hard, but the expression in his eyes was haunted.

The other Alpha had long, dark hair pulled back in a bun. He was wearing black jeans and a dark shirt, not as wide as Easton, but his muscles were still on display.

Ezra was right. I didn’t want to tell him anything, and I was terrified of being home alone.

“Fine, they get to check my apartment, and then they need to leave.”

“Works for me, Princess,” Easton said, his voice devoid of emotion.

“Call me if they get out of line, and I’ll be there in a heartbeat,” Ezra promised. “We’re just trying to do what we can.”

“I know,” I whispered before ending the call. I couldn’t find it in me to say thank you, not when they’d given me no warning and sent two Alphas and a Beta who all looked like they could kill me with a thought into my home.

The guys didn’t say anything else as they walked past. I was hit twice, once with a pear and bourbon scent that smelled like cr me br lee and poached pears—sweet, a little spicy, and decadent.

The second scent was a strange mix of smoke, cedar, and parchment. He smelled like a roaring fireplace in a library—comforting and nostalgic.

Neither one of them seemed to react as they passed, other than pausing for a half-second before moving forward.

I didn’t say a word as I watched them methodically move through my space, as if they owned the place. They checked windows, doors, and the other Alpha went out to the balcony for a moment before returning.

He didn’t even bother to meet my eyes as he spoke on his way out. “I think we have what we need. We’ll be back with some security devices soon.”

The door closed behind them, and I stood there frozen to the spot, my heart slamming into my chest and tears fighting to break free.

My first instinct was to pull out my phone and call Ellie back, scream at her. My second was to tell Felix what was happening, but I couldn’t do either, not without admitting just how shaken I’ve been the last few days—the random presents, the men outside my door. It was all too much.

Part of me was relieved to have backup, but I wasn’t even sure I could trust this man. He looked like he wanted to snap my neck the moment I opened the door, as if he’d determined before he’d even knocked that I wasn’t worthy of his attention.

For some reason, that stung, but I had no right for it to. Hadn't I done the same thing to Warren, just without the animosity?

My movements felt mechanical as I forced myself to go to my couch, sitting down on the edge of it and not even settling back into the soft cushions. My place didn't feel like a safe haven anymore. In fact, it felt like the walls were closing in, that everything was too small now. I'd never been claustrophobic before, but now I could barely breathe.

I don't even know how much time passed as I sat there, trying to figure out what the hell to do and how to handle this. A knock sounded on my door again before it was pushed open, and Easton was back, shoving his way through with boxes in his hands. The other two were right on his heels.

"You should have locked this," he barked out.

My eyes narrowed into a glare, but I just sat there, frozen, not uttering a word. That seemed enough for him as he started going around the apartment, putting sensors and wiring on the windows, cameras up in the living room and the kitchen, one facing the front door.

Each piece of technology that was added made my skin crawl. Was this the price of my safety? That I got to be watched at all times, that I'd have these three men, who clearly hated me for no reason, seeing into my life no matter what I was doing?

Yeah, every time I caught their scent in the air and every time I stared at them for a little too long, the Omega in me wanted me to get up, to move closer, to demand that they give me an explanation, tell me their names.

Just as quickly as they barged into my life, the guys were gone. There were no more instructions or words before they were closing the door behind them.

Their absence was deafening in the silence. There were no more stomping footsteps, grunts, or harsh whispers.

All I knew was that I had more mates in my life, and I was feeling the other side of rejection. It had bile rising in my

throat and guilt swirling in my stomach, telling me that Warren had never deserved what I did to him. But then again, even through all that, at least I never made him feel worthless.

It took me a few minutes to realize what was really getting to me. It was the way he spoke to me, condescending, like I wasn't even worthy of his time or protection.

Maybe it would be better to just face whatever man was lingering around my apartment after all.

## CHAPTER

# TEN

### *Theo*

“Are we just not going to talk about this?” I demanded as I watched Easton slam himself around the apartment. Everything he did was with too much force. Even now, as I spoke, I could hear the counters squeaking under the pressure of his grip on it.

“What about? The princess next door who’s just going to make our lives fucking hell for the next month?”

“No, the omega next door that happens to be our fucking mate,” I said, crossing my arms and staring him down.

Jordan just sat on the couch, tapping away at his computer, focused on the security systems and making sure everything was in place. We still had to put a code on the door, but it wouldn’t do any good if we didn’t get the rest set up.

“No, I don’t need a damn mate like her.” His eyes were a flash of anger and pain and I wanted to smack him and hug him at the same time.

“You don’t even know her,” I countered, pinching the bridge of my nose as a headache started to bloom behind my eyes.

Easton was difficult on a good day, and this was one of the worst I’d ever seen. His eyes narrowed and he leaned forward as he started to spew more hate for our mate.

“Oh, I know girls like her. Grew up with money and privilege, thinks the world revolves around her. She probably

thinks hiding away in the shoebox apartment next door makes her a martyr. Oh woe is me, no room service and I have to clean up after myself.”

“What is she hiding from?” Jordan questioned. “Did they give you anything?”

“A stalker,” Easton said, practically spitting out his words now. “Probably another rich socialite that can’t handle being told no.” His voice was still rough around the edges, and I could scent the bitterness clinging to him.

Easton was probably one of the most complicated people I’ve ever met. He was a loyal friend, a great protector, but he was stubborn as hell. He showed time and time again that his way was the only way.

We weren’t afraid to challenge him anymore, and he’d grown a lot because of it, but at the end of the day, he was still that alpha that had to take on too much as a child. The same one that helped us escape the hell that we’d all lived in.

We all grew up in the same neighborhood, a long road lined with dilapidated houses that should have probably been condemned a long time ago. We never had enough money or food, but the three of us managed to survive together.

Our parents would have never noticed if we hadn’t. They were all shit. Jordan’s mom had a new boyfriend every week, ones that never liked having another man in the house. He had a few broken bones before we managed to run.

Easton’s mom, on the outside, looked like a devoted single mother. At least at first. She had our families as friends, random men willing to protect her, but that also meant that she would sleep with them whenever they wanted. As she fell deeper into that hole, she wasn’t afraid to sell her body for more drugs.

My parents hated me for being born. I wasn’t an alpha or an omega that could have been useful to them. I was just a lowly beta, so they treated me like a servant. If I didn’t do something they liked, I paid the price for it.

The moment we were old enough, we all enlisted, hoping the military would save us from that hell. In some ways, it did. But in other ways... it broke us.

Easton may have just scared off our mate, but maybe it was for the best. She didn't need men like us crashing into her life, especially if she was expecting perfection and money. Those were two things that we'd never have.

We had enough savings to take care of ourselves. We were secure, but we didn't have an abundance. This would give us enough to be set for a bit, but it wouldn't be enough to take care of her like she would want.

She was likely used to lavish things, expensive clothes, maids, the works. It would have never worked out between us.

Yet I couldn't shake the look of fear in those green eyes when she opened the door. Even though her hair was only shoulder length, she tried to hide behind it more than once, peeking out behind it to watch us as we moved around her apartment.

Victoria was a cornered animal, afraid of something much bigger than herself.

And that right there was the reason I couldn't just dismiss her.

Part of me felt terrible about crashing into her life. She clearly didn't want us there. That fear and worry that clung to her, amped up anytime we got near.

She didn't want us any more than Easton wanted her.

Fate was a bitch sometimes.

“So, we're just all supposed to work alongside her, protect her, and pretend that everything's fine? What happens at the end of thirty days? We just walk away from our scent match?”

“Damn straight we do,” Easton said.

Jordan let out a hum. It was neither agreement nor disagreement, instead just a simple acknowledgment that we'd spoken.

“A lot can happen in thirty days,” he finally offered, breaking the tense silence. “For now, we’re getting paid to make sure she’s safe. We watch these feeds, we listen, someone stays home or around her at all times. If she leaves, you follow.”

“She’s not going to take that lightly,” I pointed out. “She didn’t even want us in her apartment.”

“We all know I love a challenge,” Easton said, his wide smile anything but amused. He looked downright feral, and I made a mental note to keep her away from him as much as possible. Even if I knew we’d never work out, there was an innate need to protect her.

This was going to be complicated.

He was being purposely ignorant if he thought this was going to end well, that he was just going to be able to walk away from her when the contract was done.

We all fell into silence. I picked up my charcoal pencil and started sketching. It wasn’t until I was halfway done that I realized I was sketching her.

It felt more like an omen than anything. Her eyes were haunted as she stared up at me from the page.

Easton was on his phone. He let out a bitter laugh that broke through my trance before reading from whatever article he’d found online.

“Oh look, her father was just recognized for taking on another business venture, marking up their family’s wealth into several million. See what I mean? Complete princess, pampered, and has never had to work hard for anything.”

We didn’t give him any kind of acknowledgment, so he continued on. Another shocked but unhinged laugh filling the air before he spoke his next point.

“It seems that innocent little omega over there that you seem to want to protect, is engaged.”

Now that had both of our attention. We looked up at him. My eyes narrowed at the downright cocky look on his face.



“To who?”

“To the son of one of his business partners, it seems. Come winter, our omega is going to be married off and out of our hair forever.”

A brick settled in my gut, and I clenched the pencil so hard in my hand that it snapped in half.

“Don’t go getting soft on me now,” Easton warned. “She’s not good for us. We don’t need a mate like that in our lives. We’ll let her go.”

“Are we sure that’s actually happening? Because if she was getting married to someone, why would she be here in these tiny-ass apartments and this little bitty town needing protection?” Jordan pointed out. I was relieved to see he wasn’t ready to throw in the towel either.

“Maybe her alpha is locking her away so she doesn’t cause him any trouble,” Easton offered.

That wasn’t true. I didn’t even know her well, but I knew damn well that with the fear we’d witnessed... there was no way we could let her get married.

What I did need to know was what we were truly protecting her from.

“We need more information,” I said, ignoring Easton now and looking at Jordan.

“I was thinking the same thing,” he said in a low rumble. It meant he was already making plans in his head. Good. “I need to go finish the wall panel.”

He picked up his phone, and a few moments later, my phone chimed in a group chat.

Jordan: This is Jordan, one of your security detail. I need to come put this wall panel in place.

He didn’t bother to wait for an answer, and she didn’t offer one, so instead, he was on his feet, straight into action. He paused at the doorway, turning around to glare at Easton.

“You can stay the fuck home. We don’t need you for this.”

“Good, I don’t want to be there,” he said as he kicked back, putting his feet up on the coffee table. But the reflection in the sliding glass doors to the balcony showed his face set in a scowl.

Jordan and I shared a look but said nothing as we walked to her door.

“Victoria?” I called out, knocking lightly.

She rushed to open the door, her eyes full of fury. My stomach dropped at the sight, though I was equally relieved to see the fear gone this time.

“Don’t call me that, and hurry up, I’m ready to be alone.”

Her fire would be good for Easton if he ever gave her a chance.

I let the door close behind me, and Jordan got to work on the panel.

“That’s Jordan,” I offered. “I’m Theo, obviously. You know Easton’s name now. What should we call you if it’s not Victoria?”

“Tori,” she said, studying me like she couldn’t figure out why I wasn’t being a dick like the others. I just didn’t have it in me. We weren’t close, and I didn’t think she’d want to be, but that didn’t mean we had to be assholes every minute of every day.

“We need to know what we’re protecting you from, Tori,” I said evenly.

Her shoulders sagged, almost like she was disappointed that the words even came out of my mouth.

“I’m not sure,” she said. “I’ve had some alpha hanging out at my door. There have been break-ins in the past when I lived in other cities, and I’m afraid it’s going to happen again.”

*The curse of being rich, I guess.*

‘You have more to steal,’ was my first thought, and then guilt bubbled up as soon as I had it. As much as Easton wanted

to call her a socialite, the girl in front of me didn't look anything like I'd expect. She wasn't wearing expensive designer clothes, her apartment wasn't even decorated to the hilt.

There was no luxury in sight, she seemed almost... normal.

“Do you have any idea who it could be?”

“There's an ex of sorts that just moved to town, Warren Avery. It could be him, but his roommate said it's not.”

“Has he done anything out of the ordinary before?”

“He posed as a dating app date just so I'd talk to him when I blocked him on everything. Until a few days ago, he's been texting me even though I block every number he tries with.”

“Was that when someone started coming to your door?” Jordan asked. His voice was husky and quiet. She turned to him and blinked a few times as if to clear her head before answering. It seemed she wasn't as unaffected as she tried to act.

“Yes, actually,” she said, her mouth turning down into a deeper frown as she mulled it over. “We don't know if it's him yet, and nobody's actually broken into this apartment yet.”

“Now, they won't,” I pointed out. “We've got you covered. Every window, every doorway, is covered. No one should be getting in.”

Her eyes were haunted as she glanced around. She nodded, not offering any more words. That scared look was back and it had my fists clenching at my sides.

“You have our numbers now. Just text the chat if you hear or see anything. Call us, no matter what time of day it is. This is what we get paid for. We'll keep you safe,” Jordan promised even though his eyes were focused on the panel.

She chewed on her lip and forced herself to sit. She looked so uncomfortable, so I didn't push her any farther.

I think we've done enough of that for today.

For now, I walked over to Jordan, watching him finish in silence. A few minutes later, he stuck a sticky note on the wall above the panel and turned to our charge.

“Your code’s up here. If you need or want to change it, just let me know. I can help you. Call us if you need anything.”

His words were quick before he was heading out the door. When the door closed behind us, I stood outside Tori’s door until I heard her hurried footsteps, and the lock clicked back into place.

“Good night, Tori,” I offered before walking back to our apartment.

There wasn’t even friendship between us, nor was there understanding, but it seemed that Tori just needed a little bit of kindness in her life. And if I could round out Easton’s venom, then I would try, especially if I was going to have to walk away from her in thirty days.

I wouldn’t survive if I didn’t keep my heart out of it. Easton always said I had a bleeding heart and just one interaction and my instincts were all on edge.

Jordan turned to me before we opened our door, his face set in a solemn scowl.

“Did you notice that there wasn’t even a single picture on the wall? That place had no personality. I’m not so sure about this fiancé.”

## CHAPTER

# ELEVEN

### *Tori*

For the second time in two days, I woke up to the sound of something hitting my door. Anger bubbled up in me, and I threw on my robe, rushing to the door. One peek through the peephole, and I saw Easton standing there, a scowl on his face.

“What do you want?” I asked through the door. Having the solid wood between us was reassuring.

“Did you unplug the window sensors?” His question was full of accusation and venom. I swear everything this man said to me was laced with something vile.

“No, I didn’t,” I deadpanned. The last thing I was going to do was show this man how much he affected me. In fact, his outright animosity toward me was enough to stave off the fear I had for his size. No other Alpha that tried to use me had gone straight for anger. It was always pretty words and lies before the threats came out. With Easton, I knew he hated me, and I was settling into that, letting it keep me calm when he was around.

“Let me in so I can fix it.”

Rolling my eyes, I opened the door, knowing damn well he wasn’t going to give up until I gave him the chance. He pushed past me, his shoulder hitting my arm. I stumbled backward, barely catching myself. He glanced back, and for a moment, I thought I saw a brief flicker of regret, but it was quickly masked by a scowl.

“Yes, because it’s my fault that you nearly launched me into the wall, Easton,” I bit out before slamming the door shut.

He muttered to himself, too low for me to understand what he was saying. It was when he went silent that I started to worry. My steps were quiet as I walked up behind him, peeking over his shoulder to see what he was doing.

“Are you suddenly a security expert?” he bit out.

“Is everything you say aggressive?” I questioned, crossing my arms and staring him down. I’d perfected my mask of indifference a long time ago, but I swear this man was hellbent on cracking it.

This time his muttering started back up, but I could catch words about frayed wires or something crazy before too long. He pulled out his phone, barking orders into it.

“Jordan, something’s wrong with your sensors and the window. No, she didn’t unplug it; something’s wrong with it.”

Easton hung up, crouched down to get a better look. He started toying with it before I heard a zap of electricity, and he hissed as he shook his hand out. My mistake was letting out my laughter, even if it was quiet. His glare turned absolutely furious.

Thankfully, Jordan was pushing through the door a few minutes later, breaking the tension. Theo trailed behind him. My eyes ran over both of them, but it was the dark coloring at the end of Theo’s hands that caught my attention, especially when he nervously scratched his nose, leaving a streak there.

Jordan gave me a nod of his head as he passed me, and I tried not to soak in a deep breath of his scent—the crème brûlée and bourbon scent making my mouth water even with the brief flash that I got. He bent down in front of the windows, listening for a second as Easton pointed out before gently shoving him out of the way and taking over. It didn’t take long before he was cursing.

“Did anybody come over yesterday after we left?” he asked, turning to me.

“No, I locked the door behind you and went to bed.”

He looked at Easton. “It might be time to talk to the landlord. She needs new keys.”

“Why?” I asked, and my voice was shaking, and there was no hiding it this time. Was he insinuating that someone was in here with me while I was sleeping?

Jordan’s eyes were dark as he turned to me, studying me for a moment before finally answering my question. His gray eyes were stormy, the streaks of blue and gray warring within them as if he was barely containing his emotions, though I couldn’t exactly identify what they were.

“Someone messed with this since we put it up. This did *not* look like this yesterday, and it’s not simply short-circuiting. This was cut discreetly. Someone was trying to turn off our sensors so they could get to you.”

“Fuck the landlord. We don’t need his permission to change these locks. If someone else has a key, that’s a problem, and the only other person that could have handed him that key is the landlord,” Theo’s words were said in a harsh rush, and Easton opened his mouth ready to say something before closing it and nodding once.

I half-expected him to argue, to let it go and see what happened.

“Stay with her while I go get a new set,” he said before rushing out of the room. The tension in the room dropped several degrees when Easton was gone. I sat down on the couch and let out a breath. I didn’t bother turning on the TV or picking up a book, I just stared at the coffee table as my thoughts tumbled around in my head.

Inside, I knew it was not Warren. He wasn’t that bold or aggressive, and the contrast in small notes and breaking in was vast. I was more than a little confused and unsure.

“Hey, hey, breathe.”

My eyes snapped up to Theo, who was crouching down in front of me. His brown eyes were full of warmth and concern, which was strange since he seemed so distant before.

“Take a breath.”

I couldn't follow his command. I tried to breathe in, and it was only then that I realized I was panting. My breath was coming in short gasps as panic took over.

I turned to Jordan, his eyes frantic. The alpha moved closer, but in my state of panic, I couldn't convince myself that he was safe. I curled in on myself, the panic worsening until Theo cursed and pushed him away.

"What happened to you?" Theo said more to himself than me, but at the same time, he grabbed my hand, putting it against his chest. His breaths were exaggerated, and he encouraged me to match the movement.

"And breathe in with me, Tori. Let it go, breathe out. You have to calm it before you pass out."

Already, black dots were dancing in my vision, and I tried to do as he said, even as I failed over and over again. He didn't call me on it, he just kept encouraging me in that calm, unwavering voice until finally, I was breathing normally again.

My chest was tight, my head was pounding, and I felt dead on my feet.

"We're going to change the locks," Jordan said. "You'll be safe here. We'll make sure of it."

"Okay," I said, my voice quiet. They didn't leave me while we waited for Easton to get back, but they didn't talk, either. This time the silence wasn't tense, but I could still feel their unease.

That and the fact that having Theo sitting next to me on the couch meant the scent of his smoke, parchment, and cedar was seeping into every breath.

I wanted to run from it, but yet, my omega leaned into it, the visceral need within me wanting to reach out for him. I fought it away with everything I had.

My phone rang, and I winced as my father's name scrolled across the screen. The last thing I wanted to do was answer it, but I knew if I didn't, he'd be calling again and again. If I pissed him off enough, he'd come looking for me. No, minimal contact was the best bet.



“Hello,” I said as I answered. His voice was so loud that I had to pull the phone away when he answered.

“Victoria Winters! It’s been months. I’m tired of this little tantrum that you’re throwing, and you need to come home now.”

“We’ve gone over this, Father. I’m not coming home. That isn’t my home anymore. I am an adult. I’m moving on with my life.”

“What kind of life are you living when you’re not here? You have nothing to offer the world except for being someone’s trophy wife.”

Even after all this time, his words still stung. I was proud of myself that this time tears didn’t form in my eyes.

“I’m not coming home. You don’t get to decide what I do with my life anymore. It’s mine.”

“No, you’re going to come home now. William is ready to marry you, his mother is working on a winter wedding.”

“He can be ready all he wants, but I’m not marrying him, Father. You can’t make me marry someone. Even you cannot be this delusional.”

“What did you say to me?” His voice dropped several octaves, and it was so deep that a shiver ran down my spine.

“I said I’m not marrying him. You know what happened between us. I’m not letting him anywhere near me.”

“We’ll see about that, Tori.”

The call ended there, and I closed my eyes, fighting off the whimper that wanted to escape. There was a threat in that last ending line, and I knew my father would be searching for me now regardless.

My phone slipped to the ground as I concentrated on not letting the panic swallow me again.

Suddenly, I was grateful for the men that were in this room with me, maybe even the growly one that was about to be

changing my locks. Even if my father found me, he wouldn't be able to physically drag me out of here.

They wouldn't let him.

I should call my siblings to let them know what was happening, but I couldn't do it. It was my own fault that I let him dig his claws in this deep, and I didn't know how to get out from under it. But the last thing I was going to do was drag them and their packs into family drama.

They'd finally escaped, and if I could shoulder this so they didn't have to, I fucking would.

"Are you okay, Tori?" Theo's voice was soft this time. I nodded once as I stared at the TV, unblinking. It was still off, but I couldn't make myself look anywhere else.

I barely registered when Easton came back with his stomping and grunting. I heard the whir of the drill as he took out my old locks and replaced them with new. When he slammed a fresh key on the counter loud enough that it shook the place, I nearly jumped out of my skin.

"Here's your new key, princess. Throw out the old one. We have a set, too."

He turned on his heel and stomped away. Jordan and Theo got up to follow him. I could feel someone lingering in the doorway, but I couldn't make myself look up and meet their gaze. I was afraid of what I'd find there.

There was no way they didn't overhear that conversation—the way my father talked to me and the lies that he was spewing.

I didn't need their pity. Or their judgment.

Finally, the door closed, and I heard the lock shift as they locked it behind them, leaving me to my thoughts. The tears finally started to fall as I heard their door close down the hall.

I'd never felt more alone in my life.

Even worse was that I knew it was my fault.

I could call Felix or Warren in a moment, and they'd be here. Even if I didn't fully trust them, I didn't think that he was behind this anymore.

But I wouldn't put it past William.

Memories of waking up to his hand slamming down over my mouth, stopping the scream before it could start, his nose brushing against mine as he leaned in, telling me all the vile things he was going to do to me when I was his, that he would hurt everyone I cared about if I didn't comply.

But Micah and Ellie were no longer alone. They had packs to protect them, and I knew his threats were empty.

When I told Dad, he said he'd take care of it, and William had backed off for several weeks. But it seemed all was forgiven now. My father wanted nothing more than for me to fall into bed with the man who was willing to hurt his own children.

They were both monsters...

There was no way in hell I was going back.

## CHAPTER

# TWELVE

### *Warren*

Three men were looming in the doorway of Felix's flower shop. Felix himself had just run down the road for coffee, and I narrowed my eyes as the tall man in front turned and locked the door behind him.

He flipped the sign from open to closed before stalking toward me.

"Warren Avery," he said. It wasn't a question. The way he said it was like he knew exactly who I was, and I was about to get my ass kicked.

I've been through enough fights in my life that I didn't hesitate to reach under the counter for the baseball bat we kept, picking it up in my hands and narrowing my eyes.

"I suggest you walk right out that door," I said as evenly as I could manage.

"We have a few questions for you," the beta said, stepping in front of the angry redhead. I'd always heard about red-headed tempers, but I didn't think it was actually true until now.

"Who are you?" I asked, still not letting go of the bat that was clutched in my hand, something he was very aware of, his eyes flickering to it a few times.

"Where were you last night?" he questioned.

“Upstairs in the apartment,” I answered. I wasn’t even sure why I was giving him this information, but if it made them leave sooner, then that was fine with me.

“Can anybody back that up?” the quiet alpha in the back asked. His eyes were gray and icy. The way he watched me had my grip tightening again. The redheaded alpha might be strong, but this one was deadly.

“Yes, my roommate. What is this about? You’re not exactly cops. You want to fucking tell me why you’re in the shop threatening me?”

“Not one threat has left my lips,” the red-headed snarled. “Yet.”

“Your entire presence is a threat,” I said in a dry tone. That had him letting out a low growl that I matched with my own.

“Okay, alphas, pack it in,” the beta said. “Look, we’re here because we were hired to take care of a certain omega, one that said that you might have been around her apartment.”

Then everything clicked into place. My hand absently rubbed at the ache that had formed in my chest, the one that hadn’t left since Tori had rejected me outright.

“I’m giving Tori space like she asked.”

“Are you?” the quiet alpha asked. The way he said it so casually yet laced with promise was downright terrifying.

“Yes. Do I want to? No. Do I want to go shake my scent match until she listens to me? Yes, yes, I fucking do, but I haven’t.”

“Scent match,” the beta said, his eyes widening. He cast a glance at the others but the redhead only looked more angry.

“Yes, she’s my mate, and she refuses to even talk to me. She ghosted me one weekend, no explanation, no word. I’ve tried everything I can to get her to talk to me. She won’t say if I did something wrong. She won’t even let me defend myself.”

“And you haven’t been to the apartment?”

Now I was getting nervous.

“What do you mean?” I demanded. “What’s going on? Is something wrong with her? Is she safe?”

“Someone’s been bothering her, and we’re just trying to figure out who. She’s safe. Her sister hired us to keep her that way. We live right next door.”

