



The Flavor of Us (Beta Accepted)

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Category: Urban

Description: Nearly a year ago, I found my forever.

And just as fast, I lost her.

Carleen just so happens to be my best friend's sister and an Alpha I've been crushing on for far longer than is appropriate. However, she believes that her demisexuality will keep us apart.

My beautiful, fierce Alpha has absolutely no idea what I want. So, I try to make Carleen see that I'm more than the unruly party girl and dancer at Euphoria that she knows me to be. She's only ever seen one side of me.

Suggesting to move into the empty bedroom in her apartment and help with her catering business may be a little much but I'm desperate to show her that I'm serious. She's wary but willing and I know it will be hard breaking down her walls.

Until I meet her two new Alpha assistants, Ashton and Ryder, who seem to be the perfect puzzle pieces to our crazy dynamic. They're funny, down to earth, and so fucking attentive that it's scary.

Having three protective Alphas hovering around me isn't something I ever imagined.

But when an incident at Euphoria sets me back, they're right there picking up the pieces with Carleen.

I thought I only had enough room in heart for one Alpha but I'm leaning toward three.

The Flavor of Us is an 18+ MMFF romance between a Beta and three Alphas learning to love within their limits. TW/CW in Authors Note.

~ Best read after Perfectly Yours but can be read in any order. ~

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Chapter one

TATI

The text notification flashes across my phone like a beacon, and my stomach drops.

Ellie's in labor.

I barely finish reading before making a U-turn and speeding down the highway. A few days ago, I decided to come back to our chaotic little city and return to my life. Running away never solved anything and I've been pining away for my Alpha, Carleen, for far too damn long.

First, though, I have to get to Ellie. My best friend, my confidant, and Carleen's younger sister.

God, I'm a shitty friend. But no matter how messy my head's been, there's no way I'm missing this. Not after I ran off like a high school teenager when things fizzled out with Carleen.

The drive is a blur—red lights, honking horns, and me cursing under my breath the whole time. Of course, everything is conspiring to slow me down today. Traffic? Check. Some guy going five under in the fast lane? Double check. By the time I skid into the hospital parking lot, my heart is pounding as if it's trying to escape my chest.

I grab my purse from the passenger seat and bolt through the automatic doors, not caring about the stares. My boots squeak against the polished floors as I navigate the

maze of hallways, following the signs to labor and delivery. A wave of antiseptic hits me—bright lights, sterile smells, and a low hum of voices. It's sensory overload, but I don't care. All that matters is Ellie.

And then I stop dead in my tracks.

There she is. Carleen.

Leaning against the wall outside Ellie's room, arms crossed over her chest, head tilted like she's been expecting me. Her sharp brown eyes lock on mine and I'm pinned to the spot like prey under a predator's gaze. Damn it. I didn't plan for this. Not today.

My pulse skyrockets and now it's not just the running up here or the panic about missing my best friend's delivery.

No, it's her . Carleen—tall and proud, with that stupidly confident smirk she gets when she knows she's in control of the situation. She's fucking gorgeous, just like she always is—a certain fierce aura hanging around her with that pixie cut and the luscious brown curls piled on top of her head. It feels like she threw on some clothes—sweatpants and a worn band tee that's just a little too short, hugging every curve. And yet, she's still perfect.

"Tati." Her voice cuts through the noise in my head. It sends a shiver down my spine and I hate that she still has that effect on me.

I force myself to move, one step at a time, until I'm standing a few feet away. I open my mouth to speak, but the words stick in my throat. Her thick scent reminds me of fresh rain and a hint of peaches, like the beginning of summer, causing me to lose my thought. What do I even say to a woman I've been pining over for months ? I told myself I'd ease into this moment, that I'd eventually work up the courage to ask her out for coffee or dinner.

If I hadn't been so frantic to get here, I would have realized that it was Carleen who had sent that text and that of course, Ellie's sister would have been waiting here to see her niece and nephews. I'm still in awe that Ellie's Omega somehow impregnated her with triplets.

"You made it," Carleen says, her lips curling into a faint smile. There's something in her eyes that looks almost...relieved. I want to believe that it's for me but I shove that feeling aside.

"Of course, I made it. Ellie's my best friend." My voice comes out sharper than I intended, but I can't help it. Being this close to Carleen is like standing too close to a flame—like feeling the heat before it burns.

She nods, the smile fading slightly, but she doesn't say anything else. Silence stretches between us and I shift awkwardly, my fingers playing with the strap of my bag. Every nerve in my body is screaming at me to either run or say something, but I can't do either. Not with her watching me like that.

Finally, I break the silence. "How is she?"

"She's doing great," Carleen says. "Ellie's strong. Always has been."

Her words hang in the air and I know she's not just talking about Ellie. She's talking about us. About me leaving. About her pulling away. It's like every unspoken thing between us is standing in the hallway, glaring at us both. I feel like I'm going to fucking explode if I don't say something. This is both the worst and best time to address it.

Forcing myself to take a seat outside the room, my breath hitches as Carleen sits beside me. We started something months ago, just as Ellie first met her mates—Macon and Savin. It had been the happiest moment in my life, watching my

best friend find her forever. And then I found mine.

Carleen.

I tried to ignore it for a while because what kind of friend would I be to date her sister? Carleen had been there for both of us through thick and thin and now I was thinking of her in a very different way. I don't even know when it truly started. But some part of me couldn't exist without Carleen.

We never talked about a relationship. We just fell together. I started staying over more and it just... happened. Until it fell apart and I ran off because I couldn't handle the shame of being rejected. Sitting in this silence now though, I realize that's not what happened.

Her scent strengthens just a little, a tell-tale sign that she's just as uncomfortable as I am. "How's everything going?" I ask lamely, my gaze focused downward on my hands in my lap. If this were any other situation, I'd find myself laughing at this version of myself. My entire persona revolves around being this loud, outspoken individual.

Hell, I dance naked on stage for a living but talking to the woman I want to spend forever with? Fuck, I think my heart is going to dance out of my chest.

Carleen lets out a heavy breath, leaning back in the chair "Good. Really good. The first baby's here—healthy, loud, perfect. The other two are still taking their time, though. Might be a long night." Her lips twitch into a small smile and it's like a punch to the gut. How can someone look so damn good in hospital lighting?

"Well, lucky for me," I say, forcing a grin, "I brought a bag." I nudge the purse slung over my shoulder like it's some kind of prize.

Her laugh is soft but genuine and for a second, it's like no time has passed. Like we're back to being...whatever we were before it all went sideways. But then her eyes meet mine and the tension snaps back into place.

"So," she says after a moment, twisting to face me. "How've you been?" She's still closed off, despite the soft conversation, her hands folded in her lap, one leg crossed over the other. Carleen's giving me that business pose. I hate it.

An exaggerated breath falls from my lips as I shake my head. Ignoring this isn't going to work. Trying to play into pleasantries as if we're just two ships passing in the night isn't going to work either. We've been texting for a few weeks now, rekindling feelings and I'm done playing it safe. "Can we just...skip the small talk? Please?"

Her eyebrows lift, surprised, but she doesn't say anything. Just watches me, her expression unreadable.

I turn toward her fully, leaning forward a little, my voice steady even though my chest feels like it might explode. "I didn't come back to talk about the weather, Carleen. Or to pretend like nothing happened between us."

She stiffens, just barely, but I catch it. Her eyes flicker down to her hands, her fingers twitching like she's trying to keep herself grounded. Goddess, we're such a mess. "Tati—"

"No." I cut her off, my voice firmer now. "I came back because I want something real. With you. And I'm ready to work for it—whatever that means. Whatever you need."

Her eyes snap up to mine, wide and a little startled. "You don't—"

“I do,” I say quickly, cutting off whatever excuse she’s about to throw at me. “I know you’re scared. I know you’ve got your reasons and I’m not here to bulldoze over them. But I’m here, Carleen. I’m here because I want you in my life and I’m willing to fight for it. For us.” Tears gather in my eyes as I swallow back the bile creeping up in my throat. I hate being this assertive but Ellie told me that Carleen won’t easily take a step forward.

She’s been hurt too many times.

And if I want a forever with her—I have to fight for it.

She exhales sharply, her hands clenching into fists against her thighs. For a moment, I think she’s going to argue, to push me away again, but instead, she leans forward, resting her elbows on her knees. Her head dips, the tension radiating through her shoulders.

“You don’t get it, Tati,” she mutters, a rough edge to her tone. “This isn’t...it’s not simple.”

I reach out, hesitating for only a second before brushing my fingers against her arm. She doesn’t pull away and that tiny victory gives me the courage to press on. Carleen has said those same words to me before and every time, I’ve said the same thing. I just hope this time she believes me. “I don’t need simple. I just need you.”

She finally looks up at me and the raw vulnerability in her eyes nearly knocks the air out of my lungs. There’s so much there—pain, fear, guilt, longing—all of it swirling together in a way that makes my heart ache.

“I came back for this,” I say again. “Because I can’t imagine my life without you in it. So, whatever you’re dealing with, whatever you think is too much, let me help carry it.”

Her jaw tightens, Carleen obviously dealing with emotions she hasn't let me see before. "Don't judge me."

Carleen's words hang in the air between us, like the room itself is holding its breath. Don't judge me. Her voice echoes in my head as I sit there, staring into her wide, vulnerable eyes. This is Carleen—confident, sharp-tongued, impossible-to-shake Carleen—and yet, here she is, looking at me like I'm holding her whole world in my hands.

I swallow hard, reaching forward to grab her hands in mine. "I'd never judge you, Alpha. Not for anything."

Calling her Alpha seems to give her some relief, a tiny crack in the armor but it's enough to remind me that beneath everything, she's still human. Just as scared of getting hurt as I am. Maybe more.

"I'm scared, Tati," she admits. "I'm scared I'm not enough for you. That what you want...what you deserve ...is more than I can give."

Her confession cuts deep, but I don't truly know what she means. Carleen? Not enough? She doesn't get it—she doesn't see what I see when I look at her. Strong, fierce, beautiful, and so damn Carleen that it drives me crazy.

I frown, leaning closer. "What are you talking about? Where is this even coming from?"

She shakes her head, her jaw tightening like she's trying to hold it all in, but then the words come tumbling out. "I don't...move fast, Tati. I never have. I need time to build that connection, to trust someone completely before I can even think about—" She cuts herself off, glancing away like she's ashamed to even say it. "Before I can take things further."

I blink as all the pieces fall into place. I suspected for a while but since we never truly made our relationship official, it never became part of the conversation. I wish it had. It would have made everything so much easier because in what world would I have judged Carleen for being herself? “Are you demi?” I ask, wondering if putting the question out there is too much.

Her eyes snap to mine, wide and almost defensive, like she’s waiting for me to laugh or brush it off. But I don’t. How could I? All I feel is a rush of love for this woman sitting in front of me, trying to bare her soul when she’s probably terrified I’ll break it.

She looks away again, her voice barely above a whisper. “Yeah.” It takes me a moment to realize Carleen is waiting for me to push her away, to agree with her that she’s not enough for me. I wonder how many have seen her and told her those very same words. I’m going to kill every single one of them.

Squeezing her hands in mine, I grab her attention again. “Alpha, I would spend eternity proving myself to you if it meant you’d love me at the end. I don’t care how long it takes, or what it looks like, or what anyone else thinks. I want you . Whatever you have to give, whatever you’re comfortable with—I’ll take it. Happily.”

Her breath hitches and then her lips curve into the softest, most genuine smile I’ve seen in months. It’s small, almost shy, but it’s real, and it makes my heart feel like it’s about to burst.

