



# Only Ever His

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**Category:** Erotic, Romance, Billionaire Romance

**Description:** Falling for him wasn't part of the plan neither was her past coming back to haunt her.

Tori Blake has worked hard to rebuild her life after leaving a toxic relationship. As the owner of a charming boutique in her small town, she's determined to prove she doesn't need anyone to thrive—not even the gorgeous billionaire who's swept her off her feet. Cole Valen might be the epitome of control and power, but Tori's past has taught her to guard her independence fiercely.

Cole Valen didn't expect to fall so hard for Tori. She's unlike anyone he's ever met—fierce, passionate, and unwilling to be intimidated by his wealth or reputation. But as much as Cole craves her, he can sense the shadows she hides behind her brave smile. He's willing to do whatever it takes to protect her, even when she insists she doesn't need saving.

When Tori's ex resurfaces, his manipulation and obsession threaten the fragile trust she's built with Cole. Determined to stake his claim on her, her ex isn't afraid to cross dangerous lines. Cole won't stand by and watch the woman he loves be hurt—but Tori isn't sure she can let someone else fight her battles for her.

As the tension escalates, so does the passion between them. But can their growing love survive the secrets, threats, and fears threatening to tear them apart?

Fans of protective billionaires, emotionally charged romances, and swoon-worthy slow-burn passion will devour Only Ever His.

**Total Pages (Source):** 72

# Page 1

*Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 7:03 am*

TORI

The dream always came the same way.

I lay curled up in bed, every nerve stretched thin as I clutched a cold metal handgun beneath my pillow, my fingers trembling around its grip.

Shadows stretched across the room, spilling from corners and doorways that didn't exist.

They pooled closer and closer until one of them unfurled, coalescing into a figure standing at the foot of my bed.

I couldn't see his face—couldn't make out anything more than a silhouette.

But the way he held himself, the familiar tilt of his head, the simmering rage in his stance, made my chest tighten in recognition.

It was Marcus. I felt him in my bones, in the heavy press of dread that sat like a weight on my heart.

Slowly, the shadows slithered away, revealing his features one by one—the narrowed eyes that once looked at me with kindness now dark with malice.

The hard line of his mouth twisted into something that barely resembled human.

I wanted to scream, to raise the gun from beneath my pillow and aim it at him, but my

arms wouldn't move.

I was frozen, locked in place by the same fear that had shackled me for years.

Marcus stepped closer, his face tightening with rage as he leaned over me, his voice a snarl that shredded through my veins.

“You thought you could leave me?” he spat. “You thought I'd just let you go?”

My breath caught as his hand shot out, fingers wrapping around my wrist, pinning me to the mattress.

The gun slipped from my grip, clattering uselessly to the floor.

His grip was vice-like, squeezing until pain radiated up my arm and tears pricked my eyes.

I was powerless, just as I had been when I left, just as I had been every time he'd made me believe that I was nothing, that I'd always be his.

My heart pounded against my ribs, adrenaline flooding my veins as panic clawed at me, desperate and raw.

And then I woke up.

I shot upright in bed, my heart racing, skin damp with sweat, chest heaving as I gulped in breaths of cool morning air.

It took a few seconds for my brain to catch up, to tell myself that I wasn't that helpless woman anymore.

That Marcus wasn't looming over me, ready to tear apart everything I'd built.

I ran my hand over my face, trying to steady my breathing, to ground myself in the present.

Five years. It had been five long years since I'd escaped him, left behind the broke, terrified girl I once was.

I was Tori Blake now, the proud owner of a boutique in Oakridge Bay.

The sound of my shop's name alone helped soothe my rattled nerves. I'd worked so hard to create a life he could never touch.

And yet, even now, Marcus's ghost haunted me in my sleep, a specter of memories I wished I could burn away forever.

I swung my legs over the edge of the bed, feet meeting the cool floor as I steadied myself.

I am not her anymore.

## Page 2

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The words became my anchor, a mantra I clung to as I pushed the nightmare back into the shadows where it belonged.

I wasn't that scared, silenced version of myself.

I wasn't the woman who flinched at raised voices or second-guessed every decision, terrified it might be the wrong one.

I was safe now. I was free.

I had clawed my way out of that darkness, brick by brick, dollar by dollar, until I had built a life I could call my own.

A life I was proud of.

A life where his shadow couldn't reach me anymore. And no matter what, there was nothing he could do to tear it down.

A hot shower was my first stop, and I let the water beat down, imagining it washing away every trace of the dream.

The steam fogged up the mirror, and as I wrapped myself in a towel, I saw myself as I was now—calmer, stronger.

My reflection looked me squarely in the eyes, as if daring me to let him haunt me again.

Not today,I thought, nodding back at my reflection.Not ever again.

After getting dressed, I slipped into my routine with the comforting ease of well-worn steps.

I went to Oakridge Grind, my favorite coffee shop just down the road.

The place was small, cozy, with hand-painted murals of oak trees winding along the walls and a barista who always greeted me with a smile.

“Morning, Tori! Usual?” Jamie, the barista, asked with a wink.

"Good morning. Yes, please," I said, grateful for the sense of familiarity.

She handed me a latte and a fresh blueberry muffin that warmed my fingers through the wrapper.

The simple comfort of it, the taste of the coffee and the sweetness of the muffin, grounded me in the here and now.

I wasn't in some nightmare world where Marcus lurked in the shadows.I was in my hometown, surrounded by the life I'd made for myself.

The walk to my boutique, Velvet & Lace, was short and peaceful.

I loved this town and its quiet streets, the way the morning sun filtered through the trees lining the main road.

Velvet & Lace sat on a charming corner of Main Street.

The boutique was more than just a shop. It was the culmination of years of dreaming,

planning, and relentless hard work.

Every detail carried a piece of my heart.

Even on my darkest days, when the world seemed heavy and hope felt like a distant memory, Velvet & Lace brought me joy.

It reminded me of how far I'd come, a tangible proof that dreams could become reality.

When I arrived, Candy was already there, setting out a new display with her usual enthusiasm.

Her bright red hair and matching lipstick were as bold as her laugh, which echoed softly through the quiet store.

"Morning, boss!" she called, giving me a smile as she fluffed the sleeves of a blouse on one of the mannequins. "Ready to make some magic?"

"Morning, Candy," I replied, returning her smile. "Let's open up and do this."

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I unlocked the door, letting in the golden light of the morning.

Then I took a deep breath, inhaling the faint scent of lavender that I always kept in a diffuser at the back of the store.

My boutique was a blend of vintage charm and modern elegance.

Every detail had been chosen with care—from the rustic wooden racks to the carefully curated pieces that filled each shelf.

Pastels, warm neutrals, and soft, textured fabrics filled the space, making it feel like a warm, inviting sanctuary.

I'd poured my heart and soul into creating a place that felt safe, a haven for anyone who walked through the doors.

I looked around, letting pride swell in my chest.

This was mine. I had done this.

Every late night spent poring over designs, every risk I'd taken, every setback I'd pushed through had led to this moment.

This wasn't a gift, or luck, or a handout. It was mine, built from the ground up with my own two hands.

And as I stood there, I couldn't help but let the pride settle in, warm and steady,



filling the cracks I never thought could be mended.

Just as I was preparing to settle into the day, the soft chime of the doorbell rang, signaling a new customer.

I turned, expecting a local or maybe a tourist, but the sight that met me was something else entirely.

Trouble had just walked into my store.

He was tall, impossibly tall, with broad shoulders that filled the doorway.

His black hair was short and perfect, as if a single hair out of place would be an affront to him.

Sharp green eyes locked onto mine, piercing and unreadable.

His suit was perfectly tailored, hugging his frame in a way that was both sophisticated and sinfully enticing.

The air shifted, electrified, as he stepped inside, moving with a confidence that bordered on predatory.

Every line of his body spoke of command, of someone who was used to getting exactly what he wanted.

My heart gave an involuntary lurch, the lingering shadows of the dream retreating under the weight of his presence.

He looked around briefly before his gaze returned to me.

He studied me with an intensity that made my skin prickle, as if he could see beneath the surface, straight to the thoughts I tried to keep hidden.

“Good morning,” he greeted with a smile I couldn’t help be wary of.

COLE

Nothing about meeting Tori Blake had been accidental.

My first glimpse of her had been pure chance—a brush with fate, if you believed in that sort of thing.

The mayor of Oakridge Bay, an old friend of my father’s, had thrown a formal gathering in town, and my father had asked me to attend as a favor.

One quick look at my phone had shown me where Oakridge Bay even was—a small dot in the mountains of Washington, far removed from the spotlight where I typically operated.

The people at the party had known my name, whispering about my family and the company my father and I ran.

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I was used to the questions, the people clamoring to be seen with me, the thinly veiled agendas under every handshake.

Most were eager for any connection they could leverage. I would've left the second I fulfilled my obligation—until I saw her.

Tori Blake.

The way she moved in the crowded room was different from anyone else.

She was quiet, blending in with the servers as she passed trays of drinks, her steps graceful, her gaze fixed straight ahead.

It was almost as if she was there on a mission of her own.

Not a single person had caught her attention, and she definitely hadn't paid any attention to me.

She didn't have that look of greed, of calculation, that so often crossed faces when people knew who I was.

I'd watched her for half the evening, noting the way she sidestepped the attention.

The guarded light in her eyes that suggested she was more comfortable on the fringes.

She wore a fitted black dress, simple but elegant, setting off her curves and hinting at the strength beneath that quiet, focused expression.

When I'd tried to approach her at the party, she'd disappeared before I could even say hello.

But the mystery of her haunted me, had me rethinking my flight back to Seattle the next day.

I'd asked a few subtle questions, and by the end of the night, I had a name—and I knew exactly where to find her boutique.

So, two days later, I found myself outside Velvet & Lace, Oakridge Bay's answer to a high-end clothing boutique.

A small shop, filled with clothes that somehow managed to bridge elegance and comfort with a touch of class.

My kind of place. The kind of place that Tori Blake had clearly poured herself into.

I pushed the door open, and the bell jingled, sounding more cheerful than I felt.

As I stepped in, I saw her behind the counter, busying herself with some paperwork.

She looked up, and in that instant, I was caught all over again.

She didn't smile. Just gave me a polite nod, her eyes flicking over me as if assessing whether I was worth her time or not.

It was like nothing I'd experienced before. Most women I encountered weren't shy about their interest.

Tori? She seemed utterly uninterested. I gave her my best smile.

“Good morning,” I said, keeping my voice warm, friendly.

“Morning,” Tori greeted.

She looked back at her paperwork, clearly intent on ignoring me. But that only made me want her attention more.

The silence stretched, charged in a way I hadn’t expected. I could feel the layers beneath her calm exterior, the walls she’d built.

But I also saw something in her eyes, a glint of wariness that sparked my curiosity, a flicker of a past she didn’t want exposed.

Someone had hurt her.

I could almost feel it in the way she held herself, guarded and composed, as if expecting some unspoken threat.

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“Are you the owner?” I asked, though I knew the answer.

“Yes.” She looked up, and there was a momentary surprise in her gaze, as if she was unused to being addressed so directly. “How can I help you?”

I tried to read her, looking for cracks in her armor, for any sign that I might gain her trust.

“I’m here for something... unique. Something that only you can recommend,” I said.

She narrowed her eyes, tilting her head slightly as she studied me.

Her face was a careful mask of politeness, but there was something deeper. Interest, maybe. Or at least curiosity.

“We have several options,” she said. “Our fall collection is fresh off the line.”

“I’ll take a look,” I replied, leaning slightly closer, just enough to be casual, but also to let her feel my presence.

Her gaze flickered, as if deciding whether to engage or keep me at a distance.

She chose the latter, turning to a display without a single hint of interest beyond the professional.

I couldn’t deny how frustratingly enticing that was.

She walked over to a rack of dresses, her fingers brushing the fabric lightly.

“This one has been popular,” she said, gesturing to a flowing, burgundy dress with delicate lace details. “Perfect for events, dates, formal dinners.”

“Events and dates,” I repeated, considering her carefully. “I could see you in something like that.”

She paused, and for a split second, a crack appeared in her calm demeanor.

A slight stiffening of her shoulders, a quick glance that made me think she was trying to size up my intentions.

“I’m not the type to take my own recommendations,” she said evenly.

I didn’t miss the way she shifted her stance, the way she crossed her arms, creating a physical barrier between us.

I leaned against the counter, keeping my tone light.

“So you’re the type to let others have all the fun?” I asked.

Her eyes met mine, fierce and defiant. “I don’t need clothes for fun, Mr...?”

“Cole Valen,” I answered, watching her face for any sign that she recognized the name.

Nothing. Just that guarded look, a flicker of annoyance, and a sense of mystery I couldn’t quite crack.

“Well, Cole Valen, our shop is meant to give people whattheyneed,” she said, her

voice edged with a challenge. “I don’t think that includes being told what to wear.”

“Fair enough,” I said, nodding. “But something tells me there’s more to this place than meets the eye.”

Her eyes narrowed slightly. “Is that so?”

“I can tell that every detail here has been chosen with purpose. It’s refreshing to see that level of care. Not many places have that. Or people.”

My words hung in the air, charged, and I saw her shift slightly, as if my gaze had brushed too close to something private.

She forced a polite smile, but it didn’t reach her eyes.

“Thank you,” she replied, but her voice lacked the warmth that her expression feigned.



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Something in me wanted to reach across that distance, to strip away the defenses she held up like armor.

But I knew better than to push too hard, especially with someone as guarded as her.

Whoever had hurt her, whoever had made her flinch at the smallest kindness, deserved to pay for it.

But I knew that the last thing she needed was a man trying to play protector, someone ready to sweep in like a hero.

She needed control, her own agency.

And I would give her that, no matter how fiercely my instincts clawed at me to hunt down her demons and rid her of them.

Instead, I shifted tactics, offering her a chance to engage without pressure.

“I have a sister,” I said. “We haven’t spoken in a while, and I’d like to find her something special. She has a similar taste to yours, I think.”

Tori’s eyes softened just slightly, enough that I felt a hint of the woman behind the armor.

“Your sister?” she asked, sounding genuinely curious.

“Yes. She’s the best of us, I’ll admit,” I said, letting a small smile slip through.

“She’s strong, independent... a lot like you, I’d imagine.”

For a moment, she looked as if she might let her guard down, a faint smile touching her lips.

But just as quickly, it faded, and she turned back to the dresses, deflecting with practiced ease.

“Well, if you’re looking for something memorable, this would suit her,” she said, pulling a sleek, emerald-green dress off the rack.

I took the dress, nodding thoughtfully.

“She’d like it, I think. It has character, a bit of fire,” I remarked.

She gave a quiet laugh, her gaze dropping to the floor.

“Fire, maybe.” She paused, her tone softer now, almost reflective. “Or maybe just enough to keep people at a distance.”

The words hit me harder than I’d expected.

She might have been talking about the dress, but there was something in her voice.

In the way she looked away when she said it, that hinted at far more.

I wanted to reach out, to tell her she didn’t have to be on guard. But I knew better.

Trust was something I’d have to earn, and Tori Blake wasn’t a woman who handed it out freely.

Instead, I nodded, letting her see that I'd caught her meaning, even if she wasn't ready to admit it.

"Thank you," I said, holding her gaze a second longer. "For your recommendation. It means a lot."

She gave me a polite nod, but there was a glint in her eye now, something that spoke of curiosity, maybe even intrigue.

The first crack in the walls she'd so carefully built.

And I'd be back—I knew that much. Because no matter how many walls she raised, I'd find a way through.

TORI

The bell chimed softly as the door to Velvet & Lace swung open.

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My heart fluttered, an instinctive reaction that I tried to shove down the moment I caught sight of him.

Cole. His tall frame filled the doorway, and he stepped in with that relaxed, quiet confidence, his eyes scanning the shop before they landed on me.

My pulse quickened despite my best efforts to stay composed.

“Tori,” he said with that faint smile that I’d been trying—unsuccessfully—to get out of my head since he’d walked in here a few days ago.

I nodded, keeping my expression neutral as I walked over to him.

“Cole. Did your sister not like the dress?” I asked.

His grin widened, and he shook his head.

“Quite the opposite, actually. She loved it so much, she insisted I come back and pick out a few more things for her,” Cole said.

I raised an eyebrow, trying to quell the warmth creeping into my cheeks.

I’d convinced myself I’d never see him again, that he’d just been passing through.

But here he was, and despite the warning voice in my head urging me to be careful, to stay distant, I felt myself melting just a little.

“She has good taste,” I replied, straightening the rack of blouses next to me to distract myself.

“If I had to be honest,” he said, his tone deepening, “I wouldn’t have minded stopping by, even without my sister’s request.”

I froze, forcing myself not to look directly at him, focusing on smoothing out nonexistent wrinkles in the clothing display.

I could feel his eyes on me, and my heart thundered in my chest.

When I finally glanced up, he was watching me with that same steady intensity.

A hint of warmth in his green eyes that made my skin flush.

“Well, since you’re here,” I said, clearing my throat, “I’ll show you some more options.”

I gestured toward a new selection of fall clothing.

“We just got a shipment in yesterday,” I added.

He followed, his presence filling the small space beside me, close enough that I could feel the warmth radiating from him.

Close enough to make me acutely aware of how long it had been since I’d felt this alive around a man.

I’d tried dating after Marcus, tried to convince myself I was moving on. But in the end, fear always crept in.

That deeply ingrained distrust I'd built up like armor after Marcus had taken pieces of me and left me hollowed out.

And yet, with Cole, that fear was tempered by something else—a cautious intrigue, a dangerous attraction that I wasn't sure how to handle.

He slipped a tailored blazer off the rack, inspecting it with a surprising amount of attention to detail.

“This looks like her style,” he said, giving it a little nod of approval before glancing my way. “What do you think?”

I blinked, taken aback.

“You... know clothes.” My surprise slipped out before I could stop it.

He laughed, a soft, rumbling sound that settled somewhere deep in my chest.

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“I do, actually. My sister makes sure of that. Our two younger brothers refuse to step foot in a boutique, so I’m her go-to companion on shopping trips,” he said.

My lips tugged into a reluctant smile.

“I suppose that would explain it,” I said.

Cole shrugged.

“Helps to know a thing or two. Plus, it gives me an excuse to keep coming back here,” Cole said.

His gaze met mine again, and this time, I couldn’t look away.

Silence stretched between us, full of tension, an unspoken pull I couldn’t deny.

I broke eye contact first, reaching for a nearby blouse to distract myself.

We chose more clothes.

Finally, I busied myself bagging his selections, trying to ignore the rush of warmth that his words sent through me.

When I handed him the bag, his fingers brushed against mine, and the small, electric touch sent a spark up my arm.

“Thank you, Tori,” he said. “I appreciate your help. Would you let me buy you lunch

as a thank you?”

My heart stuttered. For a long moment, I couldn't speak, my mind spinning with reasons to say no.

I'd told myself I was done with men who made me feel vulnerable, that I'd protect myself this time.

But the way he looked at me, steady and respectful, softened something in me. This wasn't Marcus.

I didn't sense danger in his eyes, only a careful curiosity that felt... safe, even though I barely knew him.

I bit my lip, weighing my options before finally nodding.

“Okay.”

“Great.” His smile widened, and he gestured to the door. “Is there somewhere nearby you'd recommend?”

“Depends,” I said, crossing my arms as I glanced up at him. “Are you used to posh restaurants?”

He chuckled. “Let's just say I'm up for trying new things.”

There was a small diner down the street.

The kind of place where the tables had been worn down from years of regulars and the coffee was always a little too strong.



I led him there, stealing glances as we walked.

I tried to hide the way my heart raced, the strange warmth curling low in my stomach every time I felt his presence beside me.

Once inside, the waitress led us to a booth by the window, and I slipped into my seat across from him.

The diner was quiet, warm, smelling faintly of coffee and butter.

Cole looked surprisingly at ease, his shoulders relaxed as he studied the laminated menu.

“Not your usual haunt, I’m guessing?” I teased, feeling a small, reckless thrill at poking fun at him.

He glanced up, a faint smirk touching his lips.

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“Maybe not. But I’m discovering that Oakridge Bay has its charms,” Cole said.

I knew he wasn’t talking about the diner, but I ignored the blush that threatened to rise in my cheeks.

Instead, I looked out the window, gathering my thoughts.

“So, where are you from? I’m guessing not from around here,” I said.

He shook his head, setting the menu down.

“Washington, actually. This place is a bit of a change, but I like it. Peaceful,” he said.

His gaze was on me, intense, as if he could see through every wall I’d built. It was unnerving. Exhilarating.

I took a deep breath, trying to ground myself, to remind myself that I was in control.

“I’ve seen you before,” he said. “At the mayor’s party.”

“Why were you at the mayor’s party?” I asked, surprised.

“My father’s an old friend of his,” Cole replied, pausing as the waitress brought us our drinks.

Cole continued, “He couldn’t make it, so he asked me to attend in his place.”

I watched him over the rim of my cup, feeling that familiar pull, the soft spark of something that felt dangerously like hope.

Cole felt... safe, which was strange, given his power and influence.

He was a man who probably had the world at his fingertips.

And yet, here he was in a small-town diner, looking at me like I was the only person in the room.

“You didn’t have to come all the way back to Oakridge Bay to buy a few dresses,” I said, my tone light but curious.