I wasn’t sure if that was a warning to me or reassurance, but I gritted my teeth. The last thing I was going to do was let Tori hide behind these men or spread lies about me.

That was the thing that hurt the most—that these men came here fully expecting the fact that I’d been stalking her, yet I’d done everything she asked.

I’d given her space.

Me demanding answers was not over the line. She was my mate, she owed me an explanation. I deserved to know why she thought being tied to me was so terrible she ran away.

What was it about me that immediately had her shutting down? Yet, she didn’t feel the same about Felix.

I wasn’t stupid. I saw the way Felix came back smelling like her. He didn’t offer up the information when asked, but he also didn’t outright lie.

When I asked him where he went, he said the grocery store, but he came home with nothing. My best friend was lying to me and now this.

My entire life was a mess right now, and the last thing I needed was these men fucking it up worse.

“I think it’s time for you to leave. It wasn’t me. If you have questions, you can come back when Felix gets here.”

We were interrupted by a loud knocking on the door. It was frantic, and I could see Felix peering in around the sign, probably wondering why it said closed. The redhead flipped the sign back before unlocking the door and opening it.

“What are you doing in my shop, and why are you touching my open sign?”

For being one of the quietest omegas I knew, now he was full of fury. They say alphas are territorial, but honestly, they have nothing on an omega.

“We were just asking this alpha, here, some questions. Could you tell me where he was last night?”

“Upstairs in his bed,” he said without skipping a beat. “I have security cameras. I can show you that nobody left.”

The redhead turned back to me. “And if we watched them, would you be on them walking away in the middle of the night?”

“No,” I said, waving toward Felix. “You can show them if you’d like.”

The beta pulled out a business card and handed it over to Felix. “Could you send me that? We just have to be sure.”

“What the hell is this about?” he demanded. “You aren’t cops.”

“We’re just trying to keep our clients safe,” was all the beta offered before they were stalking out the door.

Felix blinked a few times at the retreating back before turning to me.

“Warren, what the actual fuck just happened?”

“They think I’ve been messing with Tori,” I told him. My voice was devoid of any emotion.

He let out a breath. “I’m not sure why they think you’re involved. She asked me about it the other day, and I told her it wasn’t you.”

“I knew you were with her.”

“Yeah, I ran into her at the grocery store. I helped her shop,” he said.

If you asked Felix outright most of the time, he wouldn’t lie, and this time I felt like he was finally telling me the truth.

The look he cast me had my stomach dropping. Felix was protecting me.

“I didn’t want to hurt your feelings, but I didn’t want to turn down the chance to get to know her. I thought maybe if I did, she’d give you a better chance.”

“It’s so fucked up that you even have to think that way. We should be celebrating that we have a mate. This is not how it’s supposed to be.”

“It’s not, Warren, but there’s something going on with her. She’s been hurt before. She mentioned some trauma with alphas, and then she also said her dad used to arrange dates with prospective alphas from his circle, forcing her on them.”

“He what?” I demanded, white-hot fury lancing through me. I was ready to hunt this man down and force him to pay for every wrong he’d ever done to my mate.

“Take a breath,” Felix cut him off. “As far as I know, he has no idea where she is.”

“Are we sure about that? Because we just had some strange men in here asking me where I was last night. Somebody’s after our omega.”

His words were cut off as a customer came in to pick up her order. We packaged it up for her before sending her on her way, putting our best customer-service smiles on, though I doubted they seemed real at any point.

The next time Felix ran to the back to stock some flowers, I couldn’t help myself. I pulled out my phone.

Warren: Some men came by asking where I was. They mentioned someone is messing with you. What’s going on, Tori?

Warren: For the record, it wasn’t me.

For the first time in far too long, three dots appeared and disappeared several times, like she was trying to figure out what to say.

Tori: My siblings hired a security team. I’m safe.



Warren: Tori. If you just tell me why I need to back off...

I didn't need to explain more. She knew exactly what I was talking about. Now that she was talking to me, I couldn't keep myself from asking. There was nothing I needed in this world more than her, and she was pushing me away at every turn. The least I deserved was a fucking answer.

Tori: Because no alpha has ever shown me that they can be trusted.

Warren: I'm your mate, Tori. I'm matched to you for a reason. I'm not some asshole out here trying to ruin your life.

Tori: How can I know that, though?

My heart shattered, and I sat down heavily on the chair behind the counter, taking a deep breath and trying to figure out what to say next.

Felix was right, our mate was traumatized. It seemed that all that she was used to were not the good kind. They were the ones who called themselves true alphas, but they were simply using their designation to push around those 'lower' than them. They were master manipulators at best... monsters at their worst.

Warren: How can I prove it if you don't let me try?

Warren: Why Felix and not me?

Tori: He's different. Felix is kind and wears his heart on his sleeve. He doesn't make me afraid.

Warren: I do?

Tori: Yes.

Ouch. Hearing my mate tell me that she was afraid of me had my heart fracturing even further.

There was no way to win this battle, was there?

I hadn't even realized Felix had walked up behind me, and I jumped when he put a hand on my shoulder.

"Maybe ask her if you guys can text. That she gets to know you first."

Warren: What if we text? You can ask me anything, get to know me first.

Warren: Felix will tell you anything about me, I give him my permission to answer. He knows me better than anyone else.

After several minutes, she still hadn't replied. In fact, Felix and I finished out the workday, picked up dinner, and headed back upstairs, and my phone still stayed silent in my pocket.

I checked it more times than I could count, and my stomach was churning with nerves. She was acting like I was asking her for her heart right now.

Maybe, in a way, I was, but what else could I do?

This omega already had me in a chokehold. She had from the moment I breathed her in, the moment I saw her beautiful face, the moment I heard her laugh.

She'd burned herself into my memories and then tried to leave me behind. There was no way I could let her go, not like this.

As I lay in bed, unable to sleep, tossing and turning in the dark, finally, my phone pinged with a new text.

Tori: Okay.

I blinked down at her answer. After all this, her agreement was so unexpected that I didn't know what to do. I dropped my phone twice before I was able to tap in the response.

Warren: Okay? We can talk?

Tori: Yes.

Warren: Ask me anything.

Tori: Why haven't you given up?

Warren: You're my mate, Tori. I won't ever give up on you. From that first date with you, I knew I'd never have enough. Kind, gorgeous, smart, fiery... you're everything.

Tori: I'm nothing special, Warren. Don't put me on a pedestal, I'll only break your heart.

Warren: Pushing me away is what's breaking my heart.

Tori: I'm an omega with no degree, no job, no real future. You don't want me.

Warren: Quit trying to convince me that you're a bad idea, Tori. I'll never believe it.

Tori: You should.

Something in that last text broke me. I didn't want to break the rules already, but I could sense that she needed more than this, that she needed comfort.

Warren: Can I call you? I just want to hear your voice. You can hang up if it's too much.

There was another long pause that stretched on for several minutes. It was long enough that I was kicking myself.

Then she finally answered me.

Tori: Okay.

My heart was in my throat as I hit call. It barely rang twice before Tori answered. Her voice was raspy and quiet, like she'd been crying for hours.

“What’s wrong?” I asked, my voice just as quiet as hers in the dark.

“Everything.” She let out a shaky breath, and I had to fight the urge to drive across town right now.

Her bodyguards would have more than a few words about that.

“Baby, I wish you’d let me help.”

“You can’t. I’m not good for you, Warren.”

“Pushing me away is not going to solve anything.”

“It saves me from getting hurt.”

“Baby, I’m not going to hurt you.”

She let out a humorless laugh.

“That’s all alphas do.”

“Tori, I’m not other alphas. I’m your *mate*. If you just give me a chance—”

She was quiet, and I heard a shuddering breath, and I knew tears were falling down her face. My entire body ached for her.

“Baby, I just want to hold you and tell you everything is fine.”

“I don’t know how to let you. What if I’m broken?”

I’m not sure what told her to let me in today, what made her vulnerable enough to tell me as much as she was telling me. But if she was going to let me be there for her, then I sure as fuck was going to be.

“You’re not, and even if you were, we’d figure it out, Tori. I’m not asking you to be perfect. I’m just asking you to be mine, to give me a chance.”

“Warren, I ghosted you. I was an asshole and pushed you away. Why would you still want a chance with me? I don’t deserve that.”

“We have to try. You don’t know what I could be for you but you know Felix now, baby. You know he’d never be friends with somebody that wasn’t worthy of him.”

She let out a soft laugh. “Felix is amazing,” she admitted. “He makes me feel safe.”

“God, I want to make you feel safe, too.”

“Alphas aren’t supposed to talk like that.” She let out a quiet, broken laugh.

“Then you know I’m not like the alphas you’re afraid of, baby. I’m different.”

“I’m trying to believe that.”

CHAPTER

# THIRTEEN

*Tori*

Tori: I have an interview. I'm leaving at noon. Letting you know because I can't be late.

Jordan: I'll drive.

Tori: I can drive myself.

Theo: We'll both come. There was something else outside your door. You shouldn't go alone, and I don't trust your car right now.

How did things keep getting more and more complicated? Last night, I'd broken down for long enough that I found myself giving in to Warren's attempts. It wasn't letting him in all the way, but the texting felt safe. The fact he'd known I wasn't okay and asked to call me should be a sign that he's right about being different.

But tell my brain that.

Self-preservation had been my only setting for too long. Be a good girl, and Father would finally be proud. Don't complain, and he'd be happy. Go on the date even if it makes you uncomfortable; this is what Father wants.

"Stop, Tori. You have to get it together," I reminded myself as I pulled on my black blazer and buttoned it in place.

I straightened my blonde hair so it was hanging down in sleek perfection. I did my makeup simple but pretty enough to enhance my features and look professional without appearing over the top and desperate.

My pencil skirt was uncomfortable, but I swallowed down my annoyance and slid my black pumps on before grabbing my clutch and my black portfolio.

This interview was for a hotel manager position. I didn't have any managerial experience, but I hoped my portfolio was enough. I'd worked on it for years while in school, including the projects I had done for them; the budgeting, my resume was on the front in case they needed it again.

I paused in front of the mirror, staring at myself. There were dark circles under my eyes, but I could tell that I tried to mask them with makeup at least. Otherwise, I looked perfect—strong, confident, ready to do this.

“You can do this,” I told myself in a whisper before heading for the door. When I pulled it open, Theo and Jordan were waiting in front of it. I didn't say anything as I locked the door, but I could feel their eyes on me as I did. They followed dutifully behind as I made my way outside to the parking lot, pausing then to turn around.

“Well, which one's yours?” I questioned.

Jordan held up the keys and clicked a button on the fob. A Tahoe beeped next to me; it looked brand new, sleek and black.

“I swear you guys pretend you're the Secret Service,” I muttered as I climbed into the backseat. Theo started to protest, but I'd already closed my door and started buckling up, while Jordan just got in the driver's seat.

“Where are we going?” Jordan asked. I gave him the address, and Theo typed it into the GPS, letting it do the talking for us as Jordan drove out of town.

Another interview in Lancaster that I knew was going to end in failure. My phone went off in my lap, and I glanced

down, smiling to myself, the words of encouragement rolling in.

Shaye: Good luck today. You've got this!

Warren: Keep calm and charm them. You're going to be amazing.

Felix: Don't forget to smile! I always forget that when I interview.

I felt eyes on me again and glanced up to see Theo studying me. A ghost of a smile was on his face, but it dropped when he saw me looking. He turned quickly, but I saw the longing there.

For a group that demanded we keep this professional, that acted like I wasn't a scent match at all, he seemed to be wishing I was.

I think it was the fact that I felt so conflicted, knowing they were my mates and didn't want me, that had me moving forward with Warren. Maybe 'moving forward' is a bit of a stretch, but we were on talking terms, and that was something.

The drive was quick between the guys softly chatting and my text messages coming in. But the moment we pulled up outside Guardian Suites, my anxiety was at full force.

"We'll be waiting right out here," Jordan said.

"Good luck, Tori," Theo offered as he got out and opened my door for me, helping me out. I felt their eyes on me the entire way to the front door, but I didn't bother to turn around.

A young beta was working behind the desk as I walked up, and he gave me his best customer-service smile. His suit was tailored to fit and expensive, his haircut and manicure only adding to that aesthetic.

"Hello, ma'am, welcome to Guardian Suites. Are you checking in?"

"Actually, I have an interview with Sasha."



His smile fell immediately.

“I’ll go get her for you.” There was a look of pity on his face as he said that, and it only had my nerves rolling in my stomach to the point I felt like I might vomit. That wouldn’t exactly make the impression I was going for.

The click of heels had me glancing up to see a tall Omega with a sleek, black ponytail and an almost identical outfit as mine. Though, she looked much better in it.

“Victoria Winters?” she asked, trying to force her lips into a smile, but it looked more like a grimace to me.

“Yes, ma’am. It’s a pleasure to meet you.” I offered her my hand, but she just looked down her nose at it before turning on her heels.

“Follow me.”

I swallowed down my annoyance at the order and glanced at the guy who just looked away, shaking his head.

Why was he working here if she was such a bitch that he needed to offer pity to everyone?

“I’m going to be getting a promotion to District Manager. I’ll be overseeing the Guardian Suites all around the state,” she said in a haughty tone.

“Oh, congratulations, that’s great.”

“What experience do you have as a manager?” she questioned. One eyebrow raised as she studied me, expecting me to stumble over my words.

I hated interviews where they’d ask the questions that were easily answered by looking at my resume. This was all intimidation and I was already over it.

“Most of my experience comes from the projects that I did while in school. I’ve been looking for something to work my way up. It’s been my dream to work somewhere as great as this.”

A little brown-nosing never did any harm, right?

“Let’s just get to the chase. Tell me why you think I should give you consideration when you lack the skills and experience.”

She sat down at the desk in the office she led me to, staring at me across it as I took my seat. I swallowed hard but held my back straight, staring at her straight on.

“Because I want this, plain and simple. I’ve practiced for this. I have done countless scenarios. We actually apprenticed at a local place, so I do have experience despite what it looks like. I’m determined, I’m a hard worker, and I will put everything I have into this hotel, ensuring that it’s thriving and ensuring that our customers have their best experience.”

“Hmm.”

That was all she offered as she looked down at my resume on the desk. She tapped her red-painted fingers, as if the silence would intimidate me.

Finally, she looked up, grabbed my resume in her hand, crumpled it into a ball, and threw it in the trash can next to her desk.

“Let’s be real. I don’t think another omega working here is a good idea, nor do I think you’re going to do a good job. I think this interview is done, Miss Winters.”

“That’s your loss, then,” I said evenly, standing up and straightening my outfit before turning and walking out of the room. There was no way I was letting that snotty bitch know how much her words bothered me.

When I walked out the door, Theo and Jordan were waiting, but I bypassed them, heading for the crosswalk and hitting the button. I knew my face was a mask of fury, but I needed a minute before I got in a car with all the tension that already existed between us.

“Hey, what happened? I take it, it didn’t go well?” Theo said, falling in step beside me.

“No, she had no intention of hiring me. She literally just wasted my time asking questions she knew the answers to, just

for her to crumble up my resume and toss it in the trash right in front of me.”

My words came out in a rush, and he shook his head.

“Sorry, Tori, that’s harsh.”

“What a bitch,” Jordan offered.

“She was,” I said, letting out a little laugh. “I need some chocolate.”

They didn’t argue as I went into the coffee shop that I’d been in far too much lately. It seemed all the businesses that I had found interviews for were on this damn street. Maybe it was cursed.

Maybe I was cursed.

It felt like my family name was haunting me, that they were giving me the benefit of an interview just to see where I sized up and then dismissing me immediately as a dumb omega.

“Have you done a lot of these interviews lately?” Theo asked.

“Too many to count,” I admitted, “and they all end pretty much this way. I interviewed there last week,” I said, pointing out the window to the corporation across the street.

“Wait, those two aren’t even close to the same type of job,” Jordan mused.

“Nope,” I said, “but I have to pay the bills somehow. Do you guys want anything?”

The barista sent the people in front of us on their way before turning to us. Jordan looked at her, giving the smallest hint of a smile, and I felt jealousy spike in me. I had to bite back a growl and stop myself from glaring at her.

It took everything in me to keep my face straight as she did the same to Theo.

Finally, she turned her smile on me. The fact that it was just as bright had me calming down, realizing she was just doing her job.

*What the hell was that, Tori?* I asked internally, knowing damn well that was out of character for me.

“Caramel macchiato, please,” I said as I handed my card over. Jordan started to do the same, but I beat him, giving him a smug smile before turning my attention to her so I could sign the receipt.

“We’ll have it right out for you,” she promised, ushering us off to the side to wait. Jordan gave me a curious look as we waited, but I didn’t give him a second glance. Right now, my emotions were all over the place, and I had to get it together.

The more time I spent around them, the more out of control I felt. I’d had no choice but to give Theo and Jordan the chance to be around me.

Ellie was right. I was terrified, and knowing that they didn’t want me had allowed me to be less stressed.

At least now that I was getting used to them.

My omega was slowly leaning into their presence, breathing them in, wanting them. Part of me wondered if it was just because I simply couldn’t have them, or if they really did have an effect on me.

Even now, as Jordan handed me my cup and his fingers brushed against mine, his hand hovering over my lower back as he led me outside, I felt myself wanting to soak in the attention.

As my life got more and more out of control, and my father’s presence loomed over me, I found myself craving having a support system outside of my siblings, someone who didn’t have the knowledge of my old life and wanted me for me.

I was getting that with Felix and Warren. It was just the beginning of the relationship, the first dregs of friendship. But even as I settled into that thought, I realized that I wanted more than that.

The real question was, could I give them a real chance?

As I glanced at the two men driving me home, the ones who'd been by my side and hadn't judged me for failing an interview, I wasn't sure I could answer that question.

CHAPTER

# FOURTEEN

*Tori*

**M**y dream went from peaceful to terrifying when something started pounding. It took me a few moments of waking up to realize it wasn't in the dream, but at my door.

Again.

My eyes were barely open as I walked to the door and glanced through. Great. Easton. I'd take the other two over this asshole alpha any day.

It felt like they were doing some sort of sleep deprivation experiment at this point.

Then again it's not their fault I don't sleep at night very well.

When I pulled open the door, hair a mess, robe tied around me, and half-asleep eyes, he gave me a mocking smile.

"Oh, am I too early for the pampered princess?"

"Cut the 'princess' shit, Easton, I'm not in the mood," I gritted out. I'd had just about enough of his open hostility. He was literally being paid to be here and couldn't be professional. "Apartment is secure, I'm fine. Can you leave now?"

He ignored me and pushed past to get into my apartment. His footsteps were extra loud as he trudged through, checking connections on my window and door sensors along with the

system. Maybe he thought I had a hangover or something but it was unnecessarily annoying.

“Why do you hate me so much?” The words slipped out without meaning to. My lack of sleep until the early hours of the morning had broken down any meager filters I had. That and Easton pushed every fucking button I had. It was like he looked into my soul, picked out my insecurities, then used them as ammo against me.

Easton froze in front of the door and met my sleepy gaze. His eyes were guarded and angry.

“Because, I’ve dealt with your type my entire life, *princess*. More money than they know what to do with and think the world owes them something because of it. You’ve had someone to clean up your messes and do the hard work your entire life. It’s pathetic.”

He braced himself, shoulders tensing as he glared at me, waiting for me to respond.

“Okay,” I said, my voice tired. I’d spent my entire life with other people’s perceptions of me hanging over my head. I wasn’t going to defend myself to a man who didn’t want to listen. I owed him nothing.

He blinked at me a few times until he realized I wasn’t going to engage, then he stormed out of the room.

When the door closed behind him a tear slipped out. I swiped it away with a sigh and engaged the lock and alarm system again before curling up on my couch.

My life was a mess and I was exhausted. The raccoons were back again and the sounds had me on edge all night. All I wanted was to have someone to hold me but I was too fucking stubborn to give in.

I’d given Felix an in and even texted Warren. Things were progressing at a glacial pace but I still felt myself holding back.

I wanted to not care what Easton thought but his words had cut me deeper than he let on. My mates were supposed to be

on my side and he thought I was some pretty, little rich omega with no brain or heart.

What I needed was some good news or a distraction. I slipped my phone out of my robe pocket and pulled up my omega group chat.

Tori: I slept like shit and my bodyguards are assholes. Someone give me some good news or something funny.

Kat: Bodyguards? I think I missed something.

Tori: Ellie, care to explain?

Ellie: Micah and I hired them for a month. I didn't like how this stalker was acting and Tori is annoyed with me. Are they really that bad?

Tori: I am... but I appreciate you looking out.

I chose not to give her more than that. It didn't matter if he was a dick as long as I was safe, right?

Ellie: Oh thank god. I've been a mess.

Ellie: [Sends Picture of Adelyn]

Ellie: Here, cute baby to make up for it

My face split into a grin at the sight of her cute, little smile. My mood perked up enough that I got up and started walking toward my coffee maker.

Then there was a soft thump outside of my door again. Ready for a fight this time, I hurried over and peered through the peephole. I didn't want to scream in Theo's face because of his friend if I could help it.



My blood turned to ice in my veins as I glanced at someone's back crouching in front of the door. The dark hair wasn't one of my bodyguards.

Fuck.

I froze, not wanting to make a sound and alert him to the fact that I was home. My breath caught in my lungs as I slid to the floor. My ears strained for any sound of his retreating steps.

Instead, something scratched against the bottom of the door. My eyes were wide and terrified as I glanced down at the small slip of paper. It was a receipt.

Did this fall from the trash? Was this already here and I was blowing this way out of proportion?

My eyebrows pulled down in confusion as I saw the hardware store's logo. I haven't been there since I arrived. I've never needed to.

Fuck... this isn't me being crazy. God, I wished it was.

Then I noticed ink bleeding through the paper on the back and my breath caught in my throat. My hands shook and a small whimper escaped me as I slowly turned the paper over in my hand.

*I'm always here*

To anyone else it might seem like a sweet note from a mate. But I knew this was no love letter.

He found me.

Fuck.

Something slammed against the door and dark laughter followed as I scrambled to my feet to look through the peep hole only to see the flash of a man before he rounded the corner.

I'd been so fucking close to him.

As I closed my eyes, I was struck by the sight of his scowling face and his hands tightening around my throat. He'd only gone as far as scaring the shit out of me but I knew if he

got his hands on me again, I might not make it through. My father was a narcissist who only cared about his own reputation and deals. I knew this had his name all over it.

The door next door slammed open and I saw my bodyguards rushing down the hall toward my door, though Easton and Jordan kept going.

“You there, Tori?” Theo asked gently enough I knew he saw me by the door from their security feeds.

I didn’t say anything until I’d opened the door. Theo’s face was the picture of sweet concern and just the sight of him had a half-sob escaping. I shoved the paper in his hand before rushing out of the room into my bedroom and closing the door behind me.

They didn’t get to see me break down. Not one of them had earned any of my vulnerability.

In fact, even with them near me every day, I had never felt more alone. They were a reminder that I’d chosen solitude and rejected my mate and they were doing the same to me.

What I needed was a night out.

A release.

I knew that Theo wouldn’t leave my apartment unlocked so I locked my bedroom door and slipped out of my comfy clothes. It had been too long since I’d done this so I took my time showering and shaving, putting a scented lotion over my skin, then finding the most revealing outfit I could get away with.

Felix was the only person keeping me from finding an alpha to go home with, but the others didn’t need to know that. Dancing and drinks were definitely a fine way to spend my night. Maybe I’d fucking sleep for once.

I settled on a little black dress and matching lace panties. It hid anything the general public shouldn’t see but also didn’t leave a whole lot to the imagination.

Reaching into the bottom of my closet I picked out a pair of black heels that wrapped around my ankles.

Voices drifted in as I sat down to do my makeup and I didn't even listen in as I brushed on my eyeshadow, eyeliner, blush, and mascara. One thing I had mastered was smokey eyes and when I glanced in my full-length mirror, I knew I looked hot as hell.

When my door opened three sets of eyes locked onto me and the heat in the room amped up an easy thirty degrees as shock turned to lust.

Good. Let them pine for me a bit after being assholes.

"I'm going out," I said as I walked past, my heels clicking loudly in the silence as I snagged my keys and tucked my wallet into my clutch.

"No, you aren't," Easton growled. "We're not following you to some fucking bar."

"Club," I corrected. "Then don't follow me. I don't need a cock-blocking asshole lurking over my shoulder."

His jaw clenched so hard I thought his teeth might break. He glared over at me and held up the slip of paper.

Nope. Not today. I'd had enough.

"What is this?" he demanded in a low growl.

"Your guess is as good as mine," I said, not willing to fight. "Lock up, will you?"

"You know we're coming, right?" Jordan asked, his voice a bit deeper than usual as he and Theo fell into step behind me.

"That doesn't bother me, but I won't be leaving alone," I warned them. It was a lie but they didn't need to know that.

"Excuse me?" Jordan asked, voice low and cold.

"I'm not sure what you expect," I said as I started for my car. They weren't going to drive me. "You got here, said this was all professional, and you want me to...what? Remain abstinent until you decide you want me?"

They both blinked at me but the guilt on Theo's face told me everything I needed to know. The guys were too stunned to fight as I got in the driver's seat and locked my car.

I was done being afraid and I was done waiting on alphas to decide my fate. This was my life and I was going to fucking own it.

It wasn't until I was backing out that they took off toward their black SUV at a run. I'd barely made it a block before the SUV was following behind me. They didn't let anyone cut between us the entire way to Lancaster.

It was only noon but I knew one club that would be open at six, I'd take my time shopping in town before then and they could just follow along.

Was I playing up the rich girl stereotype?

Absolutely.