“Tati...” she starts, but I shake my head, cutting her off.

“I mean it, Carleen. All of it.”

Her smile grows, the silence stretching between us finally comfortable. I feel like we’ve taken a huge leap forward, my Alpha staring at me, knowing that I want all of

her just as she is. Carleen squeezes my hands before glancing at Ellie's door again and then looking back at me.

"Can I ask you something?" I should keep my mouth shut and be happy with the small win but I just can't. Maybe it's instincts. Maybe it's love. Hell, I don't know.

She raises an eyebrow, still smiling. "What?"

"Is a kiss okay?" My voice is soft, teasing, but there's a real question behind it. I don't want to push her, not even a little.

Carleen's eyes widen slightly, and for a second, I'm sure I've ruined the moment. But then she nods, her lips curving into a smirk that's all Carleen—confident, sure of herself, and yet somehow sweeter than I've ever seen her. "Yeah. A kiss is okay."

I don't waste a second. I lean in slowly, giving her plenty of time to change her mind, but she doesn't pull away. Our lips meet softly, gently, and it's like the world stops spinning for just a moment. It's not rushed or desperate—it's sweet, careful, full of everything we're too scared to say out loud yet.

Goddess, I've missed her.

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Chapter two

CARLEEN

The waiting room is too quiet. Hospitals always have that weird sterile hush about them, like everyone's holding their breath. But this silence feels different—thicker, heavier. Like it's pressing down on my chest every second we don't get an update.

It's been hours. Long, torturous hours of waiting. My phone sits heavy in my hand, the screen smudged from how many times I've unlocked it and refreshed my messages. Nothing. No updates. No calls. My little sister is in there, bringing three lives into the world, and I can't do a damn thing to help her.

But right now, there's a weight on my side that's keeping me grounded. Tati.

She's curled up against me, her head resting on my shoulder, her breaths slow and even as she sleeps. I glance down, taking in the way her sharp features soften when she's resting. Her dark lashes cast faint shadows over her cheeks, and her lips—plump and slightly parted—look softer without her usual sharp-tongued smirk.

I can't stop myself from reaching out, my fingertips lightly tracing the faint freckles across her nose. They're so delicate, scattered like stars over skin I've wanted to touch more times than I can count. Her hair, those dark green highlights catching faintly in the awful fluorescent lighting, falls across her face, and I gently tuck a strand behind her ear.

Goddess, she's beautiful.

She always has been, but seeing her like this—peaceful, vulnerable—it hits me in a way I'm not ready for.

I think back to those nights months ago, back when Ellie had moved out, and Tati would still find herself crashing at my place. Nights where she'd fall asleep on my couch, hair spread out like a halo, her laughter still echoing in the quiet house. And I'd sit there, clutching the edge of the armrest, fighting every instinct to reach out, to stay . But instead, I'd get up, grab a blanket, and quietly leave the room because I was terrified .

Terrified of what would happen if I let myself fall. If I let myself love her the way I wanted to.

Because what if I couldn't give her what she wanted? What if I wasn't enough? What if she wanted all the things an Alpha is supposed to give—things I can't just fake ?

But looking at her now, curled against me, her warmth seeping into my side like an anchor in a storm, all those doubts feel... smaller. Quieter.

When she first brought up the scent match—when she confessed that we, me and her , could be something real—I panicked. I pushed her away. I pulled back so hard it felt like whiplash and she left. And goddess, it hurt. Watching her walk away, feeling her absence like a hole carved into my chest. But now she's back and I'm done running.

I'm ready.

Ellie's door slides open, her Alpha leaning out into the waiting room. Macon looks dead on his feet but his smile couldn't be brighter as he nods to me, silently telling me that the babies are here. His gaze darts to Tati, his brow raising in jest but I just wave him off. He disappears back into the room as I lean down, pressing a firm kiss

to Tati's forehead, lingering just a second longer than necessary. Her skin is warm beneath my lips and she stirs slightly but doesn't wake up.

"Tati," I whisper softly. "Wake up, sunshine."

She stirs again, lashes fluttering as hazel eyes blink open and focus on me. "Carleen?" Her voice is thick with sleep, her brows furrowing as she glances around. "What—"

"They're here," I say gently, giving her arm a small squeeze. "The babies are here."

It takes a second, but then her face lights up, her exhaustion melting away as excitement floods her expression. She straightens up so fast I almost laugh, her hand gripping mine tightly as we stand together.

"Let's go meet them," she says and I nod, guiding her toward Ellie's hospital room.

The door creaks softly as we step inside, and my chest squeezes tight at the sight before me.

Ellie's propped up against the pillows, her face pale but glowing with a softness I don't think I've ever seen before. Her fiery hair is a mess around her head, sticking to her damp forehead, but she's still so Ellie it makes my throat ache. She's holding the tiniest little bundle in her arms—a baby girl swaddled in a pink blanket.

Savin, her Omega, is beside her, cradling two little boys, one in each arm. His platinum hair sticks to his forehead, his expression so soft and fragile it almost breaks me. He looks like he's barely holding on, his entire body trembling slightly with the effort of staying upright. But he's smiling—broad and genuine—like the happiest man alive.

Macon steps forward, his large frame moving carefully as he leans down and presses a tender kiss to Ellie's forehead. The way her shoulders relax under his touch, the way her lips pull into a tired smile—it's like watching poetry in motion.

Without a word, Macon reaches out and gently takes the boys from Savin's arms. Savin sags with relief, his head falling forward as if the weight of holding them had been too much.

Ellie reaches out and pulls Savin closer, tucking him carefully against her side. Even exhausted and spent, she still worries about him. The doctors have been saying he's doing better lately, but no one really knows why he's been so sick all these years. He's fragile, but he's still here, still fighting—and right now, he looks like he could pass out at any moment.

But before he does, he grins. This soft, sleepy smile that's so full of love. Then, just like that, he's out. Curled up against Ellie, not a care in the world.

Goddess, there's so much love in this room. It's almost overwhelming.

Tati inches closer to me, her hand slipping into mine as we move toward Ellie's bedside. I release her hand to step forward, leaning down slightly as I meet my sister's tired gaze.

"She's beautiful," I whisper, looking down at the tiny baby girl cradled in Ellie's arms. Her little face is pink and wrinkled, her tiny mouth slightly open as she sleeps peacefully against her momma's chest.

Ellie smiles softly, her head tilting toward Savin as he sleeps against her side. "He did so much, Carleen. More than he should've. He's so overworked."

I let out a short laugh, shaking my head. "You just pushed out three little potatoes and

you're still worried about your Omega? Seriously, Ellie?"

She laughs, though it comes out weak and breathless, her smile growing as she looks down at her daughter. "I can't help it. He's Savin."

"Yeah, well, he's got you and he's got Macon. And now, he's got these three. He's not carrying it all alone anymore."

Ellie nods, her eyes glassy as she looks between her children. There's something so deeply maternal in her gaze, something so fierce and protective, it's almost hard to look at.

"So...what are their names?" I ask softly, my voice barely above a whisper.

Ellie's smile grows and she shifts slightly, cradling the baby girl closer. "This little one is Aria."

My heart stutters at the name—it's perfect. Light, melodic, just like her little sleeping face.

"And these two," Ellie continues, glancing at Macon, who's still holding the boys carefully in his strong arms. "The bigger one—he was born first—is Quinn. And the second one is Oliver."

Quinn, Oliver, and Aria.

"They're perfect," I say softly, brushing my knuckles lightly over Aria's tiny cheek. She stirs, letting out a soft noise before settling back into Ellie's arms.

The moment Tati steps closer to Ellie's bedside, the room feels lighter. Like someone cracked open a window and let all the tension float out. Ellie's eyes go wide,

surprised by her best friend's presence. None of us—not even me—knew that Tati had been back in town or close enough to show up at the hospital this evening.

“Tati!” Ellie practically squeals, her voice cracking slightly from exhaustion, but the excitement is there. “Oh my goddess, you’re back! Are you two—” She pauses, her sharp brown eyes flickering between me and Tati. “Are you two working things out?”

Tati lets out this soft, warm laugh that sounds like sunshine on a cloudy day. She rolls her eyes but steps up to the edge of the bed, her hand reaching out to softly brush against Aria's tiny cheek just like I did. “Hand me one of my damn godchildren first,” she taunts playfully, before glancing over at me with the faintest blush dusting her cheeks. “And... yeah. We’re working on it.”

Macon steps forward, his broad shoulders filling the space as he carefully shifts one of the baby boys in his arms. With a gentleness that doesn't match his intimidating size, he hands the swaddled infant to Tati. She cradles him instantly, her body shifting to support his tiny frame like she was made for this moment.

“Oh my goddess,” she whispers, her eyes locked on the baby's face. “Hi, little guy.”

Watching Tati hold Quinn puts thoughts in my head that I can't possibly entertain right now. And yet, I can't help imagining a family, Tati at the center of it, those rosy cheeks on full display. Unable to handle my own emotions, I turn back to Ellie as Tati moves to the lounge seat and sits down with Macon. “You’re going to have your hands full with these three.”

Ellie snorts lightly, her head tilting as she leans back into the pillows. “Tell me about it. But honestly, Savin and Macon are already pros. I just need to make sure Savin doesn't faint halfway through diaper duty.”

Savin stirs from where he's still tucked against Ellie's side, muttering something

incoherent before settling back into sleep. My gaze drifts to Tati again, my Beta slowly rocking from side to side like some natural instinct took over. Her lips are pressed together in a faint smile, her eyes focused entirely on him.

Ellie clears her throat, dragging my attention back again. “Carlie, don’t waste this.”

“Waste what?” My brows pull together as I unsuccessfully try to avoid what my little sister is referring to. I can give all the advice in the world. I can protect my sister and I know damn well how to protect my heart. Which is part of the problem.

Ellie slowly hands me Aria and then sits up a little straighter, gesturing to her best friend. “You look so much happier, Carlie. In the last several minutes since she showed up, I’ve seen you smile. Like a genuine, happy smile. It’s like you’ve let yourself breathe again.”

That’s exactly what it feels like. Pushing Tati away was hurting us both.

“I’m not letting her go this time,” I say, the words slipping out before I can second-guess them. “I mean it.”

Ellie smiles before her head sinks back against the pillows. “Good. About damn time. The amount of meddling I had to do while pregnant with triplets was a pain in the ass.” Her lids flutter closed as I hold Aria, her breathing soft as she unconsciously pulls Savin closer so damn precious. There’s a soft sigh and then those eyes are open again, a deviant smile spreading across her lips. “Okay, listen, I know it’s insane, but I could really go for some lemon lavender ice cream right now.”

I choke on a laugh and Tati’s gaze flicks to us, surprise in those wide hazel eyes. Macon lets out a low chuckle, but the real comedy gold comes from Savin, who jolts upright like someone just poured ice water on him.

“Wait, what ?” he blurts out, blinking rapidly as he looks between Ellie and the rest of us. “Why...why would you want that? You only ever wanted that stuff when you were pregnant ! Are you—wait—are you pregnant again ?!”

The silence that follows lasts about half a second before Macon snorts, Tati wheezes, and I can’t stop the loud, undignified laugh that bursts out of me. Even Ellie starts giggling despite how utterly exhausted she looks.

“Savin,” I say, wiping a tear from the corner of my eye. “Ellie has always liked odd flavors. Pregnancy just...enhanced it.”

Ellie waves her hand weakly at Savin. “That’s not how pregnancy works, babe. Also, I ate that stuff for like six months straight. I’m just...kind of in love with it now.”