“Maybe not,” he admitted, his gaze unwavering. “But I wanted to.”

The words hung between us, heavy with implication.

I could feel my walls crumbling, just a little, an inch of trust slipping through the cracks.

“Why?” I asked softly, unsure if I wanted to hear the answer.

“Because,” he said, leaning forward slightly, “there’s something about you, Tori. Something I don’t want to ignore.”

My heart raced, my fingers curling around the edge of the table as I searched his face.

It had been so long since I’d felt anything like this.

A warm, insistent tug, the kind of connection that I’d thought I’d never let myself feel again.

“I’m not looking for anything,” I said, my voice barely a whisper, a hint of apology lacing my words.

I felt vulnerable, exposed, afraid of the weight his words carried.

“Neither am I,” he replied, his voice steady, grounding. “But sometimes, things find us when we’re least expecting them.”

There was no hint of pressure in his tone, no forcefulness or insistence.

Just an invitation, a chance to let down my guard, even if only for a moment.

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His eyes held mine, and I felt a warmth seep through me, melting the last of my hesitation.

As we talked, the hours slipped away, the conversation flowing effortlessly.

He shared stories of growing up with his siblings, the closeness he had with his sister, his distaste for the rigid, superficial circles of his life in Seattle.

And I found myself opening up, sharing small pieces of my life, my shop, the quiet love I had for this town.

By the time the meal ended, I knew I was in trouble.

He'd stirred something within me I thought was long gone, rekindled a fire that Marcus had snuffed out.

Cole walked me back to my boutique, his hand brushing gently against my arm.

I knew I was on the edge of something both terrifying and wonderful, yet I was scared to take that step forward.

COLE

Lunch with Tori was quickly becoming the highlight of my week. That day, I arrived early at Maple Grove Café.

It was a cozy spot she'd suggested tucked just off Main Street, its brick walls lined

with plants and warm, wooden décor.

I couldn't deny the way my pulse quickened at the thought of seeing her again.

She had a way of lighting up a room just by walking into it.

The more I learned about her, the more that quiet intensity in her eyes intrigued me.

When she finally walked in, my breath caught.

She wore a simple green dress that complemented her dark hair, the color deepening the warmth in her eyes.

I rose as she approached, fighting to keep the eager smile off my face, not wanting to overwhelm her.

Tori was still guarded around me, and though I could guess why, I still didn't know the full story.

I wanted to respect her boundaries, but I also wanted her to know I was here for the long haul, even if she didn't fully trust me yet.

"Hi," she greeted, her voice soft but steady as she took her seat across from me.

Her expression was composed, polite, but there was a flicker of something deeper that I hoped to bring to the surface.

"Hi, Tori," I replied, unable to keep my smile from growing. "Thanks for meeting me here."

We ordered our drinks, and I leaned back, studying her.

I tried to resist the urge to ask every question that had been piling up in my mind since the first time I saw her.

"So," she began once the waiter stepped away, tilting her head slightly as if weighing her words, "how does a guy like you keep ending up in Oakridge Bay?"

"A guy like me?" I chuckled. "What's that supposed to mean?"

She looked down, twisting the napkin in her hands with a faint smile.

"You know, someone probably way too busy for a small town like this," Tori said.

I shrugged, swirling the spoon in my coffee.

"I'm a little different from my family, I guess. I like space to think, to breathe. I wasn't expecting to find... someone like you here, though."

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I held her gaze, waiting for her reaction.

A flicker of surprise crossed her face, and she quickly looked down, cheeks coloring just a bit.

She laughed softly, the sound warm and genuine, but I sensed her unease.

“I think you’re trying to make me blush,” she said, shaking her head.

“Well, if I am, it’s working,” I teased, trying to keep things light.

We talked about everything—her boutique, the town’s quirks, her love of vintage clothing.

But I could tell she was holding back, skirting around anything that dipped below the surface.

I wanted her to feel safe, but a part of me ached to know more.

To understand the shadows that occasionally flitted through her expression.

Finally, when the conversation lulled, I decided to offer a piece of myself first, hoping it might encourage her to do the same.

“So,” I began, running a hand through my hair. “Dating history. Want to swap stories?”



I gave her a lopsided grin, aiming for casual, though the question held more weight than I wanted to admit.

Her brows lifted, eyes flicking up to meet mine, cautious and curious.

“You first,” she said, crossing her arms on the table, leaning forward slightly.

I leaned back, gathering my thoughts.

“All right, but I’ll warn you—it’s probably going to be a little boring. My dating history is... bland. Lots of polite dinners, plenty of nice girls who could have checked every box. But the truth is, none of them really did it for me. They were beautiful, successful, everything my family could approve of, but—” I paused, trying to find the right words, watching her closely.

Tori’s eyes softened, as though she could sense the vulnerability in what I was saying.

“But what?” she asked softly.

“But I didn’t feel anything. Not really.”

I looked down, remembering those nights in expensive restaurants, the surface-level conversations, the pleasant but vacant dates.

I continued, “I guess I just... wasn’t interested in pretending with them. It wasn’t enough for me. I’d rather wait for something real.”

I glanced up at her, hoping she understood what I wasn’t saying.

She seemed to consider this, her gaze drifting out the window, her fingers tracing the

edge of her glass.

“I know what that’s like,” she murmured, her voice barely above a whisper.

“Do you?” I pressed, sensing this was as close as she’d come to opening up.

Her eyes flicked back to mine, wary but vulnerable.

“After my last relationship... I told myself I’d focus on my career. I needed to rebuild my life, to make something of my own,” Tori said.

The words hung between us, and I could feel the weight of what she wasn’t saying.

She’d been hurt, scarred by something or someone in her past, and the resolve in her voice was laced with the echo of old wounds.

“Tori,” I said softly, my voice firm with the weight of my intentions. “You don’t have to tell me anything you’re not ready to. But I want you to know, I’m here. I’m not going anywhere.”

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She nodded slowly, offering a faint, grateful smile.

Still, I could still see the tension in her eyes, a guardedness that told me she wasn't ready to let anyone in yet—not even me.

And that was fine; I respected that.

“It’s... flattering, you know,” she said after a pause, her eyes searching mine. “That you’re here, I mean.”

She looked down, fidgeting with her napkin again, her voice barely audible as she continued, “But I’m... not sure if I’m ready for anything beyond a professional relationship right now.”

The words hit like a cold splash of water, but I nodded, forcing myself to stay composed.

I knew this wasn't about me—it was about the pain she carried. If it took time, I'd wait. She was worth it.

“I understand,” I replied, my voice steady, reassuring. “We can keep things professional. No pressure, no expectations. Just... two people sharing lunch.”

She gave me a skeptical look, her lips curling into a smile that didn't quite reach her eyes.

“Sure, Mr. Professional,” she said.

We both laughed, but I could sense her wariness behind it, a hesitation that told me how deeply guarded she still was.

And it only made me want to protect her more, to show her that with me, she could feel safe.

“So tell me, Tori,” I said, changing the subject as I leaned forward, my hand brushing lightly across hers as I reached for my drink, “what’s your favorite part about owning a boutique?”

She looked down at our hands, a faint blush coloring her cheeks before she pulled her hand back.

“It’s a dream come true, honestly,” she admitted, a genuine smile lighting up her face. “I love curating everything, helping people find something that makes them feel special. It’s... personal. A piece of me in every item I choose for the store.”

Her passion was infectious, and I found myself captivated by the way she spoke about her work.

The way her eyes sparkled as she described the little things that brought her joy.

I listened intently, nodding along.

When she spoke of her store, it was as if the walls around her heart crumbled, even if only a little.

Time slipped away, and by the end of the lunch, I realized I was hooked, even more than I’d thought.

Tori was smart, resilient, and so much more than the shadows in her past.

I wanted her to feel that, to know she could let herself feel again.

As we walked back to her boutique, I felt an urge to reach out, to brush a hand down her arm, to let her know I was here.

But I held back, knowing she needed space.

When we reached the door, she hesitated, turning to look at me with a soft, unreadable expression.

“Thank you for lunch,” she said quietly. “It was... nice.”

Her words were simple, but I could sense the layers of meaning in them.

She was grateful, yes, but there was something deeper, a note of hope laced with hesitation.

“The pleasure was all mine,” I replied, smiling down at her. “Whenever you’re ready for round three, you know where to find me.”

She laughed, shaking her head. “You’re persistent, aren’t you?”

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“For the right person, yeah,” I replied, feeling that truth resonate in my chest.

I wanted to show her that I wasn’t just another face in a line of passing relationships.

That I was here for her, and that I’d wait as long as it took for her to trust me.

As she opened the door to the boutique, she looked back, her gaze softening for just a moment.

“See you around, Cole,” Tori said.

And with that, she stepped inside, leaving me standing on the sidewalk.

I was already counting down the moments until I could see her again.

TORI

I was really looking forward to seeing Cole again.

This afternoon, with the sun spilling golden light across the outdoor terrace of the café, I could almost forget the shadows of my past.

Almost.

I’d chosen a table near the edge of the patio, overlooking a gentle slope that rolled down into a forested edge of the park.

Oakridge Bay had a natural beauty that drew me in each time I looked, especially with Cole sitting across from me, smiling as if he were perfectly at ease here.

I leaned back, fiddling with my napkin as he recounted a story about his younger sister's antics.

The more he talked, the more I was struck by how much he'd shared about himself.

Cole had an openness I hadn't expected from someone so effortlessly confident, powerful even, in his own way.

I found myself caught in thoughts of what it might be like to close the distance between us.

To lean over the table and kiss him, to feel his hand wrap around mine as if he'd never let go.

Before I realized it, I was staring, lost in my own thoughts, a blush creeping up my cheeks.

My gaze drifted down to his hands, watching the way his fingers tapped the edge of his cup—a casual, rhythmic motion that felt oddly soothing.

“Something on your mind?” he asked, catching me off guard.

I cleared my throat, glancing away quickly.

“I just... appreciate you coming all the way out here again. You don't have to, you know. We could meet halfway,” I suggested.

“Maybe I don't,” he said, a playful spark lighting his eyes, “but I want to. I told you, I

enjoy getting to know you.”

A warmth bloomed in my chest at his words. He was real, grounded in a way that Marcus had never been.

Marcus. I frowned, the unwelcome thought threatening to break the fragile peace I’d allowed myself to feel.

It was rare that I let myself sink into a moment without looking over my shoulder.

I was just about to turn the conversation back to him when something caught my eye.

A flash of movement behind a nearby tree—a figure standing still and watching.

I squinted, my heart giving a wild, painful thud. No... it couldn’t be. I forced myself to keep calm, but my pulse roared in my ears.



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The face was half-shadowed by leaves, but I knew that stance.

That look, the smirk that crawled across his mouth when he knew he had control.

Marcus.

A chill sliced through the warmth of the afternoon, and I felt myself go rigid.

Cole must have noticed the change because he leaned forward, his brows knitting together with concern.

“Tori, what is it?” Cole asked.

I couldn’t find the words. I was hoping—desperately—that my mind was playing tricks on me.

That I’d imagined Marcus’s face in the blur of the trees, a ghost conjured by my own fear.

But he was still there, gaze fixed on me and, more chillingly, on Cole.

His lips curled in a lazy, arrogant wave before he turned.

Marcus strolled off, hands casually in his pockets as if he hadn’t just sent a jolt of terror into my soul.

“Who was that?” Cole’s voice was tight, a low growl simmering just below the

surface.

I looked up at him, surprised to see a dark, almost feral glint in his eyes, a promise of danger lurking beneath his composed exterior.

For a second, he looked like a predator—a protector ready to strike. It should have scared me. But it didn't.

“Marcus,” I said quietly, my voice barely audible. “He’s... my ex-fiancé.”

The words felt foreign, stiff, as if I hadn't said them aloud in a long time.

Cole's jaw tightened, and a flicker of something dark crossed his expression.

“I see,” he murmured, each word careful and measured. “So he's the one who hurt you.”

It was less of a question and more of a statement.

Though I wanted to argue, to tell him that I wasn't some broken doll, the truth clung to me like an unwanted shadow.

Marcus had hurt me, yes—physically, emotionally and mentally, until I'd barely recognized myself in the mirror.

He'd twisted pieces of me until I'd felt trapped, suffocated by a love that had never been love at all.

“He is,” I admitted, my voice shaking just slightly.

I swallowed, struggling to meet Cole's steady, expectant gaze.

I continued, “It was a long time ago, five years, actually. We were young, and I... I thought he was it for me.”

Cole reached across the table, his fingers brushing mine, grounding me in the moment.

“What happened?” Cole asked.

“He... changed. Or maybe he was always like that, and I just didn’t see it. He became controlling, possessive. I couldn’t even go out with friends without him demanding to know every detail of where I was, who I was with.” I laughed bitterly.

I remembered the claustrophobic feeling of his shadow following me everywhere.

I added, “Eventually, he made me feel like I was nothing without him. But one day, I found the courage to leave. I never looked back.”

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Cole's gaze softened, but his grip on my hand was firm.

"And now he's here. In Oakridge Bay," Cole said.

"I don't know why he's here," I admitted.

I forced myself to look away, toward the spot where Marcus had stood moments before.

The ghost of his presence lingered, like a dark cloud over the sunny café terrace.

"Maybe it's a coincidence. Maybe he's just passing through," I added.

Cole shook his head, his expression hardening.

"I don't believe in coincidences," he said.

The truth was, I didn't either. My stomach twisted uncomfortably, a gnawing fear creeping up the back of my mind.

The thought that Marcus had come looking for me, that he still felt entitled to some piece of me, made my skin crawl.

Cole's fingers tightened around mine, grounding me again.

"He's done a number on you," he said gently, his voice low and measured. "Even now, you're still scared of him."

The heat rose in my cheeks, and I pulled my hand away, bristling at the way his words sliced through me.

“I managed to do right on my own,” I replied stiffly. “I built my life back up from scratch. I didn’t need him then, and I certainly don’t need him now.”

Cole held up his hands in a placating gesture, though his eyes never left mine.

“Tori, no one could deny you have steel in your spine. It’s one of the things I admire most about you.”

He leaned closer, his voice dropping. “But even the strongest people don’t have to face everything alone.”

I bit my lip, searching his face for any sign of pity, any trace of condescension.

But all I saw was concern—genuine, earnest, and unwavering. Slowly, my shoulders relaxed, and the tension ebbed just slightly.

“Thank you,” I whispered, letting my hand drift back to his.

This time, I didn’t pull away when he wrapped his fingers around mine, squeezing gently.

Cole lifted my hand to his lips, pressing a soft kiss to the back of it.

The touch was warm, grounding, a promise I could almost believe in.

I shivered at the feel of his breath against my skin, the way his eyes softened as he looked at me.

Something shifted between us in that moment, a silent understanding that neither of us put into words.

We finished our lunch in comfortable silence.

The weight of our unspoken words still lingered but somehow, it didn't feel as heavy.

By the time he walked me back to the boutique, I felt a strange calm settle over me.

It was as if just being near him was enough to keep the worst of my fears at bay.

At the door, I turned to face him, our hands still entwined.

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His eyes held that same intensity, a steady warmth that sent a pleasant shiver down my spine.

“Thank you, Cole. Really,” I said softly, my voice barely above a whisper.

He took a step closer, his free hand drifting to my cheek, brushing a stray strand of hair behind my ear.

“You don’t have to thank me, Tori. I’m here because I want to be.”

His voice was low, intimate, each word wrapping around me like a protective cocoon.

Before I could second-guess myself, I let my hands drift up to his shoulders, feeling the warmth of his body under my fingertips.

He leaned down slowly, giving me a chance to pull away, but I didn’t.

I tilted my face up, meeting him halfway, and the moment our lips touched, the world around us seemed to fall away.

The kiss was soft at first, a gentle exploration, but it quickly deepened, his arms winding around me, pulling me close.

I melted into him, my hands sliding up to his neck, fingers threading through his hair.

I felt a warmth spread through me, chasing away the cold, bitter memories that Marcus had left behind.

Cole's touch, his warmth, it was something real, something I hadn't allowed myself to believe in until now.

When we finally pulled away, both of us a little breathless, he pressed his forehead to mine.

His eyes held a promise that made my heart ache in the best way possible.

"Tori," he whispered, his breath brushing against my skin. "Whatever happens, I'm here. You're not alone anymore."

My heart thudded as I wondered if I was being foolish for wanting to believe him.

COLE

The sweetness of Tori's kiss lingered on my lips, sharp and intoxicating, even as the car door shut and I settled into the back seat.

I turned to glance back at her shop, where she was talking animatedly with one of her employees through the glass.

The sight of her, so gorgeous and animated, warmed me—but something else tugged at my focus, something darker.

I scanned the street, a chill prickling down my spine. I couldn't shake the feeling that someone was watching her. No, not me. Her.

Was it Marcus? Her ex-fiancé's recent return to Oakridge Bay didn't sit well with me.

That man had forfeited any right to look at her, let alone be in the same town as her,



when he left her broken.

Yet here he was, slinking back into her life. I clenched my fists, willing myself to calm down.

Tori wouldn't want me to pick a fight—not that I wouldn't, given the chance. But I didn't intend to let her handle this alone, either.

“Back to the office, sir?” my driver asked.

“Yes,” I replied absently, still watching the street in my side mirror.

Marcus was dangerous in ways Tori didn't even know, and I had no intention of underestimating him.

The drive back to the city felt like minutes instead of an hour.

Before I knew it, we were pulling up to Valen Tower, the skyscraper my father had built.

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I entered the building, ignored the nods from passing staff, and took the elevator to my office on the top floor.

Even as I stepped into my office and my secretary reminded me of the upcoming board meeting, I couldn't fully shake the worry gnawing at me.

I paced toward the floor-to-ceiling windows, surveying the city like it held the answers I needed.

I finally reached a decision and phoned my secretary.

"Mia, contact Shaw for me," I said.

"Right away, sir," she replied.

Moments later, my phone buzzed with Shaw's name on the caller ID.

Shaw, CEO of Bracken Security, was an old army buddy—a man with a reputation for leaving no stone unturned when it came to protection.

"Shaw," I greeted, getting straight to the point. "I need one of your specialists on a close-protection assignment. The target's name is Victoria Amelia Blake."

There was a beat of silence on the other end before Shaw's amused voice came through.

"Cole Valen, calling me for a bodyguard? Who's this lady, huh? Can't say I ever

pictured you going to such lengths for a woman,” Shaw said.

I let out a sigh, suppressing my impatience. Shaw was perceptive, but this wasn’t the time for him to dig into my personal affairs.

“Just make sure your guy keeps a low profile. No interaction unless absolutely necessary. If her ex is behind this, I don’t want her dragged into his mess again,” I told him.

“Sure, Cole, whatever you say,” Shaw replied with a laugh. “Consider it done. But seriously, who is she?”

“She’s...” The words hung in the air, unspoken.

I could barely define it myself. I continued, “Just make sure your man doesn’t slip up. I can’t afford for her to find out about this.”

Shaw gave a low whistle.

“Got it. Your secret’s safe with me,” he said.

As I ended the call, I felt a presence at the door.

Christian, my younger brother, stood there, arms crossed, an amused gleam in his eyes.

I groaned, annoyed at the timing of his appearance.

“Eavesdropping, were we?” I asked coolly.

Christian shrugged, sauntering into the room like he owned the place.

“So, is Tori the reason you’ve been skipping important meetings to gallivant off to Oak Bridge?” Christian asked, ignoring my question completely.

“Oakridge Bay,” I corrected, leaning back into my chair with a heavy sigh.

But my correction only seemed to amuse him, as he settled himself into the seat across from me without a hint of shame.

He crossed one leg over the other, taking his time as he looked around my office.

“And does she have any idea what kind of monster she’s dealing with?” Christian asked.

My jaw clenched.

“You’re calling your older brother a monster?” I asked dryly, giving him a pointed look.

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I added, “The same blood runs in your veins, Christian. You’re more like me than you’d care to admit. When you decide you want something, or someone, you don’t let anyone stand in your way.”

Christian let out a bark of laughter, shaking his head.

“Maybe, but never for a woman. Honestly, I never expected the infamous Cole Valen to turn into a lovesick puppy over anyone. And here you are, pulling out all the stops to... protect her,” Christian said.

Christian smirked, and the implication was clear.

“Tori’s life might be in danger,” I said stiffly, jaw tightening.

I’d trained myself to bury feelings for years, focusing instead on business and family, and now this woman had blindsided me.

Christian looked at me with a brow raised, clearly not buying it.

“And she’s aware you’ve got one of Shaw’s ex-Navy SEALs tailing her every move?” Christian asked.

Silence settled in the room.

If Tori ever found out what I’d done, I doubted she’d forgive me—or even look at me the same way again.

In a single moment, whatever tentative trust I'd managed to build with her would come crumbling down, scattering like sand through my fingers.

I knew her too well already.

Tori was fiercely independent, someone who'd fought hard to shape her life on her terms, free from the shadows of her past.

She'd made it clear that the last thing she wanted was anyone meddling in her life, especially not a man trying to play the savior.

And here I was, doing exactly that. Admittedly, what I'd done was more than a little questionable.

But keeping her safe, ensuring she didn't have to look over her shoulder every time she walked home at night, was worth the risk.