If they wanted me to be some small-minded, rich girl, I'd give that to them. Then I'd go home with some single, handsome alpha, get fucked senseless, and then go back to normal life tomorrow.

Easton, apparently, had joined them at some point. He was waiting outside the third shop as I exited, a shopping bag in hand. His sneer grew even more like I had just confirmed everything he thought he knew about me.

Let him think the worst of me. At least then he could never get close enough to betray me.

I stopped in a sub shop and bought a sandwich, though the guys followed me in here. They all sat down around me, Easton glaring at me and the other two not meeting my eyes.

It had never been this awkward and I knew it was partially my fault. For an omega hellbent on not wanting a pack, I had let their standoffishness get to me.

I was punishing them, yes, but I was also punishing myself.

It was fucked up and guilt started to simmer under the surface.

Maybe I was taking this too far.

Then I looked up at Easton's stare full of venom and judgment and shoved all those soft thoughts aside.

If he wanted to play with fire, I would happily bring the gasoline.

Their frustration followed me right back to the club when it opened. The guys loomed behind me as I joined the growing line. They stood behind me as we finally reached the bouncer.

"Pretty omegas don't pay here," The alpha bouncer said as he flashed me a wolfish grin. I trailed my fingers over his chest as I passed and gave him a wink.

"Thank you," I purred before disappearing inside, holding back laughter at the guys' protests when he charged them full price.

The music was already thumping and the lights were low. It was packed inside full of omegas ready to let loose and packs hanging around waiting to shoot their shot.

I made a beeline for the bar. If I was really going to do this then I wanted some liquid courage to take the edge off. I knew once I gave in and took this step, made them think I'd find an alpha to go home with, it would change everything.

Was I willing to do this and actually let them in? I wasn't sure. Truthfully, I couldn't care less what Easton did.

Theo and Jordan, however... they were different. Just like I was giving Felix and Warren a chance, I wanted to give them one, too.

Maybe it was time to stop living in isolation and fear.

As if I summoned him with my thoughts alone, my phone went off and I saw his name flicker on the screen.

Felix: I was just thinking about you. Are you up for a date tonight? Warren and I would love to take you out.

Tori: Raincheck? I needed a night away from stress so I'm getting some drinks and dancing.

Felix: Absolutely. Let me know if you need a DD.

He was too sweet. After ordering my drink and finding a high table, I held my camera out, bit my lip, and took a photo of my outfit.

I sipped my cocktail as I watched the dots appear and disappear for a few minutes and I could almost picture my blushing omega mate battling with what to say to me.

Felix: Fuck, Tori. You look amazing.

Tori: How do you feel about me dancing alone tonight?

I was the one playing with fire this time. Maybe it was time to give in and let it consume me. Let them consume me.

Felix: I'd like it more if you were sandwiched between me and Warren. The feel of your curves grinding into me with each movement.

Tori: You have to stop

Felix: You go have fun. Be safe. I'll be looking at this picture all night.

Tori: Good.

With a shiver of anticipation, I downed the rest of my drink. The warmth was starting to spread through me. I had just made it to the bar when I saw the guys make it past the bouncer. He likely made them stay back thanks to Easton's shitty attitude.

Biting back my laughter I paid for my double shot and downed it, giving Easton a wink and heading for the dance floor.

He'd find me in seconds but I couldn't find it in me to care.

*Burn me alive, Easton, maybe for once I'll let you.*

## CHAPTER

# FIFTEEN

### *Jordan*

Tori was playing with fire.

There was enough attitude in that wink that I was ready to drop to my knees and worship her.

She was an entirely different person than the omega we saw that first day. Her fear was likely there under the surface still, but something had changed.

She pushed her way through the crowd, several alphas looking her way as she sauntered past. It took everything I had not to hover behind her and kill anyone who dared to look at my mate.

Though she made it clear that we'd lost the chance to call her that. My stomach churned at the thought. She belonged with us. Even Theo was growling as another alpha approached her, his hands skimming over her hips before she rejected him.

Tori may not want it, but she had the attention of all three of us on her, unwavering and full of venom.

There was no way this was going to end well for the alphas in this room.

Then she started to dance.

I was rock-hard in seconds as I watched her lose herself in the music. Her eyes closed, her cheeks were warm and pink with the buzz of alcohol, her inhibitions falling away as she let herself just feel.



There was a soft smile on her face as she threw her hands up and moved her body fluidly to match the beat.

What I wouldn't give to be out there on the dance floor with her, wrapping myself around my sexy mate.

I thought after the coffee, the interview, and the time we'd spent together that she was softening towards us.

Then she said those words as she walked out the door, reminding us of our place and pointed out the line that Easton had drawn for us in the sand.

He was fucking lucky I let him walk out of there unharmed after that.

Just that thought alone had my fists clenching at my sides for the millionth time in the last two days. My jaw was tight enough it felt like my teeth might crack but it was the only way I wasn't punching the man I'd once called a brother.

He made it clear he was here for the contract and nothing more, expecting us to fall in line.

We had far too much history to just walk away from him, but I had a feeling it was going to come down to us being happy with our scent match or us being forever miserable with him.

That wasn't a choice I wanted to make and one I wouldn't make lightly.

Yet, I knew my answer already.

I'd choose Tori every fucking time.

Tori wasn't the pampered socialite he thought she was. If he spent more than two seconds without fighting with her, he might be able to see that.

Easton had built up more defenses than anyone I knew. The walls around his emotions and his heart were so strong that no one could get through but us. That was only because we'd been through hell and back together. That was a bond that wasn't easily broken, and I didn't *want* to break it.

I just wanted him to come to his senses.

The three of us gathered around a table, watching our omega dance the night away. Despite her saying she wasn't leaving alone, she seemed to move away from every alpha, beta, and omega that tried to give her any sort of attention.

I also didn't miss the way her eyes cast our way, ensuring that we were still watching her.

Every second she was out there alone was torture. My entire being was calling out to her but I knew if I stepped over this line she'd push me further away. This dance we were doing was toxic and I was ready to end it.

She was getting frustrated by the constant interruptions. If she'd just let us come to her we'd solve that problem.

Her smile slowly slid away and she gave up with a huff, flipping off the last alpha before stalking to the bar. That was the last straw for me. I hurried over just as she ordered.

"Make that two," I said, sliding over my cash. "Keep the change."

She didn't meet my eyes right away. Her fingers wrapped around the shot glass before slamming it down.

"You were putting on a show for us, omega."

"No, I'm not," she countered. "I'm enjoying my night and letting loose for once. Now I'm leaving." Her words held a slight slur and I raised my eyebrows as she opened her clutch.

"If you think I'm going to let you drive out of here after having that much to drink, you've lost your fucking mind." I reached out and snatched her keys before she could protest.

"I'm sure I can find somebody to drive me home. Micah can help me pick up my car tomorrow."

There was a challenge in her eyes, and I knew instinctively that she wanted me to get angry, to refuse, to stake my claim. But it wasn't that fucking easy.

God, I wish it was.

Her shoulders sagged before she called over the bartender. "One more, please." She slammed her money down before I

could move and took the shot. She drank it down with a hiss before moving back into the crowd.

She was a storm of frustration and fury now. I made sure to stick close instead of letting her find solace in someone else and I had never despised myself more.

When we left, I intended to let Easton know that I was giving into her whether he wanted to or not. I wasn't going to pause my life for him anymore.

Our omega had enough to worry about between the words we'd overheard on the phone from her father and the stalker, yet here we were making her life harder. She didn't deserve that

Guilt bubbled under the surface and I swallowed it down as I focused on her. Instead of slinking off to our table I stood stoic behind her, glaring at anyone who dared approach her.

Bodies moved and shifted around me but I could care less. I'd be an inconvenience to the drunken dancers if it meant keeping her safe when she was feeling reckless.

My message was clear. She was mine.

If anyone put a hand on her, I wouldn't bother to hold back. My own frustration was too close to the surface.

When she finally spotted me and realized what I was doing, she let out a feral growl that went straight to my cock. Her eyes were fierce as she moved closer, shoving me with two hands on my chest. The alcohol had weakened her, and I just gripped her wrists, holding her close to me and looking down at her with a steely glare.

"Why are you hell-bent on ruining my life?" she demanded. "Haven't I dealt with enough, bullshit?"

"You have," I agreed. My honesty seemed to throw her for a loop, and she blinked up at me for a few minutes before she was pulling me down. I met her halfway, letting the heat build as I brushed my lips across hers but not giving in.

However, she wasn't letting me hide this time. Her fist tightened in my hair, forcing me closer before her mouth

devoured mine. This wasn't a sweet kiss, it was dominating, possessive, her staking a claim since I wouldn't do it myself.

Just as her tongue delved into my mouth, the taste of liquor and sweet cocktails on her tongue, I was ripped away from her. I'd let my defenses down enough that Easton got the drop on me, shoving me to the ground. I scrambled to my feet and put myself between the angry alpha and our mate.

Easton was so angry, his face contorted in betrayal and rage that he looked like a monster. He cocked his fist back to punch me, but I moved out of the way at the last second so he face-planted on the floor.

Easton cursed, the concrete was much less forgiving than flesh.

"You deserved that," I spit out, kicking him in the side to make sure he was down before taking Tori and dragging her away.

Theo was behind us, his eyes wild and uncertain as we walked outside. I knew it was only a matter of minutes before Easton was at our back, but I was not about to get kicked out of this club and bring more attention to Tori.

If her name held as much weight as I thought it did, that would only reach her father and cause more problems, or worse, reach the fake fiancé he'd set up for her.

We'd barely made it to the car when footsteps thundered behind us, the bouncer yelling and brushing his shoulder off where he'd been shoved into the wall.

Easton's nostrils were flaring like an angry bull, his head down as he stalked toward us. It would be intimidating if I didn't know him so well. My fists were up, waiting for him. If he wanted a fight, I'd fucking give him one.

"Get her out of here," I told Theo but he ignored me and put himself between us. Easton started to move around him and I shoved the beta gently toward our mate again. Thankfully, this time, he took the hint.

"I suggest you calm the fuck down, Easton," I said evenly as he came toe-to-toe with me. His face was so red that it was

starting to turn purple. In all our years, I don't think I'd ever seen him quite this angry.

"You knew the rules. What the fuck did you think you were doing?"

"Those were never our rules, Easton. They were yours," I countered. "What I do with my mate is *my* business. Not everything requires a fucking vote."

"It's all of our business," he growled. "You know where we stand."

"Again, I know where *you* stand. Don't turn this into a group decision when you made them alone without considering our thoughts."

The alpha was so far gone that he couldn't even see how badly he was tearing us apart—his own brothers, best friends, the ones who'd had his back his entire life.

"Enough of this. You're not fighting over me," Tori said, shoving me aside. It was surprisingly gentle for how angry she was. Easton's anger faded a fraction when she stepped between us.

"This has nothing to do with you, *princess*," he spat her nickname out like a curse, and I clenched my fists again, flexing them to stop myself from punching him and causing more damage.

"If it had nothing to do with me, then why are you saying 'princess' like that? Like it's the worst curse you could possibly think to call me?"

"That's because it is," he said with a dark chuckle as he stepped forward. "Why don't you just go run along to the fiancé that your father bought for you? Imagine being so pampered that you were handed everything in life and just expected us to fall at your feet like one of your money-bag suitors."

"I never asked you to, Easton," she growled. She was meeting him fire for fire, and damn, it was a sexy sight. It had every instinct in me ready to throw her over my shoulder and

take her home and... well, that probably wouldn't be a welcome reaction.

"I'm surprised you haven't called my father yet, told him exactly where I was," she said with a bitter laugh.

"That's not a bad idea, princess. I'm sure he'd pay more than whatever your siblings give us." His smile was wide and wicked.

"Fuck you, Easton. You're crossing too many lines. This is done."

"Oh, I'm sure he would," she said, ignoring me as tears started to track down her face. "There's always been a bounty on my head, and he's never afraid of making deals. The first deal was with a supposed fiancé. His business was worth more than my own safety, did you know that?"

Easton started to speak but she wasn't done yet, anger flaring even hotter as she continued, jabbing a finger in his chest with each new point.

"That same man broke into my apartment. Imagine my horror waking up to someone leaning in my face, telling me all the vile things he planned to do to me."

"Tori," Easton tried but she let out a growl.

"He also tried to do those things but alcohol made him slow and I managed to escape. Do you think my dad was going to protect me against that? No. In fact, that's who he's planning the wedding with—the same damn man."

Theo moved closer, hovering nearby but Easton had her full attention now and this gorgeous, beautiful, jaded omega was going to break him before she was done.

"Actually, you probably think just because my family had money that automatically means I deserved it, right? That I don't deserve the freedom to tell an alpha no. Money may have bought your protection, Easton, but I sure as fuck didn't have any before now and I don't want yours now."

"That's not what I said," Easton started, but his anger had faded into an awful shock. I had a feeling this wasn't over, that

he wasn't going to give in just like this because the man was too damn stubborn for his own good, but it felt like she was finally getting through to him.

“He’s also the same man that treated Ellie like crap our entire lives, the one who demanded that Micah turn out just like him. You can act like my life was full of privilege, but I can promise you that it was a prison. Money always comes with strings, and I was expected to dance because of it.”

“Tori,” Theo whispered, his voice as fractured as I felt at hearing the full brunt of her story.

“So, keep thinking I’m some weak, cheap princess who wouldn’t know how to appreciate anything in life. I’d rather be alone for the rest of my life than be with someone like you, Easton. You’re as bad as the alphas who have abused me my whole life. I don’t know why I thought you might be different.”

She turned to walk away, and Theo followed. Easton tried to fall into step, but I stepped in front of him, my eyes narrowing.

“I suggest you get in this car with me and we head home before you irreparably break everything we have.”

CHAPTER

SIXTEEN

*Tori*

Theo was steaming the entire way home, his hands gripping my steering wheel so tightly his knuckles were white.

I didn't know what to say, so I simply ignored it, staring out the window and letting him take the lead. If he had questions, I might answer them, it seemed the alcohol loosened my lips far more than I meant for it to. Otherwise, I was content to let my silent tears fall.

The moment we arrived, he ushered me upstairs, put me inside my apartment, and locked the door behind me with a hasty goodnight.

The sting of rejection had fresh tears forming in my eyes. I just poured my heart out to them, and this is what I got.

My stomach turned when voices started in the next room. A few minutes later, their screams echoed through the floor. I caught my name, and I heard something smash. If they weren't careful they were going to have the cops called on them soon.

The fight had raged on long enough I was ready to scream.

I hated the sound of it. It was a rift I'd brought between them, yet I knew it wasn't truly my fault.

Another scream of anger and smash had my hurt and frustration turning to fear. My hands shook as I pulled out my phone. It wasn't my mates that I was afraid of, but the sound of their yelling, mixing with the drinks in my body, and the



vulnerability that I just displayed on that sidewalk, were all starting to make me shut down.

I didn't want that. Not again.

"Hello," Felix's voice was worried when I let out a shaky breath, unable to give him a simple hello. "Hey, what's going on? Where are you?"

I heard Warren in the background but couldn't make out what he said.

"Can you come over? I don't want to be alone." My voice was barely more than a whisper.

"Yeah, of course," he promised. "Alone, or should I bring Warren?"

I hesitated. The thought of having an alpha here had me curling in on myself again.

"I'm not ready."

"I respect that," Warren said, "but I am going to drive Felix over there. It's late."

That sweet sentiment alone was enough to break down a few more of my walls. I wanted to let Warren in. I already knew that we were compatible personality-wise. We'd already fucked before and were compatible in a lot of ways.

I just had to let go of my trauma and stress, and tonight was not that night.

I'd make it up to him later.

"Give me ten minutes, and I'll be there," Felix said before we ended the call.

They were the longest ten minutes of my life as I sat there listening to the angry growls back and forth next door. The walls were too thin to keep the noise out, though, I couldn't make out their words.

I stood frozen in place in the middle of my kitchen, waiting for Felix to get here.

In hindsight, I could have called my brother, my sister, any one of their pack, but it was my own mate that I wanted this time.

If that wasn't progress, I didn't know what was.

The moment I heard his soft voice on the other side of the door, I was yanking it open and pulling him inside. Warren was on the other side, looking conflicted. I tensed when he stepped forward, but he simply placed a kiss on my forehead.

“Whatever it is, Tori, I know you're strong, and if you need me, I'm a phone call away,” he promised in a calming voice. His sea salt and sandalwood scent wafted over me, and I breathed it in, committing it to memory.

When I opened my eyes, he was already walking away, though his steps were slow, like he was forcing himself to leave.

“He'll be okay,” Felix promised as he pulled me inside, locking the door behind us. “What's going on, Tori?”

One look into his soft hazel eyes and the sweet scent of his oranges, vanilla, and cream was all it took for me to break down.

I told Felix everything. In a way, I was trauma dumping, but I desperately needed all the vulnerability out at once.

He didn't say a word as I told him about my dad, William, the creepy notes and flower petals, the confrontation tonight, Easton's reaction to me, the confusing back and forth between Easton and Jordan, my hesitation with Warren, and the guilt that consumed me because of it.

When I finished speaking, my throat was raw, and my tears had dried. I started to sag but Felix was there to catch me. He gently guided me to the sofa.

As an omega himself, he easily started tucking me into all the soft things I had around, from pillows to fluffy blankets, even going as far as kicking on the small heater in the room.

Even with all of this surrounding me, and him, it wasn't what I wanted. My nest would be my first choice but I

couldn't make myself go in there. It didn't smell like any of my mates.

Because even though my heart was shattered and I knew they didn't want me... my omega still couldn't find peace without them.

“Everything will work out, Tori. It has to. This is fate.”

There was enough conviction in his tone that I clung to his optimism. I tried to believe it with everything I had in me. It was the only way to get through this.

He let out a sad sigh before going to my kitchen. He was in there long enough that I started to worry. Until the rich scent of cocoa filled the air.

He wasn't offering me a bunch of false promises or telling me he was going to fix it. He simply had faith that things would work out.

Instead, he was doing everything he could to make me comfortable. Was this what it felt like to be taken care of? Someone to exist with you so you didn't have to feel so alone?

The voices picked up next door before a door slammed. Felix and I shared a look and he moved to the door, standing vigil since someone was stomping our way.

We waited for the knock but it never came. Finally, there was a soft thud and Jordan's soft voice drifted through the thick wood.

“Tori, please let me in. I just need to see that you're okay.”

Felix looked at me, mouthing the word so Jordan couldn't hear them.

“Do you want me to tell him you're asleep?”

“No,” because apparently, I was a masochist. I wanted to know if they were rejecting me, if they were giving in to Easton's demands. More than that, I was curious about how things were going to play out. “Let him in.”

Felix studied me for a second like he wanted to argue but eventually turned and pulled the door open, stepping out of the

way so Jordan could storm past.

He didn't give him a second look until he was a few steps away and they both froze.

"Wait," Felix said, breathing in deeply. He turned toward me as his mouth fell open in shock.

Jordan was so thrown off that he didn't even bother to close the door. It wasn't until I heard Easton's voice raise that he snapped out of it, locking the door behind him and looking from Felix to me.

"Two mates..." he breathed out the words in a soft, reverent voice. It seemed almost lighter than his usual tone, lacking the gravel that he usually had.

"Well, this is unexpected," Felix said, letting out a heavy breath and coming to my side. I lifted the blanket so he could snuggle in next to me. His hand twisted in the edge of the blanket and I knew he was worried about what that could mean for us all.

"You guys are mates?"

"I don't know how I missed it. We were all at the flower shop... maybe all of the floral scents mixing in masked it," Felix said more to himself than me. I never even stopped to consider the fact that Felix was an omega like me, that he would need an alpha just the same as I would.

It was rare to have two omegas in one group. I guess I always assumed Warren was his alpha. Maybe it was stupid to think platonic alphas could be a thing.

"This complicates things," Jordan said heavily as reality kicked in. He dropped down on the coffee table in front of us so he could face us both.

"I've already told him everything. He's up to date," I admitted.

Jordan's eyes widened. "You opened up to him without a fight?"

"He's an omega, and he hasn't lied to me or treated me like less. Ever."

Felix's temper flared at my words and he leaned in, snapping him out of his shocked trance as he gave Jordan the full brunt of his indignant fury.

“Why are you allowing anyone to talk to our mate like that? The things she told me? I'm ready to go punch that alpha in the face myself. Yet you, another Alpha, didn't feel the need to step in to stop this? To make sure she knew how you felt and weren't going to cast her aside like trash because he was too stubborn to care about anyone but himself?”

“You have no idea what you're saying. It's not like that.” Jordan was way too defensive. It was a clear sign he'd already been feeling guilty over this.

“It looks that simple to me,” Felix said, raising an eyebrow and crossing his arms. “Please, enlighten me. Tell me why it's so hard for you to do what's right.”

I swallowed hard and I wanted to stop him, but part of me was ready to hear this answer myself. Jordan needed to tell me why I wasn't worth fighting for. How could I move on or accept it if he wasn't going to be up front about how he felt?

“It's not that you weren't worth fighting for,” he said, rubbing a hand over his eyebrow like a headache was starting to form. “There's just so much history with Easton. There's so much shit we've all survived together that cutting him out feels like cutting off a limb. At first, we thought that it would be better for you if you didn't have us in your life. We were all a mess, barely able to live without the rigid schedule we were used to, and a past that liked to haunt us. Then we started to get to know you and things are changing. Theo and I are fighting his stupid ‘keeping our distance’ rules, but he's...”

*Stubborn. An asshole?*

“Is that what the yelling was about?” I questioned.

“Mostly,” he agreed, flexing his fingers. They were bruised and bloody. I had a feeling that Easton would be sporting a new black eye. Honestly, I was a little surprised that Jordan wasn't if that was the case.

“I think you got through to him tonight, but there’s still so much of him that’s afraid to let you in. In all our years together he’s never let a single person get close.”

“Escaped what?” Felix asked.

“None of us came from a good neighborhood. Theo was dismissed, treated like a servant and abused if he did any slight wrong or if they even assumed he did. My parents were addicts. They didn’t give a fuck about anything except their next high. But Easton still had it the worst. He had a single mom, and you can imagine the company she kept to support her drug and alcohol habits.”

My stomach dropped as he went into detail about some of the horrors they’d all lived through. Felix’s fingers found mine, wrapping around them in silent support.

“That’s terrible, and I understand that it would be hard to let people in. Maybe it’s not my place to say since my parents were nothing like that, but when you want a better life—”

“I do, more than anything,” Jordan rushed in to say. The conviction in his tone brought fresh tears to my eyes. “I want you, Tori. At first, it seemed like we all wanted to keep things unsaid. You seemed so fragile and scared and it was just easier to focus on your safety. But something’s changed in you and I was too blind to see it.”

“I’ve changed,” I said. “I’ve been surrounded by all these people that are supposed to be my mates, and Felix was honestly the only one I didn’t want to push away. He was safe because he’s an omega, but more than that, I knew he wasn’t going to intimidate me or use me, he gave me space. He gave me the space to be myself and it felt good... freeing.”

“He made it easier for you to let us in,” Jordan said in a quiet whisper. “Maybe that’s why I’m not freaking out about finding a second mate right now. How is this evening going to work with two omegas?”

“Two omegas that are together,” Felix corrected. “Why does everyone assume omegas are going to get territorial of their fated mates? We were put together for a reason. She and I

will have a relationship just like you two will and we will. It may take some communication, which I know seems to be hard for you guys,” Felix said drily. “But if we want it to work, it will.”

Jordan’s jaw tensed as his phone buzzed in his pocket.

“Don’t go back,” I pleaded. “They know where you are.”

‘I need you,’ was left unsaid.

His stormy, gray eyes met mine before flickering to Felix. There was hesitance at first, but then acceptance and something that looked like hope. It may be fragile and new, but it was there.

“Okay,” he said, tossing his phone on the coffee table.

“Then stop sitting there like a statue and join us,” Felix challenged. “We don’t bite unless you’re into that sort of thing.”

A soft smile drifted across Jordan’s stoic face, and he shook his head. “I’m in trouble, aren’t I?”

Felix stifled a laugh. “Oh, definitely. But you’re also a lucky bastard, our mate is forgiving.”

Jordan nodded in agreement and looked into my eyes. His gray orbs were swirling with regret and I couldn’t look away. He pulled me in and I wanted nothing more than to curl up in his lap. It was hard to hold it against him when I had to come to terms with my own trauma in a similar way.

He was listening and he was here. That was exactly what I was asking for.

Jordan stood then and stared pointedly at us. When neither of us moved, he shifted the blankets from our laps and lifted Felix as if he were as light as a feather, putting space between us. I started to protest, but he dropped into that space, putting himself in the middle of his two omegas.

“What are we doing now?” he asked, as if he was unsure for the first time in his life and didn’t know how to take it.

“Watching a movie,” Felix decided, reaching across us both for the remotes on my side table. I watched as Jordan breathed in, his eyes almost dazed when the omega moved away again. I bit back a smile. It was nice to watch them discovering each other for the first time and as long as we were all happy, then I couldn’t complain.



## CHAPTER

# SEVENTEEN

### *Theo*

**M**y fingers were gliding over the sketchbook, charcoal smudging my skin as my eyes flickered back and forth between the page and the sleeping omega. She was snuggled on the couch, Jordan next to her with a man's head in his lap.

The argument had left me exhausted. We could see that her words had gotten to him but he was holding steadfast to his decision to keep his distance. He refused to give her a chance to prove that she wasn't some entitled omega.

If we left him to his own devices, that man would deny wanting her to his dying breath, living a life alone and miserable. We all deserved better than that. Hell, he deserved better, though he was too damn stubborn to see it.

When I left our apartment to spend the night with Tori and Jordan, I never expected to find them on the couch with the omega from the flower shop, one of Tori's other mates.