More laughter ripples through the room and even Savin cracks a sleepy smile as he lets himself sink back against Ellie’s side.

For a moment, everything feels right . Ellie’s tired but happy, Savin’s safe in her arms, Macon is practically glowing as he holds one of his sons, and Tati—gorgeous, fiery, stubborn Tati—is sitting there with a tiny baby cradled in her arms and this soft look on her face that makes me want to press pause on the world and stay in this moment forever.

All I have to do is stop pulling away and let the walls around my heart crumble.

Easier said than done.

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Chapter three

TATI

My head's still spinning from everything—my god babies, the love pouring out of that hospital room, and the way Carleen looked at me when she said she wasn't letting me go this time. Those words haven't stopped replaying in my head, looping over and over like a song stuck on repeat.

I want that kind of forever—the way Macon looks at Ellie like she's the sun and the stars and every damn thing in between. The way Savin clings to Ellie even in his sleep, like she's the only thing tethering him to the earth. It's raw, unfiltered love. The kind that wraps itself around your ribs and makes it hard to breathe. The kind I want with Carleen.

The emotions sit heavy in my chest as we walk out to the parking lot, side by side, but not touching. The night air is cool, sharp against my cheeks, and the distant hum of the city surrounds us. I glance at her out of the corner of my eye and she's got her hands stuffed into her coat pockets, her jaw tight like she's thinking too hard about something. Probably about us. Probably about me .

The silence stretches out between us and I hate it. I hate that we've spent so long stuck in this purgatory—her pulling away, me pretending it didn't hurt, both of us too damn scared to just talk about it.

I remember those late nights at her apartment, curled up on her couch with some trashy reality TV show playing in the background. We'd share inside jokes, laugh

until our sides hurt, and drink wine until our words slurred together. I remember falling asleep next to her, the warmth of her body just inches away, and thinking, This could be enough. This could be everything.

And then she pulled away.

One day, she was there—solid and warm and Carleen —and the next, she wasn't. She shut me out, left me stranded in the middle of something I couldn't name, and I didn't know how to climb my way back.

But then she texted me. A simple, hesitant hey that cracked my chest open all over again. It wasn't much, but it was enough to keep me from completely unraveling.

My fingers fumble with my keys as I stare down at the worn leather keychain, my stomach twisting itself into knots. I don't know what to say, so I don't say anything.

“Goodnight, Carleen,” I murmur, my voice softer than I intend it to be. I move to open my car door, but her voice stops me.

“Tati.”

Slowly, I turn around to face her. She's standing there under the dim yellow glow of the parking lot lights. Her hands are out of her pockets now, one reaching up to gently cup my face. Her thumb brushes over my cheekbone, her touch soft. Like she's scared I'll shatter if she presses too hard.

“You're thinking too loud again,” she murmurs, her lips quirking into the faintest smile.

I let out a breathy laugh, but it's shaky. “Can you blame me?”

“No,” she says softly, her thumb still tracing slow, careful circles on my cheek. “I can’t.”

There’s something about the way she’s looking at me right now—her eyes warm and vulnerable, all her usual sharp edges softened—that makes me feel like I’m standing on the edge of something huge. Something that could either break me or rebuild me entirely.

Carleen’s lips twitch into a teasing smirk and her eyes flicker down to my mouth before meeting mine again. “You know... I still have that bedroom vacancy if you want it. Come home with me.”

My brain short-circuits. Like, fully shuts down. Did Carleen just... did she just say that? Come home with me. The words are still ringing in my ears, bouncing around in my skull, and I can’t process them fast enough.

My eyes go wide and I’m pretty sure I look like a fish gasping for air. Carleen notices—of course, she notices—and she laughs, this deep, throaty sound that makes my stomach do a full gymnastic routine.

“Don’t look so surprised,” she says, her brown eyes twinkling in the dim light of the parking lot. “But I mean it, Tati. I still need to go slow—I need to feel like we’re building this the right way. But the thought of having you anywhere other than beside me? It hurts to think about.”

My heart. My poor, fragile, overworked heart. It clenches so hard in my chest I almost double over. How does she do that? How does she say things like that so easily, so honestly?

“So...” I manage to stammer out, my voice embarrassingly high-pitched, “does this mean we’re, like... dating? Or whatever?”

Carleen's lips curl into that smirk—the one that's equal parts amused and absolutely wrecking my life. “Yeah, Tati. We're dating. Or whatever.”

And just like that, I'm grinning so wide my face hurts. I must look like a complete maniac because Carleen laughs again, softer this time, and reaches out to tuck a loose strand of my hair behind my ear.

“Get in your car, sunshine,” she says, her voice dipping low in a way that makes my knees weak. “Follow me home.”

I nod so fast I'm pretty sure I give myself whiplash. “Yep. Yes. Absolutely. Following. Right behind you.”

I practically fling myself into my car, my hands gripping the steering wheel so tightly my knuckles turn white. My reflection stares back at me in the rearview mirror, eyes wide, cheeks flushed, lips pressed into a shaky smile. “Okay, Tati,” I whisper to myself, sucking in a sharp breath. “Calm the hell down. You're going home with her. Her . But don't freak her out. Don't make it weird. Don't—oh my goddess, we're dating .”

I let out a squeaky laugh that absolutely no one needed to hear and then I start the engine. Carleen's tail lights glow in front of me as she pulls out of the parking lot and I follow her like she's leading me to the gates of heaven. Which, honestly, might not be far off.

My car is still packed with all my stuff. Suitcases, boxes, duffel bags stuffed to the brim with every piece of my life I could fit before I came rushing back to the city. I hadn't even gone home yet—I'd barely made it past the city limits before Carleen's text pulled me straight to the hospital.

I take a deep breath as we turn down a familiar street. I know the way to her

apartment like the back of my hand. Ellie was my best friend after all. But more recently? Too many late nights, too many movie marathons, too many mornings where I left before she woke up because I couldn't handle how much I wanted this—wanted her—and how afraid I was she didn't want the same.

But she does. She said it. She said it .

The soft rumble of my car's engine fades as I pull into the parking spot. I shift into park and lean back against the seat, staring up at the large building in front of me. Carleen's building. I've been here a hundred times before, but tonight... it feels different. Heavier. Like every brick and window is staring down at me, judging whether I'm worthy enough to walk through those doors again.

Carleen stops by my window but I wave her inside, silently telling her I'll be up in a minute because, fuck, I kind of need one. Now that I've come to my senses, I've realized that everything I could absolutely want has fallen into my lap and I have no plans on how to move forward.

Typical.

Needing yet another voice to kick my ass into gear, I grab my phone, my thumb hovering over my mom's contact. I need to talk to her. I need someone to tell me I'm not about to crash and burn by diving headfirst into this thing with Carleen. With a deep breath, I press call and bring the phone to my ear.

She picks up on the second ring.

“Tati, baby! You made it back safe?” Her voice is warm and honey-sweet, like a hug through the phone. She's always been my safe space, the one person in my life who would never judge me regardless of anything I did or wanted.

“Yeah, Mama. I’m good. I’m parked outside Carleen’s place right now.” My voice wobbles slightly on her name and I curse myself internally.

There’s a pause, and then, “Oh, sweetheart. You’re there. There-there ?”

I laugh softly despite the knot in my stomach. “Yeah. There-there. ”

The line goes quiet for a second before my mom’s voice returns, softer now. “I’m so proud of you, Tati. I know how much this means to you. You’ve been carrying this for so long and seeing you take this leap...” She trails off, her voice thick with emotion. “It’s brave, baby. And I know Carleen—she’s a good woman. She’ll see how lucky she is to have you.”

My mother was there through every step of this fragile relationship—when it was blooming, when it broke, when it restarted, and now. She held me through tears and the confusing feelings and talked me out of shutting Carleen out of my life forever. Ellie’s been there too, both of them coaxing me back until I realized that running away never solves anything.

I swallow a sob threatening to make its way out into the night air but my mother catches on. “What’s wrong, Tati? What are you afraid of?”

It’s the one secret I’ve been holding—a secret that only my parents know. My father found out by accident but he didn’t even blink; just said he loved me and we’ve never mentioned it since. However, I can see that he cares, that he’s still providing for me without us ever discussing it.

I let out a shaky breath, my voice barely above a whisper. “I’m scared that I’m not what she wants. That... the things I want, the things I like —they’re not what an Alpha expects from a Beta. They never have been. And when she realizes that, she’s going to look at me differently. And I can’t handle that, Mom. Not from her.” I’m not

sure why I thought rushing into this was the right thing.

If Carleen sees my nest, she's going to freak. Carleen doesn't want an Omega—and I'm not one—but all the cute shit that Omegas enjoy? I want that. I want all of it. I can do without the heats and the absolute submission to Alphas but everything else? Fuck, I've never craved something so much in my entire life aside from Carleen.

My mom hums softly through the earpiece. "You've always been different, Tati. Even when you were little, you had your own way of seeing the world. Your Omega friends might have rubbed off on you a little, but that doesn't make you any less of who you are. You're still you, baby. And Carleen? She's not like anyone else. I think you know that already."

I chew on my bottom lip, staring up at the glowing windows of Carleen's apartment. "But what if she doesn't want that side of me? What if it's... too much? Or not enough?"

"Tati," my mom says firmly, her voice cutting through my spiral of doubt. "You have to talk to her. Tell her. Be honest. If Carleen is the woman you think she is, she's not going to judge you for being soft, or tender, or for liking the things that make you feel good and safe. You've been hiding that part of yourself for too long. Don't hide it from her."

The problem is that no Alpha I've ever been with has understood that. They've looked at me like I'm broken, like there's something wrong with me for wanting those things. And Carleen? She's not just any Alpha. She's Carleen. And if she looks at me like that, it'll ruin me.

But my mother is right. I can't go into this hiding parts of myself. Carleen deserves the full truth and I deserve to be seen for who I am.

I take one last steadying breath before grabbing my keys and stepping out of the car. The cool night air bites at my skin, but I barely notice as I grab as many things as I can carry and walk towards the building. By the time I reach Carleen's door, I pause. This is it. The moment where everything either falls apart or falls into place.

The door swings open, my Alpha standing there like a breath of fresh air. Goddess, it feels like home.

I'll tell her everything tomorrow.

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Chapter four

TATI

The door clicks shut behind me and I'm officially in . Carleen's apartment smells like warm spices and something faintly sweet, like vanilla and cinnamon had a love child and decided to set up camp in her living room. It's so her —a mix of bold and soft, confident and cozy. And now, it's about to have a little bit of me tucked into one corner of it.

"C'mon," Carleen muses. "Let's get you set up."

She grabs a few of my larger duffle bags, throwing them over her shoulder like they weigh nothing, and leads me down the hallway to the spare room. It's familiar—it's the same space I crashed in more times than I can count, back when things were easier. Back when I wasn't so hyper-aware of every look, every brush of her hand, every second I spent too close to her.

I wonder if she knows she's carrying the pillows of my nest but I decide not to dwell on it.

"Here we are," she says, dropping the bags on the bed. The sheets are fresh, the pillows fluffed, and there's this tiny vase of flowers on the side table. It's nearly the same as when I left. The only difference is that it no longer smells like me.

"Thanks, Alpha," I murmur, giving her a soft smile, not even realizing what I called her. I ignore that too—I'm getting good at it already—reaching for one of the bags

full of clothes. And then I start shoving them haphazardly on the lingering hangers in the closet. It's late and my brain feels fried from the emotional whiplash of the past twenty-four hours—which is why I naturally start building my nest without even thinking about it.