I couldn't let her ex worm his way back into her life—or worse. Who knew what Marcus was capable of?

I made a mental note to call Shaw again and have one of his specialists look into him.

Either way, I'd made my choice, and if it meant carrying this secret alone, so be it. What she didn't know wouldn't hurt her.

And as long as I could protect her from afar, I'd be willing to live with that.

Christian's smirk grew wider.

"Didn't think so," he murmured, leaning back in the chair, crossing his arms.

“Seems like Tori doesn’t know half the lengths you’re going to in order to keep her close. You sure she’ll be okay with that, big brother? Especially when she realizes you’re still keeping secrets?” Christian asked.

“I don’t expect you to understand,” I replied, coldly.

Christian, for all his intelligence, had never understood what it meant to protect someone like Tori.

He hadn’t been there when I’d first seen that fire in her—the fire that made me feel more alive than I had in years.

“Oh, I understand perfectly,” Christian said, tone laced with mock concern.

“But answer me this: What exactly is your endgame here? You’ve got your guy following her, you’re keeping tabs on her ex... What’s next? You planning to swoop in as the knight in shining armor?” Christian asked.

Honestly? I didn’t know the answer to his question.

I simply knew I had to keep Tori safe. I felt the tension coil in my chest, but I fought to keep my voice level.

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“Tori isn’t some prize, Christian. And if Marcus thinks he can worm his way back into her life, he’ll have to go through me first. There’s a reason she walked away from him, and I’m not about to let him pull her back down,” I said.

Christian studied me, his sharp gaze unwavering.

“So, this is serious, huh? You’re not just keeping tabs on her to protect her—you’re invested.” He chuckled to himself, shaking his head. “Who would’ve thought?”

“Is there a reason you’re here, or are you just here to poke at me?” I finally asked, hoping to cut the conversation short.

Christian’s amusement was wearing thin, and I needed to focus.

He gave a dramatic sigh. “You know, we do have a board meeting in about five minutes. Remember the one Mia reminded you about?”

I scowled, glancing at my watch. I’d been so caught up in thoughts of Tori, I’d completely forgotten. “Fine. Let’s go.”

Christian stood, shaking his head as he followed me out of the office.

“By the way,” he added casually, “I’d love to meet this Tori of yours. After all, if she’s got the legendary Cole Valen wrapped around her finger, she must be one hell of a woman.”

I gritted my teeth, resisting the urge to tell him exactly where he could stick his



curiosity.

Instead, I pressed the elevator button and willed myself to keep calm. Because deep down, I knew Christian was right.

Tori had done something no one else ever had.

She'd slipped past every wall I'd built, breaking through defenses I'd held firm for years.

She hadn't just captured my attention—she'd managed to steal a piece of my heart and soul.

Somehow, without even realizing it, she'd anchored herself in the deepest part of me, slipping into the spaces I'd long thought closed off.

Every glance, every laugh, every fierce spark of independence she showed only pulled me deeper, leaving me torn between wanting to hold her close and letting her have the freedom she cherished.

For the first time, I understood what it meant to feel vulnerable, and I wasn't sure I liked the feeling.

TORI

The final transaction of the day was done, and I was counting up the register when Candy gave me a concerned look.

“Are you sure you don't need me to close the store?” She lingered by the door, glancing outside.

“Thanks, but no need.” I forced a smile, wanting to ease her worry. “I appreciate it, really, but I’m fine. Cole’s picking me up in a bit.”

At the mention of his name, Candy’s eyes lit up, concern replaced by something far more mischievous.

“So, things are heating up between you two, huh?” Candy asked.

“Not like that,” I chuckled, glancing down as I finished counting the bills.

I continued, “He’s just taking me to the small business appreciation event at the pavilion. Strictly business, I swear.”

Candy rolled her eyes, smirking.

“Business? Right. Well, have fun... and don’t do anything I wouldn’t do,” Candy said.

I laughed as she left, shaking my head. Moments later, my phone chimed.

Cole: Five to ten minutes late because of traffic. But I’ll be there soon.

It amazed me, if I was being honest. He was so consistent, so thoughtful.

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Cole never seemed to get tired of driving all the way out here from the city just to spend time with me.

And why? What did he see in me, a small-town boutique owner with more baggage than I could carry some days?

The bell to the store suddenly rang, and I looked up, automatically reaching for the “Closed” sign.

“We’re closed,” I called, glancing back at the register. “Come back tomorrow.”

No answer. I glanced up, expecting to see someone just turning around.

But my blood ran cold instead.

Marcus stood by the door, his dark eyes fixated on me with a smile that only made my stomach twist.

Every instinct in me screamed to run, but I stayed still, forcing my expression to remain calm.

“Well, hello, Tori,” he said smoothly, stepping forward with a bouquet of black roses in his hand.

“What are you doing here?” My voice came out sharper than I’d planned. “We’re closed, Marcus.”

“These are for you.” He extended the black roses, a forced smile still in place, though I could see it wavering.

“No, thank you,” I said, the words like sand in my mouth. “I’d like you to leave. My boyfriend is picking me up soon.”

His smile dropped in an instant.

“So it’s true. You’re dating Cole Valen?” He sounded almost amused. “Guess he’s an upgrade from me, huh? I hear there’s a big event tonight in town. Let me guess... he’s your date?”

My stomach dropped. How did he know about the event? Had he been keeping tabs on me?

I pushed down the cold coil of fear building in my chest, trying to sound braver than I felt.

“Marcus, what do you really want from me?” I asked.

He gave me a look that could almost pass as remorseful if I didn’t know better.

“Tori, you’re the one that got away. It took me five years to realize letting you go was the biggest mistake of my life. I want to win you back,” he said.

I didn’t believe him for one second. Lying was second nature to Marcus.

He could bend the truth without blinking, mold words to his advantage as easily as he breathed.

I’d spent years being fed half-truths and manipulative promises, each one hollow yet

persuasive enough to keep me tethered in his grasp.

I'd watched him lie to friends, charm strangers, and manipulate anyone who crossed his path—always with that smooth, effortless confidence.

It was frightening how believable he could make anything sound, even as his true intentions twisted beneath the surface.

I forced myself to hold his gaze.

“You didn’t let me go, Marcus. I left.” I wanted to keep the bitterness out of my voice, but it slipped through. “And I’ve moved on.”

Just as he started to speak again, the door opened, and relief flooded me.

But it wasn’t Cole—it was a tall, muscular man with dark hair and a friendly smile, likely a few years older than me.

“Sorry,” he said, looking around, “but are you still open?”

“We’re closed. Leave, buddy,” Marcus snapped, glaring.

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The newcomer shot him a look but then turned back to me with a smile. I tried not to show my relief at his presence.

“Actually, you can browse,” I told him, my voice calm as I turned back to Marcus. “I think it’s time for you to go.”

Marcus’s jaw clenched, his face twisting with frustration as the man began browsing the racks.

The slight distraction allowed me a chance to breathe, but only for a second before the bell rang again.

Cole stepped inside, looking calm at first glance.

But as soon as he took in the scene—Marcus leaning over the register, a bouquet of roses on the counter, and my tense expression—his jaw tightened.

A dangerous glint darkened his green eyes.

His gaze flicked to the stranger, then back to Marcus, his mouth a hard line.

He strode to my side without a word, his hand brushing against my arm in a gesture that was reassuringly possessive.

“What’s going on here?” His voice was low, calm—but the edge was unmistakable.

Marcus’s smile returned, but now it was mocking.

“Nothing to worry about, Valen. Just catching up with Tori. Right, Tori?” Marcus asked.

I could feel Cole’s gaze on me, but I couldn’t tear my eyes away from Marcus, feeling a mixture of anger and fear.

“Marcus was just leaving,” I said firmly, hoping he’d take the hint.

Cole’s hand moved to rest on my shoulder, and his calm exterior began to crack as he looked back at Marcus.

“You heard her,” Cole told Marcus.

Marcus sneered, but he didn’t move.

“You think you can keep her, Valen?” he said, voice dripping with arrogance. “I’m not done here.”

Cole’s grip on my shoulder tightened slightly, his voice dangerously quiet.

“Listen carefully, Marcus. Tori and I are together, and she’s made it clear she doesn’t want you around. So if you have any respect for her—or yourself—you’ll leave. Now,” Cole said icily.

For a second, Marcus looked like he might argue.

Marcus lips curled into an ugly sneer, but then he stepped back, throwing one last glance at me, his eyes promising this wasn’t over.

He tossed the bouquet onto the counter before he finally strode out.

As soon as he was gone, Cole's hand slid to my arm, turning me to face him.

His eyes searched mine, his jaw tight with worry and something else—something fierce and protective that took my breath away.

“Are you okay?” His voice was gentle, but the intensity in his gaze hadn't lessened.

I let out a shaky breath, nodding. “Yeah. I'm okay.”

The man who'd been browsing cleared his throat awkwardly. “I, uh... I'll come back another time.”

He quickly made his way out, leaving Cole and me alone in the quiet of the store.

Cole didn't release his hold on me, though.



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His hand moved to my cheek, his thumb brushing gently along my skin, his gaze never leaving mine.

“Tori, why didn’t you call or text me immediately?” he asked, his voice rough with a blend of frustration and concern. “If I’d known, I would have?—”

“I didn’t want you to worry,” I admitted, feeling a pang of guilt as I looked into his eyes. “I thought... I thought I could handle it on my own.”

His gaze softened, but his jaw remained tight.

“You don’t have to handle it alone, Tori. Not with him. I’ll always be here for you. That’s a promise,” Cole said.

I felt a lump form in my throat as his words sank in, the weight of his loyalty and protectiveness wrapping around me like a shield.

I’d spent so long doing things alone, keeping walls up to keep myself safe, but with Cole... those walls felt unnecessary.

It was both terrifying and incredibly freeing.

Before I could find the words to thank him, Cole’s expression softened, and he leaned closer.

“Let’s get out of here. You don’t need to think about him. Just me,” Cole said.

I nodded, and as he led me to the door, I felt a warmth flood through me.

As soon as we stepped outside, Cole pulled me to him, his arms wrapping around me.

My heart pounded as his face neared mine, his green eyes searching my face, as if asking for permission.

Then his lips pressed against mine, firm yet tender, his hand slipping to my waist as he held me close.

I felt a thrill run through me as I melted into him, the world fading away until it was just us, wrapped in each other's warmth.

When he pulled back, his gaze lingered, fierce yet soft.

"I'm not going anywhere," he whispered, brushing a strand of hair behind my ear. "No one's ever going to hurt you again. Not while I'm here."

## COLE

The lights of the community hall cast a warm glow over the business appreciation gathering as I escorted Tori inside, my hand resting against the small of her back.

She looked stunning, her eyes bright with excitement, her confidence shining through in the way she moved.

Her navy dress hugged her frame perfectly, understated but graceful, much like her.

This was her world—one she'd built from scratch—and I felt proud just standing beside her.

Tori greeted friends and fellow shop owners, introducing me with a smile that hinted at both pride and a touch of self-consciousness.

As she led me through the small crowd, introducing me to the different people who made Oakridge run, I admired her poise.

She had truly built a life here, independent and strong, a long way from the shadows of her past.

“This is Cole Valen,” Tori introduced, her voice carrying a hint of pride, which made my heart ache in a good way.

Each introduction seemed to unfold another layer of her world—the quirky bookstore owner who stocked Tori’s clothing line.

The older couple who owned the bakery down the road, and the slightly eccentric guy with the coffee shop who apparently brewed the “best latte on the East Coast.”

She laughed with her friends, her cheeks flushed with the warm color of happiness.

But even as she moved through the crowd, seemingly relaxed, I could tell she was still shaken.

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I knew Marcus had been at her store earlier, lingering like a damn shadow that refused to let her move on.

If Aden, Shaw's security specialist, hadn't intervened, I dreaded what Marcus might have done.

It was hard not to think about the fury I'd felt, my hands balling into fists as I hurried to her store.

And seeing her now—smiling, happy, strong—was both a relief and a reminder.

Marcus was a threat that I knew would need to be dealt with sooner rather than later.

I shook the thought away, though, forcing myself to focus on her instead of letting my protective instincts derail the evening.

She deserved a night that was solely about her.

“Are you alright?” Her voice broke through my thoughts, her face searching mine. “You seem a little distant tonight.”

I smiled, slipping my arm around her waist to pull her close.

“Sorry, I was just thinking about a business proposal. But don't worry—it's only you on my mind tonight,” I told her.

She laughed, that light, musical sound I was beginning to crave.

It was amazing, the way she could draw me out of my own head so easily, make me forget the weight of everything else.

We found our way to a quieter corner of the hall where I could stand close to her without feeling the eyes of her friends on us.

Just as I was about to say something, she took a breath, the look in her eyes softening.

“It means a lot that you came tonight. I know you just came from a long meeting,” she said.

“Tori,” I said, my tone serious as I met her gaze. “Coming here and spending time with you is always worth it.”

Her smile faltered for a second, and a flicker of uncertainty danced across her expression, as if she didn’t quite know how to respond.

I could see the faint hint of vulnerability in her eyes, and my chest tightened.

I reached for her hand, feeling her fingers slip into mine, soft and warm.

We spent the rest of the evening talking, laughing, and sharing stories of her early days in Oakridge.

Each story she told revealed a bit more about her journey, her resilience, her determination.

I could see why she was so admired here, why her friends looked at her with respect.

As the evening wound down, I offered to walk her home.

She hesitated for a moment before nodding, a small smile curving her lips as she thanked the host.

Once outside, we walked in comfortable silence.

The cool night air was refreshing, and I could hear the distant chirping of crickets, adding to the quiet intimacy of the moment.

We reached her apartment building, and I felt my heart pick up, even as I told myself not to rush things.

Tonight had gone perfectly, and I didn't want to spoil it by pushing her to move faster than she was ready.

She turned to me, the faint glow from the porch light casting a soft sheen over her features.

I could see the uncertainty in her eyes, the wariness that told me she was weighing her next move.

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For a split second, I wondered if she would invite me in.

I would have loved nothing more than to spend just a little longer with her, to be alone with her in the warmth of her apartment.

But as quickly as the thought crossed my mind, I knew better.

She wasn't ready—not yet. I wasn't going to push her, not when she was still healing from everything Marcus had put her through.

“Thank you for tonight,” she said, her voice soft but genuine.

She glanced down at our hands, still linked together.

“It was my pleasure.” I took a step closer, brushing a strand of hair from her face, and I saw her inhale, her breath catching.

Her gaze held mine, vulnerable yet brave. She was letting me in, little by little, and I was grateful for every step she took toward me.

Leaning in, I pressed a soft kiss to her cheek, lingering just a bit longer than necessary.

She didn't pull away, and I could feel her relax against me, her hand tightening around mine.

“I'll text you tomorrow,” I whispered against her skin, pulling back just enough to

look her in the eyes. “Goodnight, Tori.”

“Goodnight, Cole.” Her voice was barely more than a breath, her gaze holding a warmth that made my chest tighten.

I watched as she unlocked her door and slipped inside, her silhouette lingering for a brief moment before she closed the door.

Turning, I made my way back to the car. Tonight had felt like a turning point, and I knew there was no going back now.

I’d find a way to deal with Marcus, to make sure he stayed out of her life.

She deserved peace, and if I had any say in it, I would be the one to give it to her.

Returning to my apartment, the familiar silence wrapped around me, but tonight it felt emptier.

I tossed my keys onto the counter, loosening my tie as I glanced around.

The image of Tori flickered in my mind, filling the space in a way that wasn’t just physical.

I could see her standing by the kitchen, pulling one of those quirky mugs out of the cupboard, maybe leaving her jacket draped on the couch.

Small traces that would turn this place into something more. Into something warmer, lived-in.

But then reality settled in like a weight on my chest. Tori loved her life in Oakridge Bay.



She had her boutique, her friends, the life she'd fought to build.

I knew she wasn't looking for an escape, for something new in the city with me.

No, she was rooted there, every bit as stubborn and unyielding as the old trees lining the mountain roads.

I raked a hand through my hair, feeling the ache that lingered after each trip back.

The city lights blinked from beyond the window, indifferent to whatever war waged in my head.

The truth was, there were nights when the drive, the back-and-forth, felt like an uphill climb.

The company headquarters were here.

I'd worked my way up from the ground floor, putting everything I had into building my life, my career, here.

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Was I willing to let that go for her?

With a sigh, I grabbed my phone and dialed Shaw's number. It rang twice before his gruff voice came through.

"I heard from Aden. Is your Tori alright?" Shaw's tone was casual, but I could hear the underlying concern.

Aden's report from earlier had given me a good sense of what happened.

Still, hearing Shaw mention her as my Tori stirred something deep inside me.

"She's shaken up," I replied, pacing the living room as I tried to shake off the frustration.

I continued, "But she refuses to show it. She doesn't want anyone knowing how much he got to her."

That was Tori—strong, fiercely independent, but carrying a world of hurt just under the surface.

"She's really something, huh?" Shaw chuckled, as though he understood more than he let on.

"Yeah, she is," I said, and there it was—my answer, plain as day.

I knew we hadn't been dating long, but somehow, I was certain Tori was it for me.

I hadn't even fully admitted it to myself, not in so many words, but there it was, unbreakable and undeniable.

She'd put down permanent roots in Oakridge, and no part of me wanted to pull her away from that.

"Pity she saw Aden," Shaw commented. "You want me to send a replacement to keep things under wraps?"

I hesitated. Aden had gone above and beyond; he was the reason I hadn't charged in there like a storm tonight.

Tori had barely noticed him hanging back, and with how discreet he was, I didn't think she'd pick up on his presence going forward.

"Actually...I'd like to retain him. He knows what he's doing, and I think he'll be good for the job," I told Shaw.

There was a beat of silence before Shaw replied, "Alright, if that's your call. Aden's the best, so I'll set it up. But Cole, if this escalates, you know we'll need to handle it differently."

"I know." I didn't like thinking that far ahead, but I knew Shaw was right.

Marcus had already crossed a line.

After we ended the call, a text buzzed from my sister.

Lacey: Family dinner at the lake house next weekend. You coming?

The lake house.

The family had spent so many weekends out there growing up, surrounded by water and pine trees, that it felt almost like its own world.

A world without boardrooms and city traffic, just open air and memories.

An idea took root. Tori might need an escape, a place where Marcus couldn't reach her, where she'd be safe for a few days.

I typed out a quick response to Lacey, letting her know I'd be there, and that I wanted to borrow the lake house for next weekend.

That would give me a few days to put everything together, to make sure the invitation didn't seem as out of the blue as it felt.

The more I thought about it, the clearer it became.

If I wanted a life with her—really wanted it—I couldn't just expect her to slot herself into mine.

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No, I'd have to meet her where she was, be willing to take that leap for her.

And if bringing her into the family fold, even for a weekend, showed her that she was already a part of my life... then that was the least I could do.

I could still feel the tension in my shoulders, the residual anger from Marcus's intrusion.

Knowing he'd been in her space, that he'd had the audacity to try and worm his way back into her life, made my blood simmer.

I trusted Tori to handle herself, but even steel had its limits. And she'd been through more than enough.

There was no way I'd allow him to rattle her, not after everything she'd built to stand on her own two feet again.

I stared out at the city lights again, but this time, they felt different.

Tori already on her way to becoming mine. I'd just have to make the next step count.

TORI

The door chimed as I crossed the threshold, balancing coffee cups and a bakery bag.

The comforting, familiar smell of espresso mixed with the sweet aroma of croissants filled the shop, and it made me smile.

Today, the whole place seemed wrapped in a cozy blanket of warmth and sweetness that eased some of the lingering tension in my shoulders.

“You’re here early,” Candy noted, a raised eyebrow accompanying her teasing smirk.

I set the coffee and croissants on the counter, fighting the heat in my cheeks. I knew what was coming.

“New stock coming in,” I replied.

Candy’s gaze darted to the bakery bag, her eyes widening in delighted realization.

“Oh, you didn’t just bring croissants from that place in the city,” she said, glancing at the famous bakery logo. “This place has lines out the door every morning! Let me guess, your boyfriend dropped these off?”

“His driver did,” I admitted, my cheeks feeling even warmer.

The word “boyfriend” still felt unfamiliar, strange, and somehow thrilling on my tongue.

But even as I said it, the memory of Cole’s thoughtfulness brightened my morning further.

The idea of him arranging for this little surprise felt unexpectedly intimate, and I wasn’t quite used to it.

Candy reached for the bag, biting into a croissant and rolling her eyes with a moan of appreciation.

“Oh, wow. I get it now. This is why people go nuts. Cole Valen, unexpectedly

thoughtful and with great taste in pastries,” Candy said.

I chuckled. “There’s coffee for you, too. He sent enough for both of us,” I said.

Candy was still savoring her first bite, giving me a playful wink.

“Well, I’m just saying... you’re one lucky woman,” Candy said.

It was the word lucky that grounded me back to reality.

Lucky, I was sure, was the last thing I was when it came to romantic history.

The ghost of that thought lingered even as Candy moved behind the counter to set up for the day.

I watched her, grateful for her presence but ready to take a step back.

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“Hey, can you handle the shop for a bit? I’ll be in the back,” I said.

She nodded, still wearing a knowing smile.

“Take your time. I’ll hold down the fort,” Candy assured me.