I didn't even realize Jordan was into guys, but then again, it had never really come up. We'd avoided mate and relationship talk until now.

This entire ordeal was showing the fractures that had been under the surface and it was a devastating sight to see.

My eyes flickered back to the page as I continued the scene before me, adding in Jordan's sleep softened face and his possessive hand on each of them. The touch was familiar

and told me the story they hadn't said yet: that they'd found mates within each other.

It made sense.

He was a bridge between her other mates and us. Fate had a way of twining us together in packs, ensuring that it was a cohesive group.

Right now, our pack was more than a little complicated.

If you could even call us a pack.

My brothers and I were at war and our omega barely trusted us. I thought we were building something but now I wasn't so sure.

Her words from last night still stung, though they weren't wrong. She deserved better than we've been giving. It was the wake-up call I needed.

Easton had turned toxic and volatile. I'd never seen him act like he did last night and I was done holding myself back for an alpha hellbent on his own destruction.

It was time to stand on my own two feet.

I'd depended on him when I was a child, and we'd all depended on each other to get to this point in our lives. But now, I needed to make my own decisions that weren't clouded by his trauma.

The male omega was the first to stir. He shifted first, snuggling in, and then stiffened as if he realized who he was sleeping on. My gaze shifted to him, watching to see how he'd react.

"I'm not asleep anymore," Jordan said without bothering to crack his eyes open.

"It's way too early for this," Tori groaned.

That brought a chuckle out of Jordan, and he finally opened his eyes.

"Too many shots last night?" he teased.

“Maybe,” she mumbled, burrowing under the blanket and covering her head.

“I’ll go get breakfast,” Felix offered. “There’s a smoothie place in town that can get you over a hangover pretty fast.”

“I’ll come with,” Jordan said quickly, before turning my way. “Are you staying here with her?”

“Yes,” I said. He stood up, stretching out his tired back, before giving me his attention again. I knew what he was going to ask before he even opened his mouth, so I gave him an answer. “Still just as stubborn. I think some things managed to make it through his thick skull but he was still holding tight to our supposed betrayal.”

Tori let out a bitter laugh and shook her head but said nothing. Felix pulled back her blanket to brush a kiss over her lips before tucking her back in.

“Anything I should know before we get you food?” Felix asked.

“I’m not picky,” she promised. “No allergies.”

“We’ll be back,” Jordan said, giving her head a kiss before he led Felix out, his hand resting on the omega’s lower back. Without the complication of business in place, it seemed he was a little more open with his new mate. I wondered if Tori would be jealous about the ease between them.

Or maybe, like me, he came to the conclusion that there was no point in holding back anymore. We all knew what we wanted. We just had to be adult enough to fucking talk about it.

Even without being able to see Tori, I knew her face well enough. I could close my eyes and picture it, so I continued on with my sketch, adding a bit of shading under her eyes and making her lips just a little more plump. The small nuances she had that I hadn’t realized I’d committed to memory so easily over the past few weeks.

I’d fallen into my art trance and didn’t notice her shifting the blanket down and crawling to the end of the couch where I was perched. When her scent filled my nose, I looked over to

find her watching the paper, eyes wide with shock. I breathed in her grapefruit and champagne scent as she studied the page, her green eyes wide.

No one had seen this book before, not even my brothers. Yet, I didn't want to pull it away, I wanted to share this piece of me without questioning it.

"You're so talented," she breathed out. "This makes me look so peaceful and beautiful."

"You say it as if it's a surprise," I said, my voice low in the peace of this moment with her.

"I wasn't sure you thought that way, and honestly, nobody's ever made me feel that way."

"That's a tragedy," I said with pure conviction in my tone. When she looked up, I put one finger on her chin so she couldn't look away from me. "Tori, you are the most gorgeous woman that I've ever laid eyes on. I'm sorry that I let him come between us, and that won't happen again. He can dig his own way out, but as for me, I'm going to tell your sister and brother to keep their money. I don't need to be paid to keep you safe."

"No, keep the job. It's only for thirty days," she argued. "They hired you for a reason, and you've done more than enough to earn that."

"I don't want anything between us anymore," I argued. "I want you, Tori, more than I've ever wanted anything in my entire life."

She chewed on her lip but didn't say anything right away, and I gave her that space to think. When she spoke, she kept her eyes on me. It was hard to focus on her words when I was captivated by this blonde bombshell. She was gorgeous and had so much strength.

"I'm sorry that I dumped all of that on you guys last night. It wasn't my intention to just give you every bit of my trauma without holding back."

"I have a feeling you held back plenty of details. Don't apologize. I have no regrets in knowing more about you, Tori."

You broke down the last barriers that business and brotherhood built between us. I'm grateful for that."

We shared a small smile before she snuggled back into the soft couch. Now that she was watching me, it felt strange to sketch her, so I shifted the page instead, going back to the forest I've been working on for days. I'd needed the tranquility.

"Is that a specific place?" she questioned. I don't even think she realized that her hand was resting on my thigh now. The warmth of the touch burned right through the sweatpants I was wearing and right into my soul. Her touch made me feel grounded in a way I'd never felt before.

"The only reprieve I ever got in childhood was when I'd go visit my grandparents. They didn't care that I was just a beta, and they were some of my only good memories. They owned property that was lined with woods. This clearing was tucked in the trees, far enough the sound of civilization was lost but close enough to hear my grandma call for me. It always felt like my secret spot."

My finger skimmed lightly over the page, and I tapped the center.

"Just beyond this huge, gnarled tree is a bridge and a small creek. It was so quiet there. I'd lose myself in the scent of the forest surrounding me, the soft flow of the water, the warmth of the summer. There, it felt like I was untouchable."

"I had a place like that," she admitted. "In my parents' house, it felt like nothing was ever mine. My father was quick to remind us of our place. He said he gave us everything and he could easily take it away. Everything came with a price, from the food we consumed to the school he paid for and then yanked away."

"He's a bastard," I offered. She let out a soft chuckle but didn't argue.

"One summer, my dad had taken Micah on a trip to Europe. Ellie, of course, didn't get to go, but she was always her own person. She would study, determined to get out of

there. She was always so smart. Me... I was just jealous and sad. My mom was nowhere to be found, Ellie was always closer to my grandpa. I felt like I had no one.”

“Do they know?”

“My siblings? No. They were there when they could be but they had their own stuff to work through.”

“I’m sorry,” I said, my fingers running through her blonde hair and tucking it behind her ear. Her eyes closed but she continued her story in that soft, melodic voice of hers.

“I was shocked when my grandfather came to check on me. I realized that I’d been the one holding back. He was so happy when I let him in and we started talking. He told me stories about when he was a kid and how he’d hide away in his closet. My room was his room growing up.”

“So, it wasn’t even your father’s house.” What an asshole.

“It was. My grandparents left it to him. That was the last summer I had with my grandpa, actually. After he told me the story of hiding away in the secret attic above my room, I couldn’t let it go. I searched every corner, every panel in the wall, and then finally I found it. It wasn’t in the ceiling of my closet, but behind all the clothes. I yanked everything out of the way until I could find the door. There was a small notch in the wood and when I tugged I found a staircase.”

She was so beautiful when she spoke. The smile on her face was wistful, and she looked truly at peace as she relived one of her few happy memories. I had a feeling she felt that same calm that I did when I thought about the forest.

“It was dusty and dirty up there, but there were pictures on the walls. Old toys and books lined the dusty shelves. It was full of history and I spent weeks exploring it.”

“I love that,” I told her. “Did you not have a nest in that house?”

“No,” she admitted. “He said it made omegas weak, and we’d get that privilege if we found a good pack.”

“Do you have one here?” I asked. These apartments were fairly small, if she did it was likely tiny.

“Kind of,” she said with a shrug like it didn’t matter. “I just keep cozy things everywhere in my apartment. I’ve never wanted alphas around for a heat, so I’ve never really ridden one out. I take suppressors.” The way her cheeks heated had me wondering if she did have one and had just never finished it.

“After all you’ve told us, I can’t blame you. I can’t get your words out of my head. I just want to hunt this bastard down and end him for ever messing with you.”

“My dad? Or William, my supposed fiancé?” she questioned with a quick, dark laugh. It was lacking humor and warmth, and it felt wrong falling from her lips.

“William,” I said. “Your dad, too, for not protecting you. But that alpha should have known better than to break into your place. He did it on purpose. He knew that it was your safe space, and he wanted to shatter that to make sure you understood that he gave you whatever he wanted and nothing more, nothing less.”

“I’d rather die than marry him,” Tori admitted in a quiet voice.

“He’ll never get close to you again, I promise.”

“What happens when these thirty days are up?” she asked instead.

“Easton may leave, he may stay, but I won’t be going anywhere, Tori.”

## CHAPTER

# EIGHTEEN

### *Tori*

Things were different today. As I was sitting there talking to Theo about my safe space as a kid and watching him draw his own, I realized we weren't holding back from each other anymore.

Maybe they hadn't spilled everything about their past like I had, but I knew it would come in time.

At least I knew the bulk of their issues, just not all of the little details.

What I did know broke my heart.

Warren had come from a similar situation. He'd mentioned being in foster care and now I knew it was Felix's family that took him in.

Just the thought of Warren had my stomach churning. I realized that I wanted him here, too.

Something in me had broken last night, but today, I was ready to mend it

Last night, I'd called Felix, desperate to have someone here with me. Even when I didn't want an alpha around, Warren had shown up without hesitation. Not just that, but he respected my boundary. He didn't love it, but he still left because he knew that's what I needed.

That was huge.



Then Jordan came over, and everything unfolded between him and Felix.

Now that they'd left, I let myself absorb that knowledge and sit with it. There was no jealousy or fear. Instead, I was relieved. It was nice to not be the only omega in the mix. Knowing that I wouldn't be the sole focus of our entire pack because their relationship would be just as important as mine, was like taking a weight off of me.

I'd come home last night feeling more lonely than I ever had before, but in a few short hours, it all faded away.

Felix proved time and time again that he wasn't going anywhere, and Warren was trying his best to respect my boundaries while also making sure I felt like I mattered.

Fuck, I really needed to fix things with him, to explain things so he understood.

The guys came back with their arms loaded with greasy food and healthy smoothies. It was the perfect combination for the hangover.

After a few pain pills, I was feeling human again. Things still felt a bit shaky between us all, as if there was a tentative peace and we were unsure when the ogre next door would come stumbling back over.

To his credit, Easton kept his distance.

The thought of him sitting alone in his apartment, angry and letting his own thoughts beat him up, broke my heart.

"You doing okay?" Jordan asked, his voice low and soft. Felix and Theo were arguing over some TV shows that they were scrolling through, and I had been so lost in my head I hadn't even realized he wasn't joining in.

"I'm okay, I promise."

Of course, my body chose to give me away, my eyes flickering to the wall between our apartments. Jordan gave me a sad smile and ran his fingers down my arm in reassurance. Those gray eyes were full of pain and frustration, but most of all sadness.

“It’s never been your fault, Tori. Easton has a lot to work through, and it’s not like he hasn’t had the opportunity. He just doesn’t know how to let go of things. That armor of his that he thinks is saving him from so much, just makes him miss out on life.”

“I’m the last person to force anyone to do anything they don’t want to do,” I warned him. “I won’t beg. He has to want this to fix this.”

“You shouldn’t. It’s on him.”

“Speaking of mates,” I said with a sigh. “I’m going to go take a shower, and then could somebody give me a ride over to Warren?”

“Really?” Felix asked, his eyes lighting up.

“Yeah, just let me talk to him alone first.”

“Of course,” Felix said, no hint of hesitation on his face. The way he trusted me so sincerely was humbling. Felix was everything I didn’t know I was missing in a companion. He was compassionate and sweet, calming, and he brought a gentle optimism that I’d lost too long ago.

Twenty minutes later, I was showered, dressed, and my hands were nervously twisting in my lap as Felix and Jordan drove me across town. Theo chose to stay behind, facing off with Easton and taking a shower of his own.

My phone started ringing before we arrived. I expected to see Warren calling to check in, but it was my brother. Both of my siblings had backed off when they realized I was forced to live next to my mates. Brats. They knew exactly what they were doing.

“Hey, Micah, what’s up?” I asked.

“Hey, little sister,” he sang out in that chipper voice he always had. How Micah kept his sweet and outgoing side while trying to live up to my father’s standards was beyond me, but I loved that about him. “My mate wants to have a word with you.”

“Hello,” Shaye said quickly, taking the phone. She never struck me as the enthusiastic type, but right now, her voice was dripping with excitement.

“What are you up to?” I asked, suddenly a bit nervous. She was way too happy right now.

“Listen, Lake and I stumbled across something. I really need to show it to you in person. Are you free today?”

I hesitated because I really needed to do this with Warren, but curiosity was also pulling me.

“Okay, I can tell you’re not. It’s okay. Tomorrow, ten a.m. sharp. Wear boots you can hike in.”

“What the hell do you think you’re dragging me to?” I demanded with a laugh. “You do know I’m not exactly the hiking type, right?”

“I do,” she promised. “It’ll be worth it. Just trust me.”

“Fine, send me the details. I probably won’t be alone,” I said, looking up at both the men in the car with me. They both nodded their heads, as if that was a given.

“Oh, I see we have some catching up to do,” she said. “I’ll send the details over and I’m hanging up before you can ask me any more questions. Bye.”

“I’ll have to be at the shop tomorrow, but I’m sure the others will be with you.” He gave Jordan the stink eye, making sure I had someone to go with when he couldn’t. Felix had claws and I loved it. He reminded me of a cat. Sweet and cute on the outside but vicious if provoked.

“You know it,” Jordan said. “Until we figure things out with this ex-fiancé, you’re not going anywhere alone, princess.”

Just hearing the nickname froze me in place. Felix tensed next to him at first but relaxed when I did. Hearing it from Jordan’s mouth with a soft edge actually made me like it. It felt like he was taking the power away from Easton completely, and that was something I could get behind.

We pulled up outside of Felix's shop and my anxiety amped up even more. He gave me an encouraging smile as he unlocked the door and pulled me inside. Felix showed me to the back stairs and pointed at the door at the top before heading back to the front to wait with Jordan.

My hand hovered above the door before I finally managed to knock.

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### *Warren*

A POUNDING on the door had me dropping the remote from my hand. I didn't even know what was on the TV at this point. I'd stopped paying attention the moment I chose a show to binge.

My mind had been on Felix and our mate. He'd checked in a few times, but I needed more than a text. I was going crazy over here.

What I didn't expect was to open the door to find her standing on the other side.

"Tori," I breathed out, almost as if I was afraid she'd disappear if I said it any louder.

"Can we talk?"

There was something in her face that told me there was only one right answer here. Not that I would have said anything else. I'd give this girl the world if she'd let me.

"Of course," I said. "Come in."

I stepped aside and let her into the apartment. Instead of talking, she glanced around, taking in Felix's space. It was small but cozy. The omega knew how to make a home.

"He's organized, isn't he?" she chuckled to herself. Everything was meticulously in its place, but it was also full of life: pictures of the two of us, plants, and art everywhere you looked. He was never one for bare walls.

"Why are you here, Tori? Is everything okay?"

Her shoulders slumped, and I had to fight the urge to reach out for my mate. All I wanted was to hold her close and help

her realize how strong she truly was.

“I need to get this out, and I need you to not interrupt me, otherwise, I don’t know if I can keep going,” she said in a rush. She was starting to pace, so I just sat on the couch, waiting for her to continue, refusing to break the moment.

Hope swelled in me. She wasn’t angry or hurt, she was almost manic in her need to speak and I was taking that as a good sign.

Tori shot me a relieved smile at my silence. That was the last time Tori gave me the view of those pretty green eyes. She started talking and didn’t stop.

My mouth dropped open in horror as she began her story. She continued outlining everything her father had done and then the real reason behind the bodyguards. The attempted breaking in, someone creeping in at night—everything had me ready to join the hunt.

She’d carried so much alone and I hated that she felt she had to. The alphas in her life had failed her.

“I’m sorry for giving it to you like this. I feel like that’s all I’ve been doing lately is dumping on you guys the truth so you understand why I am the way I am. I won’t say that it’s an excuse, but it is a reason. It’s the reason I hold myself back. It’s the reason I have a genuine fear of alphas. Sometimes I wake up, and I expect him to be hovering over me like he was that night.”

She looked up at me finally and my heart shattered even further at the look of desperation in her eyes. She needed me to listen, to absorb, and most of all to forgive her.

“I know that you wouldn’t do that to me now, Warren. And I think I knew it then, but I just needed time. You gave me that eventually, and I’m thankful for that. Felix has helped me see that not all mates are terrifying, and his trust and yours helped me find it, too. But last night, that you were willing to walk away from me to give me what I needed...”

There was no need for apologies or even thanking me for being a decent human. I never held it against her for protecting

herself. In fact, I was so damn proud of her for being able to do that.

“Will you let me take you on a date and give me a chance to make this up to you?” she begged.

I had a feeling this wasn't about who paid for the meal or who made the plans, it was about her needing me to let her take the lead.

“I'd love to.”

Her whole face transformed, turning the look of worry into a bright smile. She was moving before she even realized it. Her steps faltered just within reach, my hands already hovering over her hips, itching to pull her close.

But I needed her to choose this. All of it.

Tori studied me for a second, gauging my reaction, before giving in. She took those final steps and I finally let myself touch her.

My fingers wrapped around her slender hips and I tugged her close, pressing my lips to hers.

She tasted so sweet and her sigh of relief was even more so. Having her hands on my chest and the scent of her enveloping me was intoxicating.

The kiss was slow, purposeful, and explorative, a testing of boundaries. It was so many things all rolled into one, and I sank into every single one, just living in the moment and breathing in my mate—the mate that I thought had walked away from me forever. The one who'd always had my heart from that very first moment I watched her smile at me.

Now she was in my arms, and I almost couldn't believe it. I didn't want to do anything to ruin the moment or have her pull away from me again.

She slowed down the kiss, as if she understood where my head was.

“I promise not to run away again,” she said, resting her forehead against mine as we tried to catch our breath. “It

wasn't fair of me, and you deserve better than that. I'm so sorry."

*It's okay* was on the tip of my tongue. But there was no way I could say the words and mean them. Instead, I simply said the words we both needed to hear.

"I forgive you. I want this, I promise," I said before pulling her back down gently for a kiss.

Her cheeks were flushed, her lips puffy from our kissing, and she was biting back a smile as she stepped away.

Then she held a hand out for me. I didn't even need to know where she was taking me, it didn't matter. I'd follow this Omega anywhere.

## CHAPTER

# NINETEEN

### *Tori*

“**W**here are we going?” I asked Shaye as I stumbled behind her and Lake. “I’m not really one for hiking. I’m not even surprised Micah skipped out on me. Brat.”

I started to trip but Easton was already on my heels. He reached out and let out a grunt of annoyance as he put me on more solid ground.

“It was a tree root,” I huffed, eyes narrowing. Everything I did seemed to annoy this asshole.

“Go, princess, we’re going to lose daylight at this rate,” he ordered in that deep rumble of his. How could someone that sounded so appealing be such a dick?

“Stop being a jerk,” Shaye growled as she reached back and snatched my hand, pulling me to walk between her and Lake.

At least I wasn’t the only one who noticed the way he acted. He didn’t bother to mutter a false apology, instead staying quiet as we rounded a few more trees.

“There’s got to be an access road somewhere but it’s long overgrown,” Lake said as he offered me a kind smile. “Don’t worry, little sister, we’ll kick his ass if we have to.”

“I’d like to see you try,” Easton growled. It only made Lake’s smile widen.



“We have Riv on our side,” Shaye said in a sing-song voice. I wouldn’t count us out yet.”

“Forgive him, he never learned manners,” Theo said before hissing something at his friend. They argued quietly back and forth behind us while Jordan watched on, but I ignored everything as we made it past the hill and I saw exactly what she was getting at.

“Look at it!” Shaye said with a flourish of her hands. “You were talking about your degree last girls’ night and then we were exploring the woods and stumbled across this. It all seemed a bit like fate.”

I was at a loss for words as I took in the building nature was trying its best to reclaim.

The siding was faded from years of abandonment and the overgrowth around it made it almost impossible to take in the full building.

“What was it?” I asked as I pulled out my phone and took a picture of it from back here before hurrying down the hill. There was a faded sign just under the sconce on the wall. I pulled away the thin vines choking it until I could read.

“Shady Oaks Inn,” I read out in a hushed whisper. It felt like I was intruding on something unseen and I found myself taking soft steps and trying not to make noise as if I’d disturb anything that had claimed this place.

Maybe it was haunted. That could be a good gimmick.

“There’s an old in-ground pool out back and a small gardener’s cottage. It even has a tree house area for kids,” Lake said. “Come this way.”

It was easy to forget about my angry shadow as I lost myself in the magic of their discovery.

“Oh my god, stables,” I gasped as I ignored Lake’s tour and veered off to the right. The bushes outside had almost hidden it from view but the fencing of the large corral was easy to see.

My footsteps squished on the soft moss as I stepped into the cover of the trees and searched for an entrance. It was so quiet here it was easy to forget we were only about twenty minutes outside of Lockwood.

The door was left open and I started to pull it open but it wouldn't budge. My hands ached as I clutched at the rough wood and put all my weight into it but I wasn't giving up.

Finally, it gave way just enough to slip inside.

The guys wouldn't fit, but honestly that was a bonus. Easton could get lost for all I cared.

"Get your ass out here, princess, you don't know what's in there," Easton yelled out, disturbing a flock of birds nearby that rushed off in a flurry of wings and squawks.

"I'm good where I am," I said evenly as I stepped over some fallen equipment to the stalls. My fingers ran gingerly over the bronze name plates outside of each one. River, Valley, Sunny, and Morning Dew. They'd gone for nature names.

Past the stalls I found myself in an equipment room. There was a scattered desk with equipment logs and a few faded pictures of the inn in its prime. I took a few more photos before making my way back outside.

I couldn't help but wonder what happened to this place. It felt like one day it was all abandoned. How had no one come for anything other than the animals? What happened here?

When I stepped back outside I ignored the glares coming my way and went toward the smiles Lake and Shaye were giving me. She knew what this place would mean to me and was letting me soak it all in at my pace. She was a true friend.

"Just wait, it keeps getting better," Shaye said. "I can already see you turning this into something amazing."

"Maybe," I mused, not quite able to let myself cling to that hope just yet.

"Don't get too close to the edge, there's some nasty water in there," Lake warned me as I stepped up, his arm stretched

out to stop me and his mate from tumbling in. My tripping on the walk wasn't helping his obvious anxiety.

Again it was like time froze the grounds. The grass was tall, the pool still held some water and was now an entire ecosystem of frogs and a few other things I didn't want to think too hard about.

Statues were covered in grass, vines, and dirt, making it seem as if they sprouted from the earth itself. The fountain was long dried but still intact.

"I think all of the windows survived," Theo said softly beside me. I nearly jumped but stopped myself and nodded in agreement as I stared up at the tall building. It was two floors and possibly an attic.

"That's good, maybe it won't be overrun inside," I said with a grin. His eyes were locked onto me, holding me in place as he moved closer to my side, his warmth seeping into my skin like a caress. Out here in the sun his brown skin glowed even more and I had to bite back the urge to reach for him. Easton would likely throw a fit again.

"Are you still feeling brave?" This time his smile was mischievous and I couldn't stop myself from returning it.

"Always."

He held his hand out, keeping it low so the others couldn't see. It felt like an offering, a step forward. We'd already made so many but this was him diving into my future with me and I wanted him there.

Theo rewarded me with a soft smile that was full of hope and my stomach flipped in response.

He pulled me across the yard and up the porch, heading for the door. The knob didn't budge but he moved to the window next to it and managed to shimmy it open.

"Don't you dare," Easton warned him but Theo just held it up and cocked his head toward the inn.

"You going?"

“Hell, yes,” I said before scrambling to get inside. My leg scraped on something but it was barely a scratch. I dropped to the dusty floor and coughed as a cloud of dust rose around me.

“Get the door, muse,” he said before dropping the window shut. I considered not letting him in but the look on his face when I took his hand had me shifting around the dusty rug and side table to unlock the door.

Theo pulled it open and propped it with a small flower pot to let the sunshine and fresh air inside.

We were standing in a dining room. Instead of one large table there were several small wooden tables and chairs, though there was still a long table running through the center of the room.

All the furniture seemed to be made by hand and I wondered if Bear and Ezra might be able to help me restore it.

*With what money, Tori, you don't even have a job?*

My heart sank as my inner voice decided to lay some logic on me in the worst possible way. I blinked back my tears of frustration. It was so exhausting to always see something you wanted dangle in front of you before being promptly snatched away.

“What just happened?” Jordan asked with a frown. I glanced around for the issue until I realized he was focused on me. “Why did the light just drain from your eyes?”

“I’m fine,” I lied as I stepped away and shot a glance at Easton, not ready to have anyone who thought I was a pampered, naive princess know more about me and my thoughts.

“She’s probably realizing this would take real work,” Easton huffed out a condescending laugh. “Something she’s never had to do.”

Each time he shot something vile my way, I expected it to hurt less. Instead, it hit me square in the chest and my stomach turned.

“You know nothing about her,” Shaye said, coming to my rescue again. “If you don’t like being here then just fucking leave. We’ve got this.”

He narrowed his eyes but Lake was right next to her, staring him down in challenge, as if daring him to say something. This time, Theo stepped up next to me and for once, Easton’s permanent scowl was replaced by surprise and his eyebrows rose in question.

Even after our fight outside the club, he thought they’d give into his bullshit. Something shifted in his expression then. It almost looked like regret.