The clothes are always first, something hanging above me so that it makes the space feel smaller. And then the pillows. My gaze darts around the room for the duffel bag and I start unzipping it before Carleen's chuckles break through my concentration. My head snaps up to meet her amused expression as she leans against the doorframe. "Tati, what the hell are you doing? Why are you cramming everything in the closet? You know you're staying here, right? Like, really staying here."

Heat blooms across my cheeks and I scratch the back of my neck awkwardly. Fuck, she knows, doesn't she? I toe the duffel bag with my foot, hoping she doesn't stare too long at the corner of the pink fluffy blanket popping out. "I—I don't know. Habit? I'm used to... not taking up too much space." That's an understatement. I've been building nests for years and hiding myself away in them when the world got a little too loud. And they've always been in a small corner, tucked and a little bit darker than the rest of the room.

I swallow nervously as Carleen steps closer, gently pulling me into her arms. My entire body melts as she embraces me, her nose running along my cheek. "Take up space, sunshine. Please. This is your room, your home. If this is going to work, I want you to make it yours."

Goddess, I want to tell her so fucking bad but everything is perfect right now. Tomorrow, I tell myself. "Right, of course."

Carleen chuckles, still running her nose along my cheek, plastering her scent against me. It's a possessive move, one that I'm 100% behind because it tells me that even her instincts want me. "I'm going to make us a little something and we can deal with

the rest in the morning. Sound good?” Her voice has dropped a few octaves, an almost sultry edge to her words. My entire body responds, heating from the inside out but I tamper down those desires.

Neither one of us is ready to take that step just yet. We will be and when it happens, it will be glorious but tonight, baby steps.

“Yeah, food sounds perfect.” I watch her leave, a sigh of relief leaving me as I strip and head for the attached bathroom.

Steam curls around me as I step out of the shower, the hot water working its magic on my tense shoulders and the knots in my stomach. I let myself take a moment, my forehead resting against the cool tile of the bathroom wall as droplets of water trail down my spine. This feels... surreal. Being here, in her bathroom, using her towel. It feels like stepping into something sacred—like I’m being let in on some part of her that no one else gets to see.

When I finally pull myself together, I tug on the pajamas I brought—a pair of soft shorts and an oversized tank top with a faded band logo on the front. Cute but casual. Just enough to make me feel like I’m not trying too hard while still looking... y’know, presentable .

I rake my fingers through my damp hair, letting it fall naturally around my face as I pad barefoot into the kitchen. The soft glow of the under-cabinet lights spills over the countertops and the smell that hits me nearly knocks me off my feet.

It’s rich and savory—something with beef, garlic, herbs, and... oh my goddess, is that wine? Carleen stands at the counter, plating whatever culinary masterpiece she’s just created and I swear, she looks like something out of a magazine. Her brow is furrowed in concentration, her lips pressed together, her sleeves rolled up to her elbows. She’s got this look of intense focus, and it’s... distracting. Very distracting.

I lean against the entryway, arms crossed loosely over my chest as I watch her work. The way her hands move so deliberately, every flick of her wrist precise, every placement intentional—it's mesmerizing.

And okay, maybe I'm staring at her arms. And maybe her shoulders. And maybe her mouth. But can anyone blame me?

She glances up just as I lick my lips, and her eyes go wide, her cheeks immediately turning a deep, rosy red.

"Tati!" Her voice is sharp, embarrassed, and it makes me grin like I've just caught her doing something scandalous.

"What?" I say innocently, pushing off the archway and sauntering into the kitchen. "I was just watching, Alpha. You looked... focused."

Her mouth opens like she wants to argue, but then she just huffs out a breath and looks back down at the plate. "I was plating. Not exactly sexy, sweetheart."

"Debatable," I murmur under my breath as I slide onto one of the barstools, leaning forward on my elbows. "So, what did you make? It smells amazing."

Carleen's lips twitch like she's fighting a smile, and her eyes flick up to meet mine again. "It's beef bourguignon... with a twist."

"Beef...what now?" I blink at her and she actually laughs this time, this low, warm sound that makes my stomach flip.

"Beef bourguignon," she repeats, slowly. "It's a French stew. Slow-cooked beef, red wine, onions, mushrooms..."

She keeps talking, but I'm already distracted by the plate she's sliding in front of me. The sauce glistens under the light, the meat practically falls apart on sight, and the smell—oh, the smell. Without thinking, I grab a forkful, scoop an entire bite into my mouth, and nearly moan right there at the counter.

“Oh. Oh my goddess. ” I slap my hand on the countertop as I chew, eyes closed in pure, unfiltered bliss. “Carleen, what the hell. Did you put crack in this?”

She lets out a sharp breath, half frustration, half amusement as she stares at me. “Tati... you just inhaled that bite. Did you even taste it?”

I look up at her, cheeks full, blinking innocently. “Yeah. It tasted like heaven.”

She pinches the bridge of her nose, muttering something about ‘heathens’ and ‘no respect for art’ under her breath, but I just grin and hold out my fork. “More, please.”

Her brown eyes flick to mine, and she looks almost pained, but there's a smile tugging at her lips despite herself. “Tati, food like this is meant to be savored . You don't just shovel it in like it's drive-thru french fries.”

I gasp dramatically, clutching my chest. “I'll have you know I love drive-thru french fries.”

“That's not the point,” she grumbles, turning to grab the pot from the stove and scooping more onto my plate. “What I do... it's a craft. It's about flavors, balance, layers. You're supposed to experience it.”

I nod solemnly as I stab another piece of beef with my fork. “Carleen, I respect your craft. I really do. But food is also meant to be enjoyed . And if it's not enjoyable, then what's even the point of eating it?” Carleen's still staring at me, her brown eyes locked onto mine like I just said something wild. And okay, maybe I did, but it was

the truth.

Her brows pull together, her lips parting like she wants to say something, but no words come out. She just stares. I flash her a grin, trying to ease whatever storm's brewing behind those deep brown eyes. "Don't look so surprised. I meant it."

She doesn't reply, just leans against the counter with her arms crossed over her chest, her broad shoulders blocking out the kitchen light behind her. She's got that look—the one that makes me feel like she's seeing every inch of me, every thought in my head, every stupid little insecurity I've ever carried around.

But instead of letting myself get caught up in the intensity of her gaze, I laugh, stepping around the counter and straight into her space.

"Alright, enough brooding. You're starting to look like a tortured anti-hero in a romance novel."

Her lips twitch, but she doesn't break the stare. I smirk and wink at her before turning my attention to the kitchen. Carleen's kitchen, mind you. Her perfect kitchen, where everything has its place and every spice jar is alphabetized like it's some kind of military operation.

I start rummaging through cabinets, pulling things out at random. My chaos has always intrigued her at the same time that it frustrates her.

"What are you doing?" she asks, a hint of amusement lingering in her words.

"Making something," I reply vaguely, opening another cabinet and— jackpot —finding a fresh, homemade sourdough loaf sitting pretty on a wooden cutting board. The thing looks like it belongs in one of those fancy Instagram flat lays, but instead of grabbing it, I slide past and open the fridge.

“Oh, no you don’t,” Carleen says, straightening up as she watches me bypass her precious sourdough and grab a store-bought loaf that looks like it’s been sitting in the back of the fridge for a week. “Tati, what the hell are you doing?” she asks again, her tone edging closer to exasperation as I grab a few more random ingredients—cheese, butter, some garlic paste, and what looks like leftover pasta sauce.

I drop everything on the counter with a loud thud and grin up at her. “Just watch, Chef Carleen. Sit back, relax, and let me show you some Beta magic .”

Carleen’s frown deepens as she glances at the chaos I’ve unleashed on her pristine kitchen counter. “You’re going to use that bread instead of the sourdough? Are you serious right now?”

I hold up the store-bought loaf dramatically like it’s the hero of this story. “This, my dear Alpha, is deliciousness in the making . Trust the process.”

She pinches the bridge of her nose again, muttering something under her breath about ‘blasphemy’ and ‘culinary sins,’ but I catch the way her lips twitch like she’s fighting a smile.

I smirk and get to work.

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Chapter five

CARLEEN

Tati's rummaging through my kitchen cabinets and honestly, it's starting to feel like her personal treasure hunt. I lean against the counter, arms crossed over my chest, watching her with a mix of curiosity and dread. She's already pulled out peanut butter, some half-squished store-brand jelly, and leftover store-bought bread I used for a bread pudding in a pinch.

My goddess, she's making a peanut butter and jelly sandwich.

I blink slowly as she slams the ingredients onto the counter like she's about to perform open-heart surgery. Her brows furrow in concentration as she unscrews the peanut butter jar, dipping the knife in without a second thought. No finesse, no care—just pure chaotic energy.

"Are you... okay?" I ask cautiously.

She ignores me, scooping out an obscene amount of peanut butter and slapping it onto a slice of bread with all the delicacy of a wrecking ball. Peanut butter smears across her knuckles, and she mutters something under her breath as she spreads it unevenly, one slice nearly tearing in half.

"Do you... need help?" I try again, but she just glares at me over her shoulder.

"Carleen, I love you, but do not ruin this for me," she says, her voice firm and full of

authority in a way that makes me snap my mouth shut.

I bite my cheek to keep from laughing as she starts on the jelly. It's not even spread—it's globbed . Like angry spoonfuls of grape jelly slapped onto the bread with zero distribution. One corner has enough jelly to drown a toddler, while the other corner is as dry as the Sahara.

The two slices are smashed together, peanut butter oozing out the sides like some culinary horror movie.

And then it happens.

Tati holds up the butter knife, still smeared with peanut butter, and without breaking eye contact... she licks it .

Like, fully licks it. Tongue flat, slow, deliberate.

I feel my eye twitch. My Alpha instincts practically scream at me about safety, hygiene, the chaos of it all. And yet... I can't look away.

“You didn't just do that,” I mutter, horrified.

“Oh, I absolutely did,” she replies, grinning wickedly as she tosses the knife into the sink with a loud clank .

I move toward the sink, my hand reaching for the faucet to start washing the chaos away when—

“ Carleen! ” Tati groans dramatically, shoving the sandwich into my chest with both hands. “Eat the damn sandwich!”

I stare down at the monstrosity she's forced into my hands. The bread is uneven, jelly drips down one side, and there's a smear of peanut butter on my thumb now. I glance up at her, eyebrow raised. "You can't possibly expect me to eat this."

She crosses her arms and levels me with a look that could cut steel. "Take. A. Bite. Just... do it. Remember when it was just a sandwich? Like... lunchtime on a school day or a picnic in the park. It doesn't have to be perfect. It doesn't have to be artisan or handcrafted. It's just... food."

Her words hit harder than they should. Something about the way she said it, all soft and nostalgic, tugs at something buried deep in my chest. I sigh and glance back down at the sandwich. The messiness of it, the rawness of it... it's almost charming. Almost .

"Alright, fine," I mutter, bringing it to my mouth. I take a bite, my teeth sinking into the soft bread, the sweet jelly mixing with the nutty peanut butter. It's clumsy, sticky, and absolutely not refined in the slightest.

And yet... it's good .

The flavor hits me harder than I expect and for a second, I'm not here in my sleek kitchen with Tati smirking at me. I'm back in our tiny childhood kitchen, Ellie sitting across from me at the table with jelly smeared across her cheek and her eyes wide with excitement as our mom hands her another sandwich.

I remember school days when our mom would pack PB&J sandwiches into our lunchboxes with a note scribbled on the napkin. Days when it was just Ellie and me against the world, sitting under the slide at the playground and splitting one sandwich because Ellie had dropped hers in the dirt.