With my coffee in hand, I headed to my makeshift office—a small, cramped room tucked at the back of the store.

It was really just a glorified broom closet, but I’d turned it into my own little hideaway.

Once inside, I shut the door and took a long, steadying sip of coffee, letting the warmth ground me.

Despite the comforting surroundings, I couldn’t ignore the anxiety gnawing at me.

I hadn’t told Candy about Marcus’s appearance last night.

I didn’t want the pity, and the truth was, I wasn’t sure I could handle anyone’s concern about something I’d spent years trying to put behind me.

But here I was, drawn back to it like some dark, twisted magnet.

Setting my coffee down, I reached for my laptop, pulling up the security feed from last night.



Oakridge Bay was a small town, and my instincts were sharp enough to know when something felt off.

There, on the grainy footage, was Marcus, leaning too close to the register, his smile as slick as ever, a bouquet in hand.

My stomach clenched as I watched, unable to look away from his face, that all-too-familiar expression of possessiveness and smugness.

It had been five years. But for Marcus, it might as well have been yesterday.

I zoomed in, my finger lingering over the screen as I scrolled through the footage again.

My heart rate spiked when I spotted him—the customer who'd walked in right after.

I remembered the relief I'd felt then, an outsider breaking up the suffocating tension Marcus had created.

Now, I wasn't so sure.

He'd been browsing the racks, acting casual, but I zoomed in closer, a familiar gnawing suspicion worming its way in.

He'd pulled out his phone while standing near the counter, holding it to his ear as he browsed.

The image was slightly grainy, but I knew I could get a better look.

I'd been paranoid about investing in good security equipment when I opened this place, memories of Marcus too fresh in my mind to ignore.

And now, it seemed, that paranoia was paying off.

I zoomed in until I could make out the faintest outline of his lips moving.

Most of his conversation was inaudible, just the muffled static of a distant voice on the other end.

But then, my heart skipped a beat. I couldn't make out much of what he was saying, but I caught a single word. Cole.

My stomach twisted. This man—whoever he was—had been talking about Cole. About me.

I leaned back, processing the unsettling discovery. It made no sense. Could he really have been working for Cole?

The thought made my blood run cold. Maybe I was overreacting, but every instinct screamed that something was wrong.

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You're jumping to conclusions, I tried to tell myself. Cole wouldn't do this. He's been honest with you....

But Marcus's face in the footage refused to leave me.

And somehow, knowing Marcus had his eyes on me again made every other piece fall into a sinister puzzle.

It was too easy to assume Cole's world, the one filled with power and influence, came without complications.

I picked up my phone, fingers hovering over the screen. There were so many ways to go about this.

To push this thought away and wait for Cole to explain. Or to confront him, point-blank, demanding answers.

But the unease bubbling inside me was too real. I couldn't ignore it. I opened our chat, tapping out a brief message.

Tori: Call me when you're free.

It was only a matter of minutes before my phone lit up with his name.

The sight of it sent a rush of relief through me, but my gut still twisted with uncertainty.

I swiped to answer, my voice as steady as I could manage.

“Hey, Tori,” Cole greeted me, his voice warm and familiar.

There was that familiar ache, the part of me that wanted to believe in him wholeheartedly, to trust without hesitation.

“Hi,” I replied, clearing my throat. I wanted to ease into it, but the words spilled out. “Did you...have someone watching me last night?”

There was a long pause, and I could almost hear the shift in his tone as he realized the weight of my question.

“Why do you ask?” Cole asked.

I swallowed. “There was a man in the store after Marcus showed up. At first, I thought he was a customer, but now I’m not so sure,” I said.

He didn’t answer right away, and my heart began to pound harder, waiting for his response.

Finally, he sighed, and there was something in his voice—a mixture of regret and resolve.

“Yes, Tori. I did,” Cole admitted. “Aden is a security specialist I hired once I heard your ex was in town.”

I felt a pang in my chest, my fingers tightening around the phone.

“So you don’t trust me to handle things on my own?” I demanded, my voice rising as fury surged through me.

I could hardly believe it—he thought I was so incapable, so helpless, that I needed...what, a bodyguard?

I took a sharp breath, trying to steady the anger heating my skin. How dare he?

I'd worked so hard to build my life back up, to prove—to myself, if no one else—that I could stand on my own two feet.

And here he was, just assuming I couldn't manage without his help.

"No," he replied, his voice firm yet gentle.

He continued, "It's not about trusting you; it's about not trusting him. Marcus is dangerous, Tori. I had someone dig into his past—he's been charged with assault before, and there are rumors he's done worse. I'm not willing to take any chances if he's anywhere near you. I'm going to make sure you're safe."

My heart softened at the protectiveness in his voice.

Still, the anger, the old feeling of being watched, of losing control over my own life, was still there.

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“Cole, I thought... I thought you’d respect my boundaries,” I said.

“I do. But I can’t stand by and do nothing while he’s trying to worm his way back into your life. This isn’t about controlling you—it’s about keeping you safe,” Cole told me.

My anger wavered, caught between my instincts to protect myself and the warmth of his intentions.

There was no malice in his voice, only a raw honesty I hadn’t expected.

The lines I’d drawn around myself, the barriers I’d spent years carefully constructing, suddenly felt... unnecessary.

Those walls, the ones that had kept me safe and hidden, seemed to waver, like maybe they weren’t as essential as I’d once believed.

For the first time in so long, I could imagine letting someone in—lettinghimin—and it didn’t feel terrifying. It felt oddly liberating.

But then, like clockwork, doubt crept in, weaving through my mind. Was I letting my guard down too quickly?

Was I being naïve, foolishly hopeful that Cole could truly be the opposite of Marcus?

How could I be sure he wasn’t just another mistake waiting to happen?

I hesitated, gripping tightly to my reservations, the ghosts of my past whispering to stay cautious.

Yet, there was another voice, softer but persistent, gently urging, Give him a chance.

It was a quiet but insistent reminder, stirring beneath my frustration, urging me to push aside my instincts to keep everyone at arm's length.

Cole had done nothing to earn my mistrust, yet here I was, ready to build walls.

Maybe it was time I didn't give in to the impulse to protect myself by shutting him out.

I took a deep breath, loosening my grip on the phone.

"Okay," I murmured, the word barely audible, but even that tiny agreement felt like a step in his direction.

I wouldn't let this slide completely; I deserved a say in the way Cole protected me. This wasn't over.

I intended to set clear boundaries with him. I wanted openness, honesty, even if it was uncomfortable for both of us.

Cole had to understand that trust went both ways.

"Thank you for understanding," Cole said, a hint of relief in his voice.

Then he paused, seeming to consider something.

"Actually... I was wondering if you'd be up for a little getaway this weekend. My

family is having a gathering at our lake house out in Silverwood Pines, just outside Willow Creek. It's beautiful this time of year, especially by the water. I'd love for you to come with me."

I felt the warmth of his invitation settle into me.

The thought of seeing him in that setting—someplace that meant so much to him, with the people who were closest to him—both thrilled and terrified me.

That soft voice inside nudged again, urging me to step a little further out from behind my walls.

"Okay," I whispered.

COLE

The drive to the lake house wasn't peaceful.

Tori sat beside me, her hands twisting in her lap as she looked out the window, her lips pressed together in a tight line.



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I could feel the tension radiating from her, and I knew she wasn't going to stay quiet for long.

Finally, she turned to me, her voice soft but edged with hurt.

"Cole, I know you were trying to help, but hiring a bodyguard without telling me?"

I tightened my grip on the wheel.

"Marcus is a threat, Tori. I was just worried about you," I told her.

She let out a breath, her fingers now fidgeting with the hem of her sleeve.

"I understand that. I do. And I'm not saying I don't appreciate the gesture. But Cole, don't you see how this could make me feel like I'm not in control of my own life?" Tori asked.

I sighed, taking in her words. She was right; I could see that now.

"I'm sorry," I said, my voice softer. "I should have been upfront with you. I should've trusted you enough to tell you what I was planning, let you be part of that decision. You have every right to feel betrayed."

She looked down, biting her lip, and I could tell she was thinking.

Then, after a moment, she said, "I came here, despite how I feel, because I want to hear your side of things, and I want to give you a chance. I just... I need to know that

you're willing to be honest with me.”

I reached over, resting a hand over hers.

“I will be, Tori. I don't want to keep anything from you again. From now on, it's total honesty, no more hidden plans. I promise,” I told her.

Her gaze softened, and she nodded, but I could still see the hurt lingering in her eyes.

It wasn't something that would disappear in a day, but she was here, and she was giving me that chance.

It was more than I deserved, and I wasn't going to waste it.

The conversation shifted into a heavy silence.

I steered us along the winding road past fields of golden wheat that gave way to dense, tall trees.

I glanced over at her, noting how she'd turned back to the window, watching the trees blur by.

Matters between us had been somewhat settled—for now.

But as we continued driving, I noticed she kept glancing down at her phone.

She was doing her best to hide it, but every few minutes, she'd pick it up, swipe the screen.

Then she'd set it back down, only to reach for it again.

I couldn't hold back my curiosity any longer.

"Everything okay?" I asked.

She hesitated, her fingers resting on her phone before she turned to me, her expression a mix of hesitation and something else I couldn't quite place.

"It's... Candy. I'm just reminding her about a big shipment coming in for the boutique. I don't want her to feel overwhelmed with everything while I'm gone," she explained.

I chuckled softly.

"Candy seems capable. I'm sure the store will be fine without you for a weekend," I said.

She let out a small laugh, but I could tell she was still a little on edge.

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Tori tucked her phone away and looked out the window again, the tension in her shoulders slowly easing.

“I’m just...nervous, I guess,” Tori admitted.

“About meeting my family?” I reached for her hand, giving it a gentle squeeze.

“Maybe,” she admitted, tracing her finger along the seam of her jeans. “You know, this feels...big.”

It did feel big. And a part of me wondered if this was all too soon. But the thought faded as quickly as it came.

This was Tori, and I wanted her here with me, wanted my family to know her.

The way her fingers slipped into mine and held on reassured me.

“Just be yourself,” I said. “They’re going to love you.”

The lake house appeared in the distance.

It was nestled against the water, surrounded by pines and maple trees that painted the shoreline in shades of gold and red.

I watched her eyes widen a little as we pulled in.

Tori swept her gaze over the sprawling two-story cabin that had seen generations of

memories.

As we parked, my brothers Christian and Keir were already waiting outside, leaning against the porch railing.

Lacey, my younger sister, came out next, wearing one of Tori's dresses from the boutique, the vibrant color standing out against the rustic woods.

"Hey!" Lacey waved, jogging down the steps to meet us as we climbed out of the car.

She didn't wait for introductions, her eyes lighting up as she took Tori's hand and pulled her into a warm hug.

"You're Tori! Cole's never brought anyone home before. Not like this, at least," Lacey said.

"Lacey, chill," I said, rolling my eyes.

But Lacey just grinned, giving Tori a nudge.

"Nice to meet you, Lacey," Tori replied, laughing, though I could tell she was a little taken aback by the warm welcome.

My dad, Maxwell, walked out then, his usual serious expression softening as he approached.

"Cole," he nodded at me, his gaze shifting to Tori. "And you must be Tori."

She nodded, her voice quiet but steady as she introduced herself, and he shook her hand with a reserved but respectful smile.

Dad had always been the strong, silent type, especially since Mom passed away when we much younger.

But I could tell by the way he looked at her that he approved.

Christian and Keir, on the other hand, kept their cool as they exchanged introductions with Tori.

But I didn't miss the way Christian's gaze lingered just a bit longer, clearly curious about her.

"You're the woman behind Lacey's new favorite wardrobe?" Christian asked, his brows raised as he gave Lacey a teasing nudge.

"I don't think I've seen her wear anything else since she started shopping there," Christian added.

"Guilty," Tori said with a grin. "But she makes everything look amazing, so I can't take all the credit."

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We headed inside, where Tori and I settled into a guest room with a sprawling view of the lake.

The room had been made up perfectly with warm blankets and cozy furnishings.

A hint of the pine-scented candles Lacey loved so much filled the space.

Tori glanced around, a look of relief and happiness in her eyes.

“Comfortable?” I asked, watching her take it all in.

She nodded, her smile softening. “Yeah. It’s beautiful here.”

Later, as the sun began to dip low over the trees, we all gathered around the long oak table in the dining room.

Dinner was warm and filling—roasted vegetables, perfectly seasoned chicken, and the mashed potatoes my dad insisted on making himself every year.

Tori sat next to me, gradually relaxing, her laughter mingling with Lacey’s as the two of them swapped stories about their love for design.

My brothers kept a watchful, albeit teasing, eye on her.

I could tell by the time dessert arrived—a homemade apple pie Lacey had baked just for the occasion—that Tori was feeling at home.

I reached over to take her hand under the table, giving it a light squeeze, and she shot me a grateful smile.

“Alright, Tori,” Christian said, leaning back with a smirk. “Now that you’re here, you need to know one thing about Cole.”

She raised an eyebrow, her curiosity piqued.

Christian grinned.

“This guy,” he said, pointing a thumb in my direction, “pretends to be all serious and composed. But growing up? He was the worst at keeping any secret.”

Tori’s laugh lit up the room, her eyes sparkling as she glanced at me. “I find that hard to believe.”

“It’s true,” I said, shrugging. “There are some things better left in childhood.”

Keir leaned forward, unable to resist adding to the teasing. “Just you wait. He’s bound to crack under pressure sometime.”

“Oh, I don’t doubt it,” Tori replied, giving me a playful nudge.

Dinner soon wrapped up, and as the family moved to the living room, Tori and I slipped out onto the deck.

The night was quiet, save for the gentle rustling of leaves and the soft lapping of water against the shore.

She leaned on the railing, her gaze sweeping over the lake, the stars reflected like tiny, glimmering lights on the water’s surface.



“I think they liked you,” I murmured, moving beside her, my hand finding the small of her back.

“They’re wonderful,” she replied softly, her cheeks pink in the moonlight. “I can see why you’re so close to them.”

There was a hint of wistfulness in her voice.

I knew Tori no longer had any family. Both her parents had passed away while she was a sophomore in college.

I brushed a strand of hair from her face, letting my fingers linger a little longer than necessary.

“Thank you for coming. I know it must have been a little overwhelming,” I told her.

“It was,” she admitted, “but I feel...happy. Comfortable, even. And I don’t feel that often.”

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Hearing that hit me with an unexpected tenderness.

She was finally letting her guard down, and I wanted to make sure she knew it was safe with me.

Gently, I turned her to face me, one hand sliding to rest on her waist.

Her gaze flickered up to meet mine, a mixture of vulnerability and anticipation in her eyes.

“Can I kiss you, Tori?” I asked.

She nodded, her breath catching, and I didn’t waste a second.

I leaned in, brushing my lips against hers, savoring the moment as the world faded away.

She pressed closer, her hands finding my shoulders as our kiss deepened.

When we finally broke apart, I rested my forehead against hers, my heart pounding.

“You have no idea how much you mean to me,” I murmured.

Her fingers brushed lightly against my cheek, and she said, “I think I’m beginning to understand.”

Just as things were starting to heat up between Tori and me, I heard Keir calling us in

from the porch.

He and Lacey had taken it upon themselves to declare a family card game to end the night.

Tori smiled, pulling back slightly. “Guess we’re needed.”

I brushed a thumb across her cheek, reluctant to let the moment go.

“We’ll have plenty of time tomorrow. I can’t wait for our hike,” I told her.

Her face lit up, though she shook her head with a laugh.

“Just a fair warning—I haven’t hiked since college,” Tori said.

“That’s alright,” I assured her. “We’ll take an easy trail and enjoy the views.”

She grinned, her eyes shining, before taking my hand, and we headed back inside.

Lacey immediately pounced on her, dragging her over to the couch, apparently needing her opinion on a dispute she and Keir were having.

Dad had retired to bed, but Christian was in the kitchen, rummaging through the fridge.

As I stepped in to grab a beer, he glanced over, raising an eyebrow.

“So things are going smoothly between you and Tori, huh?” Christian asked.

I nodded, twisting open the cap on my drink. “Yeah, they are.”

Christian leaned against the counter, crossing his arms with a knowing smile.

“And...does she know about the bodyguard?” Christian asked.

I sighed, taking a long pull from my beer.

“Yeah, she found out after her ex showed up at her shop, and Aden stepped in. It wasn’t exactly the way I’d wanted her to find out, but...we talked things out,” I said.

“So, she’s cool with it?” He looked skeptical, scratching his chin. “Most women would’ve been put off, I think.”

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I gave a small shrug, feeling the weight of the whole situation with Tori settle on my shoulders.

“I managed to calm things down. And that’s why this weekend is so important. I need her to see this side of my life, with you guys, with family. I want her to know I’m not just some over-possessive jerk,” I said.

Christian watched me carefully, studying my face. After a moment, he gave a small nod.

“I get it, man. She seems comfortable here. Like she fits. Maybe she’s already a keeper,” Christian said.

I swallowed, his words resonating more than I wanted to admit.

My gut told me he was right. I just hadn’t wanted to acknowledge it until now.

“Guess we’ll see,” I said, trying to keep my voice light.

Just then, Lacey called out, asking if we were going to join the game or stand around drinking beer all night.

Christian laughed, giving me a friendly shove toward the living room.

“Come on, lover boy. Let’s see if your luck with Tori holds up in cards too,” Christian said.

With a grin, I followed him back to the living room, where Tori was comfortably nestled between Lacey and Keir, already in the thick of the family chaos.

TORI

The morning started quietly, but there was a warmth in the air.

I found myself easing into the family dynamic as we sat around the large wooden table, sipping coffee and passing around platters.

Cole's dad had a great sense of humor, and his younger sister, Lacey, kept everyone on their toes.

It was like a well-rehearsed play, each of them feeding off one another with jokes and playful bickering that made me laugh until my cheeks hurt.

"You know, Dad, you've got to let Cole take over the grilling one of these days," Lacey said, grinning. "He's out of practice. Poor Tori here doesn't know what she's in for."

"Oh, is that so?" I quipped, casting a look at Cole, who just shook his head, smiling.

"Don't listen to them," Cole said, nudging my shoulder. "My cooking's just fine."

"Just fine?" Christian laughed. "Lacey's got a point, you know. I think the last time you grilled, you left half the steaks looking like hockey pucks."

"I was seventeen!" Cole protested, a grin tugging at his lips.

"Seventeen or not, I still think Tori deserves a warning," Lacey teased, winking at me.

“Better get yourself an apron and teach him, Tori,” Lacey added.

I laughed, feeling a warmth inside. It wasn’t often I’d been able to joke like this with anyone’s family.

It reminded me of how much I’d missed this—the feeling of being part of something big, something good.

Both of my parents had died in a car crash while I was in college, leaving me alone with a grief I struggled to process.

Not long after, I met Marcus.

He’d often remind me, in his own way, that I should be grateful because he was “the only family” I’d ever need.

For a long time, I let myself believe him, let myself lean into that dependence because it felt safer than facing the world on my own.

It took years to see through the layers of control that were buried in his kindness.

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His words and actions weren't about support or love.

They were designed to keep me isolated, trapped in a version of life that revolved only around him.

Marcus made me doubt my strength, made me question if I could even stand on my own without him by my side.

I'd been convinced he wanted what was best for me.

But in reality, he only wanted me to be reliant on him, bound by his needs and his twisted sense of "family."

Being here with Cole's family, feeling laughter and lightness fill the space around me, I realized just how much I'd lost.

This was what family was supposed to feel like—a place of warmth and acceptance, not a tool of control.

After breakfast, I noticed that everyone started packing up their things.

That was when I realized they'd all be leaving for the weekend. My heart did a small, unexpected flip.

"You're all heading out already?" I asked, glancing at Cole with a raised brow.

"Just you and Cole here from now on," Lacey said with a little smirk.



She leaned in, lowering her voice conspiratorially. “Don’t havetoomuch fun, alright?”

Lacey winked and nudged my shoulder, her mischief sparkling in her eyes.

A heat crept up my cheeks. I forced myself to keep a cool expression, but Cole noticed.

A faint smile curled up at the corners of his mouth as he pretended not to hear.

I waved goodbye to everyone, hugging Lacey, who squeezed me tightly, and giving a small wave to Christian, Keir and Maxwell.

It was strange—I hadn’t expected to feel so welcomed, and it was both overwhelming and heartwarming.

I let out a breath, feeling a mix of excitement and nerves as the realization sank in.

Just Cole and me, alone in the lake house for the weekend.

We decidedto go hiking after breakfast, and I found myself enjoying the fresh air as we ventured onto a nearby trail.

It was lush, with trees shading us from the morning sun, and the quiet of the woods brought a calmness I hadn’t felt in ages.

I kept stealing glances at Cole, noticing the way his features softened in the sunlight.

The way his gaze would turn towards me every now and then, his expression warm and open.

“Everything alright?” he asked, catching my stare.

I blushed slightly, laughing it off.

“I was just thinking... Thank you. For inviting me here, letting me meet your family. I was a little intimidated at first, but...they’re wonderful,” I admitted.

“They’re crazy, you mean,” Cole laughed, but there was a warmth in his eyes. “They can be a lot, but they mean well.”

“I get that. They remind me of the friends I grew up with.” I hesitated. “I didn’t realize how much I missed this feeling.”