Was it regret for finding me, hurting me, or hurting them?

I wondered if I’d ever know.

“Come on, let’s check out the entry,” Theo said. His voice was tight as he cast a fresh glare at Easton. He was taking a stand against his pack instead of letting them bulldoze me.

Jordan hung back, the two exchanging growled whispers that were far too low to overhear.

I still couldn’t figure out why he was sticking around. If Easton didn’t want to be here he didn’t have to be. I sure as fuck wasn’t asking him to stay.

Theo’s hand found mine again and he pulled me out of my head and right through the archway into the main lobby and sitting area. There was a huge stone fireplace at the center of the sitting area and the discolored and molding furniture looked like it was plush at one time.

The entire inn was cozy. I couldn’t see what color the walls were without proper lighting, but I knew it had to be something soft and neutral.

Whoever owned this inn had put their whole heart into it. The urge to bring it back to life left me breathless and for the first time in a long time, I wasn’t willing to just accept defeat.

I didn’t know how I’d make it happen, but I was ready to give anything to call it mine. I’d have to research and maybe

call someone about my trust fund. There were limitations on it, but maybe they'd be willing to work with me.

It wasn't controlled by Dad at least, my grandfather had made sure of that.

The group let me explore for another twenty minutes but Lake stopped me at the base of the stairs.

"Your brother would murder me if I let you go up there, Tori," he said, almost pleading with me not to argue.

"Okay," I sighed. "Then, I'm ready to go."

"So, what did you think?" Shaye asked as she hooked her arm through mine and led me back outside. She was likely just keeping distance between me and Easton, but I wasn't going to complain.

"It's incredible. I want it more than I've ever wanted anything in my life," I admitted quietly, as if saying it out loud would break the spell and reality would slap me back to Earth at any moment.

The ride back was quiet but Theo kept his leg pushed against mine, offering silent comfort that I accepted. My mind was in chaos and I needed the reassurance.

They dropped us off outside and Shaye turned to Theo.

"Make sure he's not a dick. I'm not kidding, I will steal her away from all of you," she warned with a glare.

"Bye, Shaye," I said with a little laugh. She's been an amazing friend over the last few weeks. I'm glad she came into our lives. Micah deserved a fierce omega in his corner and she took me on as her own sister with the same ferocity.

Theo stuck by me as we walked up to my apartment. Easton stomped by to theirs next door while I fidgeted with the key.

"Thanks, Theo," I offered as I pushed it open.

"Anytime, muse. And if you want help with anything, you know how to reach me."

He gave me a soft look that was full of promise. It said he was here and he was trying, and for the first time in a long time, I wanted to try, too.

## CHAPTER

# TWENTY

### *Tori*

**A**fter the guys left me in my apartment, I started swiping through the photos I took. The inn looked awful in the pictures—a reminder of how much work the place needed.

However, I didn't love it any less than before. It was perfect. There was history in those old bones, and I wanted to bring it back to life.

I'd barely made it five minutes alone before I heard the guys fighting next door. It seemed there was a constant war going on between Theo, Jordan, and Easton. Even worse, I knew I was right smack in the middle of it.

Part of me wanted to feel guilty for driving a wedge between them, but I refused to take the blame for that. They drew that line in the sand the moment they met me, especially Easton.

It was just that now that the others were crossing that line and leaving Easton behind. He wasn't happy about being left behind, either.

He was stubborn enough to keep this war going, too. The fact they were staying and fighting still was a clear sign of how deep that brotherhood ran.

I didn't even bother to say anything before slipping out of my apartment, locking up behind me. Maybe it was risky to



leave alone, but I needed a moment without them and their frustration.

When I was safely locked in my car, I shot off a text to the guys, but didn't expect a response.

It wasn't until I was sitting behind the driver's seat in my car, heading toward Felix's flower shop, that I realized I knew where I was going the whole time.

I'd already said my piece to Warren and asked him on a date. Maybe now it was time to collect on that.

Sure, I looked ready to hike, not go on a date, but I couldn't find it in me to care. I knew Warren would feel the same.

When we first met, he was so easy-going that I never felt like I had to do more for him. I could just be myself. There were no shitty comments about my choice in clothes or lack of makeup. I was always expected to dress to the nines in designer clothes with perfect airbrushed makeup and my hair done.

More often than not, I felt like a doll, one that the alpha in my life could manipulate.

He'd been the first alpha to break that mold. Even then, I had tucked tail and run, hiding because I knew my father would find a way to snatch this away from me, too.

Warren never deserved how I treated him. The fact that the alpha was giving me a fresh start spoke volumes of his character. He'd respected every boundary I'd thrown up between us. It wasn't like I had aimed to test him from the start. Those small moments were an unconscious way of my mind protecting my heart, little ways to find out if he was the kind of alpha I needed.

He was. I was just too stubborn to see it right away.

Felix was standing outside in his cute, little, green apron, watering the flowers in the displays. They were tucked into a vintage, metal flower cart that he'd redone. Just the sight of him had my excitement rushing to the surface. I practically flew out of the car to greet him.

“Hello, my blossom,” he said with a wide grin, his black hair falling in front of his hazel eyes. The sweet term of endearment was so fitting of Felix. It was so casually sweet that my cheeks burned and my stomach flipped in the best way. He could make me feel precious and desired in just one look or greeting.

“Hey, Felix,” I said, rushing up and pressing a kiss to his lips before I could second guess it. His eyes widened in surprise. I started to back away but he gripped my shirt, pulling me closer and kissing me again. This time, it wasn’t sweet and carefree. Felix was almost as possessive as an alpha.

When he released me, we were both a little breathless. A startled laugh escaped me as heat swirled in those gorgeous eyes of his, the flecks of green and gold dancing.

“Who knew you had it in you, Omega?”

He gave me a sassy wink that had my laughter rising even more. The door swung open, and Warren stepped out.

Not for the first time since meeting him, I was struck by how handsome he was. From his ripped jeans to his vintage band tee, the tattoos lining his arms, and the gauges in his ears, he was gorgeous. But it was the sharp jawline and the contrast of his soft-blue eyes against all the black that got me. That gaze seemed to pierce through me every time, locking me in place.

“This is a surprise,” he said, leaning forward on his toes like he was going to step toward me but stopping himself at the last minute. This time I closed the distance, brushing a kiss over his lips as well.

It wasn’t the same as kissing Felix, it didn’t feel as natural yet, but it had my heart pounding in my chest and heat flooding through me. My nose was filled with his alpha pheromones, sea salt, and sandalwood. I was ready to drown in this man.

We stood in silence for a few beats before my brain came back online and I blushed again.

“Sorry to just pop over like this, but I figured you’d be closing up soon, and I wondered if you wanted to go on that date.”

Warren glanced behind me before raising his eyebrows. “Did you ditch those bodyguards?”

I chewed on my lip, looking at him from under my lashes, trying to hide my smile. “Maybe. They were arguing in their apartment, and I don’t think they noticed. I did, in fact, text them, though.”

“Arguing again?” Felix questioned, his head tilting to the side. “What happened?”

“Micah told me yesterday that Shaye and Lake wanted to show me something. It involved way too much hiking for my liking, but what they showed me was—” My words drifted away, and I shook my head, trying to find a way to describe how amazing the afternoon was, how perfect the old inn was, and how scared I was that it might not be possible.

“Actually, baby, would you mind if Felix joined us? I feel like you need a quiet date-night in to spill all these amazing stories more than going out.”

As if he’d taken the thoughts directly from my mind, the alpha seemed to sense what I really needed. How had I missed this for so long?

Maybe because the alphas in my life before them weren’t truly alphas. They were just rich, entitled men who thought they could do what they wanted, and everyone around them would just bow down and accept it.

“That actually sounds really nice,” I admitted. It was so strange—I felt so shy around men that my entire body and soul called for.

“You know,” Felix said, cocking his head to the side as he studied me. I noticed he did that a lot, as if he could see better when he tilted his head. “I have no idea what you like to eat.”

The absurdity of it had me barking out a laugh, and I shook my head.

“All I know is that she loves chocolate,” Warren offered.

“Everyone loves chocolate,” I said, rolling my eyes.

“Can I cook for you?” Felix asked, a blush rising on his cheeks, which had my insides turning to goo. I swear I was a sucker for this man already.

“You want to cook for me? I don’t want to be a pain. I know you weren’t planning to.”

Warren tucked me against him and laughed, the sound rich and deep, vibrating right through me.

“Don’t even try to stop him now. Once Felix is on a mission, it’s over.”

Warren led us inside and Felix trailed behind, tapping at his chin as he thought things over.

“I have to run to the store,” he said quickly, turning to me, conflicted. “But I want to hear about what Shaye and Lake showed you.”

“How about we just run to the store together? It’s literally just down the road,” I offered. “You don’t have to go alone.”

My phone chimed, and they both froze, giving me a look. We all knew who it was from.

Easton: Where the fuck are you?

A low growl in my ear had me looking up at Warren. His face was a mask of fury.

“We may need to postpone the date while I go beat this alpha’s ass.”

Not that I wanted to discredit Warren’s strength, but Easton was easily three times his size. That was not a fight I wanted to see the outcome of.

“Listen, I’ll just send them a picture for proof that I’m not alone. That should be enough.” The guys moved in close while I pulled up the photo app, taking a selfie with all three of us.

What was supposed to just be easy smiles turned into me openly laughing as they both smacked a kiss to my cheeks at the same time. The fact that they hadn't said a word out loud had me laughing even harder. They were definitely best friends.

After sending the pic to Easton, my phone dinged again. I started to open my mouth to reassure him, but Felix was stepping away and holding the phone to his ear.

“Oh god, is he calling them? What the hell did Easton say?”

I could hear the bark of Easton's voice, even from several steps away. Felix's voice was deadly calm and cold when he spoke.

“If you ever speak to my mate like that again, those will be the last words you ever speak. Do you fucking hear me? I'm not sure what kind of person you are because we haven't had the chance to get to know you, but I will tell you right now, I won't tolerate this. You're a bully and an asshole. I have half a mind to go talk to Micah and Ellie and let them know how you're treating the person that they *hired* you to protect.”

Easton tried to say something but my mate was on fire.

“Mate bullshit aside... this is the most unprofessional and childish behavior I've ever had the displeasure of witnessing. You should be ashamed of yourself. You're a sorry excuse for an alpha and a human. Get your shit together. You have no idea what our mate has been through. If she deemed you important enough to tell you, then you should know better than anyone that her life wasn't all sunshine, rainbows, and money. I'm so fucking tired of people underestimating omegas at every turn. If you can't speak to her with respect, Easton, I will not rest until you're run out of this town. Do we understand each other?”

My jaw had dropped, but Warren looked like he was biting back laughter of his own. Felix listened for about five seconds, and I was surprised I couldn't hear Easton's rumbling voice. Finally, he nodded once, even though the alpha couldn't see him.

“Great, make sure that you do.”

He stabbed the phone angrily to end the call. I expected him to walk back to us, but instead, he started walking away. I went to follow him, but Warren stopped me.

“He doesn’t get angry often, just give him a second to cool down, okay?”

I wanted to argue with Warren, to run to Felix right away, but I waited until Felix had turned and paced back our way. His eyes met mine, and my favorite smile was back in place.

Seeing the grin on his face had me ignoring Warren’s warnings and rushing toward my mate. I’m not sure who lost their balance first but we toppled to the grass, pulling each other down so I landed on top of him, our faces inches apart.

I grinned and pressed a kiss to his lips.

“Felix, that was the nicest thing anyone has ever said or done for me.”

## CHAPTER

# TWENTY-ONE

### *Tori*

After the excitement of Felix yelling at Easton on the phone, we all packed up and went to the grocery store. Felix had been peppering me with questions the entire way, but I was loving his attention on me. It never felt forced, he was simply just getting to know me. He soaked in every single mundane detail like it was precious.

As we wandered through the produce aisle, he asked, “What’s one meal that you haven’t had in forever but always fills you with warm, fuzzy memories?”

Warren let out a small chuckle and gave his friend a playful shove. “Felix, not everyone associates memories with food.”

Felix rolled his eyes.

“Oh, yes, they do. Close your eyes,” he ordered. He didn’t say another word until we’d followed his directions. “Think about the hottest summer day you experienced as a kid. Now, picture the one thing you ate that day that made all that heat fade away. I can bet there’s something in your mind’s eye right away.”

My mind was far away, thinking of my grandfather and how he would always take me, Ellie, and Micah out for ice cream when our dad was busy.

One summer, it was so hot that even the big mansion couldn’t keep us all cool. So, he took us to this cute, little ice

cream parlor that we always went to. It looked like a glorified shed, but the woman there made the most amazing ice cream. She had this adorable Italian accent and a bright smile, and she was five feet nothing but sass.

Felix looked at us with crossed arms and a smug expression. “I can tell from the look on both of your faces that you thought of something.”

Glancing up at Warren, I nearly lost it. His exasperation was clear on his face. They both wore their hearts on their sleeves. It wasn’t just Felix, Warren’s eyes were just as expressive, telling me everything he didn’t know how to put into words.

In fact, I hadn’t felt this relaxed in a long time. What Theo, Jordan, and I had was tentative and slightly tainted by the other alpha.

Warren had forgiven me and we both listened, communicated, and he let me right back in. Now, it was just... easy.

“Fine, you win,” Warren conceded, glancing at me. “Did you think of something for dinner? Something he can make that makes you happy?”

My cheeks flamed, and they both saw it. Felix did a little happy dance and tapped the tip of my nose. “Now I have to know what you’re holding back, blossom. Don’t keep secrets from me.”

“Felix’s love language is letting him feed you, take care of you, and give you flowers. It makes him deliriously happy.”

“He gives you flowers?” I asked, biting back a smile.

Warren nodded, not the least bit ashamed. That was sexy as hell.

Then reality sunk in and I sighed.

“What if I don’t know how to let someone take care of me?”

Everyone assumed that because I came from money that I was pampered and always had someone at my beck and call.



My childhood was nothing like that. It was full of cold interactions outside of my siblings. Micah, Ellie, and I took care of each other, bonding within the iciness of that fucking mansion. They were the only ones who ever did anything for me just because they wanted to.

Both of their eyes softened at my question, and Felix pulled me in for a hug. I wasn't expecting it and nearly stumbled into him, but he caught me in his strong arms. The omega was deceptively strong despite his slight frame. It was surprising that the two omegas, who were nothing like what they seemed, had come together.

On the outside, everybody thought Felix was shy and reserved. Around me, he was full of life — smiles, teasing, and sweet moments. I loved every second of it.

“Okay, there's one thing,” I admitted. “When I was around twelve, we had an aunt visit. My cousin was only a baby at the time, so she had a nanny with her.”

She was a dainty woman that my mother had called homely behind her back. I thought she was sweet and warm, her smile far too kind for a place like that house.

“All the adults went out on some fancy excursion and had the nanny watch us as well. Micah and Ellie hid in their rooms but I liked her. When she put the baby down, she asked what I liked to eat. I couldn't tell her. I wasn't used to having to make that decision, so she offered to surprise me.”

My smile was soft as I pictured the kitchen finally being full of life for the first time ever.

“The entire time she cooked, she told me stories about growing up in this sweet, small town and how much she loved it there. Then she put a heaping plate of lasagna in front of me. I had never had it until then. It was one of the most delicious things I've ever had, and I haven't had it since. I just remember feeling like she was giving me a glimpse of another life — one where the adults would tell stories and share things with their children, and the food was made with love.”

“Lasagna it is,” Felix said thickly, his voice full of emotion. He gave my hand a squeeze before turning to the produce section.

He stared around for a minute before moving. Warren and I followed dutifully behind him as he tossed ingredients into the cart. I expected him to just buy tomato sauce and noodles, but Felix was having none of that. He added tomatoes, onions, fresh garlic, and herbs to the cart.

“Felix, you don’t have to go through all this for me,” I tried to protest, but he silenced me with a stony glare that told me he was going to do what he wanted, and I was just going to accept it.

“You’re going to let me take care of you, omega, and you’re going to like it,” he said with more than a little sass as he handed me a bag of flour to put in the cart.

“It’s strange at first, but you get used to it,” Warren reassured me, stepping closer. His shoulder brushed against mine in a show of support.

I hadn’t expected this experience to turn into something so sweet and touching, but then again, they were a constant surprise.

“You guys wouldn’t even let me help pay for the groceries,” I complained as they checked out twenty minutes later. Felix had somehow dragged out of me that I had a deep love for brownies and had added the ingredients for that as well.

Then Warren stepped in and got ice cream and marshmallow sauce to add on top, and I think I fell in love.

Even as I had that joking thought, I realized that it was true. I was falling for these men, and we had only interacted like this a handful of times, if that. I didn’t want to be the omega that fell head over heels for a pack within moments, but Ellie had been right all along — you have no control over how fast you fall for fated mates.

Our conversation stayed light as we drove back and unloaded the groceries.

“If you think Felix is bad about feeding you, just wait until you meet his mom. He got it from her,” Warren said with a snort as he emptied the paper shopping bag.

“She sounds like a fantastic woman,” I said. They both smiled to themselves, the pure innocence in the gesture making my chest ache for something I never had.

“She is, but the moment she finds out about you, she’s going to start coming by all the time, trying to win you over.”

“Wait until we figure out this craziness with the stalker first,” I said, hating to break the mood but it needed addressing.

Felix’s face hardened. “Any news on that?”

It was the elephant in the room, the one we never talked about. My stalker was so sporadic about dropping things off that sometimes it was easy to pretend that it wasn’t happening, to tuck those dark memories away in the corner of my mind and not let them out until something happened again.

“No, but let’s not ruin the night with it,” I said quickly.

“We’ve got too much to do,” Felix agreed with a wink, letting me know it was okay to avoid it for now.

Felix guided me to the stool in front of their kitchen island as he started to work, walking me through each step. If I wanted to join in, I think he would have let me, but I was just happy to hear him talk.

Watching Felix work was mesmerizing. He was making his own pasta, and I was shocked when he poured the flour straight onto the counter, making a well for the eggs before cracking them and then stirring it with a fork.

With practiced precision, he had the dough formed into noodles, flattened them, and cut them into strips.

Then in a flash he was onto the sauce.

“Alright, enough of the small talk. We want to hear about this adventure you went on yesterday,” he demanded as he started to set out his spices.

Warren took that as his cue to move in closer, dropping down to the seat next to me. Felix put a cutting board in front of us both, giving us instructions.

As I was chopping up the herbs into small pieces, I started to explain everything from the hike to discovering the inn.

“It was like something out of a movie,” I said with a happy sigh. “Everything was overgrown and honestly a mess, but it was beautiful.”

“Do you have pictures?” Warren asked. There was no judgment in his tone, only curiosity.

Wiping my hands off on the towel next to me, I reached into my pocket and pulled out my phone. I looked at the pictures before showing them each one.

“You’ve got a good eye for photography,” Felix noted. “You captured the light perfectly. This place is gorgeous.”

“It’s got character,” Warren agreed. “I don’t think I’ve ever seen you light up quite so much.”

My cheeks heated again, and I ducked my head, focusing on the cutting again.

“It’s a stupid pipe dream anyway.”

I didn’t realize that they’d both frozen until it got too quiet, and I flickered my eyes up. They were both staring at me with narrowed eyes.

“What?” I demanded.

“Why is it a ‘stupid pipe dream?’ Anything that you talk about with that much enthusiasm is *not* stupid,” Warren said. His vehemence on my behalf had my breath catching.

But it changed nothing.

“Do you know how many interviews that I’ve been on in the last few months? More than I can count. I’ve got a trust fund that I can’t touch. There are all these restrictions on it. There’s no way anyone would let me buy that place out there with no real income, and that’s if we even knew who it belonged to.”

“You took a picture of the sign,” Felix said. “I guarantee a quick internet search will find whoever owned that location. It may be frozen in time, a chunk of history, but history always has a record.”

“We’ll find a way to get it for you, mark my words,” Warren said. I wanted to give in to that confidence, but hope was dangerous and this dream was too precious to let it hurt me.

As if they could feel me shutting down and pushing them away, they both moved, standing shoulder to shoulder in front of me. Felix reached out, his palms resting on my cheeks so I was forced to look at him.

“Don’t you ever lose that spark on me again,” Felix said gently but demandingly. “This clearly means something to you. Which means something to me. When Warren says we’re going to make it happen, he means it. If this is your dream, then we will be putting all of our efforts into finding a way.”

His hazel eyes were shining with promise, and I wanted to sink into that, to give in to him. I wanted to see myself as strong as he saw me.

There was nothing I could say because I didn’t know how to put into words what their faith meant to me. They thought I was strong and capable, and no one had ever thought that before.

Instead of finding the right words, I pushed forward until my lips were on his again. He made a startled noise but quickly sank into the kiss.

Felix was back to demanding, coaxing my head to the side and deepening the kiss until he swept his tongue inside, tasting me with a sweet groan.

Warren hadn’t made a move yet, but I wanted them both right now.

No, ‘want’ wasn’t a strong enough word.

I *needed* them.

More than I’d ever needed anything in my life.

They had pushed themselves past my defenses and into my heart, now I wanted to show them how much I loved that about them.

I broke the kiss and turned to Warren. His blue eyes were full of heat as he watched us. There was a longing there that settled in my chest.

When my attention was on him, he raised his eyebrows in question. I brushed a kiss across his forehead before dropping to my knees.

CHAPTER

# TWENTY-TWO

*Tori*

“No, Tori, you don’t—”

I cut him off as I snapped the button free and shoved his ripped jeans down his hips along with his boxers so his cock was springing free.

It bounced up, brushing across my mouth as I glared up at him

“Warren, I want this, and I want you to not hold back anymore. I don’t plan to.”

With that I ran my tongue along my lips before licking the precum that was already dripping from the head of his cock. I wrapped my fingers around the base before taking him into my mouth. He was so fucking sexy and I hadn’t realized how much I missed him and his cock.

Their groans filled the air, Felix’s eyes rolling back as if he felt that swipe of my tongue himself. I watched him through my lashes, his hazel eyes burning with desire as he watched me tease his best friend’s cock.

That was all I needed to see. I turned away, putting all my focus on Warren. My fingers squeezed around him as I started to move, pulling all the way off to tease my tongue around the crown before sinking back down and taking as much of him as I could manage.

Tears were running down my face but I didn’t care. The feel of his hard, velvety cock against my tongue already had

slick pooling between my thighs. The scent of sea salt and sandalwood was stronger here, the alpha musk matching it in potency each time I brushed my nose against his skin.

I breathed him in deep, committing this moment to memory so I would never forget it.

Despite my warning, Warren held back on me. He was standing still as a statue as he let me take the lead, not trying to take over. This time, I didn't want that. I wanted him, unfiltered and unrestrained, taking as much as he wanted from me.

My palm came down on his ass in a sharp smack as I hollowed my cheeks and sucked hard, his knees buckling for a fraction of a second as I did.

“Fuck, Tori,” he growled through his gasping breaths.

“Use me, please,” I begged. His eyes shuttered closed for a moment before I watched him give in. His jaw tightened and he fisted my hair in his hand, his hips moving slightly at first before he let go.

Felix stepped back to give us this moment but the sound of his zipper going down and the slick sound of him running his hand over his own cock had that fire turning to molten lava in my veins.

Warren and Felix saw me. Even now as I rested on my knees for the alpha, they looked at me like I hung the moon. Like I was precious, powerful, and sexy.

I felt all of those things, too.

My chest tightened as Warren whispered out my name like a prayer.

“Tori, baby, you feel so fucking good,” he groaned as he slammed his hips forward, making me gag on his cock. It was exactly what I wanted. When I woke up tomorrow I wanted to feel owned by them, the ache echoing in every part of my used body.

I hummed in appreciation but that only made his groan deepen, his hips canting forward more forcefully this time. My



nails dug into his thighs as I braced myself before trailing to his ass. His perfectly-sculpted ass was something I couldn't seem to keep my hands off of.

Warren cursed and stepped back. I started to protest but he was breathing heavily and holding a hand between us to stop me.

“You have to stop before my knot swells in that beautiful mouth of yours,” he said in a hoarse growl.

The whimper that fell from my lips was cut off as Felix dropped to his knees in front of me. His lips found mine despite the fact that he would taste Warren on my tongue.

“Let's get our mate to a bed,” Warren said, helping me off the floor and forcing Felix to follow us.

He swept a hand under my legs and carried me through their apartment, dropping me on the bed. I laughed as I bounced but the way they stared down at me had me swallowing hard.

“So fucking beautiful,” Felix said reverently before he was moving again. He slowly peeled off every item of clothing between us, his mouth worshipping each new inch of skin he uncovered.

They studied me with so much heat in their gaze that it threatened to burn me alive. I wanted it to consume me, scorch me from the inside out.

“If someone doesn't fuck me soon I'm going to lose my mind,” I groaned, letting my head hit the pillow and my legs fall open for them.

Felix was the first to break the trance, diving between my thighs and burying his face in my wet pussy. There was no finesse to his attention. Instead, he was licking and sucking at me like he couldn't get enough of my taste.

My legs shook as my thighs clamped around his head. With a gasp, my back arched off the bed as waves of pleasure rolled through me.

He sucked hard on my clit and that was enough to throw me over the edge, my vision tunneling and his name falling in a whimper from my lips.

“Does she taste like heaven, brother?” Warren asked, his voice desperate and borderline unhinged. “This might be the sweetest death.”

“She tastes phenomenal. Here,” Felix said, stepping back to let him have a taste.

My pussy was sensitive and the first long swipe of his tongue had me jolting away. His hands clamped on my hips, holding me still before he was pushing his tongue into my core, fucking me with it as his fingers teased slow circles around my clit.

He was purposeful with his movements, building a rhythm that had a second orgasm building fast and forceful.