Our parents were amazing. Supportive, loving, everything we needed. But there were

still moments—little pockets of time—where it felt like it was just Ellie and me. And back then, a sandwich like this felt like a feast.

I swallow the bite, my throat tight, and glance up at Tati. Her grin has softened into something gentler, her hazel eyes watching me carefully.

“It’s good, isn’t it?” she asks softly.

I nod, my voice coming out a little rougher than I intended. “Yeah. It is.”

Tati grins at me and then—like it’s the most natural thing in the world—she slides closer and cuddles up against my side. Her head rests lightly against my shoulder, her arm curling around my waist, and I swear my entire body goes still. My chest feels too tight, like my ribs can’t quite hold everything I’m feeling.

“Sometimes,” she whispers, “beauty is in the simple things. Like a messy peanut butter and jelly sandwich and a little moment like this.”

I huff out a breathy laugh, but it comes out a little watery. Something about the way she said that—how soft and content she sounds—it hits me right where it counts.

“But,” she continues, tilting her head to look up at me, her lips curling into a smirk, “don’t get me wrong. I’ll never say no to all those really pretty foods you make. The ones that look like art and taste like heaven.”

I laugh, genuinely this time, and the tension in my chest eases just a little. “Good to know, sunshine.”

She hums softly and presses her cheek against my shoulder again, and suddenly, the half-eaten PB&J sandwich feels like something more than just food. I glance down at it, then back at her, and a thought crosses my mind before I can stop myself.

Carefully, I tear off a corner of the sandwich and hold it up to her lips.

Her hazel eyes flicker up to meet mine, but she doesn't hesitate. Her lips part and she takes the bite with a soft hum of satisfaction as she chews. And just like that, something shifts in the air between us.

It's not sexual—not yet—but it's... intimate. Soft. Vulnerable. Her scent—rich melon, sweet and heavy—thickens around me and I feel it sink into my skin, filling my lungs with every breath I take. I can't believe I've never noticed it before.

Tati is basking in this. In being fed. In being taken care of. Her whole body has relaxed against me, her lashes fluttering slightly as she chews another bite I offer her. Her soft hums of contentment make something deep in my chest ache in a way I can't explain.

I keep feeding her, tearing off small bites of the sandwich and pressing them gently to her lips. She takes each one without hesitation, her hazel eyes flickering up to meet mine every now and then. It's like she's trusting me with something unspoken, something delicate.

And goddess help me, I love it.

I love watching her like this—soft and pliant, safe in this little bubble we've created in my kitchen. The way her scent wraps around me feels like a promise, one I'm not sure I deserve but one I'm damn sure not going to walk away from. By the time the sandwich is gone, Tati's nose scrunches up in disappointment, her lips pulling into a pout that nearly undoes me entirely.

“Hey,” I murmur, my voice low as I brush a thumb over the corner of her mouth.
“Don't give me that look.”

“You ate all my sandwich,” she says, her voice laced with fake betrayal.

I chuckle, leaning forward to press a soft kiss to her temple. “You ate all your sandwich, sunshine. I just helped.”

She huffs but doesn’t move away. Instead, her eyes flicker toward the small plate of leftover beef bites I’d plated earlier for our snack.

I smirk. “Is that what you want now? Hmm?”

Her cheeks flush slightly, but she doesn’t back down. “I’m just saying... they are right there.”

I laugh, reaching for one of the small beef bites with my fingers. It’s messy, the soup slipping down my fingers but it doesn’t bother me. I hold it up to her lips and she takes it delicately, her eyes fluttering shut as she hums around the bite. And there it is again. That little hum, that soft sigh of contentment that feels like it’s pulling at something deep inside me.

She likes this.

No—she needs this.

She needs to feel cared for, doted on, safe. And the fact that she’s letting me see this part of her? That she’s letting me do this for her? It feels like a gift, one I’m only just starting to understand.

I feed her another bite, then another, and each time her scent grows thicker in the air, wrapping around me like silk. She’s practically glowing, her body loose and relaxed against mine, her little sighs filling the quiet spaces between our breaths.

The night stretches on, the lights in the kitchen dimmed now, and the smell of garlic and beef still lingers faintly in the air. It's late—edging into the early hours of the morning but neither one of us is ready to go to sleep.

Tati's perched on the edge of the couch, knees tucked under her, damp hair falling in dark waves around her face. She looks soft like this—unguarded, comfortable, mine .

I'm sitting next to her, one arm draped casually along the back of the couch, but my body's coiled tight, my chest full of restless energy. The TV flickers in the background, some random late-night reality show playing low enough to be nothing more than background noise. Neither of us is really watching, but it's there—filling the silence that stretches between us.

I glance at Tati and she's staring at the screen with a faint smile, her thumb absentmindedly brushing along her knee. She must feel me watching her because she turns her head and catches my gaze, her hazel eyes warm and sharp all at once.

“You okay, Alpha?” she asks softly.

I huff out a laugh, shaking my head. “Yeah. I'm good. Just... thinking.”

“Dangerous pastime,” she teases, her lips curling into a grin.

I smirk, but it doesn't last. My chest feels tight again, and the words slip out before I can stop them. “I'm sorry, Tati.”

Her brow furrows and she shifts so she's facing me fully, one leg tucked underneath her, the other hanging off the edge of the couch. “Carleen, no. Don't do that. Don't apologize.”

I glance away, chewing on the inside of my cheek. “No, I need to. I pushed you away.

I made you feel like you weren't enough—like we weren't enough. And I'm sorry for that. For all of it." Goddess, I've been dying to say those words for months. I've wanted Tati to know that it was never her fault we spent those days apart.

She reaches out, her hand landing softly on my thigh. The warmth of her touch seeps through the fabric of my sweats, grounding me in a way I didn't realize I needed.

"Carleen," she muses, "all I saw was that we were supposed to be together. That's all I ever thought about. The rest? It doesn't matter anymore."

I let out a low laugh, shaking my head as I glance back at her. "It's wild to me, you know? That biology can just... push people together and expect them to figure it out. Like, 'Hey, your scents match, congrats! Now go build a life together.'" It's always been a sore spot for me, ever since I discovered my own preferences and my comfort level. It was a terrifying thought that biology would thrust me into a situation where love didn't follow.

I'm glad that didn't happen.

Tati snorts, her head falling back against the couch cushion as she laughs. It's such a her sound, so full of life and warmth, that I can't help but smile. "You sound exactly like Ellie," she says, her voice still tinged with laughter. "She said almost the same thing after she found out she was pregnant. Like, 'Cool, biology. Thanks for the mandatory bonding experience.'"

I shake my head, but I'm smiling now, the heaviness in my chest starting to ease. "She's not wrong."

"Nope," Tati says, popping the 'p' as she shifts closer to me, her arm pressing lightly against mine. "But here's the thing, Carleen. This? Us ? It's not just biology. It's not just some chemical reaction telling us we're supposed to be together. It's... it's real .

And we get to make it whatever we want it to be. This feels like a do-over,” she continues. “Like we get to start over, clean slate, and actually try this time.”

I nod, my throat tight as I process her words. “Yeah. A do-over.”

“But,” she adds, tilting her head slightly, her eyes locking onto mine, “we have to be honest with each other. No hiding, no running. If something’s wrong, we talk about it. If something feels off, we say it out loud. Otherwise... this won’t work. It can’t.”

She’s right. Goddess, she’s so right it hurts.

We fall into a comfortable silence after that. Her hand is still resting on my thigh, her thumb tracing slow circles over the fabric. I stare at the TV, but I’m not really watching it. My attention keeps drifting back to her—to the way her lips curve faintly in a private smile, to the way her scent lingers in the space between us, sweet and warm and undeniably Tati .

I shift slightly, turning so I’m facing her more fully, my knee brushing against hers. “You know... you make it really hard to stay in my head when you’re sitting this close.”

She grins, sharp and teasing. “Good. You spend way too much time in there, Alpha.”

I let out a low chuckle, reaching up to tuck a loose strand of her hair behind her ear. My fingers linger there for a moment, grazing the soft skin of her cheek. She leans into the touch, her lashes fluttering slightly as she exhales.

“Tati...” I start, but the words catch in my throat.

“It’s okay, Carleen,” she says softly, her eyes locking onto mine. “Whatever you’re trying to say—it’s okay.”

For a moment, we just look at each other and then, without thinking, without second-guessing myself for once, I lean in and press my lips softly against hers. It's not rushed, not desperate. It's soft, slow—like a promise. Her lips move against mine, her hand sliding up to rest against my chest and it feels like something inside me finally clicks into place.

When we pull back, her forehead rests lightly against mine, and our breaths mingle in the small space between us.

“We’ve got this,” I murmur, my voice low but steady.

Her lips curl into a small smile, her eyes shining. “Yeah, Alpha. We do.”

And for the first time in what feels like forever, I believe it.

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Chapter six

TATI

Being wrapped up in Carleen's arms feels fucking amazing. Her scent wraps around me, the steady rise and fall of her chest beneath my cheek allowing me to relax further against her. Her arm is draped over my waist, holding me close and every time she exhales, the sound rumbles deep in her chest and into me.

Goddess, she's purring for me.

I can't remember the last time I felt this... safe . And not just physically safe, but emotionally too. Like nothing in the world could touch me as long as I'm tucked against her like this. It doesn't help that I told her that this wouldn't work without being honest—because I'm the one holding back. And it isn't just a little secret.

A Beta with a nest? I have no clue how Carleen will take that—I'm not even sure how Ellie would take it if I ever told her. And yet, I want to live out this night before I ruin what we've just started.

The TV drones on in the background, some reality show that neither of us is paying attention to, and the glow from the screen casts a faint light across the room. It feels like we're in our own little bubble—timeless and untouched by the world outside.

Carleen shifts, her fingers brushing up and down my spine. "Tati," she says softly, her voice rough in that way it always gets when she's trying to be vulnerable but doesn't quite know how.

I tilt my head up, my chin resting lightly on her chest so I can meet her gaze. “Yeah, Alpha?”

She takes a breath, her eyes locking onto mine in that way that always feels like she’s seeing straight into my soul. “I want you, Tati. In every way. Body, mind, soul—all of it. But...” She hesitates, her brows pulling together slightly. “It’s going to take time. If I say no to something, it’s not forever. It’s just... not right now.”

“Carleen,” I say, reaching up to cup her cheek. “I get it. I promise, I do. You don’t have to rush for me. I’m not going anywhere.”

We fall into a comfortable silence after that, her thumb still brushing soft circles against my back and I let my eyes drift shut for a moment, just basking in the feeling of being here, with her. But then, because I’m me and I can’t leave heavy conversations hanging forever, I tilt my head up and smirk. “So, Alpha...”

She raises an eyebrow, her lips twitching slightly. “What?”

I shrug casually, trying to keep my voice light. “Do you see yourself ever being part of a pack? Or is this, like... just us against the world forever?” I don’t care either way—both options are fantastic, having her all to myself or sharing her with another Alpha or Beta. As long as she’s still mine.

And just like that, Carleen’s face does something I have never seen it do before.

She turns bright red .

Like, tomato red. The tips of her ears, her cheeks, even down her neck—it’s like someone flipped a switch and turned her into a glowing space heater.

“Oh my goddess,” I gasp, sitting up slightly. “Are you blushing ?”

“No,” she says quickly, her voice way too high-pitched for it to sound convincing. She tries to sit up too, like she’s going to create some space between us, but I’m already wrapping my arms around her waist and dragging her back down.

“Oh no, you’re not escaping, Alpha. You’re blushing! ” Carleen is gorgeous like this—all sharp edges gone and in place, just my woman showing off the most adorable blush in the entire goddamn world.