He was quiet for a moment, his gaze thoughtful as he watched me.

Then he nodded, taking my hand as we continued up the trail. The way he held onto me was gentle, reassuring.

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As we approached the peak, my muscles ached.

I could feel the burn in my legs, but the sight that awaited us made everything worth it.

The town lay sprawled out below, nestled against the shimmering lake with fields stretching as far as I could see.

The clouds drifted lazily across the sky, casting gentle shadows over the rooftops.

“Wow,” I breathed, taking it all in.

The town looked so peaceful from up here, as if nothing could ever go wrong.

“Worth the climb?” Cole’s voice was close, and I felt his fingers tighten around mine.

I turned to him, smiling. “Absolutely.”

Without a word, he slipped his backpack off and unzipped it. Cole pulled out a picnic mat and some containers of food.

My eyes widened, surprised by the unexpected gesture.

“You packed us lunch?” I asked, touched by the thoughtfulness in it.

He shrugged, flashing me a brilliant grin.

“I thought it might be nice to take our time up here. No rush to go back,” Cole said.

We settled down on the mat, sharing sandwiches and fruit, with a few pastries he’d picked up from his favorite bakery in the city.

The conversation flowed easily, and I realized just how much I enjoyed these quiet, simple moments with him.

It was as if being up here in the open air let us both relax, let us just be ourselves.

“Thank you, Cole,” I said softly, meeting his eyes. “For all of this. For bringing me along this weekend. I... I didn’t think I’d be able to relax like this. I’m usually all about the store, always worried about something going wrong.”

He leaned back, crossing his legs as he studied me, his gaze soft.

“You deserve a break, Tori. Candy’s more than capable of handling things for a weekend. I wanted you to have some time just for you,” Cole told me.

I laughed, shaking my head.

“You’re probably right. It’s just, sometimes I get so used to being on my own, doing everything by myself, that I forget it’s okay to... I don’t know, let go a little,” I said.

Cole reached out, tucking a strand of hair behind my ear.

The touch was gentle, almost reverent, and it sent a spark racing through me.

“You don’t have to do everything alone, you know,” he murmured, his voice low. “I’m here now.”

There was something in his gaze, something deep and unwavering that made my heart beat faster.

I looked away, feeling a warmth spread across my cheeks, but I didn't pull away from him.

In fact, I found myself leaning into his touch, my hand finding its way to his. Our fingers intertwined.

For a moment, we sat there in comfortable silence, with nothing but the sound of the breeze rustling through the trees and the distant chirping of birds.

It felt like we were in our own little world, high above everything else.

“You know,” I said after a while, breaking the comfortable silence between us, “I was pretty angry with you when you finally admitted to hiring a bodyguard without telling me.”

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I shot him a pointed look, though any real edge to it had softened over the past day.

His lips curved up in a half-smile. “I know, and I deserved it. I should’ve told you about Aden sooner.”

“It’s...well, it’s water under the bridge now.” I sighed. “I get it, though. You were trying to look out for me. I just... I guess I don’t always know how to handle it.”

He nodded, his thumb tracing gentle circles on the back of my hand.

“I’m glad you understand. And I’m sorry if I ever made you feel like I didn’t trust you. That was never my intention,” Cole assured me.

I squeezed his hand, feeling my heart swell with something I hadn’t felt in a long time—trust.

“Thank you, Cole.”

Before I knew it, he was leaning closer, his face inches from mine.

I held my breath, my pulse quickening as I looked up at him.

His lips brushed mine, gentle and hesitant at first, as if he was savoring every second.

Then the kiss deepened, his hand cupping my cheek, and I felt myself melt into him, all my walls and worries fading away.

When we finally pulled back, I was breathless, my heart pounding as I looked into his eyes.

There was a warmth there, a quiet certainty that made me feel as though I was exactly where I was meant to be.

COLE

The rain began softly, a gentle patter on the leaves as we wrapped up our picnic, but within minutes it was coming down in earnest.

A thick, misty veil blurred the trees around us, soaking everything in sight and turning the path into a slippery mess.

I grabbed Tori's hand as we started back down, pulling her close to keep her from sliding in the mud.

"This isn't exactly the romantic stroll I promised," I said with a laugh, squeezing her fingers as the rain poured down on us.

Tori gave me a wry smile, blinking water from her lashes. "It's memorable, at least."

Our laughter echoed through the woods, adding a touch of warmth to the otherwise cold, wet descent.

Every step we took felt treacherous, the dirt and rocks beneath our feet slick with rainwater.

I kept my arm around her waist, determined to steady her through the worst of it.

Just as we reached a particularly steep slope, Tori's foot slipped on a patch of mud,

and she let out a yelp.

I tightened my grip, pulling her against me with enough force that she nearly stumbled right into my chest.

Her hands pressed against my shoulders as she caught her breath, her eyes wide with surprise and a little spark of thrill.

“That was close,” she said, laughing, her cheeks flushed despite the rain. “I almost ate it.”

“I’ve got you,” I murmured, still holding her close.

Her laughter softened as her gaze lingered on mine, her damp hair clinging to her face.

Raindrops slid down her cheeks, and without thinking, I brushed one away with my thumb.

She didn’t pull back, didn’t look away.



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Instead, she tilted her chin up, her lips parting slightly. I didn't waste a second.

I leaned down and kissed her, the rain drumming around us as I pressed my mouth to hers, tasting the sweetness of her smile mixed with the freshness of the rain.

She responded with equal fervor, her fingers curling into my jacket, pulling me even closer.

When we finally broke apart, I let my hand linger at the nape of her neck, breathing her in.

"Let's get back to the lake house," I murmured, my voice thick with a possessive edge that even surprised me.

Tori nodded, her cheeks flushed, and I didn't miss the way her eyes held that same glint of excitement.

With renewed energy, we navigated the rest of the slippery path down, my hand never leaving hers.

By the time we reached the lake house, the rain was still pouring down.

All I could think about was the fact that we finally had the place to ourselves.

The house was quiet, the air inside warm and still.

I could see Tori shivering, her clothes soaked through, and I took off my pack,

grabbing a couple of towels we'd stashed away earlier.

Gently, I wrapped one around her shoulders, rubbing her arms to help chase away the chill.

"You should warm up," I said softly, pulling another towel free and drying off her hair as best as I could.

"There's a bathroom just down the hall if you want to take a hot shower. I can heat up the leftover soup from last night," I added.

Tori smiled, looking up at me with gratitude in her eyes. She turned to head toward the bathroom.

But then, she paused, glancing over her shoulder at me with a look that sent my pulse racing.

"You can join me...if you'd like," Tori said.

A surge of heat flooded through me at her invitation.

Her voice carried a hint of shyness but a clear invitation that made my blood surge.

I think I just might, I thought, my gaze catching hers as a blush colored her cheeks.

I followed her down the hall, unable to look away.

I knew the kind of trust she was placing in me, and I swore to myself I wouldn't betray it.

We stepped into the small, warm bathroom.

As the shower hissed to life, a mist filling the space, I watched her reach for the hem of her shirt.

Her movements were a little hesitant but steady.

I moved to help, my hands gently brushing hers, lifting the fabric and sliding it off her shoulders.

We undressed slowly, almost reverently, as if we had all the time in the world.

The air was thick with anticipation and an unspoken promise that neither of us wanted to break.

When I finally stepped under the stream of warm water with her, the heat washing away the chill of the rain, I felt as if everything else had faded away—leaving just us in this moment.

Tori leaned into me, her hands resting on my chest.

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I could see the vulnerability in her gaze mixed with a trust that hit me like a punch to the gut.

I wrapped my arms around her, pressing her against me.

I dipped my head to capture her lips again, this time slower, savoring every touch, every heartbeat.

The warmth of the water cascaded around us, mingling with the heat that built between us, the droplets trickling down our skin.

“Tori, tell me if I’m going too fast. Tell me if you’re not ready for this yet,” I murmured, tracing the curve of her breasts.

“I’m ready, Cole. I want this, want you,” she said.

That was all I needed to hear. I gently pushed Tori against the wall, turned the water off, then took my time, worshipping her body.

I kissed her breasts reverently, sucking on both her nipples until they peaked. Tori cried out, burying her fingers into my hair.

I left a trail of more kisses down the line of her body, her ribs and belly, finally reaching the valley between her legs.

Tori parted her legs without me needing to tell her.

Gripping her thighs, I kissed the soft lips of her pussy.

I paid close attention to the sensitive nub until Tori moaned and climaxed against my mouth.

I stood back up, surprised she tugged me close for a kiss, which I eagerly returned. When she pulled back, she gave me a shy look.

“My turn,” she whispered, reaching for my thickening cock.

I groaned against her touch.

“Not here. I want to take you in bed,” I told her.

We finished up in the bathroom, then moved to the bedroom.

Tori looked gorgeous and naked on the silk black sheets, a gorgeous offering.

I joined her, straddling her sweet body, crushing my lips against hers.

“Cole,” she murmured, eyes dilated with pleasure. “I’m yours.”

“Mine,” I said possessively.

Lifting her legs over my shoulders, I slid one finger inside her wet heat, then another. Tori let out an impatient moan.

“Wait,” I said, quickly getting off her.

After grabbing the condom from my wallet, I tore the packaging, slipped it on, then resumed what we were doing.

I entered her, slow and steady.

The last thing I wanted to do was hurt her. I didn't break eye contact at least once and Tori didn't tell me to stop or slow down.

Finally, I was deeply seated inside her.

Tori groaned, digging her nails into my shoulders. I rode her then, started with slow strokes before picking up the pace.

It was electric. Each time I entered her, it felt like a piece of her soul reached out to brush mine.

Sweat coated our bodies. She started meeting me for every push.

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I shifted the angle of my thrusts and hearing her cry out, I knew I found her sweet spot.

I repeatedly aimed for the spot. My balls tightened against my body and I knew I wouldn't last long.

The next time I entered her, Tori climaxed, calling out my name.

Several moments later, I came as well, my mind filling with a haze of pleasure as I pulled out of Tori.

After I disposed of the condom, I grabbed a towel to clean us both off.

I lay next to her, pulling her close until our bodies were entwined, her head resting against my chest.

I wrapped my arm around her, possessively, protectively, feeling like I never wanted to let her go.

I pressed a soft kiss to her forehead, breathing in the faint scent of her hair mixed with the lingering warmth of our shared moments.

“That was amazing,” she murmured, her voice barely above a whisper.

Her fingers traced gentle lines along my jaw, her touch light and filled with a kind of tenderness that made my chest ache.

The warmth of her breath ghosted against my lips as she gazed up at me.

Her eyes were soft and full of something that made my heart pound.

“It was,” I agreed, my voice just as low, feeling the weight of the connection we’d shared.

I brushed her hair back from her face, letting my hand linger at her cheek.

Her skin was warm beneath my fingertips, and I couldn’t help but run my thumb along her cheekbone.

I silently memorised the curve of her face, the softness of her skin.

She smiled, her lips curving in a way that made me feel like the luckiest man alive.

“I’m glad you invited me here,” she whispered.

“I’m glad you agreed to come,” I murmured, pulling her even closer. “I wanted you to see this part of my life...to know the people who matter to me.”

I swallowed, suddenly vulnerable as I looked into her eyes.

“I wanted you to know that you matter, Tori,” I told her.

Her eyes softened, and she lifted a hand, letting her fingers trace the outline of my lips, her touch both delicate and intimate.

“I feel like I belong here,” she admitted softly.

Her words felt like a balm to all the times I’d doubted I’d ever find someone who



could fit into my world so seamlessly.

I wrapped my hand around hers, bringing her fingers to my lips and pressing a kiss to her knuckles.

“You do belong here,” I said, the words coming out rougher than I’d intended, but I meant every one of them.

“I don’t know how to explain it, but I’ve never felt this way before,” I added.

She sighed, her eyes filled with warmth as she pressed a kiss to my chest, right over my heart.

“Me neither,” she whispered.

And with that, she nestled closer.

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Her body seemed to melt against mine as we lay together in the quiet, wrapped in each other and the softness of the moment.

TORI

The familiar smell of cinnamon wafted from the bakery as Cole and I walked down Main Street.

The town was bustling, and for the first time in a while, I felt almost relaxed—until I saw her.

Samantha Crane. She'd been my so-called friend.

But really, she'd been Marcus's eyes and ears, reporting back to him every time I dared step out of line.

What was she doing in Oakridge Hill? Did it have anything to do with Marcus?

Then I remembered Samantha mentioning that she sometimes came to Oakridge to do her hair, because her stylist had moved here or something.

She noticed me before I had a chance to turn away, her red-painted smile widening in that unsettling way I remembered all too well.

"Tori! Wow, it's been ages," she said, her voice honeyed and loud enough to make people glance our way.

She looked me up and down, taking in Cole beside me.

I felt the familiar pang of anxiety rise in my chest, memories flooding back of how she'd always worm her way under my skin.

The only reason I'd kept Samantha in my life was because, under Marcus's tight control, I'd felt too isolated to completely let her go.

She wasn't exactly a friend, more like someone who filled the empty spaces when I needed it most.

Even if her loyalty was questionable, she was better than the silence and solitude that Marcus imposed on me.

So, I had endured her company.

"Samantha," I managed, keeping my voice steady.

Cole's hand rested gently on my lower back, grounding me, though I could tell from his stiff stance that he sensed something was off.

"I almost didn't recognize you!" Samantha's gaze slid to Cole with thinly veiled curiosity. "And...who's this?"

"Cole," I said, my voice firmer this time. "My?—"

"Boyfriend," he said effortlessly.

I wanted to roll my eyes, but I couldn't deny the small comfort I felt at his protectiveness.

For once, it felt like someone was in my corner without hidden agendas.

“Oh, boyfriend.” Samantha’s smile turned knowing, her eyes glinting. “It’s just so good to see you happy, Tori. After everything, you know. You were...well, let’s just say, you’ve come a long way.”

The undertone in her words made my stomach clench.

She’d always had a way of making me feel like a child, like I’d only been something to Marcus because of her oversight.

I could feel Cole shift beside me, his fingers pressing more firmly against my back.

He was holding himself back, I could tell, fighting the instinct to step in.

“I have,” I said, forcing a smile.

I met her gaze, a spark of anger cutting through my nerves. “I’ve come a very long way. Without Marcus’s help, actually.”

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Her laugh was the same one I remembered—a little too high-pitched, a little too smug.

“I’m sure you have. He only ever wanted the best for you, you know that, right?” Samantha asked.

I felt my chest tighten, memories clawing up to the surface.

I remembered the way Marcus would call me up after Samantha’s reports, her voice feeding his insecurities and paranoia.

I remembered the fear, the endless accusations.

“Maybe I did then, but I don’t now,” I said, my words coming out sharper than I intended.

Cole shifted closer, his fingers pressing comfortingly against me.

Samantha’s gaze flicked to Cole, something in her smile twisting.

“Well, if you ever want to chat, catch up on things, I’m sure Marcus would love to know you’re doing well. He worries, you know,” she said.

The subtle threat in her words wasn’t lost on me, and Cole heard it too; his jaw clenched visibly.

But this time, I wasn’t cowering. Not anymore.

“That’s funny,” I said, my voice steady, “because I don’t.”

Samantha’s smile faltered, and in that moment, I saw it—the flicker of frustration in her eyes.

I had changed, and I could see that realization land.

“Well,” she said finally, her voice tight, “I’ll let you two...enjoy your day.”

As she walked away, the tension in my body slowly ebbed.

I took a deep breath, looking down at my hands, which were still shaking slightly.

“Are you okay?” Cole’s voice was low and soft, and I could feel his gaze on me.

But when I glanced up, he wasn’t looking at me with pity or anger. Just...concern.

I nodded, my throat tight.

“I didn’t expect to see her again. Samantha was always Marcus’s...little messenger,” I said.

I continued, “She’d report everything I did, every time I spoke to someone he didn’t know about, every time I stayed out a little too late. She’d even make up stories just to make sure he kept me in line.”

Cole’s expression darkened, and I felt his arm tense around me.

“If I’d known...” he trailed off, frustration evident in his voice.

I placed my hand on his chest, trying to calm him.

“You didn’t know. And I don’t need you to fight my battles,” I reminded him.

I could tell he was struggling to respect that, and it made me realize something.

Unlike Marcus, Cole’s protectiveness didn’t feel like a cage. It wasn’t stifling or demanding, or some twisted means of possession.

When Cole watched over me, it didn’t come with rules or conditions or the fear of disappointing him.

His protectiveness wasn’t about control; it was about care.

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When he looked at me, I saw a strength that was there to shield, not to suffocate.

It was the first time I'd felt that kind of security without feeling diminished.

Maybe, just maybe, I was starting to understand that.

Cole wasn't trying to mold me into something or keep me within invisible walls.

He didn't need to own me to feel close, and he didn't need me to be smaller so he could feel strong.

For the first time, someone's strength felt like it was adding to mine, not taking from it.

I smiled, giving his hand a gentle squeeze.

"Thank you for not stepping in back there," I told him.

He looked down at me, a trace of regret in his eyes.

"I wanted to. I wanted to tell her exactly what I thought of her. But..." He hesitated, and I could tell he was trying to balance what he wanted with what I needed.

I nodded, appreciating his restraint more than I could put into words.

"I know you wanted to. But letting me handle it—that's exactly what I needed," I said.



His expression softened, and a small, relieved smile appeared on his face.

For once, I didn't feel stifled by someone else's presence. I felt...safe.

"Let's get out of here," he said, his voice gentle, almost playful.

"I know exactly where to go," I told him with a smile. "Let's go for a drive."

After we got out of Cole's car, I reached for hand and started leading him down the narrow path.

"There's a quiet spot by the lake I want to take you," I told him, glancing back to catch the curious spark in his eyes.

We wound through the trees in comfortable silence, my heart thudding.

The leaves crunched beneath our feet, and soon enough, we reached a little clearing that opened up onto a glassy, still lake.

It was a place I used to come to think when things felt overwhelming.

"This is...beautiful," Cole murmured, his eyes sweeping over the water, the tall pines framing the view, and the little wildflowers that dotted the edge of the lake.

"I didn't think you could find a place this peaceful," he added.

"It's special," I said softly. "I used to come here when I needed to get away. To clear my head."

We found a patch of grass near the edge of the lake and settled in.

I drew my knees to my chest, feeling the cool air wash over us. For a few moments, we sat in silence, letting the quiet envelop us.

I didn't realize until that moment how badly I needed this calm, and to my surprise, Cole seemed to feel it too.

His usually guarded, confident expression softened.

Cole exhaled deeply, almost as if he was letting go of something he'd been holding onto tightly.

"So, this is your quiet place," he said, running a hand over the grass. "Do you still come here often?"

I shook my head.

"Not as much as I should. I used to come here all the time when I first opened the boutique," I added, glancing around at the familiar surroundings.

I continued, "Back then, I was constantly second-guessing myself. Marcus always told me I couldn't handle things on my own, that I'd never make it by myself."

Cole's face tightened, and I immediately regretted bringing Marcus up. I wanted this moment to be about us, about something new.

But then Cole surprised me by reaching out, his hand covering mine in a gentle, steadying warmth.

"That must have been tough, feeling like you had to face everything alone," he said.

I nodded. "It really was. It took me a long time to rebuild my confidence, to believe that I could actually stand on my own."

Cole's gaze held mine, and for a moment, I felt the weight of his own thoughts hanging in the air between us.

"You know, most people see me as this...confident guy, I guess. Maybe even arrogant sometimes. They think I've got everything figured out."

He laughed, but it wasn't his usual easy laugh—it was low, almost self-deprecating.

“Isn’t that true, though?” I asked, only half-joking. “You’ve built this incredible company. You have a family who adores you. You’re...successful in every possible way.”

Cole smiled, but there was a sadness in it.

“It might look that way. But the truth is, there are a lot of expectations. Expectations that I carry every day, whether I want to or not.”

He glanced down at our intertwined hands, his thumb brushing softly over mine.

Cole continued, “I grew up watching my dad build the company from scratch. I was a kid when it started, but I saw the sacrifices he made. The late nights, the pressure, all for us.”

I listened quietly, something inside me softening as I watched him open up.

It was a side of him I hadn’t expected—a vulnerability beneath the confidence.

“And you feel like you have to live up to that?” I asked.

He nodded, looking out over the lake.

“More than that. It’s like...if I don’t succeed, I’ve failed him. Failed everything he worked for. My siblings—they look up to me. They rely on me. It’s not something I regret or resent, but it’s there. And sometimes...sometimes it’s heavy.”

He turned to me then, a wistful look in his eyes.

“I envy you, you know? That you could find a place like this to escape to. That you allowed yourself to need that,” he said.

My breath caught at the openness in his words. He wasn't just the smooth-talking, confident man I'd met.

Here, in this quiet moment, he was just...Cole.

"I guess we're more alike than I thought," I said softly. "Maybe we're both trying to escape something. Maybe we're both still learning that it's okay to want more than just...success or control."

His hand squeezed mine gently, and for a moment, we sat like that, connected and understanding each other in a way I hadn't thought possible.

Then, without thinking, I leaned closer, feeling the warmth of his shoulder against mine.

He turned to face me, and suddenly the tension that had been simmering between us was undeniable.

My heartbeat quickened as I met his gaze, his eyes holding mine with an intensity that sent a shiver down my spine.