There were no soft cries as I came this time. Instead, I screamed out against the tidal wave that crashed into me, drowning me in sweet pleasure until I was gasping for air.

“Do we have condoms?” Warren asked as he pulled away. He started trailing kisses up my body as he waited for the answer. His mouth clamped on one nipple, nibbling at the sensitive peak before soothing it with his wet, hot tongue.

“Don’t need them,” I pleaded more than answered. “I’m protected.”

“You’re going to be the death of me,” Warren groaned at my answer.

“What a sweet death it will be,” Felix hummed as he moved Warren out of the way. “Can I fuck you now, blossom? I need to feel that sweet, tight pussy around my cock.”

“Fuck yes,” I breathed out, letting my legs fall open a little wider for him. Not that my omega needed the space.

My eyes trailed down his toned body. There was a hint of omega softness around the edges but he clearly took care of his body.

And that cock? I'd write a ballad for it. He was long and thick, shockingly big for an omega or anyone outside of an alpha really.

He gave it a lazy stroke, his half smile back in place as he noticed me watching.

“You're so fucking sexy, Felix.”

His smile brightened at that and he let out a low chuckle before teasing the head of his cock over my swollen pussy. I was so wet that it made noises that sent fresh heat right through me.

“Don't torture her,” Warren said with a throaty chuckle before he moved in beside me, bending down to kiss my lips again as Felix snapped his hips forward, filling me in one swift movement.

I cried out, it had been so long that the stretch had me tensing but I quickly relaxed as he started to move. Felix was just as wild fucking me as he was eating my pussy. His moves were quick and fast, his hips snapping into me as he hooked my legs over his arms.

Our cries filled the air as he pushed me further than I'd been in a long time. My body was on fire, every nerve ending lighting up for them. Their scents mixed with mine in a sweet and salty aroma that had me feeling a new kind of high.

I'd been fucked before. But never like this. Never by a mate.

Everything had changed in that moment. We were connected in a way even I couldn't run from. They knew me inside and out and that would only grow each time we came together.

“Make her come, I'm so close,” Felix pleaded. I could feel his slick mixing with mine between us, the scent of it making my eyes roll back as Warren dove his head between us, his tongue flicking over my clit.

It didn't take much for me to explode. My release had my entire body tensing and a long, purred moan ripping from me.

Felix's cock twitched inside me as he filled me with his seed, his hands releasing my legs so he could squeeze my breasts, eyes locked on my body then my face as he marked me from the inside out.

"Fucking perfect."

"Bite me, Felix. Please," I begged, shifting my hair off of my neck. The omega gasped in shock but when I nodded to encourage him he was moving, pulling out of me before running his lips over my inner thigh.

"I'm biting you here," he said softly before his teeth sank into my flesh. He may not be an alpha but it would be a mark that lasted forever.

My eyes locked onto Warren who was watching us with pure wonder on his face.

"I want your bite, too," I demanded.

"Don't ask for it if you don't want me forever, Tori," he pleaded. "I won't survive if you leave me again."

There, in that vulnerability, was the truth in how badly I'd hurt him.

"I'm so sorry, Warren," I said as Felix pulled away. He brushed a kiss on my temple before disappearing.

I didn't mean to ruin the moment but I think we all knew this needed to be said before anything more could happen.

"I know," he promised. "It's just..."

"Hard to trust I won't?"

He nodded and I moved closer, shoving him down on the bed then straddling his hips. His pouty lips fell open in shock again but I didn't hesitate to bite down on his pec, staking my own claim on my alpha.

When I pulled away he was smiling, his blue eyes glistening with unshed tears.

"Mine?" he asked quietly.

“Yours. And you are mine,” I promised, my finger trailing over the bite and sending a shudder through him. His cock twitched where it was trapped in front of me and I gave him a wicked grin before lifting off of him and notching him at my entrance before sinking down again.

Warren let out a breathy moan as he filled me, his girth pushing me even further than my omega had. I let out a soft whimper as I rocked my hips over him. Even after they’d given me more orgasms tonight than I’d gotten in years, I needed more from my alpha.

“Tori, baby,” he breathed out as he thrust into me, fingers digging into my flesh as he tried to let me set the pace.

“Stop holding back on me,” I demanded before I climbed off of him, his knot not holding me in place yet. I settled on my stomach, knees apart and ass in the air for him. “Take me like you mean it, Warren. Then bite me as you come. Claim me, alpha.”

“My fucking pleasure, Tori,” he promised as he moved, staring down at me for several beats before he sank into me.

This time the stretch was different, but no less delicious. My body shuddered around him as he slid in easily, my slick and Felix’s cum making it easy to take him fully.

Warren palmed my ass, squeezing my cheeks and groaning as his cock twitched inside of me. He wasn’t moving yet, just holding me captive as he explored my body.

Soft touches ran down my spine before he slapped his hand down on my ass. The sting of it had me letting out a shocked gasp and he chose that moment to start moving, his thrusts punishing as he finally let himself go.

His knot didn’t take long to swell, holding me in place and putting pressure on that spot inside of me that had my cries turning feral and desperate. Warren met me with that same energy, fucking me into the mattress like he could never get enough.

Finally, as I was locked on his cock, he bit down on my shoulder as he came. I felt the wet heat of his cum filling me

as his teeth marked my flesh.

My orgasm was blinding, my vision fading and my mind slowing down into a blissful stupor. A smile rested on my face as he gently moved us to the side, spooning around me as his hands stroked my skin gently.

Then the door opened and that blissful moment fell away.

“Someone’s been in the apartment while you were gone. They’re demanding you answer your phone.”

CHAPTER

# TWENTY-THREE

*Felix*

After the phone call from Jordan I was shaken. His voice was deep and worried and that was enough to ignite my own panic.

Tori and Warren cleaned up and threw on clothes, meeting me in the living room. We should have been soaking in our post-bonding haze. Not rushing back to her likely ransacked apartment.

The drive was tense as Warren navigated his pickup to the other side of town. Easton was waiting in the parking lot and I shot him a look, a silent warning to not be a dick.

After I'd yelled at him on the phone and he'd actually let my words hit him, I hoped he'd turn things around.

"You didn't give your key away, did you?" Easton asked her. His voice was tight but not overly aggressive.

She blinked at him and shook her head.

"No, I just have mine," she promised, holding up her keyring. "I didn't even give them one."

He ran a hand over his face and gave her a guarded look.

"I'm sorry."

I had no clue what he was apologizing for but she gave us a helpless look and followed him when he quickly turned away and started walking inside.

When he walked inside her apartment I thought we'd find it in shambles. Instead, it looked the same as we'd left it.

"Wait, what?" she asked, turning around in a circle as she tried to see what the issue was.

"Here," Jordan said, his face grim as he walked inside. He sat a laptop down. A security video was already queued up and he hit play.

It was a view of her front door. A man pushed open the door and worked the key out of the lock, tucking it in his pocket, and closing the door behind him. When he was inside he pulled his hat down a bit further and avoided every one of the cameras in the room.

He walked slowly through, a slight swagger in his step. The man was obviously comfortable in her place. Far too comfortable.

His fingers ghosted over her personal things, her couch, then he disappeared into the bedroom.

Jordan switched feeds and we watched him walk into her bedroom and head straight for her dresser. He plucked a pair of lacy panties from it and tucked it into his pocket before walking back out.

The entire thing was short but precise. He knew we were fucking watching him and was putting on a show.

"I'm going to be sick," Tori groaned, rushing toward the bathroom with Warren on her heels.

Jordan closed his laptop and moved closer to me, his hand brushing over mine.

"Are you okay?"

"It wasn't my apartment," I reminded him, though I was anything but alright. Her mystery stalker had crossed so many lines at this point, I only wanted her out of this fucking house.

"Easton went for new locks again and I know it's not yours. But I'm not okay, so I figured you wouldn't be, either."

"Sorry, snark takes over when I'm stressed."



He tugged me in and I melted into his touch. The scent of spiced pears and bourbon tickled at my nose but my entire body relaxed into the embrace.

His lips ghosted over my ear.

“I won’t rest until you’re both safe,” he promised. “You’re just as precious to me as she is, Felix.”

My heart clenched in my chest. I hadn’t realized how much I wanted to hear him claim me.

Stepping back I tilted my face up, offering my lips to the alpha filling every one of my senses. He didn’t hesitate to crush his lips against mine in a kiss that left me breathless and weak in the knees.

Footsteps in the hall had us turning to the door. Theo turned the corner then froze, raising his eyebrows in question.

“It’s safe,” Jordan said with a chuckle, though he didn’t let me move out of his embrace.

“Where’s Tori?” Theo asked as he glanced around the empty apartment.

“Probably burning her underwear collection,” I mused. “She got sick to her stomach.”

“I don’t bl—” he cut off as my phone rang in my pocket. I yanked it out to silence it then saw it was my mom.

“She’ll call again if I don’t answer,” I said as I hit the green button and put the phone to my ear. “Hey, Mom.”

“Oh, my son is alive?” she asked with a sigh.

“I am,” I confirmed. “Sorry, Warren moved to town and things have been busy.”

“Perfect! I bought way too much chicken and I need to fix it. Come for dinner.”

As usual, it wasn’t a request but a demand. This woman was a pain in the ass but god, I loved her.

And it was a pretty good opportunity to distract my mate.

“Hang on a second, mom,” I said, pulling the phone away from my ear and turning to my mate.

“Yes?” he asked, looking slightly unnerved.

“Mom wants to have dinner. I thought it might be good for Tori,” I admitted.

“Okay,” he said, his voice more unsure than I’d ever heard it.

“Are you sure?”

“Yes,” he agreed. His attention shifted to Theo who shook his head.

“You guys, go. Easton and I will keep watch here.”

Nodding, I put the phone back to my ear.

“You got room for a few more?”

Her screech could be heard in the next county.

“Did you find your mate?” she demanded. “You and Warren, I should say.”

“We did,” I admitted. “Can I bring Jordan and Tori with us?”

“That’s not even a question my son should have to ask,” she scoffed. “I’ll make my famous apple crisp for dessert. See you tonight!”

The phone call ended without giving me a chance to say goodbye and I couldn’t help but laugh.

“Who’s breaking the news to Tori?” I asked.

“What now?” she asked in a whine. Warren led her toward us and I gave him a look.

“Mom called.”

“Dinner?” he guessed with a chuckle. I nodded and he nudged Tori. “Ready to meet the parents, Tori?”

“Anything that’s not here,” she said easily. Even as she appeared calm I could see her fingers fidgeting nervously with the hem of her shirt. Theo reached over and held them.

“Don’t worry, muse. She’ll love you.”

She nodded and turned around, heading back into her room.

“Can you stay with her while we run home? I need to get ready, too,” I admitted, giving Theo and Jordan a look that said they better not leave.

“What do I wear?” Jordan asked, looking alarmed now.

“No suits,” I said. “Be casual.” Mostly because I wanted to see Jordan truly unfiltered and out of his usual dark attire.

Two hours later, we were standing outside of the two-story farmhouse I grew up in. The drive took an hour but as we wound down those country roads I could barely contain my excitement.

My mom was on the porch the moment the tires hit gravel. My dad, Gordon, stood behind her, a lazy smile on his lips.

“Felix!” she shouted. “Warren!” We both were already moving forward to crush her in a hug. I breathed in the scent of her flowery perfume and smiled.

There was truly nothing quite like coming home.

“And you must be Tori and Jordan,” she said in a soft tone, shoving me unceremoniously aside to get to them.

Jordan was dressed in jeans and a black sweater, his hair down and tucked behind one ear. For once, he looked unsteady on his feet and Tori reached out for his hand, giving it a squeeze.

“It’s nice to meet you, Mrs.—”

She cut Jordan off and shook her head. “I’m ‘Mom’ to you, young man. Now get over here,” she said, rushing forward and hugging him. He stood stock still, eyes wide and startled as she squeezed him tight then moved on to Tori who did the same.

Watching them both get a hug and not know how to handle it nearly broke me.

“You two act like you’ve never been hugged before,” she teased, though the question laced her words.

“My mom didn’t hug,” Tori said, the words falling out and shocking her. Those gorgeous green eyes were wide but my mom just hugged her again. Jordan’s eyes softened at the sight before she tugged him in, too.

“Oh, my babies,” she cooed. “Get used to it.”

When she pulled away, she dabbed at her eyes and carted them inside. By the time Warren and I made it to the kitchen they were at the table with snacks in front of them.

“Oh no you don’t,” Mom called out as she saw me and Warren trying to sit, too. She rushed over and yanked us closer to the counter, giving us jobs like usual.

“Don’t get used to it,” I called out to Tori and Jordan. She’ll put you to work, too.

“Not today, this is their only time as a guest. Next time they’ll be family,” Mom said as she poked her potato peeler in the air between us.

Seeing my mom fuss over my mates was the best. She made sure they were fed and happy, telling them awful, embarrassing stories that made them laugh without holding back.

Every moment was full of so much love that my heart was bursting.

“That smile looks good on you,” Dad accused. His hazel eyes that matched mine twinkled as he teased me.

“Having mates is everything,” I managed to choke out as I watched Mom give Tori a hug and slid another slice of pie on Jordan’s plate.

“You’re right about that,” he agreed. “And your momma has a way of making everyone feel loved. It looks like they needed that mother’s touch.”

“You have no idea,” I said with a humorless laugh. “That’s why I couldn’t wait to bring them by. They needed her just as much as I needed them.”

“That alpha looks at you both like you shit rainbows.”

I gave him a dry look. “Classy, Dad.”

He chuckled, the sound warm and nostalgic.

“It’s true, though. Falling fast is a sure sign of scent matches. But it’s moments like these where the world around you weaves together in a perfect harmony, that you know fate was right. This right here? This is another reason you’re meant to be.”

I fought back the tears, realizing he was right. It wasn’t just our pack, but us finding friends and family in Lockwood. Me opening my shop and Warren moving in, only to find her again. It was the way we all fell in place so easily.

The way she stumbled on that inn.

“Actually, Dad, we may need your help,” I said, whispering to him all the details of Tori’s inn. He listened and I watched his smile grow.

Having a handyman for a father was about to come in handy.

## CHAPTER

# TWENTY-FOUR

### *Jordan*

The image of the light draining from Tori's face was haunting me. It had been two days and I hadn't let it go yet.

I also had a gut-wrenching feeling that there was a lot more to the supposed 'princess' than met the eye.

Easton was convinced she was rich and spoiled and had no grip on reality. Her aptitude for tripping over tree roots only solidified that feeling for him.

For me, the entire trek through the overgrown inn had only shown me that she was a complicated omega.

Fuck. We were screwed.

Thanks to Easton and his loud mouth, she hated him. She'd shown me a new side to herself, had given me a chance.

But how did we get past this bullshit with my brother? I'd been his righthand man our entire lives, let him take the lead because he needed that control, but now I was ready to throw him to the wolves and let him make his own mistakes.

She was mine and I wasn't going to lose her because of his selfishness and backwards thinking.

Theo walked into the room and I amended my statement. She was ours.

Something passed between the two of them in that yard and fuck I was overflowing with jealousy. I wanted her to give

me that same look of awe she gave him.

A frantic knock on the door had me launching myself forward. Shit, I'd been so in my head, I forgot I was supposed to be keeping an eye on Tori.

I ran to the door, sliding across the hardwood floor in my socks before yanking it open.

She gave me a once over but the fear in her eyes had me yanking her inside and stepping into the hall. I turned both ways, looking for danger, then back at her when nothing was there.

After finding out that maintenance had gotten in last night, we were all on edge. She insisted she hadn't given her key out which meant they'd picked the lock to get in. Easton interrogated the landlord but he hadn't called anyone out, either.

This was escalating and I wanted to know why. Was he watching? Did he know she had us now?

"What happened?" I demanded.

She let out a loud whoosh of breath and started talking faster than ever before, her hands flying as she spoke.

"My alpha father is on his way here. He found me and found out I called my trust-fund lawyer yesterday to ask some questions. I need you, Jordan. Please, can we pretend things aren't still a bit new and awkward with us. I need you to pretend we're happy and in love."

Her words were like a punch to the face. I couldn't find the words but she took that as a yes and started yanking me after her. We barely closed her door when she was flying through the apartment, cleaning it up and making it look cleaner than the pristine it already was.

I went for the kitchen, grabbing out two coffee mugs and setting them out while I brewed a fresh pot of coffee. It was a nervous habit now that she'd thrown me off-kilter but it would only add to the effect she wanted.

My stomach churned as her words replayed again. Had I really held back so much she was questioning if I wanted her?

Then again, I'd focused so hard on keeping Easton in check during the hike that she probably thought I was holding back.

Fuck, I had to fix this.

"Oh good idea, two mugs is a selling point," she said with a quick nod of approval. Her face was grim and her body tense enough it looked painful. My protective side was out to play and I was ready to protect my omega from whatever demons her father brought with him.

The knock on her door was loud and full of authority. She started to move forward but I stopped her by stepping in the way and pulling it open.

The man glaring back at me blinked in confusion. He wasn't expecting her to have someone else here. They clearly weren't watching closely enough then. We were always around her unless she was with Felix and Warren.

Tori's dad cleared his throat and I eyeballed him in silence, forcing him to say the first words.

His cologne and suit screamed of money along with his pompous haircut and condescending smile.

I fucking hated him and he hadn't even spoken yet.

If he elicited that kind of reaction from someone like Tori, then he was a monster.

"Leander Winters, and you are?" he offered, his hand extended.

I glanced down at his outstretched hand and ignored it, stepping back and holding the door open.

"Tori is in the kitchen, Mr. Winters," I said in a sharp tone.

"Ah, I see our little Tori has been talking about me," he said with a gruff laugh. "You know how these omegas are. So sensitive and quick to assume the worst."



“She’s about as level-headed as they come,” I countered. “What is this visit about? We have reservations in an hour.”

His fake smile fell and a void of ice took its place. He turned to his daughter with a sneer and dismissed me much like I did to him.

“What are you planning with that trust?” he growled.

“It’s money you can’t touch, Dad,” she said with a defeated sigh. “My plans aren’t your concern.”

“You can’t, either. The stipulations are clear,” he said in a growl.

What trust and what stipulations? Was she thinking about finding a way to buy the inn? I’d seen that spark of excitement and pure joy. Is this trust why that fell away?

“Again, what I choose to do is not your concern,” she said in as strong of a voice as she could manage. A wave of pride ran through me and I moved closer to her side, making our coffee and doctoring them up without bothering to offer this man any.

“Why is he here? This is a family matter,” Leander bit out.

“I’m family to her,” I said as I handed her mug over and kissed her temple. “We’re mates. She is, in fact, more mine than yours. So, if you could please leave.” I waved my fingers at the door in a dismissive gesture meant to offend his delicate, alpha sensibilities.

His face turned a ruddy purple as he fought not to lash out. His fists tightened and I gently nudged her behind me.

The way she shook was enough for me to drop this act altogether.

“Let me make something very clear to you, Mr. Winters. You may have done some terrible things to her but you won’t ever touch her, or bring her down, again, do you understand? You have no rights to her trust, as she just told you. So, there is nothing further to discuss here.”

“Tori,” he warned through gritted teeth. The veins in his neck were bulging and pulsing with his fury. “You have

obligations to me. A wedding to attend.”

“Leave, Dad. He’s right. I’m not doing this anymore. I want you out of my life. You can tell your precious associate the wedding is officially off.”

“After all I’ve done for you?!” he roared in a deafening scream that had me pushing her further behind me.

“What, trauma and pain? Mom leaving you wasn’t enough?” she squeaked out, her indignation finally kicking in. She stepped out from behind me and faced off with the furious alpha. “You let that alpha break me and said I should just look pretty and take it! You took my career from me! All my life you’ve tried to keep me under your thumb and I’m done with it. Leave!” The last word was a feral scream that matched his.

My arm went around her waist to pull her against my chest, holding her there.

“This is not the end of this. When you’re done with your hormonal hissy fit, I’ll be in touch,” he said as he turned and stalked out of the door. Each step was stiff and forced, like his body had turned to stone during the confrontation.

When the door closed behind him and the elevator dinged down the hall she let out a soft sob before crumbling. My arm around her was the only thing holding her up and I didn’t hesitate to scoop her up and carry her to the couch, settling her on my lap and wrapping my arms around her while she cried.

Easton was wrong. This omega had endured hell and still held onto her sanity and charm. She was strong, capable, and had so much more to offer than he assumed.

“What did the alpha do to you, Tori?” I asked as evenly as I could. “Did you tell us everything?”

Knowing this omega she’d likely glossed over the details. I wanted them all so I could end him.

“Not now,” she pleaded as she clung to me, her breathless, hiccupping cries taking back over.

She was right, now wasn’t the time to push.

Though, if she thought I was going to let this go, she was mistaken.

When her sobs subsided into soft sniffles I ran my nose over her neck, hoping if I scent-marked her it would help soothe her jagged edges. It was as if that man waltzed in and kicked the ground out from under her.

She was free-falling and I wasn't about to let her spiral. I wanted to see the omega who faced off with Easton and who stared around at a broken inn like it held the answers to life.

This wasn't Tori.

At least not anymore.

“Go get dressed, we're going out,” I told her. “I'll wait, so take your time. Nice dress, makeup, find your confidence, love.”

She stilled at the words, or maybe the term of endearment, before slowly nodding her head and climbing to her feet. She started to walk away before turning and putting a soft kiss on my cheek.

“Thank you, Jordan,” she said in a hoarse whisper that cut me right to my soul. When the shower was running I pulled out my phone and let the others know my plan.

Jordan: I'm taking Tori out tonight

Easton: What. Where?

Jordan: On a date

Easton: What the fuck

Theo: Treat her nice. She deserves it.

Jordan: I plan to.

Easton: What's with the change of heart? You hate that princess bullshit as much as I do.

Jordan: I haven't thought that in a while, you're the one refusing to listen to what we are saying.

Jordan: You're going to find yourself alone, Easton. You have to stop. All that shit you say and think about her isn't true.

Easton: What. Changed? This isn't simply giving her kindness. What fucking shifted.

He was right. This was deeper than I'd let it go before. This was me seeing just how strong my omega was and not wanting to give her anything less than everything she'd ever needed or wanted.

Jordan: Her father visited. It wasn't pretty. There's things about her and her past we don't know. Even after all she told us at the club

Theo: Of course we don't know because Easton decided she was the enemy. I'm still disgusted with myself for even listening.

Jordan: I am too. She is a lot more than just a pretty face and wealth

Easton: You've lost your fucking mind. Scent match or not, she's a fucking spoiled rich kid. I've seen her type. Fate was wrong on this one.

Theo: I refuse to believe that. Don't drive a wedge between us, brother, you don't want to go there

Jordan: Maybe stop being an asshole and talk to her. It might help things. I plan to apologize tonight. We have groveling to do.

She may have given Theo and me a bit more kindness than we deserved while she was drunk, but now I needed to show her that I didn't think like Easton.

The click of heels pulled me away from the conversation. It was probably for the best. Easton was hellbent on making himself lose out on his pack and I wasn't willing to watch it all crash and burn by his side.

I'd be by hers.

"You look..." My words trailed off as I slowly ran my eyes over her. She'd put on a tight-fitting, red dress. The top was tight around her chest, drawing attention right to her breasts.

It hung off one shoulder, exposing it completely and I couldn't help but imagine my bite mark right there on display.

The other arm was covered with the sheer red material. It was classy and just sexy enough to drive me fucking mad.

"Breathtaking," I finally finished. Her cheeks flamed but a pleased smile turned up her red-painted lips.

She walked toward me with a bit of a sway to her curvy hips. Her confidence was back and I was relieved to see her personality peeking through again.

"Come on, alpha, I'm starving," she said as she grabbed her phone and watched me stand. The heels put her at the perfect height, just short enough that I could tuck her under my chin if I wanted to.

I led her outside to my car and settled her into the passenger side, buckling her up before going around and sliding in.

"You can control the music," I said as I turned the key, my vintage cherry-red mustang roaring to life. It was the one expense in my life I didn't hesitate to splurge on.

Easton hated it.

I was finally realizing that maybe he wasn't as over his past as we all thought. He was single-handedly trying to sabotage our future over the fact Tori was raised with money and privilege.

“Tell me about the inn. How did all that come about? It clearly wasn’t a random hike,” I asked to get her talking while I drove us out of town toward our destination. Lancaster had a high-end restaurant run by an old army buddy. Our names were in his system as VIPs, so I knew I’d have no trouble snagging a table.

“It’s stupid,” she said in a small voice and I gave her a sharp look.

“I don’t want to hear any of that. Don’t let his words hold that kind of power,” I said in a tone that matched the glare I sent her way. She narrowed her eyes but her confidence had taken a huge hit tonight.

“Okay,” she relented. “I went to school for hospitality. My big dream was to open a bed and breakfast that catered to omegas. Think, old style b&b but with spa treatments and extra perks included.”

“Why ‘was’ that your dream. Why isn’t it still?”

“I didn’t graduate. He forced me to quit because no daughter of his was going to be a ‘servant.’ Without his funding, I couldn’t afford school anymore and obviously, I didn’t qualify for loans, so I was fucked.”

“What a prick.”

She let out a small laugh.

“I can agree with that. He was always doing things outside of the others’ view. Like trying to sway me out of college, forcing me to date his associates’ sons, not caring about me in the least. I was his pawn.”

“Did he do Ellie the same way?” I asked. Now that she was talking openly I didn’t want her to stop.

“No, he was openly hostile toward her and the rest of our parents followed suit. Nothing she ever did was good enough and she left as soon as she could and cut ties. She was the family scapegoat.”

“That’s disgusting,” I said. “But I know how shitty parents can be.”