“Tati—stop,” she groans, covering her face with one hand as her other arm tries to gently push me away. But it’s weak and I can see the corners of her mouth twitching like she’s fighting a smile.

I let out another laugh and lean over her, resting my chin on her chest as I grin up at her. “You’re so cute right now. Oh, my goddess, Carleen. Cute! ”

She drops her hand from her face and gives me a halfhearted glare, but it’s ruined by the way her lips are pulling into a smile. “I’m not cute. I’m—”

“An Alpha? Yeah, yeah. Big, bad, scary Alpha. But right now?” I poke her chest lightly. “You’re adorable . You know, Alpha, I bet you wanted the whole thing—a big pack, a loud house full of chaos and noise and laughter. Kids running around, someone always in the kitchen, someone always in your space.”

Carleen huffs out a breathy laugh, shaking her head. “Tati...”

“No, seriously!” I grin wider. “I bet you had this whole dream in your head. You, in some sprawling house with like... six other people and a garden out back so you’d have fresh veggies for your amazing cooking, and the most adorable little Carleens crawling all over you. Admit it.”

She exhales, her head tipping back slightly as her eyes close. And for a second, I

think she's going to deflect—push it off with a joke or change the subject entirely. But then she speaks, the heaviness of her voice changing the tempo of the conversation. “Yeah. I did. I wanted all of that. The chaos, the noise, the mess. A big family, babies, the whole shebang. But I could never find the right partner,” she continues, her eyes flickering away from mine, her thumb brushing over her knuckles absentmindedly. “Every relationship I tried just... fizzled out, or fell apart. They couldn't handle me or I couldn't handle them. So I poured myself into work instead. Building something with my own hands, focusing on what I could control —it was easier. Safer.”

The vulnerability in her voice is heavy, like she's opening a door to a room she hasn't let anyone into in years. And I hate that she had to make herself small—that she had to give up pieces of a dream she still clearly wants.

I reach out, placing my hand over hers. “Carleen...”

She shakes her head lightly, a faint smile tugging at her lips. “Don't look at me like that, sunshine. I'm not sad about it—not anymore. I'm here, with you and I'm happy about that. But...” She trails off, her voice dipping even lower. “Even now, with you here, I'm still trying to figure out how the rest of it works. How a pack fits into this. How other people fit into this.”

I blink at her, trying to process her words. “Other people?”

She nods slowly. “Tati... I know you. You're not meant to be in something small and contained. You thrive in connection. You light up in a crowd, surrounded by people who love you. You need that kind of energy—you deserve it.”

I shake my head quickly, my heart skipping a beat as I sputter, “What—no. Carleen, that's not true. I don't need anyone else. I have you . That's... that's enough. More than enough.”

Carleen chuckles, shaking her head as she runs her nose against my temple. “No, Tati,” she states, the fullness of her Alpha behind her words. “I see you. I see how you light up when you’re surrounded by people who care about you. I see the way you talk about Ellie and Macon and Savin. I know how you’ve been shaped by the people in your life and it’s beautiful. But it also means that this? Just me and you? It might not always be enough for you. And that’s okay.”

I open my mouth to argue, but the words die on my tongue because... damn it , she’s not wrong.

I’ve spent so much of my life surrounded by connection, by people who’ve filled in the cracks and made me feel whole. I’ve thrived in it. And the thought of Carleen thinking she’s not enough for me—it guts me. Because she is . She’s everything. But that doesn’t mean she’s wrong about the other parts of me.

“I don’t know how I never saw it before. But you, Tati... you want to be cherished. You want to feel loved, like really loved. You want to be the center of something—of someone’s world.” Her hand moves up to cup my cheek, tilting my face gently until I’m forced to meet her gaze. Her brown eyes are warm and unyielding, locked onto mine with so much care it makes my throat tighten. “And sunshine,” she continues, her voice softer now, “I know I can’t give you everything you need. I can’t be everyone you need.”

I open my mouth to argue, to tell her she’s wrong, that she’s enough, that she’s more than enough—but she presses her thumb lightly against my lips, silencing me.

“It’s okay, Tati,” she whispers. “It’s okay. ”

The words wash over me, gentle but firm, and I let out a shaky breath as my eyes flutter shut for just a second.

When I open them again, Carleen's leaning closer, her lips brushing lightly against the tip of my nose in a kiss so sweet it makes my chest ache.

"We're aligned, Tati," she murmurs. "When it comes to family, when it comes to love—we want the same things. To be happy, to build something solid, something real . And whoever comes into our lives— if someone comes into our lives—I'll make it work. Because I want this. I want us. "

I can't breathe. I can't think. I nod—because speaking feels impossible right now—and Carleen smiles before pressing one more kiss to my forehead.

"Sleep on it, Tati. We've got forever ahead of us." She stands, heading to the kitchen and I'm 99% sure she has no idea what she just said. Like it is just that easy, as if every bone in her body wants this. I stand and move to grab some of the dishes as she waves me off. "Tati, you've been driving all day and you haven't gotten a chance to rest. Go. Sleep. I've got this."

My cheeks heat and she just laughs, somehow clocking every last thought in my head. I let out an exaggerated sigh. "I take it back. This isn't wonderful. You're too perceptive."

"And that's exactly what you want, though, isn't it, sunshine?" Her brow raises as her tone deepens and I scurry off down the hallway before I make a fool of myself. That's when the real fun begins as I start unpacking my nest and setting it up.

There's a small corner of the closet that's absolutely perfect, one that I can close away during the day so that it isn't in the way. Tomorrow, I'll show Carleen my favorite spot. Tonight, this is just for me.

I stack the pillows against one corner, drape the blanket over them, and then tug one of Carleen's old sweatshirts I stole. I stuff that in the corner and add a few more small

touches until it feels like mine. Like home.

I sink down into the makeshift nest, pulling the blanket tight around me as I bury my face into the sweatshirt. The faint scent of rain and peaches surrounds me, my shoulders finally relaxing.

For a while, I just lay there, staring at the faint crack of light coming through the bottom of the bedroom door. My mind races, jumping from Carleen's words to the weight of her hand on my cheek to the soft kiss she pressed to my nose.

And then, somewhere in the haze of exhaustion and warmth, my thoughts drift to the future.

To a house full of noise and laughter. To a pack—maybe not a big one, but something solid, something ours. To Carleen standing in the kitchen, cooking while kids run around her feet. To lazy Sunday mornings wrapped up in a bed too big for two people but just right for more.

To love .

And somewhere in the middle of those thoughts, I drift off to sleep, wrapped up in blankets and hope and the faint, lingering scent of my Alpha.

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Chapter seven

CARLEEN

The sound starts low, like an annoying hum in the back of my mind, and then grows louder. Repetitive. Annoying. And it's starting to piss me off.

It drags me out of the best sleep I've had in months. Maybe even years. My bed is still warm and the faint smell of Tati lingers in the air—sweet melon and something sharp and uniquely her. But the infernal beep-beep-beep keeps slicing through the peace.

I crack one eye open.

It's still dark outside. The faint glow from the hallway nightlight spills across my bedroom floor and I swear to the goddess herself if that alarm goes off one more time—

Beep. Beep. Beep.

I groan, throwing myself from the bed, and march down the hallway. It dawns on me a little too late that I'm only wearing the large shirt I wear to bed but Tati has seen worse, I'm sure. When I reach Tati's door, I don't knock. Oh no, I'm way past knocking. I twist the knob and push it open, fully prepared to storm in and shake her awake or at least chuck the offending alarm clock out the window.

But I stop dead in my tracks because... what the hell am I looking at?

The alarm is still screaming from somewhere in the room, but it barely registers because Tati is in the closet.

No. Scratch that. Tati is nesting in the closet.

She's curled up in the softest, fluffiest pile of pillows and blankets I have ever seen. There's even a sweatshirt in the mix— my sweatshirt, to be precise, one I've been looking for—tucked under her cheek like a makeshift pillow. Her hair is spread out around her face in a dark halo, her brows slightly furrowed even in sleep.

And she's so... soft .

If Tati didn't have such a sharp tongue, a bold personality, and the kind of fierce energy that could cut glass, I would swear— swear —she was an Omega. I blink, trying to process what I'm seeing. Because this? This was not on my bingo card for the day.

The alarm shrieks again and I quickly step over to the foot of her nest and dismiss the alarm on her phone before it can ring again. But the sudden silence must wake her because Tati stirs, her lashes fluttering as her hazel eyes peek open. For a split second, she looks so peaceful, so soft and warm and... goddess, mine.

But then she freezes.

Her eyes snap fully open, locking onto me standing over her little nest with what I'm sure is the most bewildered expression ever to cross my face. Her face loses all color as her hands start waving wildly in the air. “Oh my goddess—Carleen—Alpha—wait—” She bolts upright, only to immediately smack her head against the low-hanging shelf above her. “ Ow! ” she yelps, clutching her head with both hands.

“Tati!” I rush forward, instinct taking over as I kneel in front of her, grabbing her hands gently to move them and check her head. “Are you okay? Did you hit it hard?”

Her hazel eyes are wide—panicked, humiliated—as she shakes her head furiously. “I’m fine! I’m fine! Oh goddess, I can explain!” She tries to stand, but we’re both cramped in her little closet nest now, and she ends up tangled in one of her throw blankets, nearly toppling over.

I can’t help it. I snort.

And then I laugh.

Like, full-on laugh. The kind that bubbles up from deep in your chest and spills out before you can stop it.

Tati freezes, her cheeks turning the brightest shade of pink I’ve ever seen and she looks at me like I’ve lost my mind. “Carleen!” she hisses. “Stop laughing! This is—this is serious!”

I try to compose myself, holding up one hand in surrender as I wipe at my eyes with the other. “Okay, okay. I’m sorry, sunshine. It’s just... what is happening right now? Why are you in a nest in your closet?”

Her lips press into a thin line and she crosses her arms over her chest, which—adorably—just makes her look smaller in the middle of all those pillows and blankets. “I... I don’t know!” she bursts out finally. “It’s just—sometimes I like it, okay? I like being surrounded by soft things and cozy stuff and... it feels safe. And I know it’s not very Beta-like and it’s kind of weird, and I was going to tell you, but—”

I lean forward, cupping her face gently in both hands, her words cutting off instantly

as her eyes meet mine. “Hey,” I muse, my thumbs brushing against her cheeks. “Breathe, Tati. It’s okay. You don’t have to explain yourself to me.”

“I just... I didn’t want you to think it was weird,” she whispers.

I smile, pressing my forehead lightly against hers. “Sunshine, I don’t think it’s weird. I think it’s you. And that makes it perfect.”

She closes her eyes for a second, letting out a shaky breath, and I can feel some of the tension leave her shoulders. “Okay,” she murmurs.

I pull back slightly, brushing a loose strand of hair behind her ear. “But if you ever startle me awake at six in the morning with five alarms again, I might have to bury your phone in the backyard.”

She hums a yes as I pull her to her feet and out of her nest. I don’t know much about Omegas because they were always too soft and pliant for me. Tati’s always been the perfect combination of soft and fierce, which is why this development isn’t as surprising as maybe it should be.

Tati tucks her head into my chest and I wrap my arms around her, my purr starting up to calm her. She’s frazzled—no doubt—and even for a non-Omega, this is a pretty big secret.