Slowly, he lifted a hand to my cheek, brushing a stray hair back behind my ear.

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“Tori,” he murmured, his voice barely a whisper.

I closed my eyes, letting the moment stretch and expand around us.

His touch was gentle, steady, everything I hadn’t known I wanted.

Without another word, I leaned into him, closing the distance between us as his lips met mine.

The kiss was soft at first, tentative.

But it quickly deepened, turning into something more intense, more consuming.

His hand moved to the back of my neck, pulling me closer, and I felt my heart race in a way it hadn’t in years.

When we finally broke apart, breathless, he rested his forehead against mine, his thumb tracing gentle circles along my jaw.

“I’m glad you brought me here,” he murmured, his voice rough with emotion.

“Me too,” I whispered, feeling a strange, giddy warmth spreading through me.

For a while, we simply sat there, wrapped up in each other as the breeze rippled across the lake.

The world felt distant, as if it was just the two of us in this little pocket of peace.

It was a feeling I didn't want to let go of—a feeling that maybe, just maybe, there was something real here.

As the afternoon wore on, the sun dipped lower, casting a golden glow over the lake, and I felt the last of my walls start to crumble.

TORI

After spending afternoon by the lake with Cole, everything felt lighter.

For the first time in so long, I felt like I could actually breathe—like I was free from the weight of the past.

But that sense of calm was quickly shattered as soon as I stepped inside my apartment.

The silence that had greeted me when I walked in now seemed oppressive.

I kicked off my shoes, letting the quiet swallow me, and moved toward the kitchen.

But before I could even get there, my phone buzzed on the counter. The message flashed across the screen. Marcus.

I froze, staring at the number, my heart skipping a beat.

I hadn't heard from him since he confronted me at the boutique. I thought he was gone for good.

My stomach twisted into knots. I didn't even need to open the message to know what it would say.

It would be a manipulation, a guilt trip, maybe even an ultimatum.

It's what he always did.

I closed my eyes and tried to ignore it. But it was like a magnet, pulling me closer, urging me to open the message. I reluctantly picked up the phone.

Marcus: Samantha called me. I hope you're happy with him, Tori. But it's not too late to come back. You know where to find me.

I sucked in a breath, the words ringing in my head.

It wasn't just the message—it was the reminder of how easy it had been for Marcus to control me.



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To make me feel like I owed him everything. Even after all this time, he still believed he had that power over me.

I closed the phone with shaking hands, my stomach churning.

What was I supposed to do? Ignore it? Call him back and tell him to never contact me again?

I sat down on the edge of the couch, staring at the phone, a rush of conflicting emotions swirling inside me. Fear. Guilt. Anger.

After all these years, why couldn't he just leave me alone?

Why couldn't he let me make my own choices without thinking I still belonged to him?

I was still caught in that whirlwind of thoughts when my phone buzzed again. A second message from Marcus.

Marcus: I know you think you've found something better, Tori, but he's not the one who has your back. You'll learn that soon enough. Everyone leaves. You can't run from me forever.

My hands trembled as I read the words. The familiar, cold wave of fear washed over me, but this time, it didn't feel as suffocating.

His words were cruel, calculating.

It was clear he was trying to break me, to make me doubt myself, to convince me that leaving him was a mistake. But why now?

What really hurt the most was how much I'd let him affect me in the past.

I wasn't the same person I had been when we were together.

I had moved on, I reminded myself. I'd built a life for myself. I didn't him anymore.

But I couldn't help but feel a pang of doubt. What if he was right?

What if Cole left once he really got to know me—and all the flaws I came with?

A soft knock on the door interrupted my thoughts. I stood up quickly, still trying to steady my breathing, and opened it.

To my surprise, it wasn't Cole standing on the other side—it was Candy. A glance at my watch showed me how late it was.

Candy had probably closed the boutique and come right here. I let her in.

"Everything okay at the store, Candy?" I asked.

"Hey, Tori. Yeah, no problem with the store. I just thought I'd check in on you," she said. "You okay?"

I forced a smile. "Yeah, just fine. Thanks for watching the store. Cole and I had a great time."

Candy's eyes narrowed a little, and she studied me for a moment. "Looks like you could use some company, though."

I didn't have the energy to argue with her.

"Yeah, I guess I could use a little distraction," I said quietly, walking back to the couch.

Candy followed me, but before she could settle in, I glanced at the phone one more time.

The text from Marcus still lingered in my mind, but I was trying so hard not to let it consume me.

"So, I have some ideas for the boutique's next seasonal display," Candy began.

I realized she probably sensed something was up but decided to bring up work to distract me. She really was a good friend.

I nodded. "I have some ideas as well. Let's brainstorm together," I said.

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It was nice to have someone talk to me about normal things, to get my mind off of everything else.

And as we continued talking, I found myself easing into the conversation, forgetting for a moment about the message from Marcus.

But the nagging feeling lingered, like a shadow waiting to rear its ugly head.

After a while, Candy excused herself.

I saw her off, waving from the doorway, but as I closed it behind her, I felt that weight pressing down on me again.

The silence in the house seemed louder now, more deafening.

I sat down on the couch again, my thoughts swirling.

I really hated how even a single text from Marcus could still have such a powerful effect on me, despite all these years.

It was like a switch he could flip, triggering feelings I thought I'd buried long ago.

No matter how hard I tried to move on, his presence—his words—still had the ability to make me second-guess myself, to unravel the progress I'd worked so hard to make.

It wasn't just frustrating; it was infuriating.

I had Cole now, I reminded myself. The phone buzzed again. This time, I didn't bother looking at it. I had enough.

I turned off the phone and set it aside, burying my face in my hands for a moment.

I needed a plan. I couldn't allow Marcus to affect me like this anymore.

But at that moment, I wasn't sure what my next move should be. Would I reach out to Cole? Could I talk to him about this?

My mind raced, torn between a desperate need to share everything with him and the fear that he might overreact.

He was so overprotective sometimes.

Just look at how he hired a bodyguard without telling me. I'd told myself I wasn't going to let Marcus affect me like this.

But as much as I hated to admit it, I felt like I was teetering on the edge.

After that tense conversation during the drive to the lake house, I assumed Cole had already told Aden his services were no longer needed but what what if—no.

Cole's involvement wasn't necessary. In the first place, this was ridiculous.

One stupid text shouldn't send me into a panic.

Still, the unease lingered, tightening my chest like an invisible hand.

Then, a soft knock at the door broke my train of thought.

My heart skipped, the breath in my lungs freezing as panic coursed through me.

Maybe Candy forgot something? I was halfway to the door when a sudden chill rushed over me, and I stopped.

What if it wasn't Candy?

What if Marcus somehow tracked me down, found out where I was? What if he was standing outside right now?

My pulse thundered in my ears. I ran to my bedroom and took my gun out of the safe.

I stood there, unmoving, clutching my gun as a cold sweat started to bead on my forehead.

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A knot of dread curled in my stomach, my hand hovering over the door handle.

I swallowed hard, the lump in my throat suffocating.

I wasn't sure how long I stood there, frozen in place, heart pounding like a drum.

Then I took a breath, forced myself to focus, and looked through the peephole.

Nothing.

A jolt of confusion shot through me, mixed with a strange sense of relief. Had I imagined it?

I waited a few more moments, my gaze flicking from the door to the silence around me.

Slowly, I opened the door, feeling more foolish with each passing second.

It felt like I'd let my imagination get the best of me, like I was becoming paranoid for no reason. I tucked my gun away.

But as I stepped forward, my foot brushed against something soft.

Instantly, my heart rate spiked again, and I jerked back, instinctively pulling away.

I looked down, breath catching in my throat as my gaze locked onto the bouquet at my feet.

Black roses.

Marcus' favorite flowers.

My stomach dropped, nausea swirling up from deep within.

They were dark, almost too dark, with deep violet tips that gave them an eerie, almost sinister look.

My hands trembled as I reached down, wincing when the thorns pricked my fingers.

There was no note attached, but there didn't need to be. Marcus' message was clear—he wasn't done with me.

COLE/ TORI

COLE

I stood in my office, staring out over the city, but my mind was miles away, right outside Tori's place.

All morning, a nagging sense of unease had been gnawing at me, distracting me from the stack of work on my desk.

Tori was no fragile flower, but that didn't stop me from wanting to protect her.

And Marcus? That man made me wish I was the kind of person who didn't have to hold back.

When my phone buzzed, I snatched it up the second I saw the caller ID: Aden.



My hand tightened around the phone as I answered. “Aden. What’s going on?”

“Sir,” Aden’s voice was calm, but there was a tension in it. “I thought you’d want to know... Marcus showed up at Tori’s place last night. Left something on her doorstep.”

My jaw clenched. “What did he leave?”

“A bouquet of black roses. No note, but I think you can guess the message.”

I didn’t need Aden to tell me what it meant. Marcus also gave her black roses when he dropped by her boutique.

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He wanted her to know he was still lurking in the shadows, watching, reminding her she couldn't shake him off that easily.

Anger flared up in my chest, and I forced myself to stay calm. The last thing I wanted was to make a call that would push Tori away.

She'd made it clear that she valued her independence. But this? It felt like I was balancing on a knife's edge.

"Did she see them yet?" I asked, keeping my voice as steady as I could.

"Yes, she opened the door after he left and brought them inside," Aden said. "Her light's been on the entire night. I doubted she got any sleep."

I took a slow, deep breath, trying to keep the protective instinct in check.

I could picture her reaction already—the way her face would go pale, her lips pressed into a thin line.

She'd probably try to brush it off like it was nothing, but I knew better.

She'd been through hell because of that man, and the scars ran deep.

"Aden," I finally said, choosing each word carefully. "Keep a close eye on Tori. But don't do anything to spook her. She needs to feel in control of this."

Aden hesitated for a moment.

“Are you sure? I mean... if she knows about me, she could use the support right now. I could make it clear that I’m around.”

“No.” The word came out sharper than I intended. I swallowed, trying to calm myself.

I continued, “No. Tori assumed I called you off. Besides, she’s been doing her best to stand on her own, and she’s just started trusting me. The last thing I want is for her to feel like I’m managing her life. Marcus already did enough of that.”

There was another pause on the line, and I could tell Aden was processing.

“Understood, sir. I’ll stay close but keep my distance,” Aden said.

“Good. Let me know if anything changes,” I told him.

The call ended, but I didn’t feel any relief. If anything, my tension only deepened.

Every instinct screamed at me to grab my keys, get in my car, and drive over to her place.

I wanted to be there for her, to tell her I’d handle this so she didn’t have to. But that wouldn’t do either of us any good.

She didn’t need a man who would coddle her, especially not after everything she’d been through with Marcus.

I dragged a hand down my face and turned back to the window, looking over the city that stretched out beneath me.

All that wealth, all that power—it felt useless when I couldn’t do the one thing I

really wanted: protect her without crowding her.

I tapped my fingers on the desk, trying to wrestle with myself. She deserved her space, deserved to feel in control of her life again.

But damn, it was hard not to reach out, to pick up the phone and hear her voice, to know she was okay.

I wanted to tell her I'd handle it, that Marcus would never come close to her again. But Tori? She wouldn't want that.

She was proud, and I loved that about her.

And even if I couldn't protect her the way I wanted to, I could respect her enough to let her fight her own battles. For now.

She'd come to me if she needed me. And when she did, I'd be ready.

TORI

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The boutique hummed with the usual rhythm of a weekday—customers browsing racks.

The soft rustle of tissue paper as Candy wrapped purchases, the faint buzz of music playing in the background.

Normally, this environment calmed me.

I loved being surrounded by my work, seeing customers light up when they found something they loved. But today, I couldn't focus.

Candy noticed it too. She leaned across the counter as I sorted through receipts for the third time.

“You okay, boss?” she asked, her voice tinged with concern.

I forced a smile, trying to keep my hands steady.

“Yeah, just a bit tired. Didn't sleep well last night,” I admitted.

Candy tilted her head, unconvinced.

“You sure? You've been zoning out all day. If something's up, you know you can talk to me, right?” Candy asked.

Her kindness made me ache. The truth sat heavy on my chest, but I couldn't bring myself to unload it on her. Not yet.

Not when I hadn't even figured out how to deal with it myself.

"I'm fine," I lied, giving her what I hoped was a reassuring smile.

Candy hesitated but eventually nodded.

"Okay. But if you need me, I'm here," Candy said.

I nodded, grateful for her understanding but still unwilling to let her in.

She went back to helping a customer, and I let out a shaky breath.

My thoughts drifted to the black roses I'd thrown into the garbage bin last night.

The memory made my stomach twist. Marcus always had a way of getting under my skin, even now, years after I'd left him.

The fact that he knew where I lived sent a chill through me.

Had he hired a private investigator? It wouldn't be out of character for him.

Marcus thrived on control, and he'd never hesitated to cross lines to get what he wanted.

The bell above the door jingled, snapping me back to the present.

For a second, I panicked, thinking it was Marcus, strolling in with another bouquet of black roses, fake smile on his face.

It wasn't him. I let out a sigh of relief and plastered on a smile as a customer walked in.

The hours dragged, and by the time the last customer left, I realized I'd barely registered the entire day.

"Have a great night, Tori," Candy called as she grabbed her bag.

She paused at the door. "You've got another date with Cole tonight, don't you?"

I blinked, startled. The day had slipped through my fingers, and I hadn't even noticed. That wasn't like me.

"Yeah," I said, though my voice sounded distant even to my own ears. "Have a good night, Candy."

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“You too!” she said with a wave, disappearing into the evening.

As I locked up the boutique, the weight of the day pressed down on me.

The worry, the memories, the fear—all of it swirled together until I felt like I couldn’t breathe.

I turned the key and sighed, leaning against the door.

“Tori.”

The sound of his voice made me turn, relief washing over me like a wave.

Cole stood a few feet away, his tall frame bathed in the warm glow of the streetlights.

His smile was soft, his dark eyes warm as they met mine.

He closed the distance between us in a few strides and kissed me, his hands resting gently on my hips.

“Hey,” he murmured against my lips.

I didn’t realize how much I needed that until it happened. The tension in my chest loosened just enough for me to breathe.

“Hey,” I said back, my voice quieter than I intended.



“Ready for dinner?” Cole asked.

I nodded, grateful for the distraction he offered. “Yeah. Let’s go.”

We walked down the quiet street to one of my favorite restaurants, a cozy little place that served the best homemade pasta in town.

Inside, the soft glow of candles lit the tables, and the scent of garlic and fresh herbs filled the air.

We were seated in a corner booth, and for a moment, I allowed myself to relax.

But as the waiter brought our drinks, I noticed something off about Cole. His shoulders were a little too stiff, his jaw a little too tight.

He was trying to mask it, but I knew him well enough by now to see the signs.

“Are you okay?” I asked, leaning forward slightly.

He glanced at me, his expression softening.

“Yeah. Just a lot on my mind,” Cole admitted.

I hesitated, my thoughts circling back to the black roses. I’d been debating all day whether to tell him.

Part of me didn’t want to—Cole could be so protective, and I wasn’t sure I wanted to deal with his reaction.

But another part of me knew I couldn’t keep this to myself.

“I need to tell you something,” I said, my voice quiet.

He set his drink down, his full attention on me now. “What is it?”

I took a deep breath, my fingers twisting in my lap. “Last night, I found something on my doorstep. A bouquet of black roses.”

His entire demeanor shifted. His eyes darkened, and his jaw tightened. “Black roses?”

I nodded. “Marcus’s favorite. There wasn’t a note, but... I know it was him. He wanted me to know he hasn’t let go,” I said.

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Saying those words felt like a weight had been lifted off my chest.

Cole sat back, his hands curling into fists on the table.

For a moment, he didn't say anything, and the tension between us felt like a physical weight.

"I can't believe he'd go this far," he said finally, furrowing his brows.

I watched him silently for a moment, my chest tightening with the weight of what I needed to say.

His gaze was steady, patient, and impossibly understanding.

Yet, I hesitated, the words caught in my throat.

"Neither can I," I admitted finally, hating the way my voice trembled a little. "I thought I could handle Marcus myself, but maybe... I'm way over my head."

Cole leaned forward, his hands reaching across the table to cover mine.

His touch was warm, grounding me in a way I hadn't expected.

"It's okay to ask for help sometimes, Tori," he said softly.

I nodded, swallowing hard. "I know, but it's hard," I said. "When we first started dating, Marcus seemed like a different person."

Cole's brow furrowed, but he didn't interrupt.

"He was charming, attentive. He made me feel special." I paused, my fingers tightening around Cole's instinctively.

I continued, "But it didn't last. Once he felt like he had me, he started to change. Slowly at first. Little comments about what I wore, who I spent time with. At first, I thought he was just protective."

Cole's jaw tightened, his eyes darkening slightly. He looked terrifyingly still, as though he were trying to hold himself together.

For a moment, I worried he might explode, but then he looked at me, and the concern in his gaze shattered the illusion of anger.

"It wasn't protection," I continued. "He wanted to know where I was all the time, who I was talking to, what I was doing. He isolated me from everyone.."

Cole exhaled sharply, his grip on my hands tightening.

"I'm worried about your personal safety," he said, his voice low but intense.

"I know," I said, my voice barely audible.

"That's why I haven't dismissed Aden," he said carefully.

I blinked. The revelation hit me harder than I expected.

"You didn't dismiss him?"

"No," Cole admitted. "I want his eyes on you in case Marcus makes a move on you

again.”

He seemed to be watching for my reaction, his gaze searching mine as if bracing for an argument.

I expelled a shaky breath, my thoughts swirling.

Back when I found out about Aden, I’d been furious. I’d insisted I didn’t need a bodyguard, that I could handle myself.

But now? Now I wasn’t so sure.

In the past, I didn’t think Marcus would become such a danger to me.

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He was controlling, manipulative, and emotionally abusive, but I never imagined he'd escalate to something like this.

Yet here I was, haunted by black roses and the knowledge that Marcus knew exactly where I lived.

"I don't like the idea of having someone watching me," I said finally, my voice steady but quiet.

"But... I think you're right. Marcus has become unpredictable. For now, it's probably a good idea," I added.

Cole's expression softened, relief flickering in his eyes.

"Okay," he said. "But only for now."

I nodded, meeting his gaze. "Only for now."

"I know how much you value your independence," Cole added, his voice gentler now. "But this is just a temporary measure."

"Alright," I said. I passed, hesitated, "Thank you for hearing me out. For being patient."

"Of course." Cole smiled faintly, but there was still a tension in his posture. "Do you know why Marcus is pursuing you after all these years?"

I shook my head, a bitter laugh escaping me.

“I genuinely don’t. The last I heard, he had a girlfriend or fiancée. Maybe they broke up, and now he’s fixated on me again. It wouldn’t be the first time he’s rebounded by trying to crawl back into my life,” I said.

Cole’s expression darkened again, his protective instincts kicking in.

“He doesn’t get to do this to you, Tori. He doesn’t get to scare you,” Cole said.

“I’m not scared,” I said quickly, but the words felt hollow.

Cole raised an eyebrow, clearly unconvinced.

“Okay, maybe I am,” I admitted. “But I’m also angry. I rebuilt my life after him. I worked hard to get to where I am, and I won’t let him take that away from me.”

“He won’t,” Cole said firmly. “We’ll make sure of it.”

Cole sounded so confident.

Honestly, I felt safer knowing he was there. Marcus had already taken so much from me—I didn’t have to face this battle alone.

The waiter approached then, breaking the tension as he set our plates down.

The smell of fresh pasta and garlic filled the air, but my appetite had vanished.

I picked at my food, my thoughts spinning in circles.

Cole didn’t push me to eat or speak, and for that, I was grateful.

Instead, he reached across the table again, his fingers brushing against mine.

The small gesture was enough to ground me.

For the rest of the evening, we talked about lighter things—work, favorite books, childhood memories.

But even as I laughed at one of Cole's stories, the weight of Marcus's presence lingered in the back of my mind.

By the time we left the restaurant, the tension had eased slightly, but I knew this was far from over.

Marcus wasn't done with me but for the first time in years, I felt like I had someone in my corner, and that...wasn't too bad.



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COLE/ TORI

COLE

I entered the hotel ballroom with Tori by my side, my hand resting on the small of her back.

She looked stunning in her sleek black dress, so gorgeous, I wanted to have her all to myself.

But as much as I wanted to focus on her, on us, I also needed to play my role and do my job.

This wasn't just another business event. It was a battlefield where alliances were forged and broken over a glass of champagne.

Normally I was in my element in these kinds of events, but tonight, more than usual, I was on edge.

"Tori, you okay?" I murmured, leaning closer to her ear.

She glanced up at me with a soft smile, but there was a flicker of something in her eyes—nerves, maybe.

"I'm fine," she said, her voice steady but not entirely convincing.

I nodded, letting it slide for now. Whatever it was, I'd get it out of her later.

For now, I had to make an appearance and deal with the usual parade of handshakes and forced conversations.

We made our way through the crowd, stopping occasionally to exchange pleasantries with acquaintances and potential business partners.

Tori was charming as ever, her presence a quiet strength beside me. But then, as we turned a corner, I saw him.

Marcus.

He stood in a small cluster of people, his posture casual but calculated, like he was the center of gravity holding them in orbit.