“I’m sorry that you understand,” she said as she put her hand on my arm. I met those pretty green eyes for a second before turning my attention back to the road. “I’m not saying that my life wasn’t a bit easier than some, but that doesn’t mean it was perfect.”

“I know, Tori. I’m so sorry that we dismissed you so easily,” I said. “It’d be easy to pin this on Easton but we all are so used to letting him bulldoze his way through life we didn’t question it soon enough.”

“Thank you for the apology,” she said. “I know things between us are shaky at best... but you saved me today. That means a lot to me.”

“I’m always going to protect you,” I promised her. Even if she didn’t believe me today, I’d do my best to keep showing up for her. She deserved nothing less. “I meant every word I said.”

She gave me a soft, unsure smile before we fell into silence.

Thankfully, we were in Lancaster now so another ten minutes and I was pulling up to the valet in front of *The Villa*.

“This place is new,” she said as she stepped out. “Pretty.”

“An old friend owns it,” I admitted as I held an arm out for her. She didn’t even hesitate to touch me this time and my chest warmed.

It was a small step and far more than I deserved.

CHAPTER

TWENTY-FIVE

*A Week Later*

*Tori*

Soft touches feathered across my forehead, tucking my hair behind my ear and waking me up from a dead sleep. My mouth opened to scream, but it stopped at the sight of Theo and Jordan looking down at me, both amused.

I clutched a hand to my chest, trying to regulate my breathing. Then, understanding dawned on their faces, and they both winced.

“Shit, I forgot about that asshole. I didn’t mean to scare you, princess,” Jordan offered. For once, his dark hair was down, hanging loosely around his shoulders. When he leaned down to brush a kiss across my forehead, it curtained us off from the world.

“It’s okay.” Especially when he was being open and candid like this. They’d changed over the last week as much as I had.

“In our defense,” Theo said with a deep chuckle. “We tried to wake you up first.”

A small smile played across my lips. “You know, my siblings always did say I was horrible to wake up.”

“At least you don’t snore,” he teased, giving me a wink with those warm eyes I was always captivated by. I never knew brown eyes could be so warm, swirling with so many emotions and flecks of gold that I could barely look away.



“What are you guys doing here?” I finally asked, blinking away the daze he left me in. Jordan chuckled knowingly.

“Actually, we wanted you to show Felix and Warren the inn today. Felix packed a lunch, and I have coffee,” Theo offered, holding up a travel mug ready to go. He shifted it back and forth in offering, but coffee had to wait.

“I’ve got to brush my teeth first,” I said as I threw the covers off my body, then froze.

“Who is we?”

They shared a look and I narrowed my eyes at them.

“Warren, Felix, and us,” Theo said carefully. My chest tightened. Things with Easton have been strange. When he was around, he wasn’t as hostile, in fact, I caught the looks of longing he’d shot my way.

“Easton is out. Again,” Jordan tacked on. The strain in his voice said Easton had also been weird around them. Yet he hadn’t done anything to fix the tension between us, so what was he doing?

Refusing to dwell on it, I started toward the bathroom, all too aware of their eyes tracking my movements.

“We’ll meet you out in the living room.” Jordan’s voice was rough and I shook my head. That was the last thing I wanted. It seemed I was going to have to be the one to take the reins on all of our relationships.

“Or one of you could join me in the shower,” I offered. I wasn’t sure what had gotten into me, but having all of my mates so close, their scents wrapped around me, had my libido at an all-time high.

Theo and Jordan shared a look, something unspoken passing between them before Theo gave me a wink and backed out of the door.

Jordan closed it behind him, his hand resting on the wooden frame as he turned to look at me. His gray eyes were stormier than ever, and the molten silver heat of them had fire running through my veins.

“Are you sure about this, princess? I can still walk away.”

He hadn't done more than look my way, his body still angled toward the exit. The tightness in my chest I hadn't even realized I was carrying around fell away.

“I'm sure,” I promised as I pulled the t-shirt I'd been sleeping in over my head and letting it fall to the floor. I was naked now except for a pair of cotton boyshorts and the way he studied me was like I was wearing expensive lingerie, not cheap fabric.

“Tori,” he warned. “Be sure.”

“I am,” I promised as I walked slowly toward him, a sway in my hips that he noticed with his sharp, piercing eyes.

My fingers ran through his long hair before settling on the back of his neck and pulling him toward me. There was no hesitation as his lips slanted over mine.

Jordan was a taker. He demanded I let him in as he slid his tongue over the seam of my lips then he tasted, drawing out... no, demanding, every sigh that fell from my lips as he kissed me like I'd never been kissed before.

He shifted away to shuck off his own clothes then my boyshorts, leaving us both naked. I didn't even have a moment to appreciate him before he was pulling me back into the kiss, amping the heat up enough a sheen of sweat formed on our skin.

My knees started to buckle but it was like he was already attuned to me, sweeping me into his arms so I was forced to wrap my legs around his waist. He never parted the kiss as he carried me to the shower.

I hissed as my skin met the cold tile of the shower but he was already pulling away from my mouth to turn on the water. The hot water and steam quickly chased away the chill and I sighed happily, my head falling back.

Jordan took his time peppering small bites and open-mouthed kisses across my neck and collarbone before dipping down to take one peaked nipple into his mouth. He was

hellbent on tasting every inch of my skin he could reach but I needed more.

Shifting my hips, I reached down and notched his cock at my entrance before sinking down on him. He'd been so lost in worshipping my body that he seemed to jolt out of it as I took all of him. Jordan's low, feral groan rocked right through me. The gravel of it, the bliss on his face, all of it had a shudder running through me.

Jordan's scent of bourbon and pear filled the air, the crisp sweetness warring with the rich spice and drowning me in the intoxicating blend.

"Fuck, you smell so fucking sweet, princess. Like your pretty pussy couldn't wait to have me."

"Needed you," I muttered, my voice slurring as I rocked my hips to take him in further.

Jordan's low hiss, as if he was in pain, was my only warning before he took over. His weight pinned me to the shower wall as he pistoned inside of me with enough force that the walls groaned in protest.

My body was on fire for him, the heat in the bathroom making my head spin as he took me hard and fast.

"Bite me," I demanded. "Mark me and remind me every fucking day that I chose you, chose this."

When I was with them I felt unhinged, demanding and possessive, wanting nothing more than to scream at the world that they were mine. Maybe it was because I'd closed myself off so long, but I liked to think it was just them.

They were what I needed. What I wanted. And I didn't want to look back. Not anymore.

Even days after taking two of my mates' marks I hadn't regretted it. No, all I could do was run my fingers over the rigid bumps of their marks and drown in the memories of ecstasy they'd given me.

"What?" he husked, pulling back to stare down at me.

That uncertainty was back and I blinked up at him, half dazed but no less determined.

“I said mark me, alpha. Leave your bite on my skin. Unless you don’t want this... don’t want me,” I said. Now he had uncertainty creeping in on me. I would understand, our entire relationship was hot and cold. Though, it wouldn’t make rejection hurt any less.

His growl was punctuated by a slam of his hips, fucking me faster and faster until I felt the ripple of his muscles locking into place. I braced for the bite but screamed nonetheless as he sank his teeth into the muscle in my shoulder, putting his bite there as he filled me with his cum.

My body clenched around Jordan’s knot, a low moan filling the air as my pussy quaked around him, my body giving him an orgasm that was nothing short of mindblowing.

He stayed like that, pinning me to the wall as we were locked together, his breath fanning on my neck as we tried to calm our racing hearts.

“Don’t regret me, Tori.”

“I won’t if you don’t regret me,” I whispered as I wrapped my arms around him, my cheek resting on his shoulder.

The moment felt far too raw but we weren’t shying away from it.

“I thought you still hated me for how we acted at first.” There was pain in his voice.

“You never treated me like less,” I admitted. “Only he did.”

“What about Felix?”

“What about him?” I asked.

“Do you think this can really work out with two omegas?”

A soft laugh escaped me. “It can if we want it to. Felix claimed me before you did. He’s not going anywhere, and you’re going to claim him someday. I don’t need to be there for it.”

“I don’t know what I did in this life to deserve you,” he said, his voice cracking like I’d said exactly what he needed to hear.

“You deserve everything, Jordan. I promise.” My putting a hand on his cheek was followed by his larger hand covering mine, and we just breathed like that, existing together, and soaking in the moment.

Then there was a loud pounding on the door.

“Everyone’s getting antsy. Let’s go,” Theo called.

I let out a startled laugh as he helped me stand on my own two feet, his knot finally receding. We still didn’t rush as we each showered, cleaning ourselves up from our moment together.

Jordan was the first one to finish, slipping out of the room while I worked on blow drying my hair and making myself presentable.

I couldn’t bring myself to walk out of the room and get dressed yet. Instead, I studied myself in the mirror. I’d lost the dark circles that had plagued me for so long. I hadn’t even realized that it had been days since I’d had a nightmare. In fact, I’d felt safer than I ever had with all of them around.

My fingers trailed over my fresh bite mark and then moved to the other two: one on my shoulder and the other between my legs on my thigh.

Nothing could have prepared me for the change in me once I gave in to the pack. Because that’s what we were now: a bonded pack, even if we were missing one part of us. I knew everything would be okay because I had Theo, Jordan, Felix, and Warren by my side.

I was just waiting for Easton to realize where he belonged.

We were all diving into this pack headfirst. It seemed so crazy since I’d held back for so long, and maybe that’s why I did it. There was no second-guessing or overthinking when I just let my heart make the decisions.

When I walked out of the bedroom fully dressed and ready to go, everyone was waiting. Felix was perched on Jordan's lap, the alpha running his hands up and down his spine. Warren was sitting next to them, his smile bright when he saw me.

Theo gave me a wicked grin and a wink, telling me that everything was okay.

"My turn next, muse," he demanded. I nodded in agreement, biting my lip, trying to keep the blush from taking over. But it was far too late for that. I could feel the heat burning on my cheeks and down to my chest.

"Are you ready for another hiking adventure?" Jordan asked, his voice amused. "Maybe we can keep you on your feet this time."

"I'll make sure you don't face-plant," Warren promised. He stood and stretched before holding out a hand to me. Jordan stood next and locked his fingers with Felix's, pulling him to his feet. My omega mate moved toward me, pressing a purposeful kiss to my mouth, even teasing his tongue inside for a taste before walking away.

My lips tingled from the quick contact, and I knew I had a dopey grin on my face, but I didn't care.

As we walked downstairs, I pulled out my phone.

We created this strange little bubble around ourselves, and I knew that my problems weren't over yet. But I had definitely been ignoring everyone else in my life.

Tori: Have I thanked you lately for pushing me toward my mates?

Ellie: OMG OMG IT'S HAPPENING. EVERYBODY STAY CALM.

Tori: Oh, stop. Is it really that shocking?

Ellie: Yes, yes it is, Tori. You're too stubborn for your own good. I take it things are going well?

Tori: Not perfect, but I feel like I finally have a life I want. I'm going to check out that place Lake and Shaye found.

Ellie: Micah told me about that. You let us know if we can help. We'll make sure that place is yours.

Tori: Thanks, Ellie. For not giving up on me and not letting me give up on myself.

Ellie: You and Micah are my only family. I'm always going to be here for you.

My heart warmed at her words, and I blinked away the tears. I had doubted my ability to secure the money for the inn before, but now I was more determined than ever.

I promised my lawyer I'd check in soon, and now I found myself dialing his number. The guys might be with me, but they would be proud of me for taking this step.

Let's just hope fate has even more in store for me. I wasn't ready to give up on my dreams anymore.

CHAPTER

TWENTY-SIX

*Tori*

The sound of a hammer slamming against wood filled the air as we approached the inn. There was still no road to be found, and I started to panic that someone had gotten here before us.

Had someone realized we'd been around? Was this place owned by someone else?

The questions swirled in my mind as Jordan and Warren stepped forward, shoulder to shoulder, as they walked ahead. *My protective alphas.*

They were still new to each other, not quite close enough to be considered real friends, but they were united in their need to protect us.

Theo walked behind us, while Felix stood beside me, his hand in mine. He tried to give me a reassuring smile. My omega, always the optimist, even looked a bit shaken.

"Easton?" Jordan's steps faltered, and that was enough for me to let go of Felix and push through them.

The redhead hadn't heard us approach. He had headphones on his ears and was nailing fresh boards to the porch where the old ones had nearly rotted away. He didn't notice me moving closer until I was close enough the boards shifted under my weight, giving me away.

Easton looked up then gasped, startled at my sudden appearance. It was the first time I'd been close to him in days.



He looked almost repentant and more than a little haggard. His stubble had grown into a thick, ginger covering, and his eyes had dark circles. His clothes were covered in wood shavings and dirt. His hands had blisters and I noticed a few bandages.

He'd softened when we got to the apartments after they discovered my stalker had broken in, but I hadn't seen much of him since then.

"What's going on here?" I demanded. My voice was sharper than I intended, but I had no more patience for Easton, especially not in a place that meant this much to me.

Not that he cared how much anything meant to me.

"I'm fixing the porch," he said. His voice was so quiet, lacking the usual rumble. I took a step back, running into someone behind me. Theo's scent of parchment, smoke, and cedar filled my senses, and I relaxed a fraction. I wasn't facing this alone.

"I'd like to know the same thing myself. This isn't just you fixing a porch. You don't do things like this, Easton," he said. Theo's voice was laced in hurt and Easton's shoulders slumped.

Easton let out a sigh that seemed to hold the weight of the world. Despite my annoyance and frustration with this man, concern started to fill me.

I crouched down so I was level with him, my eyes studying his.

"How long have you been out here, Easton?"

"The day after you found this place."

His words hit me square in the chest and I froze, letting that knowledge sink in. Even as he outwardly fought me, then shut me out, he was still here trying to pay penance for his actions.

"This is where you've been disappearing to?" Jordan asked, glancing around as if the building itself would hold answers. But the only person who could tell us what was going on here was Easton, and he seemed to be in an awkward,

stunned state. We'd broken down all his defenses and forced him to face his demons.

Now I just needed to see if he'd come out the other side a changed alpha.

"We'll give you some space," Felix offered, but Jordan held up a hand before wrapping his fingers around Felix's and pulling him close. Easton's eyes widened at the contact, then he glanced at me as if waiting for my reaction. I gave them a soft smile before turning back to the redhead before me.

"It's been almost a week. What have you been doing out here?"

He let out a self-deprecating laugh. "Trying to figure out how I fucked up so badly that even my brothers were willing to turn against me."

"I'm sure it didn't take much soul-searching to figure that one out," Theo said.

Easton dropped his hammer and the nails that were in his other hand, resting back on his haunches, hands on his knees as he watched us. For the first time since we met, we were having a conversation and he wasn't towering over me, using his bulk and size for intimidation. I swear the man worked out for that sole purpose.

"I'm not..." He trailed off as he seemed to search for the right words, starting and stopping two more times before he finally managed to get something out that made sense. "I'm not sure how to be anything other than the man I've grown into lately. The anger has clung to me like a second skin for so long I don't know *how* to trust people again."

It was the first real words that Easton had spoken to me. That was enough for me to drop down in front of him and sit, my knee resting against his. The contact had him relaxing, even if he didn't realize why.

It gave me hope. That alone meant he wanted this, wanted me, he just had to say it out loud now.

"Look, I can't say I'm innocent," I started, glancing up at Warren who just gave me an encouraging smile.

He'd forgive me when I ran from him.

Could I forgive Easton for being so awful to me?

The problem was, I knew why he had that armor. He may not have told me from his own lips, but I knew. It was self-preservation, and in its own way, he had just clung to it so fiercely that he was willing to give up everything for it.

I couldn't hurt him if he didn't let me in, after all.

Even if I wasn't trying to hurt anyone else, I was, and in my quest to protect my own heart and my own safety, I'd almost not given my mate a chance.

That one mate turned into two, then turned into three more. Sometimes letting go was the only way you could move forward.

"We can't come back from this," Easton said, shaking his head. His forehead wrinkled as he tried to make sense of it. His eyes were storms of emotions: grief, frustration, yet there was a glimmer of hope that told me that this conversation was still worth having.

"Things aren't going to be perfect overnight," I agreed. "Just like I had to apologize and make amends with Warren, you have a lot to make up for. But I'm telling you right now, I'm not here for games, Easton. If you are here to fix things just with your brothers and still keep me out of your life, then you need to leave."

"That's not why I'm here."

"If you're going to continue to treat me like I'm less because I came from money, then you can also leave. I'm not going to have anyone talk to me that way or put me down anymore."

His guilty eyes shifted from me to Felix, who just stared him down.

"I was seven, and so hungry. My mom hadn't been around for days. Things had been rough at home for Theo and Jordan, so I didn't want to bother them." His voice was strained and low but I clung to every word like the lifeline they were.

“What did you do, brother?” Jordan asked gently. It was clear this was a new story for them all.

“When I went to the food pantry, they wouldn’t give me anything without an adult, which I obviously couldn’t find. If I told them that, they’d send me off somewhere.”

Warren let out a rough breath like he’d been holding it the entire time. “As someone who grew up in the system, I can’t blame you. Felix’s mom saved me.”

“There was no one to save me,” Easton said. It wasn’t said with malice or frustration, it was simply a somber truth. He had saved himself. I knew that much before he even finished his story.

“I went around and asked businesses if they’d feed me in exchange for some work. I’d take trash out for them, do anything. Most of them had, had enough of the punk kids from our side of town and kicked me out quicker than I could speak the words.”

He trailed off. Easton was quiet for so long that everybody else settled onto the porch, sitting down on the freshly repaired boards, waiting for our broken pack member to say his piece.

I wasn’t going to urge him to keep going, either. This was one of those types of stories that haunted you from the inside out, that clawed at your nightmares, hung in the background as you lived your life, never quite letting you go completely.

It had to be at his own pace.

“There was a new shop in town,” he said, glancing up at Theo and Jordan, recognition filling their eyes.

“That clothing store,” Theo said. “Is that why you had it out for that woman?”

“I asked her the same thing I asked everyone else. She told me to get out of her store, but I didn’t have any pride left. I begged her to give me a chance, that I was hungry and I would do anything.”

He looked up at me, his eyes begging me to understand, to listen, to see him. Wasn’t that what I wanted, too? To be seen?

I reached for Easton, my hand going to his leg and resting there. He stared down at it for a moment, blinking rapidly before looking back up at me. It felt like it was easier for him to speak directly to me, and I didn't mind.

“She told me to wait, and she went in the back, grabbed out some takeout box. I think it was some leftovers that she'd been eating for lunch. When she came back, I thought she was going to give me some. My stomach rumbled loudly, and I was reaching for it when she dropped it on the ground, the container still in her hand, so the food spilled all over the floor.”

My jaw dropped in horror. It was already awful and I knew that wasn't the end of the story. My house might have been cold and my parents shit, but at least I never had to wonder if I'd eat.

“She told me if I wanted to eat, I could lick it off the floor.”

There were curses from the guys. My heart broke as I gave his leg a squeeze, tears burning at my eyes at the pain still in his voice.

“She was a bitch. You never deserved that,” I said. “No one did.”

“That woman flaunted her money all over town, but that was the lowest moment of my life. It was never you, Tori. If I would have opened my eyes even once, I would have seen that you were nothing like those rich people. Like her.”

“You're right; I was never like them. But I knew their kind.”

“For what it's worth, I'm sorry. I knew from the first time I saw you scared and fighting to find a job that you had drive in you, that you were different. Then you stood there, yelling at me every awful thing that happened to get you to that point, and I've never felt like more of an asshole.”

“Then why did you say those things when we came here?” Jordan demanded. “Tori showed us something about herself that she never let anyone else see—a dream—and then I

watched the light drain from her eyes when you told her how useless it was.”

His eyes shuttered closed, his entire body sagging at the reality of Jordan’s words.

“God, I’m so fucking sorry, Tori. I didn’t mean it. I was just mad—mad because my brothers were drifting away, hating myself because it was all my fault, upset because I couldn’t fix it. It was never about you.”

It was one of those things that I knew I couldn’t say it was okay, because it wasn’t, but I wasn’t sure what else to say. It wasn’t like I truly forgave him yet. I needed to see that he’d changed. Words were always easier than actions.

“What are you doing here, then?” I asked as I swiped a stray tear away.

“It was hard to see you warming up to them but not me, and I needed the space. I didn’t come here with intention, but then I ended up at the hardware store buying supplies and hiking out here before I knew it. The thought of you falling through this porch was haunting me, and so I put all that anger into this place. I know we don’t have rights to it, but at least I can make it a little bit safer while you try to make that happen.”

“Thank you,” I said. It looked like he had fixed the railing, the broken door, and this. He’d spent hours here doing the only thing he could, focusing his energy on something good for once, and I couldn’t fault him for that.

“You deserve more than this. You deserve better than me. But if you want to redo this place, then I can help you do that. Teach you how.”

“Bold of you assume I don’t know how to do it myself already.”

He let out a startled laugh and shook his head. “You’re right, you probably could.”

The conviction in his words was another sign he saw me now. For who I am, not who he thought I was. That progress

had my chest warming and that hope blooming from a spark to a full-blown inferno.

“Oh, I’m lying through my teeth. I have no idea how to fix anything. I’ve never even really used a hammer.”

He blinked at me, shaking his head in disbelief before he let out a slow chuckle. It morphed into full laughter as we both lost it. The moment felt lighter after that, like we’d taken the step over that metaphorical line, together.

“But I’d like to learn.”

His face softened at that.

“I’d like to teach you.”

Moving forward, I reached for a nail and picked up his hammer. Without words, he moved, putting the next plank in place and pulling a carpenter’s pencil from the toolbox, marking where I should nail it.

“Be careful of your fingers. Hold it steady here and start with careful, purposeful hits.”

My first hit was a disaster. It was too dainty and made the nail shift out of place. He didn’t say anything as I repositioned my hands. He moved in behind me, the bulk of his body surrounding me with warmth as I breathed in his scent: juniper, pine, and sage, a complete contrast of softness to the abrasive man that he was.

“Like this,” he said, wrapping his fingers around the hammer and guiding my movements.

My breath caught, and I felt my cheeks warm. My body reacted to him and this time, I indulged it. I had to blink a few times to clear my mind before trying again.

This time, I hit the nail on the head and let out a little squeak of triumph that had a deep, rumbling laughter falling from him. I dropped the hammer and turned to him, watching the way his eyes crinkled in the corners and his whole face lit up with it.

He was beautiful when he let himself be free.

As if he realized I was watching, his face started to shutter, but I reached out, desperate to keep it in place.

“No, don’t hide from me again.”

His face softened, but the smile didn’t fall completely.

“Why?” he asked.

Using the boards to distract myself while I spoke, I grabbed another nail and helped hammer the board in place, explaining about school and my father yanking it all away from me. Once I started, I again couldn’t stop until I told him more about William and him breaking in.

I didn’t realize there was a low rumble coming from him until I finished talking. It was a never-ending growl as he glared off in the distance like it could penetrate William from here.

“Even though all that happened, I’ve never felt safer than when you guys were with me.”

“Too bad I made you miserable at the same time,” he said with a sad smile. “I’ll never be able to say sorry enough.”

“I’d be a hypocrite if I didn’t give you a chance to fix it, but Easton, you have to try. You have to be different.”

He swallowed hard and nodded before reaching into his toolbox and pulling out a stack of papers, handing them my way.

“What is this?” I asked, unfolding it and getting more confused at the sight of ‘Lockwood Historical Society’ written across the top.

“Well, I did some digging and found out that the woman who owned this place was really big in the town. She died suddenly in a tragic fall, and everything was abandoned. No one, out of respect for her, felt like taking it over. She had no family, so it stayed tied up in legal for a few years while they tried to find an heir for her things. Eventually, it fell into the city’s hands, and they didn’t know what to do with it. At that point, it had fallen into such disrepair I think they wrote it off.”



“Oh no, how do I get it from the city?” I breathed out, panic starting to rise, but he tapped the papers.

“This is an application to turn this site into an official historical building. If you can make your case for this place, they’d be willing to sell it to you, give you the permits, all in the name of bringing revenue to the city itself.”

“What? You did all this?” I guessed, shock racing through me.

“Did what?” Jordan asked, their footsteps trailing out from the living room. Apparently, my excited voice had brought them out.

“He found the owner.”

CHAPTER

# TWENTY-SEVEN

*One Week Later*

*Tori*

“What if I can’t do this?” I asked, looking Easton dead in the eyes as my panic started to take over.

At some point in the last week, things had changed between us. He was no longer a source of pain and anger, but an unrelenting force that grounded me. He was a mountain of a man, unmoving, and I needed to tap into that strength right about now.

“You can,” he said, not a hint of doubt in his voice. “This is your ticket to the life you want to make for yourself. If you want it, you have to work for it.” The words were blunt but exactly what I needed to hear. Even if he no longer thought I was a useless wealthy girl who threw her money around, he still demanded that I push myself.

“You’re right,” I said, starting to pace so my heels clicked as I shifted across the lobby floor, waiting for my meeting. We were early, unfortunately, wanting to make a good impression. Which meant we had to wait even longer in the lobby. The anticipation was going to drive me insane.

“Tori, baby, sit,” Warren pleaded, snatching me as I walked past him, forcing me to sit in the empty seat beside him. His hand stayed on my thigh, keeping me in place. The heat seeped through the skirt I was wearing and I closed my eyes and took several measured breaths. He leaned in, his lips

brushing over my ear. “Maybe if you’re a good girl later, we’ll reward you.”

I shuddered at the promise in his voice.

Then, someone leaned in on my other side. Felix. I could smell oranges, vanilla, and cream. “Little vixen, in fact, if this goes well, we’ll reward you for a job well done.”