“I’ve never told anyone,” she mumbles into my shirt. “Not even Ellie. I just... I’m not an Omega. I just grew up around them and everything was so fluffy and I wanted it. People think it’s weird and I’m sorry—”

Her scent sours and I realize how much alike we are. We’ve both been guarding our hearts for entirely different reasons but in the end, we’re both scared to get hurt. And we didn’t have to be. I lead her to the bed, not wanting to encroach on her nest. Tati

immediately curls into my side, her legs propped up beneath her. I'm not even sure she realizes how easily she leans into me but I'm not going to point it out.

"Tati, you said you wanted us to be honest with each other and I think that's going to be hard for the both of us. However, I can't help if you don't tell me what you need." There's a million scenarios running through my head, ones that involve treating Tati like an Omega or fantasies of what she wants both in and out of the bedroom. My breath catches as I try to calm my thoughts and focus only on Tati.

She tucks herself farther into my chest, almost as if she doesn't want me to see her face. "It's just not something I talk about. Mom and Dad know but... Betas aren't supposed to be like this. We're supposed to be balanced, somewhere in the middle. But sometimes, Carleen, I just crave it. That feeling of being safe, of being tucked away somewhere warm and soft, where nothing can touch me."

Her fingers tighten together in her lap and I catch the faintest tremor in her voice when she continues.

"I like being taken care of sometimes. I like feeling cherished, like someone's looking out for me. And the nest—it's not... it's not something I do all the time, but sometimes I just need it. It makes me feel calm. Like the world isn't so loud for a little while."

I can't help the soft chuckle that rumbles up from my chest. Not because it's funny, but because she's so damn adorable when she's vulnerable like this. I lean down, pressing a feather-light kiss to her cheek, letting my lips linger there for just a second longer than necessary.

"Keep going, sunshine," I murmur against her skin.

She shakes her head almost immediately, her short hair swaying slightly as she does.

“That’s it. That’s all of it.”

But her scent betrays her. That rich, sweet melon note thickens in the air, curling around me and I know she’s holding back. I lean back just enough to catch her eyes, one brow lifting in challenge as I smirk. “Tati...”

She avoids my gaze, lips pressed into a stubborn little line, but the faint flush creeping up her neck gives her away.

“You’re lying,” I tease, my voice dipping lower, softer. “Come on, sunshine. Keep going. Tell me the rest.”

She lets out a frustrated little growl, her brows pinching together. “Carleen, it’s embarrassing! ”

“Tati, do you want to know what’s actually embarrassing? Thinking for one second that you wouldn’t want me because of my sexual preferences. Not once did you ever give me any inkling that you wouldn’t accept me. Even if I had never actually laid it all out, you kept telling me you’d love me regardless and I still pushed you away. That’s embarrassing.”

She freezes, her hazel eyes snapping up to meet mine, her lips parting slightly as if she wants to argue. But she doesn’t. She just stares at me, wide-eyed and soft and so very Tati . Her lips twitch and she swallows hard, her cheeks burning a deep pink before letting out a sharp exhale. “I don’t want to be an Omega, Carleen. I don’t. But... sometimes I want the things they have. The way some Alphas take care of them. The way they get to let go, to just— not think. ”

Her voice cracks slightly, but she powers through, her eyes locked on mine.

“I have to think all the time, Carleen. At work, at home, everywhere. I’m always on,

always in control, always planning and fixing and making sure everything's okay. But sometimes... sometimes I just want someone else to take over. Just for a little while." She sucks in a shaky breath and looks away, her voice softer now. "It's stupid, I know."

That wasn't exactly where I thought this conversation was going but I can see it. It makes so much sense. "It's not stupid, though, Tati. There's no one right way to be an Alpha, Beta, or an Omega. Hell, I'm an Alpha that doesn't want an Omega. What would that make me?" She loosens up against my side as she sits back a little to meet my gaze. "Tati, we can be any which way we want to be. And if that means you need a little more love and attention, then I'll be right here to give it." Her scent sweetens just a little and I decide to push, praying that I'm going down the right path. "And if you need an Alpha or two to take over when it's just us so that you don't have to think, I'll be glad to be part of that too."

And there it is, Tati hiding her face in my shoulder again.

"Fuck, you make it sound so... so dirty ," she mumbles into my shirt, one of her hands resting on my thigh. My skin heats beneath her touch, thoughts of Tati beneath me taking over my rational thoughts. Soon , I tell myself. I've been fighting my feelings for so fucking long that I think my body is more ready than my head is.

"Tati, is that not what you want?" I push a little more, getting a glimpse of the woman I've fallen for. "Are you telling me that you wouldn't want an Alpha telling you what to do, making sure you're well cared for?" And this is why she'd thrive under more than one Alpha because while I'm busying myself with new recipes and catering projects, she could be wholly taken care of by another giving her everything she needs.

A pang of loneliness hits me square in the chest but I brush it off and focus on my Beta. She's all that matters right now. She's all that will ever matter. I hold her a little

tighter and start thinking of all the things I can do to start making her feel safe and truly loved.

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Chapter eight

TATI

The day slips by in a blur of tasks and stops—errands piled on top of errands, all while my mind drifts back to Carleen. It’s embarrassing, honestly. I can’t focus for more than five minutes without my brain conjuring up the way she looked at me this morning, her warm brown eyes soft and seeing me in a way that makes my chest ache.

It’s like I’ve got her scent—fresh rain and peaches—woven into my skin now. Every little thing reminds me of her.

By the time I’m pulling into my parents’ driveway, the sun’s starting to dip below the horizon, casting long shadows across the familiar house I grew up in. The memories I made here over the years are ones I cherish, coming home sometimes the sweetest thing I look forward to. In the midst of all the chaos, my parents have always been the rock I can count on—and now I also have Carleen. The porch light flickers on as I step out of my car and I take a deep breath before heading up the stairs.

My mom’s at the door before I can knock, pulling me into a tight hug. Goddess, I didn’t even know how much I needed that. “Tati, baby! You’re finally home,” she says, squeezing me so tight I can barely breathe.

“Hi, Mama,” I murmur into her shoulder, smiling as she finally releases me.

My dad’s not far behind, standing in the doorway with his arms crossed, a faint smirk

on his face. “Look who decided to visit.”

I roll my eyes but step in for a hug anyway. His hug is even tighter than my mom’s, always reminding me that I have a place in this house. Sometimes I’m not sure what I ever did to deserve them. Pushing inside, whatever my mom has prepared for dinner finally hits me in the face.

It smells amazing —garlic, butter, roasted vegetables, and something lemony hanging heavy in the air. My stomach growls audibly and my mom snorts as she ushers me toward the dining table. “You wouldn’t be my baby girl if you weren’t hungry,” my mom chides playfully.

I just shake my head as I slip into my usual chair across from my mother and next to my father. We fall into easy conversation as we eat, my mom recounting some ridiculous neighborhood drama while my dad chimes in with his usual sarcastic commentary. I laugh, genuinely laugh, and for the first time in weeks, I feel like I can breathe without some invisible weight pressing down on my chest. No one brings up how I left on a whim because of what I thought was a failed relationship. Neither of my parents push and ask for details but it feels almost wrong not to tell them that things have worked out, that I’m happy.

My mind drifts back to Carleen, my Alpha—the woman who has accepted everything I am and more.

The way she held me this morning. The way her voice dipped low and rough when she said she’d meet me where I was, in whatever way I needed. The way her scent wrapped around me like a security blanket. The way I keep unconsciously searching for a tether back to her... like I can’t bear to be without her. I catch myself smiling, my fork halfway to my mouth, garlic chicken speared on the end of it.

“Ahem.”

The sound of my mother clearing her throat snaps me out of my daze and I blink up to find both of my parents staring at me across the table. My mom's got one eyebrow raised and my dad looks like he's fighting back a smirk.

I freeze, mid-chew, my eyes wide. "What?"

My mom tilts her head slightly, her lips twitching like she's trying not to laugh. "You're awfully smiley tonight, sweetheart."

I swallow the bite of chicken, my cheeks heating up. "I—no, I'm not."

My dad snorts, shaking his head as he sets his fork down. "Tati, you've been grinning at your plate for the past ten minutes. You look like you're in a rom-com montage."

I groan, dragging a hand down my face. "I'm just... I'm in a good mood, okay? Moving back has been a lot, and Ellie just had the babies, and it's just—there's a lot going on!" My face heats up as I try to figure out the best way to drop the Carleen bomb. I'm not embarrassed but there's no doubt that both of my parents can smell her scent on me. I haven't been exactly subtle and I did fall asleep with her sweatshirt beneath my head last night.

My mom smiles softly, her head resting on her hand as she watches me carefully. "All of that's wonderful, baby. But that's not what's got you glowing like that."

I open my mouth to argue, but my dad cuts me off with a casual, "And you haven't mentioned moving back in. Not once. And... if I'm not mistaken, you smell like someone we all know and love."

And there it is. I wish the floor could open up and swallow me whole. My fork clatters onto my plate, and I'm pretty sure my face has gone a few deeper shades of red. "Um, yes. I was going to tell you. I just... yes, me and Carleen." I'm not even

sure why I'm so embarrassed about it.

My dad laughs, reaching for my hand across the table. He squeezes it reassuringly before returning to cut into his chicken. "Tati, you're the one who came in here smelling like rain and peaches. You might as well have walked in with her name stamped on your forehead."

"Stop!" I wail, my voice muffled behind my hands. It's my fault that my parents even know that scent—not because of the nights I spent wrapped around Carleen but because every time I came back home, I tried to recreate the scent. It got so bad that my parents told me I could have no more than one or two candles or scents in my room at a time. I was obsessed. I still am.

And I've never been able to truly recreate the same scent.

My mom's voice cuts into my thoughts as she smiles across the table at me. "Tati, sweetheart, we're just happy you're happy. You deserve that. And if it's Carleen who's putting that smile on your face? Well, we've always adored her."

"She's a good Alpha, Tati," my dad adds, "A little intense, sure, but she's got a good heart." Intense is one word for it but she's always been soft with me and I love it.

My mom hums in agreement. "And she's always looked out for you, even when you two weren't speaking. I know you've been through a lot, baby, but if you two are finding your way back to each other, then I'm 100% on board."

My throat tightens instantly and I blink a few times, trying to fight back the sudden burn of tears in my eyes. She says it so simply, so casually, like it's the most obvious thing in the world. Like she's always known it would happen.

"Thanks, Mom," I mumble around another bite of food.

“And you know what else?” she continues, her lips twitching again. “You should invite her over sometime. Dinner, lunch, coffee—I don’t care. I’d love to see her again, now that the two of you are together.”

I swear my parents live to torture me. “Jesus Christ, Mom. It’s really new. I can’t just drag her over here but yes, I’d like that.” Sitting around the table with my Alpha beside me? That would be a dream come true but maybe like... next week or the week after when we aren’t still fumbling around each other.

Laughter follows as we finish dinner, my thoughts falling back on Carleen and the few times she’s met my parents in passing.

She’s always been Carleen —Ellie’s older sister, polite, respectful, confident in that effortless way that only she can pull off. But she’d never lingered. Never stayed long enough for my mom to pull her aside and bombard her with nosy questions or for my dad to give her one of those heavy, fatherly looks that says, Take care of my daughter.

Maybe that’s going to change now. Maybe we’ll get there. Hopefully, we will.

“Hey,” my mom says, her voice pulling me back to the present. Her warm eyes are locked on me, her head tilted slightly to the side. “I’m proud of you, Tati. For everything. You’ve built a life for yourself, even when things got hard. You’ve made your way and you’ve done it with your head held high.”

My chest tightens again and this time I can’t stop the tears that gather in the corners of my eyes. I look down at my plate, my voice cracking slightly as I speak. “Thanks, Mom.”