And, to my immediate irritation, one of the people in his circle was Richard Graham—a key investor in one of my upcoming ventures.

My jaw clenched as cold anger coursed through me. Of all the places for him to show up, he'd chosen this one.

Tori stiffened beside me, her hand tightening slightly on my arm. She'd seen him too.

"Cole," she whispered, her voice barely audible.

"I see him," I said, my tone low and controlled.

She took a step back, her confidence wavering for the first time that evening. I turned to her, catching the unease in her eyes.

"You don't have to worry. He won't get anywhere near you," I told her firmly.

But as I turned back to Marcus, he glanced up—and his gaze landed directly on us.

His expression shifted, a slow smirk spreading across his face. It wasn't the friendly kind.

It was the kind meant to rattle, to remind us of the control he thought he still had.

"I'm going to handle this," I said firmly to Tori. "Stay here."

She opened her mouth to argue, but I was already moving toward Marcus, my steps measured but deliberate.

He saw me coming and casually excused himself from the group, meeting me halfway with a practiced air of nonchalance.

"Cole Valen," he said smoothly in his rented suit. "What a surprise."

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“Marcus,” I said, my tone ice-cold. “Didn’t realize you ran in these circles.”

He chuckled, glancing over his shoulder at Richard’s retreating form.

“I like to keep my options open. Networking, you know how it is,” Marcus said with a shrug.

“Networking?” I repeated, the word tasting bitter on my tongue. “Seems more like lurking to me.”

His shrugged, and he leaned in slightly, lowering his voice. “You always did have a way with words. But let’s not make a scene. Wouldn’t want your reputation to suffer, would we?”

My fists clenched at my sides, but I forced myself to stay calm. Giving him a reaction was exactly what he wanted.

“Cut the crap, Marcus,” I said, my voice low and lethal. “What are you doing here?”

He shrugged, feigning innocence.

“Just making connections. Surely, a man like you can appreciate that,” Marcus said.

My gaze hardened.

“Stay away from Tori. Whatever game you’re playing, it ends here,” I told him.

Marcus's expression darkened slightly, but he quickly masked it with a mockery of concern.

"Tori? Is she here? I had no idea," Marcus said with a shrug.

"Don't insult my intelligence," I snapped, my voice sharp enough to cut glass.

He tilted his head, studying me with a maddening calm.

"You're awfully protective of her. That's sweet. But you should know, Tori and I have a long history. Sometimes, the past has a way of coming back," Marcus said.

My blood boiled at the thinly veiled threat, but I refused to give him the satisfaction of seeing me lose control.

"The past is exactly where you belong, Marcus. Don't forget that," I told him.

His smile was still in place, but there was a flicker of something else in his eyes—something darker.

At that moment, all I wanted to do was punch his lights out. It took everything to hold back. To remain calm.

"You're a confident man, Cole. I'll give you that. But when confident men fall, well, that's always delicious to watch."

Before I could respond, he turned and walked away, disappearing back into the crowd like a shadow slipping into the night.

I stood there for a moment, my fists clenched, my jaw tight.

The urge to follow him and put an end to this once and for all was overwhelming, but I knew that wouldn't solve anything.

Marcus thrived on chaos, and I wouldn't play his game.

When I returned to Tori, she was standing where I'd left her, her expression a mixture of worry and determination.

"What did he say?" she asked, her voice trembling slightly.

"Nothing important," I said, though the lie felt heavy on my tongue.

She didn't believe me, of course. "Cole..."

I sighed, running a hand through my hair.

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“He’s trying to rattle us, Tori. That’s all. He doesn’t have any real power here,” I reminded her.

She looked down, her hands twisting nervously in front of her.

“He has enough power to show up here and make me feel like...” She trailed off, shaking her head.

“Like what?” I asked gently, stepping closer.

“Like I’m still under his thumb,” she admitted, her voice barely above a whisper.

I reached for her hands, stilling their movement.

“You’re not,” I said firmly. “He doesn’t control you anymore. He’s just a coward trying to act like he’s bigger than he is.”

She looked up at me then, her eyes shining with unshed tears. “But what if he does something?—”

“He won’t,” I interrupted, my voice steady. “Not as long as I’m here.”

For a moment, she just stared at me, her vulnerability laid bare. And in that moment, I made a silent vow: I wouldn’t let Marcus win.

“We should leave,” I said softly. “You’ve had enough of this for one night.”

Tori hesitated but eventually nodded, allowing me to guide her toward the exit.

As we stepped out into the cool night air, I tightened my arm around her, determined to be what she needed.

Marcus had gone too far. He was soon going to learn that no one threatened the woman I loved and walked away unscathed.

TORI

Cole's hand on my back as we left the hotel was the only thing keeping me from falling apart.

The world around me felt distant and distorted, like I was moving underwater, every sound muffled, every light too sharp.

Seeing Marcus here of all places—Cole's event, his world—was more than just rattling. It was terrifying.

It confirmed how unhinged he'd become, that he'd stalk me all the way to the city, manipulating his way into a space where he didn't belong.

I hadn't even realized I was trembling until we slid into the back of Cole's sleek black car, and the merciful silence wrapped around me.

The constant buzz of noise from the ballroom, the weight of eyes, the subtle judgment in every glance—it all fell away the moment the door closed behind us.

Cole shifted closer, his hand moving in soothing circles on my back.

"Tori," he said gently, his voice pulling me out of my daze. "Did something happen



while I was talking to Marcus?”

Perspective. I needed perspective. I closed my eyes for a moment, taking a deep breath to ground myself.

“I went to the ladies’ room,” I started, my voice quieter than I intended. “I needed a moment to reorient myself after...everything. I bumped into Samantha there.”

Cole’s hand paused for just a fraction of a second before continuing its comforting motion.

“Samantha?” he asked, his tone calm, though I could hear the icy undertone beneath.

“She’s apparently Marcus’ date,” I said, the words tasting bitter in my mouth. “Her latest husband is some prominent investor—probably how Marcus managed to get an invite to your party.”

Cole’s jaw tightened, but he didn’t interrupt.

He was always so good at that—letting me speak, giving me the space to unravel my thoughts.

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“I decided to outright ask her why Marcus is so intent on inserting himself back into my life,” I continued, my voice growing steadier. “She fed me some nonsense about him ‘hurting’ because his fiancée Fiona left him. And now, suddenly, he’s realized I’m the ‘perfect woman’ for him after all.”

The sarcasm in my voice was sharp enough to cut, but Cole didn’t flinch.

His fingers tensed slightly against my back, though, and I knew he was holding himself in check.

“She said—” My breath hitched, and I forced myself to go on. “She said I should stop acting like a spoiled child and give him another chance. That men like Marcus are ‘one in a million.’”

Cole’s hand stilled completely, and when he spoke, his voice was dangerously quiet. “What did you say to her?”

I managed a weak smile. “I told her, ‘Then why don’t you take him?’ And I walked away.”

Cole let out a breath that was part laugh, part growl, and pulled me closer, his arm wrapping securely around me.

I didn’t resist—I couldn’t.

The steady beat of his heart against my cheek was grounding, calming.

For a moment, I let myself lean into him, let the exhaustion of the evening crash over me.

I didn't want to go back to Oakridge, to my apartment, to the oppressive silence and the constant replay of Marcus' face in my mind.

I didn't want to be alone.

"What do you need?" Cole murmured, his voice soft, almost tender.

I hesitated, afraid of sounding too needy, too vulnerable. But the words slipped out before I could stop them. "You."

The tension in his posture eased, and he tilted his head to look at me.

"Come back to my place," he suggested. "Spend the night there."

I nodded, the thought of being anywhere else unbearable.

The car ride to Cole's apartment was quiet, the kind of silence that wasn't heavy or awkward but shared.

I leaned against him, his arm around my shoulders, and closed my eyes for a moment.

The soft hum of the car, the warmth of his body, and the quiet strength in his presence—it all made me feel safer than I had in weeks.

When we arrived, the doorman cheerfully greeted Cole and gave me a polite nod.

We stepped into the elevator, and I felt a flicker of anxiety bubble up again, thinking of Marcus, of Samantha's smug words.

Cole must have sensed it because he reached for my hand, intertwining his fingers with mine.

“I’ve got you,” he said simply, and I nodded, swallowing back the lump in my throat.

His apartment was as sleek and sophisticated, all clean lines and warm tones.

Tonight, it felt more like a sanctuary than just a luxurious space. Cole guided me to the couch, pulling me down beside him.

“You don’t have to talk about it anymore if you don’t want to,” he said softly, brushing a stray strand of hair from my face.

I shook my head.

“I needed to tell you, to tell someone,” I said.

He nodded, his expression unreadable, but his hand found mine again, squeezing gently.

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We sat there for a while, just holding onto each other.

It was the kind of intimacy I hadn't realized I craved—the quiet connection, the reassurance that I wasn't alone in this.

Eventually, Cole stood, holding out his hand.

“Come on,” he said. “You need to sleep.”

I followed him to the bedroom, too tired to argue.

The room was as elegant as the rest of the apartment, but the bed was what drew my attention—a large, inviting space that seemed to promise rest.

Cole handed me one of his shirts to sleep in, and I smiled at the thoughtfulness of it.

As I changed in the adjoining bathroom, I caught a glimpse of myself in the mirror—tired eyes, faint traces of makeup smudged from the long evening.

But there was something else, too. A flicker of hope, of reassurance, I hadn't felt in a long time.

When I climbed into bed, Cole was already there, his arms open in invitation.

I slid in beside him, nestling against his side. His warmth was comforting, his steady breathing a lullaby.

“Thank you for letting me stay over,” I whispered, my voice barely audible.

“You’re always welcome here, Tori,” he said.

He kissed the top of my head, and for the first time in what felt like forever, I let myself relax completely.

The weight of the evening, of Marcus’ presence, of Samantha’s words—it all began to fade as I drifted off to sleep, safe in Cole’s arms.

TORI

The drive back to Oakridge was quiet, but it wasn’t the kind of comfortable silence I had started to enjoy with Cole.

Instead, it was tense, fraught with the weight of everything unsaid. Last night had been... something.

Waking up in his arms had felt safe, almost too safe, like I could finally let my guard down. But that was the problem, wasn’t it?

Safety wasn’t a guarantee in my life anymore, not with Marcus looming in the background like a shadow I couldn’t shake.

Cole’s hand was on the wheel, his gaze focused on the road ahead, but I could tell something was on his mind.

His jaw was set, his knuckles white against the leather steering wheel.

I wanted to ask him what was wrong, but I also wasn’t ready for another heavy conversation. Not yet.

When we pulled into my apartment complex, my stomach twisted.

It wasn't just the unease of coming back to reality after a night of peace—it was something more. Something felt off.

And then I saw him.

Aden stood near my door, a toolbelt slung low on his hips and a ladder propped against the wall.

He was drilling something into the frame, and when he spotted the car, he waved casually, like he belonged here.

“What the hell is this?” I asked, whipping around to face Cole.

He sighed but didn't look at me. Instead, he parked the car and killed the engine.

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“It’s a security system. Aden’s installing it,” Cole explained.

“You mean you are installing it,” I snapped, unbuckling my seatbelt and shoving the door open.

I stormed toward my apartment, my heart pounding with a mix of anger and something I couldn’t quite name—betrayal, maybe.

“Tori,” Cole called after me, his voice firm but calm. That only made me angrier.

I reached Aden just as he finished securing what looked like a camera above my door.

“What is this?” I demanded, gesturing at the equipment.

Aden glanced at Cole, clearly uncomfortable. “Uh, maybe I should?—”

“Go,” I cut in. “Leave.”

He looked at Cole again, who nodded.

“I’ll finish up later,” Aden said before grabbing his tools and walking off, leaving me and Cole alone in the hallway.

I turned to Cole, my arms crossed. “You had no right to do this.”

“I had every right,” he countered, his tone cool and measured. “Marcus is escalating, Tori—approaching you at the boutique, then leaving roses at your door. What’s



next?”

I flinched, my anger momentarily giving way to a flicker of fear. But I quickly pushed it aside.

“You promised to finally be honest with me during the drive to the lake house, remember? I told you I didn’t want a bodyguard, and I definitely didn’t ask for a security system.”

“This isn’t about what you want,” he said, his voice rising just enough to make me take a step back.

He took a deep breath, running a hand through his hair before continuing, softer this time. “This is about what you need.”

“What I need,” I repeated, laughing bitterly. “You think you know what’s best for me?”

“I think you’re underestimating how dangerous Marcus can be,” he shot back. “And I’m not willing to sit back and do nothing while he makes your life hell.”

“You think I don’t know how dangerous he is?” My voice cracked, and I hated the way it made me feel—weak, exposed. “I lived with him, Cole. I survived him. You don’t think I can handle myself?”

His eyes softened, and for a moment, I thought he might back down. But then he said, “I don’t think you should have to handle this alone.”

I shook my head, my chest tightening. “That’s not your call to make.”

He stepped closer, his presence overwhelming but not unwelcome.

“It is when I care about you, Tori. Don’t you get that? I’m not trying to control you—I’m trying to protect you,” Cole said.

“Protect me from what? From Marcus? Or from myself?”

The words were out before I could stop them, and the look on his face made me instantly regret them.

“This isn’t about control,” he said quietly, his voice trembling with emotion. “This is about me not losing you.”

I froze, his words hanging heavy in the air between us. “What?”

He took another step closer, his hands reaching out but stopping just short of touching me.

“Do you have any idea what it felt like to know he was here, that he could have been watching you? I’ve been through a lot in my life, Tori, but the thought of something happening to you...” He trailed off, his jaw tightening as he fought to keep his composure. “I can’t let that happen.”

The vulnerability in his voice cut through my anger, but it didn’t erase it.

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“You can’t just make decisions for me, Cole. That’s not how this works,” I reminded him.

He nodded slowly, his gaze dropping to the floor.

“I know. And I’m sorry if it feels like I overstepped. But I’d rather you be pissed at me and safe than...” He didn’t finish the sentence, but he didn’t need to.

I looked away, my emotions swirling into a chaotic mess.

Part of me wanted to scream at him, to push him away for daring to think he knew what was best for me.

But another part of me—the part that was tired, scared, and utterly exhausted—wanted to collapse into his arms and let him take care of everything.

“I don’t know if I can do this,” I whispered, my voice barely audible.

He stepped closer, his hands finally resting on my arms, grounding me. “Do what?”

“This.” I gestured between us, my throat tightening. “You. Me. Us. I don’t know if I can carry all this baggage into a relationship.”

His grip on my arms tightened just slightly, his warmth seeping into me.

“You don’t have to carry it alone, Tori. That’s the whole point,” Cole said.

I swallowed hard, the weight of his words pressing down on me.

“I need some air,” I said, stepping back.

He let me go, his hands falling to his sides.

“Take all the time you need,” he said, his voice steady but tinged with sadness.

I nodded, turning and walking away, my mind racing. I didn’t know if I was running from him or from myself.

I paced the small confines of my apartment, my hands trembling as I replayed the argument with Cole in my head.

His words, his tone—cool and measured, but beneath it, a raw protectiveness that terrified me.

It wasn’t the same as Marcus’s control. I knew that.

Deep down, I knew Cole’s actions came from a place of care, not dominance. But it didn’t matter. Not right now.

My chest felt tight, suffocating, and the walls of the apartment seemed to close in around me.

I perched on the edge of my couch, staring at the blank wall in front of me.

Could I really do this? Could I genuinely let someone in after everything I’d been through?

Marcus had been the master of manipulation, chipping away at my independence bit

by bit until I wasn't even sure who I was anymore.

And now, here I was, questioning if I had the strength to hold my ground with Cole—or if I even wanted to.

Cole wasn't Marcus.

I repeated the mantra in my head, over and over, but my heart didn't seem to believe it.

Marcus's shadow loomed large, a ghost I couldn't quite exorcise.

And as much as I hated to admit it, Cole's protective gestures—hiring Aden, installing the security system without my consent—brought back old wounds I thought had healed.

I let out a shaky breath and grabbed my phone, staring at the message thread with Cole. We had plans tonight.

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A dinner he'd been talking about all week, something he'd clearly put thought into.

But after everything that had happened today, I couldn't face him.

I couldn't deal with his steady gaze, his quiet intensity, or the way he looked at me like I was the most important person in his world.

Not when I felt like I was about to fall apart.

My thumbs hovered over the screen before I finally typed out a message.

Tori:I think I need some time tonight to myself. Sorry about canceling last minute. I'll talk to you later.

I hit send before I could overthink it, my stomach twisting with guilt as the message disappeared into cyberspace.

Cole would be disappointed—I knew that. And maybe even hurt. But I needed space to sort through this mess in my head.

The phone buzzed almost immediately, his reply lighting up the screen.

Cole:I understand. Take the time you need. Just... let me know if you're okay, Tori.

Tears burned my eyes, but I blinked them back.

He wasn't pressuring me, wasn't demanding answers or insisting on talking things

through.

He was giving me exactly what I'd asked for—space. But instead of relief, all I felt was an ache in my chest.

The hours dragged as the evening crept in.

I tried distracting myself—cleaning, organizing my closet, even attempting to read a book. But nothing worked.

My thoughts kept circling back to Cole, to the look on his face when I walked away earlier.

He had been frustrated, yes, but there had been something else there too. Vulnerability.

For all his confidence and self-assuredness, Cole Valen wasn't infallible.

And the more I thought about it, the more I realized he was probably wrestling with his own demons just as much as I was.

Marcus's voice echoed in my mind, unbidden.

You're impossible to love, Tori. Too high-maintenance. Too fragile. No one will ever put up with you the way I do.

I squeezed my eyes shut, willing the memory away.

But it clung to me like a second skin, a reminder of every insecurity Marcus had planted and nurtured over the years.

And now, those same insecurities whispered that maybe Cole would realize I wasn't worth the effort.

That I'd push him away too many times, and he'd give up on me.

Was I ready for this? To let someone in, knowing I might ruin everything?

The sun had long since set by the time I finally stepped out onto my balcony.

The cool night air brushed against my skin, and I hugged my arms around myself, staring out at the quiet street below.

My phone sat on the table beside me, its screen dark and unassuming.

A part of me wanted to call him, to tell him I was sorry for canceling, that I wanted him here.



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But another part of me—the louder part—said I needed to figure this out on my own.

Cole had been patient. More patient than I probably deserved.

But how long would that patience last? And what would happen if he decided I was too much?

The thought sent a pang through my chest, and I inhaled sharply, gripping the balcony railing for support.

I was overthinking everything—I knew that. But knowing didn't make it any easier to stop.

Meanwhile, Cole's message replayed in my mind, over and over: Just... let me know if you're okay, Tori.

The worry in those words, the quiet plea—it was so different from Marcus, who never would have cared about my wellbeing unless it somehow affected his own.

Cole cared. He genuinely cared.

And that scared me more than anything, because it meant I had something to lose.

I sat down on the balcony chair, pulling my knees up to my chest.

I thought about the way Cole had looked at me earlier, his eyes searching mine for something—reassurance, maybe? Understanding?

And I wondered if I'd given him any of that. Or if I'd only pushed him further away.

Hours passed, and I still hadn't moved. The night grew colder, and I wrapped a blanket around myself, staring out at the stars.

My mind was a tangled mess of doubts and fears, and no matter how hard I tried, I couldn't seem to untangle it.

I thought about Marcus, about the control he'd had over me for so long.

About how I'd fought to reclaim my independence, only to feel like I was losing it again now.

But this was different—wasn't it? Cole wasn't trying to control me. He was trying to protect me. And yet, it still felt like too much.

I reached for my phone, my fingers hovering over the screen as I debated whether to text him again.

I didn't know what I'd say, but I felt an overwhelming urge to connect with him, even if just for a moment.

But in the end, I set the phone down, my heart heavy with indecision.

The night stretched on, and sleep remained elusive.

My thoughts churned, a relentless storm of what-ifs and maybes.

And somewhere in the middle of it all, I realized something: I didn't want to push him away.

But I didn't know how to let him in, either.

COLE/ TORI

COLE

I couldn't just sit there.

The minutes stretched into hours, and every second felt like a lifetime. Tori's message had been clear: she needed space.

But giving her that space felt like standing on the edge of a cliff, knowing the ground beneath me was crumbling.

I paced my apartment, running a hand through my hair for what felt like the hundredth time.

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My phone sat on the counter, mocking me with its silence.

She hadn't messaged again, hadn't given me any reassurance that she was okay. And it was driving me insane.

The fear clawed at me—fear that I'd pushed too far, that I'd become the very thing she was trying to escape.

The last thing I wanted was to remind her of Marcus, to make her feel trapped.

But wasn't that exactly what I'd done by installing the security system without asking her?

I thought I was protecting her. Maybe I was. But at what cost?

The thought made me pause mid-step. Tori wasn't Marcus's victim anymore.

She was strong, fiercely independent, and I respected that about her. Loved that about her.

But I'd let my own fear—my own desperation to keep her safe—cloud my judgment.

I grabbed my keys before I could second-guess myself.

The drive to Oakridge felt longer than it was, the quiet hum of the car doing nothing to drown out my thoughts.

I wasn't sure what I was going to say when I got there, only that I had to see her. I had to make things right.

Her apartment building came into view, and I parked across the street, taking a deep breath before stepping out.