I had to bite my lips so I didn’t moan and embarrass myself right there in the waiting room. Fuck, he was so fucking sexy when he was in his confident, sassy mood.

“We can definitely think of some creative ways to show our girl how proud we are of her, right?” Theo asked, raising one eyebrow as I glanced at his sketchbook and back up at the man. We might still be fairly new at this, but I knew enough about him to know it was his coping mechanism.

“You can give me a quicky in the supply closet now,” I offered, biting back a laugh as his pencil faltered. We hadn’t found the time yet to fuck but I was more than ready to have him.

“It’s going to be fine,” Easton rumbled. I closed my eyes and took a breath, letting the gravel of his voice seep right through me, building my confidence again. “My omega is not a quitter. She’s not afraid of anything.”

My eyes popped open, staring at him in shock. He’d asked for my forgiveness, and I told him that he had to show it and he was truly trying, but this was the first time he’d acknowledged me like that.

“Does that mean you’ll reward me if I do a good job, too?” I asked.

“You think you can handle me?” he questioned. Even he looked startled by his answer, but he didn’t take it back, and that was enough for me. I was up and across the room in seconds, stopping just before him and tilting my head back to stare up at him.

“I’m not sweet like the rest of them, princess,” he said. It was good to hear that nickname without the fire behind it.

“No one ever said you were, alpha. And no one ever said I was delicate.” It was his turn for his breath to catch, and I could smell his pheromones filling the space.

If we didn't quit this soon, they'd have to air out this whole lobby. The sound of a door opening down the hall had us both taking a step back. Though my cheeks were warm and my breathing erratic, whoever it was would know exactly where our conversation had gone.

The woman who walked out was older, her gray hair pulled up in a bun, but she wasn't nearly as formal as I expected. She was wearing jeans and a faded sweater. There was a kind smile on her face, though, her lips tipped up in amusement as she took a breath, stopping fairly far away.

“Ms. Winters?”

I nodded once and took the portfolio from Jordan. We'd all worked for days on this, and I just hoped it made a difference.

The guys hung back, letting me do this alone. I needed to do this for myself.

“Thank you for reaching out to the Historical Society. We don't often have something this exciting show up on our list.”

“Well, I am hoping to impress you all with this one,” I said, giving her a warm smile. It was funny how my confidence made me feel at ease in my own skin. The anxiety was starting to flood away as I went into this with purpose.

I'd put my whole heart and soul into this portfolio, and I knew that if they didn't grant me the chance to purchase the inn, that was no fault of my own.

Maybe my dream would have to shift. That would hurt, but I'd survive. That thought alone freed me of my anxiety.

The woman led me to an old conference room. Everything was dark from the wood paneling on the walls to the polished wooden table in the center of the room. Three men sat around it, and she took her seat next to them and gestured for me to take the empty one across the table.

“We’re so glad to have you,” one of the older men spoke, giving me a nod. “The Lockwood Historical Society is excited to hear your proposal, young lady. My name is Brandon. This is Louis, Charles, and I believe you’ve met Callie.”

“It’s a pleasure to meet you,” I said, giving each of them a warm smile before opening the portfolio in front of me. “Shall I dive in?”

They shared a small smile and nodded.

“Please do,” Callie said, folding her hands in front of her and resting her chin on them, giving me her full attention.

This time, I didn’t shy away as I passed them each an outline of my talking points with all the information they needed on it—from my personal information to my plans for the future and everything in between. They looked surprised but pleased as they glanced over it, and I put the rest of the stack away. I’d printed too many, not sure how many people would be there. I should have known it would be a small meeting. Lockwood was tiny.

They didn’t interrupt as I started at the top, showing them sketches Theo had made for me so they could see my vision on page. I went through my outline of services that I wanted to implement into our program, most geared for omegas and packs, the staff that needed to be involved, ways that we preserve history, and then finally, I concluded with my proposed budget.

Louis was the first to talk again. He wasn’t smiling exactly, but I could see the curiosity sparking in his eyes.

“Could you tell us why you want to take this place over? I haven’t seen this old building in years, but even I know that it’s going to take a lot for it to become what you’re proposing. I’d like to know your motivation behind it.”

“I’ve always wanted to create a safe space of sorts. One where a pack could go to get away from the city. I’ve always felt like inns held a bit of magic. They don’t lack the sterile quality hotels have, and allow owners room to make the place unique. I never found the right way to move forward with

those dreams until a few friends of mine stumbled upon this place in the woods outside of Lockwood, and the moment I saw it, I fell in love. There's so much history there, so much character, and I realized that I wanted to bring it back to life. It may not be the same as it once was, but I would love to make it something special again. To give Lockwood something to offer the world they couldn't find anywhere else."

Charlie leaned forward then, his eyes narrowing on me. "Could they not get these services at other places?"

"Sure they can. They'll get them at a few generic bed and breakfasts around the world, but they wouldn't find the dining room stacked with treats from the local bakeries and coffee shops. They wouldn't find the custom teas that Ellie sells at the Raven's Nest. They wouldn't find fresh flowers in every room from our local florist. They wouldn't find the lake only a short walk away, the nature trails that run all through these woods. They wouldn't find the heart that Lockwood has, anywhere else."

They—all three—sat back, smiles brightening their faces. It was like I had just said the magic words to them. I knew I had them hook, line, and sinker.

I meant everything I said. This place was special, and I wanted it to become something amazing.

"If you could step out and let us have just a moment," Callie said.

"Of course," I promised, standing up, closing my portfolio, and heading outside the room. The moment the door closed behind me, I took several breaths, filling my lungs with fresh air like I hadn't had a breath the entire time.

Instead of waiting by the door, I rushed down the hall toward the lobby and gestured for my guys to come with me.

"Will you guys come in now? They're behind closed doors considering my deal. I'm waiting for an answer."

"Of course," Felix said. "Do you think it went well?"

"From that smile, I know she does," Easton said. The way he looked at me was almost unnerving now, there was a

softness to it like he saw right through me, right into my very soul.

It filled me with warmth and a little bit of weariness, like I was just waiting for him to go back to his old ways.

The doors were opening again before the others could chime in, and Callie was stepping out to greet me.

“Oh,” she said as her eyes took our group in. “You brought the whole pack. Perfect, come on in.”

We all filed inside, and I took my seat. The guys just fanned out around me, not bothering to sit as they waited for the Historical Society to speak.

“You gave a very compelling argument, my dear,” Charlie said. Now that, that part of it was over, they all seemed to soften a bit around the edges. Their eyes were no longer shrewd and calculating but warm.

“We think this is exactly what Lockwood could use, and we want to help make it happen.”

“Really?” I asked. It might have been unprofessional, but the blinding smile on my face and the small, excited squeal that escaped had everyone in the room cracking up.

“Really,” Callie said, shaking her head. “You have no idea. This is the kind of thing that we thrive on. So, here’s what we’re going to do. I’m going to talk to my contacts at the city council, and we’re going to find a way to get that road reinstated. That’s going to be our first step, because you can’t get deliveries out there until that happens. And I happen to be on the funding board and know for a fact that we can get you an insanely low price for that place, along with quite a few grants to help it grow.”

They kept going, talking about all the ways they’d be able to assist us as the words tried to sink into my broken mind. I was stunned. I’d never expected an outcome like this. They were so willing to help and make my dream happen.

When they finished I had to take a breath and remind myself that I deserved this. We all did.

“That sounds amazing, and I can’t thank you enough for offering all this help. I’ll talk to my lawyer right away.”

“Leave us your lawyer’s contact information in case he has questions, I’ll send him over an email and let him know who we are and what our plan is,” Lewis offered.

“That would be really great,” I said, shuffling in my purse for the business card I kept there and handing it over. I didn’t need his number. It was already saved in my phone. They could have it.

I barely remembered saying our goodbyes and giving our thanks again before my pack was ushering me outside.

We stood in the parking lot, and I blinked up at them.

“Did that really just happen?”



CHAPTER

# TWENTY-EIGHT

*Tori*

When things went so well with the society, I should have known that it couldn't last. The moment I walked onto our floor at the apartment building, I felt my stomach sink. The splinters of wood on the ground told me that this wasn't going to be pretty.

"My door." The words were quiet but Easton, Jordan, and Theo were already moving. Warren and Felix pulled me back towards them, sandwiching me between them to keep me safe. Easton popped his head out a few moments later and pointed at them.

"Take her to your place, keep her safe."

My entire body shook as they led me back outside. It was too much of a difference, going from such a high to a drastic low. My breath was coming out in labored, little gasps, and it wasn't until a cold voice spoke that I shook out of it.

"Ah, there's my future wife. I wondered when you'd show up."

"William," I breathed his name out like a curse, my voice shaking as I looked up at his too-pretty face. He was dressed in designer clothes, and a small sneer was on his face like he had never been caught somewhere so dirty.

"Is this the alpha?" Warren asked. His voice was low and full of gravel.

When I nodded, his eyes went from shocked to feral, and he began to move. I expected Warren to beat the shit out of the alpha, but instead, he got him on the ground and put his arms behind his back.

“You’re lucky it was me that found you,” he taunted.

“But you’re unlucky that he wasn’t fast enough to save you,” Easton’s words had all of us looking up at him in shock. He was storming over and ripping Warren off of the alpha before bringing William to his feet. His fist connected with his designer face in seconds.

The punch landed with a sickening crunch and a cry of pain.

Twisted satisfaction crept up my spine. I shuddered against it as I watched blood drip from his broken face. His eye was already swollen and he had lost that pristine face he was so proud of.

I hoped it left a scar, something every time he’d see, he’d remember what he’d done to me and what had happened to him because of it.

“Easton, stop,” I told him, because that was enough. The last thing I wanted was my alpha in jail.

“You know we have security feeds all over that apartment. You think tossing up my place and showing up repeatedly is going to save you?”

“Don’t worry, my face is obscured in every one of them,” William said. The pure cockiness there was disgusting. Jordan let out a low chuckle.

“Funny, because you didn’t disconnect all of our safeguards. In fact, I’ve got your face loud and clear right on the feed.” He turned his phone around to show a clear picture of William’s face.

The disgruntled alpha let out a low growl, trying to fight off Easton. It was a useless attempt. My alpha was stronger.

Easton stopped hitting him at my command, something that shocked me to my core.

“Jordan, how good are you at hacking?” I questioned. Easton’s lips spread into a feral grin, as if he knew where I was going with this, and Jordan raised his eyebrows in question.

“His name is William Abrams. I want you to ruin his fucking life. If he’s got a business deal or a job, I want you to yank it out from under him. Mess with his reputation until he has nothing left.”

William scoffed, “As if that could happen. Do you know how much weight my name carries?”

“Not for long,” Jordan sang out. After a few times of tapping on his phone, he tucked it in his pocket with a smug, confident smile.

William’s eyes narrowed, but he didn’t look scared yet. Not scared enough for my liking, at least.

Then, his phone rang in his pocket. It must have been a specific ringtone because the sound had the color draining from his face and his mouth falling open.

“What did you do? Why is my father calling?”

“Let him go, Easton. Just let this be a reminder that if you ever come by again, we’ll make you regret it.”

William scrambled to his feet and ran toward his expensive Rolls-Royce before peeling out of the parking lot. We watched him go, and it wasn’t until my guys were pressing into my side that I realized I was shaking.

“So much for celebrating,” Felix said softly, running his knuckles gently over my cheek. I hadn’t realized until he swiped away tears that I was crying.

“What did you do?” I asked Jordan.

“He was sleeping with a married woman. It was all over his email, he didn’t even bother to hide his tracks. It took me about five seconds to find it and forward it to her husband and his father.”

A startled laugh escaped me, chasing away the tears.

Jordan gave me a wink that told me there was more.

“I may have also forwarded it to some tabloids. His name will be in ruins in an hour. Guess you’ll be off the hook for that winter wedding, huh?”

I lunged for him, wrapping my arms around him and squeezing tightly. He scooped me up into his arms and squeezed me back just as fiercely.

“It’s over, Tori. You’re safe now.”

“Because of you guys,” I said, burying my face into his neck and breathing in his bourbon and spiced pear scent, letting it ground me.

They put me down as sirens echoed in the quiet afternoon. Two police cars drove up quickly, the cops getting out. The moment they got out of their car to find my apartment, I approached them.

The older cop raised his eyebrows. “Are you the ones who made the call?”

“No, but it was my apartment,” I admitted.

“Show us the way,” he said. It wasn’t rude, but he wasn’t here to play around. I nodded once and touched my hand to Easton’s. He looked surprised but gave it a gentle squeeze, leading the way inside.

It was strange, but nice, to have him by my side. His heart was ready long before his stubborn head, but when he gave in, just like me, he wasn’t going to look back.

It only took him an hour to get our statements and then another for the team to come in, sweeping for prints.

When they finally declared they had all the evidence they needed, they left us to it. The landlord had promised to fix the door and he looked genuinely upset that something like this had happened in his own place.

“I’ve got a rental house across town. It’s available for the next three months, but I can let you stay there for what you pay for this place while you figure things out.” It was

refreshing that he wasn't arguing for us to stay. He was just offering a temporary solution.

"We'll take it," Warren said. Not one of us complained. Instead, they took me inside to pack everything I could. Felix and Warren had left long enough to get Warren's pickup truck. By the time they came back, and we loaded everything I could into it, we had the keys to our temporary place.

It was a small two-bedroom cottage just off of Main Street. It had a hell of a lot more space than the old apartment, and even better, I wouldn't have to worry about William here.

That and we could all stay together.

"Are you all right, princess?" Easton asked as he put a plate in front of me. I looked down at the pizza slices before looking up at my mate, the one I hadn't expected to stick around.

"Yes, no, I don't actually know," I finally admitted.

Felix reached over and smoothed out the wrinkle on my forehead.

"You don't have to be, blossom. We can look for a better pack house soon. I know this place isn't that great."

"I want to move into the inn," I blurted out.

They all blinked owlishly at me. It might have been funny if I wasn't so worried about the next part.

"I want us to make our own place there, and I'd like you guys to help me make it our business and our home, something with all of us tied into it. I know Felix has the flower shop, and I would never ask you to give that up, but the rest of us could make it work. We could pay for flowers and put them in the rooms and..." I trailed off, unsure now when nobody had said anything.

They also hadn't reacted. Their faces were all completely unreadable.

Theo moved closer, sitting on the coffee table in front of me so his knees were touching mine and setting my plate

aside. “Muse, are you asking us to move in with you? To be a part of your life permanently?”

My gaze shifted to Easton, and I offered a smile. “I am.”

Easton rubbed a hand along his freshly shaved chin as he studied me. “There’s a set of rooms behind the reception desk. I think it’s meant to be the manager’s office and some storage. We could start there, knock out a few walls if we need to.”

My smile widened, and I launched myself at Easton, throwing my arms around him. He let out a deep, rumbling chuckle that made it feel like the pieces of a puzzle were clicking into place.

This was everything I needed in my life, and I’d finally let myself have it. There was no holding back or living in fear. I’d officially escaped my past with their help. Now we had forever to figure out.

“Even if I’m not going to work at the inn with you guys, I can still help from time to time. It would be nice to not live in that tiny apartment above the shop.”

“The woods around the inn are beautiful,” Warren offered. “The lake is nearby.”

My smile was so wide it hurt. “Micah and his pack’s place isn’t far. We’ll have friends close. Family.”

The truth was we hadn’t been cohesive enough to truly make friends with my siblings’ packs, but I had a feeling once things started settling we wouldn’t be able to keep them away.

Micah and Ellie didn’t know the extent of everything I’d been through with our father, and I didn’t think I’d tell them now.

Maybe someday when I’d fully gotten over it I’d tell them. But for now, I was content enough to cut him out of my life just like they had. Why ruin their happiness? I’d done what I had to and now had the life I deserved.

In fact, I’d blocked Father’s number on our way here. I intended to leave it that way.

He could live the rest of his days in that big house feeling the weight of his loneliness from pushing away everyone.

I'd never be part of that again.

Instead, I was going to keep getting to know my pack. We all had been through hell and back in our own ways, and I was ready for us all to finally claim our own happiness.

"Muse, I thought we had plans, don't tire out on me," Theo teased as my eyes started to drift closed. I was full, warm, surrounded by them, and safe. There was no way I could stay awake if I tried.

"Rain check," I muttered, though a moan escaped as his hand ran down my hip.

"Leave her alone," Easton grumbled as he pulled me into his lap so I was resting my head on his chest. I breathed him in, that crisp, masculine scent that hadn't truly fit his personality until now. A low rumble filled my ears and vibrated between us as he purred, lulling me into sleep.

Only it did the opposite.

My body flared with enough heat to rival the sun and my pussy throbbed almost painfully. Sweat beaded along my skin and my nails dug into his chest.

"Princess?" he didn't sound turned on, more concerned and a slight edge of panic.

"What's wrong?" Warren asked, but I felt someone shift closer and Felix cursed.

"She's going into heat. The stress probably canceled out her suppressors."

CHAPTER

# TWENTY-NINE

*Tori*

“We’ll take care of you, princess,” Easton promised. For once in my life, I simply accepted that they would. It felt so good to give into that instinct and just... feel.

My mates all moved around me, filling the air with their scents. My whimpers were met with sweet words that had my head swirling happily.

Now I remembered why I never rode-out heats. They made me feel vulnerable and intoxicated. I couldn’t afford to be that vulnerable alone.

As their fingers roamed over my skin, my clothes already discarded, I could only feel anticipation. There was no fear or vulnerability now. They were exactly what I needed and wanted.

“More,” I begged, my voice hoarse against the burn running along my flesh. Someone dipped their fingers into my folds, my slick already dripping onto the blankets below me.

“So ready,” Theo said in a husk before his tongue replaced his fingers. “My fucking muse. So gorgeous.”

The heat receded a fraction as I focused on him, his warm, brown eyes molten as he sent me a wink then dove back in. My back arched off the bed and I whimpered as he speared his tongue inside of me, his fingers teasing over my clit until I was exploding for him. Felix touched and tasted me like he was committing every taste and touch to memory.



The orgasm had no chance of being held back, my mind was too hazy to even try. Instead, every touch and caress was intensified to the point I felt like I might combust.

“I’m so mad at myself for not giving into you sooner,” Easton confessed in my ear as Theo notched himself at my entrance.

A whimper was all the response I could give. There was a growing void inside of me that only they could fill. Not just my alphas, but my omega and beta mates as well. I needed *all* of them.

“I nearly ruined your life, their life, and mine in the process. But you know what I also saw?”

“What?” I breathed out, needing to hear the answer even as his beta fucked me into the mattress.

“A fighter. A gorgeous omega who only wanted someone to care. And now you have five men who would do anything for you.”

“Including you?”

“Including me,” he confirmed before he turned my head and kissed me. My heart thudded in my chest as if it wanted to escape. He’d given in and I knew that he should grovel, but when he put every waking moment into finding ways to make my dreams happen I couldn’t punish him anymore.

Especially not when he already did that himself.

“Who is fucking you, omega?” Theo demanded when my attention had been on my alpha for too long.

I turned back, blinking hazy eyes up at him and letting a smile spread across my face. That glorious fog of lust and heat were starting to consume me again.

“You.”

“Then clearly, I need to up my game,” he said as he flipped our position so I was straddling him. “You feel so fucking good. Hot and warm around me. So fucking tight.”

I moaned, my hips already starting to move as I soaked in his words.

“I’m going to spend every fucking chance that I can buried in this sweet pussy, muse. Every fucking day.”

“She’d never survive,” Easton said with a rumbling laugh. Their distraction only made me want them to lose control, like I was. I squeezed around Theo and started to move, my hands braced on his chest as I fucked him like he was promising.

“Shit,” he cursed, a low groan following as he came. A smirk of satisfaction crossed my face before it contorted in pain.

“Princess, what’s wrong?” Easton demanded. I had curled in on myself the moment Theo eased out of me. The pain lancing through me was something I knew came with heats but I couldn’t speak to explain.

“She needs your knot,” Felix answered for him as he came back in. His gentle hands smoothed the hair off of my face. “Give it to her or I’ll find an alpha who will.” My omega, always my fiercest protector. Even from my mates.

“You’re so bossy,” Easton said but his words were strangled as the truth slipped past his lips. “She won’t want me to.”

“I do,” I gritted out. “Stop punishing yourself. Fuck me, Easton. Bite me. Make me yours. If you’re all in, fucking prove it.”

Another cramp hit me and I let out an undignified whine that had Felix standing, turning to leave, but Easton was already moving. He laid me out on the bed and slammed into me. It wasn’t sweet or gentle, but harsh and desperate. His need to save me from pain was met with a low, feral cry.

It only urged him to fuck me harder, his knot already swelling as he snapped his hips in punishing thrusts, pushing it deeper with each one.

It was only when his knot was pushing me to my limits and his teeth sank into my flesh that I was finally saved from the pain. Our bond and our pack was officially complete.

Easton's eyes found mine and I stared up at my blue-eyed alpha. For the first time, his face was soft and unguarded.

It said, I've changed, please let me in.

I hoped mine told him I already had.

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### *Felix*

HEARING the others constantly fucking Tori was going to be the death of me. Theo and I tapped in when we could to keep her satiated, bathed, fed, and hydrated. But this heat was unlike any other. She'd been on meds so long it was twofold. The stress had triggered it and it was like an unrelenting storm.

"You alright?" Jordan's voice was roughened with sleep and gentle. I glanced up at him and nodded numbly, not really sure if I meant it or not.

We were still new, and I wanted to take my time. My relationship with Tori started first and was quick and strong. His was slower, a flicker of a spark that was building the more time we spent together.

He had kissed me, even made me cum, but he hadn't bitten me yet. It felt wrong to do it now during her heat but with the way he stared down at me, like I was precious and perfect, made me crave it.

"Let me claim you," he said, picking up on the heat in my gaze. His cock jutted out toward me like it was begging for me to say yes.

"This is Tori's heat," I argued. "Which means it's about her, not me."

"She's fine. There are three men in there worshipping that sweet body of hers. Now stop arguing and let me have you," he demanded. His words were an order and I found myself nodding as I swallowed hard, not trying to let him see how much I liked that.

From the wicked grin on his lips he knew how much I did.

With Tori, I was the predator, with Jordan I was the prey.

The contrast between the two was stark and I loved it. I loved them. Even as new as this all was, we worked together. Trauma and pain always found a home in others, and though, I hadn't experienced the hell they all had, I wanted to be here to help them mend their past.

I'd feed them and remind them that moving on was worth it.

That they were worthy of that love.

And I wouldn't stop until they all were content in this new life and our pack felt healthy. Before it was toxic and harsh, now it was a bond that would last the test of time.

As Jordan's knot pushed me to my limits and his teeth claimed my wrist, I knew that every moment that led us to this point was worth it.

After this heat, we'd come out the other side stronger and more connected than ever before.

This was the beginning of our forever.

# EPILOGUE

*Six Months Later*

*Tori*

S hady Oaks Inn wasn't exactly ready for business, but it was prepared for my pack. We knocked out walls and spent every waking moment that we could growing together and rebuilding this place.

Nothing brought a pack together quite like physical labor. There were moments where I wanted to kill Easton for his stubbornness, but Theo was always there to soften the mood.

Felix fed us and kept everyone's spirits up while Warren and Jordan threw themselves into the work.

We became a good balance for each other.

I also got to see Felix and Jordan's relationship grow. We all got to know what it felt like to be in a pack, to have someone there for you, and never have to question that loyalty.

Through Felix and his family, we were all finally realizing what it was like to have proper parents. And now, I had what

truly felt like the first home I had never been able to call my own.

Sure, I had my apartment, but it was nothing like this place. Shady Oaks had heart, soul, and plenty of my own blood, sweat, and tears built into it.

Our suite that had once been a series of staff rooms was perfect. We each had our own space and then a shared-pack living room, and of course, a shared bed.

I had a proper nest full of cozy blankets, all the drawings that Theo had put on the walls, making it a collage of black, white, soft colors, and cozy fabrics. Easton had even found a small crystal chandelier that hung in the middle, casting the room in a warm, pretty glow, with little rainbows reflecting onto the white walls.

The rest of the inn was a work in progress but now that I had access to my trust fund, I was able to take my time turning each space into something perfect. Hours of painting and construction were good for my soul and I felt so much pride every time we finished a new space.

The guys were finding that same peace in this property and that made it even more special. We all were carving out our own place in the world, somewhere we could call home and where we belonged. Something we'd all needed in our own ways.

It was hard to believe that I'd been so stubborn for so long, refusing to give them a chance and almost blocking them from my life completely. I would have spent my life miserable and sad, falling into my dad's clutches or, worse, William's.

Now William had lost his dignity, his contacts, and his father had kicked him out. He'd lost everything for overstepping and trying to force himself into my life, and now I was thriving.

Without my father hanging over my head, my siblings and I had reconnected in a new, much deeper way. We all had to grow into our own people and we'd done that in spite of our parents attempts to ensure we were enemies.

Even me.

I had never realized how much of myself I'd held back from them and our friends until I was finally free. Now every laugh and hug came easier. I was my authentic self for the first time in my life.

My dad no longer was a shadow lurking around the corners. I'd sent one final email with a well constructed threat. The message was clear as glass. Leave me alone or the same fate that found William, would find him too.

His reputation was far too precious to him to take any chances.

As I stepped outside and into the overgrown backyard—that we were still trying to tame—and took a big breath of fresh forest air, I couldn't have hid the smile if I tried.

Maybe there was magic in this tiny town. Not only had I found sanctuary from my sad, pitiful life, but I found friends who were always there for me, a pack that loved me for who I was, and a life that was worth living.

This inn, this town, this pack—they were all part of my happily ever after, and I knew I'd never take that for granted.

***The End.***

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