The cool night air hit me, but it did little to calm my nerves. I hesitated for a moment, staring up at the window I knew was hers.

She might not even open the door, but I had to try.

I knocked lightly, the sound echoing in the stillness of the hallway. For a moment, there was nothing. No sound, no movement.

Then I heard the faint shuffle of footsteps on the other side, and the door cracked open.

Tori's face appeared, her expression guarded. She was wearing an oversized sweatshirt, her hair pulled back into a messy bun.

She looked tired, her eyes slightly red, as if she'd been crying.

"Cole," she said, her voice barely above a whisper. "What are you doing here?"

"I needed to see you," I admitted, my voice steady despite the storm raging inside me.

"I couldn't just sit there, wondering if you were okay."

She hesitated, her fingers gripping the edge of the door.

For a moment, I thought she might tell me to leave. But then she stepped back, opening the door wider.

“Come in,” she said softly.

Her apartment was warm and cozy, a stark contrast to the tension hanging between us.

She gestured for me to sit, but I stayed standing, unable to shake the restless energy coursing through me.

“Tori,” I started, meeting her eyes. “I know I messed up. I shouldn’t have gone behind your back with the security system. I thought I was helping, but I realize now that I was crossing a line.”

She folded her arms across her chest, her expression unreadable.

“I just... I can’t stand the thought of something happening to you,” I continued, my voice thick with emotion. “But if you need me to back off, to give you space, I will. I’ll do whatever you need.”

Her eyes softened, and she let out a shaky breath.

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“Cole... it’s not that I don’t appreciate what you’re trying to do. It’s just... I’ve spent so long trying to prove to myself that I can stand on my own two feet. That I don’t need someone else to fight my battles for me,” she said.

“I know,” I said, stepping closer. “And I don’t want to take that from you. But I also can’t sit back and do nothing when I know Marcus is still out there, still trying to manipulate you.”

Her gaze dropped to the floor, and for a moment, the silence was deafening.

“I’m scared, Cole,” she admitted finally, her voice barely audible. “I’m scared of letting someone in again. Of losing myself in the process.”

I reached out, hesitating for a moment before gently taking her hand.

“You won’t lose yourself with me, Tori. I don’t want to change who you are or take anything from you. I just want to be here for you. To stand beside you, not in front of you,” I told her.

Her eyes met mine, and I saw the vulnerability there, the fear she was trying so hard to hide.

“I’m scared too,” I confessed, my voice raw. “I’m scared of losing you. Of not being enough to protect you. But I know I can’t force you to trust me. All I can do is be here, however you need me to be.”

Tori let out a shaky laugh, wiping at her eyes.

“You always know exactly what to say, don’t you?” Tori asked.

“Not always,” I said with a small smile. “I’m just trying to be honest.”

She looked at me for a long moment, as if trying to decide something. Then she gave a small nod.

“Okay,” she said. “Let’s try this again.”

“Try what again?”

“Us,” she said simply. “I don’t want to push you away, Cole. I’m just... trying to figure out how to let you in without losing myself in the process.”

I felt a weight lift off my chest, and I squeezed her hand gently.

“We’ll figure it out together. No rush, no pressure. Just... one step at a time,” I said.

She smiled then, a real, genuine smile, and it was like the sun breaking through the clouds.

“Stay?” she asked softly, her eyes searching mine.

“Yes,” I said without hesitation. “I’d like that.”

We spent the rest of the evening talking, the tension slowly giving way to something softer, more hopeful.

She opened up about her fears, about the scars Marcus had left behind.

And I shared my own—my fear of not being enough, of losing her before we’d even



had a chance to really begin.

By the time we moved to the couch, the barriers between us felt smaller, less daunting.

She curled up beside me, her head resting on my shoulder, and I wrapped an arm around her, holding her close.

For the first time in what felt like days, I felt a flicker of hope.

We still had a long way to go, but in that moment, I knew we'd find our way.

TORI

The morning light filtered through the curtains, casting a soft golden glow across the room.

For the first time in days, I felt like I could breathe. I blinked, my gaze landing on Cole beside me.

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His eyes were closed, his chest rising and falling in a steady rhythm, and I let myself linger on the peacefulness of his expression.

Last night had been a turning point.

We'd laid everything bare—our fears, our hopes, and the shaky path forward. It wasn't perfect, but it was honest.

Cole stirred, his hand sliding across the bed to rest lightly on my hip.

"You're staring," he murmured, his voice rough with sleep.

I smiled, caught in the act. "Maybe."

His eyes opened, those deep green irises locking onto mine, and for a moment, the world outside didn't exist.

"Good morning," he said, his voice soft but warm.

"Good morning," I replied, my voice just as gentle.

For a moment, we lay there in silence, the weight of the past few days hanging between us but feeling lighter somehow.

"I've been thinking," I said finally, tracing a finger along the edge of the blanket.  
"About us."

Cole propped himself up on one elbow, his gaze sharpening. “And?”

“I think... I’ve been so afraid of repeating the past that I didn’t see how different you are from him,” I admitted.

I continued, “You don’t try to control me, Cole. You try to protect me, and I’ve been so scared that I couldn’t see the difference.”

His jaw tightened, and he reached out to brush a strand of hair from my face.

“Tori, I would never want to take anything away from you. I know I’ve made mistakes, but—” Cole began.

“I know,” I interrupted, placing a hand on his chest. “And I’m not saying I’m not still scared. But I trust you, Cole. I want to figure this out... together.”

His expression softened, and the relief in his eyes was almost enough to bring tears to mine.

“You don’t know how much it means to hear you say that,” he told me.

“I think I do,” I said with a small smile.

The morning unfolded naturally, an unspoken agreement between us to let the day be easy, free from heavy conversations.

After we got dressed, I found myself drawn to the kitchen, an idea forming in my mind.

“Are you hungry?” I asked.

I glanced over my shoulder at Cole, who was leaning against the counter, watching me with that signature intensity.

“Starving,” he replied with a grin.

I pulled out a carton of eggs, a loaf of bread, and a few other ingredients.

Cooking had always been a way for me to clear my head, to ground myself.

Cole stepped closer, his presence a steady warmth at my back. “Need any help?”

“Are you offering?” I teased, cracking an egg into a bowl.

He chuckled. “I can manage toast. Maybe.”

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“Then you’re on toast duty,” I said, handing him the loaf of bread.

It was surprisingly easy, the two of us moving around the kitchen like we’d done it a hundred times before.

He wasn’t half-bad at toasting bread, though he did burn the first slice.

“Better stick to boardrooms,” I teased, earning a mock glare.

By the time we sat down to eat, the air between us felt lighter, almost playful.

I couldn’t remember the last time I’d felt this... normal.

After breakfast, Cole surprised me by offering to come to the boutique with me.

“Are you sure?” I asked, raising an eyebrow. “It’s not exactly your scene.”

He shrugged. “I want to spend the day with you. Besides, I think you could use an extra set of hands.”

I couldn’t argue with that.

At the boutique, Candy’s eyes widened slightly when she saw Cole walk in behind me.

She shot me a knowing look, but to her credit, she didn’t say anything.

Cole was surprisingly helpful, carrying boxes of new inventory and even assisting a few customers when things got busy.

At one point, I caught him talking to an older woman about the scarves we'd just gotten in stock.

The sight of him holding up a bright pink scarf with a serious expression was enough to make me laugh out loud.

"What?" he asked, turning to me with a grin.

"Nothing," I said, shaking my head. "You're just full of surprises."

As the day wore on, I found myself glancing at Cole more often than I probably should have.

There was something grounding about having him there, like he was a steady anchor in the chaos of my life.

When the last customer left and Candy locked up for the day, she gave me a sly smile.

"He's a keeper," Candy said in a whisper, nodding toward Cole.

I felt my cheeks heat up but didn't deny it.

The drive back to my apartment was quiet, but it wasn't the tense silence of before.

It was comfortable, the kind of silence that didn't need to be filled.

When we pulled up outside, Cole turned to me, his expression serious.

“I meant what I said this morning,” he said. “I’m in this with you, Tori. Whatever it takes.”

I reached out, taking his hand in mine.

“I know. And I’m starting to believe that maybe I don’t have to face everything alone,” I told him.

He brought my hand to his lips, pressing a kiss to my knuckles.

“You never do,” Cole said.

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That night, as I lay in bed, I felt a strange sense of peace.

The shadow of Marcus still loomed, but it didn't feel as suffocating as it had before.

Cole wasn't a perfect man, but he wasn't Marcus. He didn't diminish my strength—he brought it out.

TORI

I looked at my laptop and sighed. The shop had been closed for hours.

I should've been home by now, curled up on the sofa with a glass of wine, sitting next to Cole.

He'd headed straight to my place after work and offered to cook me a late-night dinner.

But I'd lost track of time inventorying shipments and prepping for next week's display.

I really needed to finish up here soon.

A muffled thud echoed from the backroom, sharp and out of place. My fingers froze on the keyboard.

Every hair on my body stood on end, and the silence that followed felt deafening.



I reached for my phone, my heart pounding in my chest as I typed out a quick message to Cole.

Tori:I think someone's in the backroom. Don't know who. Sending this just in case.

I pressed send and stared at the screen, willing a reply. It came seconds later.

Cole:Leave the shop. Now.

The order was clear, but my feet felt glued to the floor.

Leaving meant walking past the backroom door, and I wasn't sure I had the nerve to do it.

Instead, I grabbed the closest thing I could find—a metal paperweight shaped like a bird—and gripped it tightly in my hand.

At that moment, I wished I had my gun, but I had left it at home.

The air felt colder as I crept toward the backroom.

The faint scent of cleaning supplies mixed with something unfamiliar, something sharper.

Sweat slicked my palms as I nudged the door open, the paperweight held high.

The room was dimly lit, and at first, I didn't see him. But then he stepped forward, and my breath caught in my throat.

“Hello, Tori.”

Marcus.

For a moment, all I could do was stare.

He looked the same—too put-together for this kind of chaos, his tailored shirt crisp and his hair neatly styled.

But there was a wildness in his eyes, a gleam that made my stomach churn.

“How did you get in here?” My voice was steadier than I felt.

He smiled, slow and smug, and held up a key. A very familiar key.

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“Candy’s key,” he said. “She’s such a sweet girl. Trusting, too. She didn’t even notice when I slipped something into her drink at the bar.”

My blood ran cold.

“What did you do to her?” I demanded.

“Relax,” he said, waving me off. “She’s just unconscious. She’ll wake up with a headache, but no worse for wear. I didn’t hurt her, Tori. I’m not a monster.”

Not a monster? He had just admitted to drugging my friend and breaking into my shop. My grip on the paperweight tightened.

“This is insane,” I said, taking a small step back. “You need to leave.”

“I’m not leaving without you,” he said, his voice calm, almost pleasant.

Marcus continued, “I’ve been patient, Tori. I gave you time to come to your senses, to see that we belong together. But you’ve been stubborn. You’ve been ignoring me, pretending I don’t exist.”

“Because we don’t belong together, Marcus,” I said, my voice rising. “We never did.”

His jaw tightened, and for the first time, I saw a crack in his composure.

“That’s where you’re wrong. You’re the one, Tori. I didn’t see it before, but I do now. After what happened with Fiona...” He trailed off, shaking his head.

Marcus continued, “She left me, you know. She said I was too controlling, but she didn’t understand me. Not the way you do.”

“That’s because there’s nothing to understand,” I shot back. “You don’t love me, Marcus. You just want control.”

His eyes darkened, and before I could react, he reached into his jacket and pulled out a gun.

“My father’s,” he said, almost reverently. “He used it to protect his family. That’s all I want, Tori. To protect what’s mine.”

I froze, my heart slamming against my ribs.

This wasn’t just a desperate ex-boyfriend anymore. This was a man unhinged, holding a loaded weapon.

“Put the gun down,” I said, forcing my voice to stay calm. “You don’t want to do this, Marcus.”

“Oh, but I do,” he said, taking a step closer. “Because you’ve left me no choice. You’re coming with me, Tori. We’re going to start over, away from all this. I’ve planned everything.”

My mind raced. I needed to keep him talking, to buy time for Cole—or anyone—to get here.

“And if I say no?” I asked, my voice trembling despite my efforts to sound strong.

He smiled again, but it didn’t reach his eyes.

“You won’t. Because you’re smarter than that. You know I’m the only one who can keep you safe. That boyfriend of yours? He can’t protect you. He doesn’t understand you like I do,” Marcus said.

The paperweight felt heavy in my hand, but I knew better than to make a move. Not yet.

“You think threatening me with a gun is going to make me love you?” I asked, my voice dripping with contempt. “You’re delusional.”

His expression flickered, a flash of anger breaking through the mask.

“I don’t need your love, Tori. Not right now. I just need your obedience,” Marcus said.

The sound of footsteps outside the shop made us both freeze.

Marcus’s head snapped toward the door, and in that moment of distraction, I acted.

I swung the paperweight with all my strength, aiming for his wrist.

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It connected with a sickening crack, and the gun clattered to the floor.

“Bitch!” he shouted, clutching his wrist.

I didn’t wait for him to recover.

I turned and ran, throwing open the backroom door just as Cole burst into the shop, his face a mask of fury.

“Tori!”

“Marcus—he’s armed!” I shouted, pointing behind me.

Cole didn’t hesitate. He moved like a force of nature, barreling past me with a speed and ferocity that left no room for doubt.

He slammed into Marcus with the full weight of his body, sending him crashing into the wall.

The impact rattled the shelves, scattering boxes and supplies onto the floor.

Marcus let out a guttural shout as he twisted, shoving Cole back.

The revolver lay just a few feet away, gleaming under the dim light, and Marcus’s gaze darted toward it with frantic desperation.

“Oh no, you don’t,” Cole growled, lunging to block him.

Marcus swung wildly, his fist connecting with Cole's ribs.

The sound of the hit was a dull thud, and Cole staggered back a step, but he didn't fall.

Instead, he retaliated with a brutal right hook that snapped Marcus's head to the side.

"You think you can waltz in here and threaten her?" Cole snarled, his voice low and dangerous.

Marcus stumbled but recovered quickly, lunging forward with surprising speed.

He tackled Cole around the waist, and they both went crashing to the floor.

I let out a strangled cry, torn between fear and the instinct to help, but I knew I couldn't get between them.

Not with Marcus so unhinged.

They rolled across the floor, grappling for control.

Marcus managed to get on top, his hands scrambling for Cole's throat, but Cole twisted beneath him, using his legs to flip them over.

He pinned Marcus beneath him, his fists raining down with unrelenting precision.

Each punch landed with a sickening crack, but Marcus wasn't done yet.

He brought his knee up hard, catching Cole in the stomach and knocking the wind out of him.

Cole grunted in pain, and Marcus used the momentary advantage to shove him off.

Marcus scrambled toward the gun, his hand outstretched.

“Cole!” I screamed, my voice breaking.

But Cole was already moving. He dove, tackling Marcus from behind just as his fingers brushed the weapon’s handle.

The gun skidded across the floor, spinning out of reach.



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Marcus let out a frustrated roar, thrashing wildly as Cole locked his arms around him in a vice grip.

The two of them collided with a metal shelving unit, the structure groaning under their combined weight.

Boxes toppled to the ground, and glass shattered somewhere nearby, adding to the chaos.

“You’re done, Marcus,” Cole hissed, his voice taut with fury.

Marcus snarled like a cornered animal, his elbow jerking back to catch Cole in the jaw.

The hit made Cole’s head snap to the side, blood trickling from the corner of his mouth, but he didn’t let go.

Instead, he tightened his grip, hauling Marcus back and slamming him onto the floor with a thunderous crash.

Marcus writhed beneath him, his face contorted with rage.

“She’s mine!” he shouted, his voice raw.

Cole leaned closer, his face mere inches from Marcus’s, and his voice dropped to an icy whisper. “She doesn’t belong to anyone, least of all you.”

Before Marcus could respond, Cole delivered one final punch to his jaw, and the fight seemed to drain out of him.

Marcus's head lolled to the side, his breaths coming in ragged gasps.

The sound of sirens wailed in the distance, drawing closer with every passing second.

Cole sat back, his chest heaving as he glared down at Marcus. "You're finished."

The weight of what had just happened hit me all at once, and I found myself clutching the doorway for support.

My knees trembled, but I couldn't look away from Cole—his bloodied knuckles.

The steady rise and fall of his chest, and the unshakable determination etched into every line of his face.

Cole turned to me then, his expression softening ever so slightly. "You okay?"

I nodded, but my voice refused to work. All I could do was stare at the man who had just fought like hell to protect me.

"I've got you," he murmured, holding me close. "He's never coming near you again. I'll make sure of that."

The police arrived moments later. I thought I'd be more rattled but I managed to confidently answer all their questions.

I recounted the events of the night without a single hesitation.

With every word, I felt the weight of the past lifting, the fear that had gripped me for

so long dissolving into nothingness.

When the officers led Marcus away in handcuffs, his head hung low, I felt no pity for him.

Instead, I felt a profound sense of closure.

Marcus could no longer touch my life, no longer cast his shadow over my happiness.

As the chaos began to subside, I turned to Cole. He was watching me with an intensity that made my heart ache.

His gaze full of admiration and something deeper—something I wasn't sure I had words for.

“What?” I asked, curving my lips upwards into a tentative smile.

“Just you,” he said, his voice low and rough with emotion. “You’re incredible.”

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I widened my smile. “So are you,” I said, stepping closer and wrapping my arms around him.

I rested my head against his chest, listening to the steady rhythm of his heartbeat.

COLE

The lake shimmered under the setting sun, the water casting ripples of gold that danced across the shore.

It was quiet here, save for the occasional rustling of leaves or the faint hum of insects in the distance.

I’d chosen this place on purpose—it was quiet and no one would disturb us here.

Tori stood at the edge of the dock, her arms crossed against the evening chill as she gazed out at the water.

Her hair caught the dying light, a cascade of fire against the soft tones of her skin.

She looked gorgeous, peaceful, but I knew her well enough to sense the undercurrent of emotion beneath that calm exterior.

This was the moment.

I walked up behind her, careful not to startle her, and placed a hand gently on her shoulder.

“Penny for your thoughts?” I asked her.

She turned, her lips curving into a small, almost shy smile.

“Just thinking how far we’ve come. This place... it feels different now,” Tori said.

I nodded, stepping beside her.

“It’s the same lake, the same dock. But we’re not the same people,” I remarked.

Her gaze flicked to mine, something soft and vulnerable lingering in her eyes.

“No, we’re not,” Tori agreed.

We stood there for a moment, the silence between us comfortable, like a shared secret.

I wanted her to feel the weight of this moment, to understand how much she meant to me, how much she always would.

“I’ve been thinking,” I began, my voice low and steady.

I continued, “About everything we’ve been through—Marcus, the fear, the fights. But also the good things. The way you light up when you talk about your boutique. The way you make me laugh even when I’m drowning in work. The way you let me in, piece by piece, even when it scared you.”

Her eyes shimmered, and she reached out to take my hand, her fingers warm and steady against mine. “Cole...”

I took a breath, steadying myself.

“I don’t want to lose this. I don’t want to lose us. And I know we’ve been through hell, but we made it. Together. And I want that to mean something,” I said.

Her lips parted, but no words came, just the slight squeeze of her hand on mine.

“I’m not asking for a ring or a piece of paper,” I continued. “I’m asking for you, Tori. For the life we could build together. I want to be there for the little things and the big things. I want everything with you.”

Her laugh came out wet, a mix of humor and tears.

“I want everything too,” Tori said. “Even though you’re impossible at times.”

“You love me anyway,” I said, my tone soft but sure.

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“I do,” she whispered, her voice breaking on the words. “I love you so much it scares me sometimes.”

I reached up, cupping her face in my hands. “I’m not immune. It scares me as well but we’ll face the unknown together.”

The kiss we shared then was slow and deep, filled with every promise I couldn’t put into words.

When we pulled apart, her forehead rested against mine, and the world around us felt miles away.

“Okay,” she said finally, her voice steady despite the emotion that lingered. “Okay. Let’s do this. Let’s build that life, Cole.”

My chest swelled, the weight of her words sinking in. She was choosing this—choosing me.

We stayed on the dock for a while longer, talking about everything and nothing.

At one point, I told her about a small property near the boutique, one that could be a perfect little home base for us.

By the time the stars had come out, we were lying side by side on the dock, her head resting on my chest as we stared up at the sky.

The quiet was no longer heavy with fear or doubt but filled with hope and possibility.

“I never thought I’d feel this way again,” she admitted softly, her fingers tracing patterns on my shirt.

“What way?” I asked.

“Safe. Loved. Like I’m enough,” Tori said.

I tilted my head to look at her, my heart aching with the depth of my feelings.

“Tori, you’ve always been enough. More than enough. I just feel lucky that I get to remind you of that every day,” I said.

She tilted her face up toward mine, her smile radiant in the starlight.

“You’re not so bad yourself, Cole,” she said.

We stayed like that until the chill of the night forced us back inside.

In the warmth of the lake house, we curled up on the couch, a shared blanket draped over us.

“This is it,” I said quietly, my arm wrapped around her.

“This is what?”

“This is the beginning. Of us. Of everything we’re going to build.”

She leaned into me, her voice soft and sure. “Then let’s make it a good one.”

And I knew, without a doubt, that we would.

THE END