Because I know not everyone gets this. Not everyone has parents who support them so unconditionally. Not everyone gets to sit at a dinner table and hear those words

without judgment, without expectation.

I didn't even finish school. I never got the degree my parents always dreamed I'd have. I found more love, more life, in dancing under the neon lights of Euphoria. And yeah, maybe it's not everyone's dream job, but it pays well—really well—and it's allowed me to save up, to build a life I'm proud of. My mom sees that. My dad sees that. And knowing they love me not in spite of it, but because of it? It's everything.

The rest of dinner passes in soft conversation. They ask about Ellie and the babies, about how she's handling being a mom to three infants. I tell them about Quinn's tiny fingers, Oliver's sleepy face, and Aria's surprisingly strong little grip. My dad jokes about how Macon's probably aged ten years overnight, and we all laugh.

By the time the plates are empty and the leftovers are packed away in the fridge, I feel calmer—my thoughts reset, and my belly full. “Don't be a stranger, baby girl,” my dad whispers into my ear as he hugs me tight. I don't want to let him go but work beckons and every bone in my body wants to rush back to Carleen's apartment and settle in her arms.

“I won't. I promise,” I say, hugging my mother next. With one last look around, I disappear back out into the evening air, ready to step back into the life that I left behind.

Walking back into Euphoria feels like slipping into a second skin. The pulse of bass-heavy music thrums through the floorboards, the faint scent of vanilla candles mixed with stage makeup and perfume hanging heavy in the air. The flashing lights, the velvet curtains, the glint of the poles under the glow of stage lights—it's all home.

It's like riding a bike. No matter how long it's been, your body just remembers.

The only thing missing is Ellie at my side as we joke about all the other prissy Betas just out here looking for an Alpha to take them home. I wonder if Ellie would ever step on the stage again or if her interests have realigned to babies and her beautiful Omega. That's a question for another day.

The moment I step through the employee entrance, Eugene's sharp voice carries over the noise. "Well, well, if it isn't our favorite little hurricane."

I grin as the Alpha steps into view, arms crossed over his chest. His bleached-blond hair is slicked back, and he's wearing a sequined blazer over a graphic tee. It seems he hasn't changed much in the months I've been gone which just makes it easier to step right back into the routine I left.

"Hey, Eugene," I say, my grin widening.

He studies me for a beat, his dark eyes sharp as he takes me in from head to toe. "You look good, kid. Rested. Happy, even. Don't go screwing it up by falling off the stage tonight, yeah?"

I laugh, shaking my head. "You know me—I always land on my feet."

He snorts. "That's what I'm afraid of. Go get ready, Tati. And don't make me regret letting you come back."

I toss him a salute as I slink past, weaving through the backstage chaos. The dressing room is buzzing with energy—girls in various states of undress, stage lights reflecting off glitter-dusted skin, and laughter ringing loud enough to drown out the muffled music from the main floor. Goddess, it feels like a second home even as chaotic as it is.

"Tati!"

A few of the other girls spot me, their voices rising in excited squeals as they pull me into a flurry of hugs, compliments, and a barrage of questions. I've never enjoyed the racket but in the moment, I preen from the attention.

"Where the hell have you been?" one asks, her dark red lips forming a perfect pout.

"I thought you were never coming back!" another chimes in, adjusting the straps on her rhinestone bra.

I shrug, brushing them off with an easy smile. "Needed a little break, that's all. Had to clear my head."

They seem to accept that answer, though one of them—Casey, tall, leggy, and always three steps ahead of everyone else—grins wickedly as she sidles up beside me.

"Well, your head might be clear, but your scent is telling a whole different story, Tati." She wiggles her perfectly manicured brows, and the girls burst into laughter.

I roll my eyes, even as heat creeps up the back of my neck. "Oh, shut up, Casey. Good to see you're still here," I throw back playfully. Casey was always one of the ones out looking for an Alpha, eyes peeled for the perfect pack to slip into. I guess she still hasn't found what she's looking for, not that it matters to me.

But they're already giggling and whispering, throwing me teasing looks as I head to my station and rumble through my bag for one of my tried and true outfits—a sleek black number with rhinestones lining the edges. The plunging neckline shows off just enough and the high slit leaves my legs on full display. The chatter continues around me, but as I swipe on my red lipstick and fluff up my short, green-highlighted hair, I feel that pang in my chest—the one that's been sitting there ever since Ellie left.

This is the part of the job I don't always love. The giggling, the gossip, the endless

talk about who they're going home with after their sets. It's all part of the atmosphere, sure, but it's never been why I'm here.

I'm here to dance . It's the only way I've ever been able to truly express myself, to let go of the noise in my head and just feel . I shake off the feeling, plastering on a sharp grin as I finish my makeup and head toward the lineup where Eugene's waiting, clipboard in hand.

"Alright, Tati," he says, giving me a once-over before raising an unimpressed brow. "It's been a while, so let me make one thing clear—if you mess this up, you're on table duty until you remember how to walk in heels."

I let out a sharp laugh. "You wound me, Eugene."

He smirks. "Get out there and remind them why they missed you, kid."

The music changes, the familiar opening notes of my number filling the air as the curtains part and the lights hit the stage.

Stepping onto the platform feels like slipping into the deepest part of myself—where confidence comes as naturally as breathing, where every step, every sway of my hips feels deliberate, controlled, mine . I can feel the crowd's energy, hear the scattered cheers and whistles, see the way heads turn as I move across the stage with the other girls. But none of that matters.

Because she's here.

My eyes lock onto the front row, and there she is— Carleen .

She's leaning back in her chair, one arm draped casually over the backrest, her sharp brown eyes fixed on me with an intensity that makes my knees weak. She's in one of

her fitted black blazers, her hair styled in soft, natural curls around her face, her lips pressed into a faint smirk.

But it's her eyes that do it.

She's not watching the stage. She's not watching the other dancers. She's watching me .

The music pulses around me, the lights flashing across my skin, and suddenly, every movement I make feels like it's for her . I roll my hips, my fingers trailing over my thigh before I turn, arching my back slightly as I glance over my shoulder—and yeah, she's still watching. Her gaze feels like hands on my skin, like warm breath against my neck, like something heavy and possessive and Alpha .

Every time I glance her way, every time I let my fingers trail down my thigh or toss my hair over my shoulder, her expression darkens—her lips part slightly, her chest rising just a little faster. It makes me shiver. Makes my stomach twist and my pulse race. And goddess help me, I lean into it. I dance for her , my body following the beat but my focus never leaving those dark, hungry eyes.

It feels like a game, but one I'm more than willing to play.

When the song starts to fade, the final notes vibrating through the speakers, I hit my ending pose—a slow, deliberate arch backward, my body stretched out and vulnerable, one arm raised above my head.

The crowd cheers, whistles filling the air, but when I lift my head and look back toward the front row—

She's gone.

My stomach drops slightly as I climb down from the stage, the glow of the performance still buzzing in my veins but now tinted with confusion. Did she leave? Did I—did we—do something wrong?

“Tati!” Casey grabs my arm as I pass her backstage, her grin wicked. “Girl, whoever that Alpha was? She looked like she wanted to eat you alive.”

I force a laugh, shaking my head as I slip past the other girls and head toward the dressing room. My heart’s still racing, my thoughts tumbling over themselves as I push open the door—

And freeze.

Because Carleen’s right there .

She’s leaning casually against one of the vanities, arms crossed over her broad chest, a wild, dangerous grin pulling at her lips. Her brown eyes are sharp, locking onto me the second I step into the room.

“Alpha,” I breathe, my voice barely audible over the chaos of my heartbeat.

I start to say something else, something witty or sarcastic—something Tati-like—but before I can get a word out, Carleen pushes off the vanity, crosses the space between us in two long strides, and crashes her mouth against mine.

Her hands are firm on my waist, pulling me flush against her body as her lips claim mine with a mix of hunger and devotion. It’s not just a kiss—it’s a statement. It’s ownership and promise and something so deep it makes my thighs press together as I swallow back a moan.

My fingers clutch at her blazer, holding on like she might slip away again if I let go.

Her scent surrounds me, that fresh rain blooming around me, and it fills every crevice of my chest until I feel like I might burst. When she finally pulls back, we're both breathing hard, our foreheads pressed together.

"I thought I'd be jealous," Carleen says softly, her voice low and rough around the edges. "Watching you up there, dancing in front of everyone, letting them see you like that ." Her hands slide up my sides, her thumbs brushing against my ribs as she tilts her head, her gaze boring into mine. "But I wasn't," she continues. "All I felt was pride. Because that was you, sunshine. My Beta, up there—dancing, free, and so damn happy . "

My heart stutters in my chest and my breath catches in my throat.

Her Beta.

Those words repeat in my head, over and over, until I can't stop the grin that breaks across my face. " Your Beta?" I whisper, my voice trembling slightly.

Carleen nods, her lips curving into a softer smile this time. "Yeah, Tati. Mine. "

And then she kisses me again, slower this time, softer—but just as deep, just as sure.

The sound of the other girls in the dressing room finally breaks through—soft gasps, scattered laughter, someone muttering, "Get it, Tati!"

But I don't care.

I don't care about anything except the way Carleen is holding me, the way she's looking at me like I'm the most important thing in the world. When she finally pulls back again, her voice drops into something softer, something a little more deviant . "If you're a good girl tonight, sunshine... we can cuddle in your little nest later."

Oh.

Oh.

My scent shifts immediately, growing sweeter, thicker, like melon in the height of summer. I swear my knees nearly give out as I scramble to pull away and start gathering my stuff, my hands shaking as I shove clothes, makeup, and random accessories into my bag. Carleen laughs behind me, a mixture of a chuckle and her Alpha purr, and it only makes me move faster.

The other girls are still giggling and whispering, but I'm already halfway out the door, bag slung over my shoulder and my heart pounding so loud it's all I can hear.

"See you at home, sunshine," Carleen calls after me.

I don't stop, don't turn around—I just bolt for the exit, my face flushed, my heart racing, and my scent still sweet in the air around me. But despite the chaos in my chest, one thought rises above the rest:

I'm hers.

And tonight?

She's mine .

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Chapter nine

CARLEEN

The soft morning light filters through the curtains, casting gentle shadows across the bedroom floor. I stretch my arms overhead, the joints in my back crackling in protest. My muscles are sore in that good way—like I actually slept, like my body finally let go of the tension it's been carrying for months.

And yeah, I know exactly why I slept so well. I glance over at the petite Beta in my arms, the faint scent of sweet melon lingering in the air, in the pillows, and now in my clothes. My Beta's scent. My girl.

Goddess, that still feels so surreal to say.

She used to just be Ellie's best friend and then at some point, things switched over. I'm not sure when but it doesn't matter because Tati is now mine to protect and I wouldn't have it any other way.

Pushing to my feet, I turn to look at the nest still stuffed into the closet, Tati curled up in the middle. Her face twists up in frustration at my absence but she doesn't wake up. Instead, she unconsciously pads around for something before pulling the pillow I slept on into her chest.

Goddess, everything about that is adorable. And her nest is cozy, colorful, chaotic—and tucked away like a secret. But that's not gonna fly. Not in my house.

I glance around her room, trying to picture where we could set something bigger up. If she's gonna have a nest, it's gonna be somewhere she can actually breathe—not shoved into a corner like some dirty little secret. The corner by the window would work. Natural light, plenty of space. I nod to myself, already mentally planning how I'm going to rearrange the furniture.

I'll admit, finding out about this little quirk of hers threw me off at first. Tati, with her sharp tongue and stubborn streak and neon highlights, nesting? It seemed almost... out of place. But then again, it doesn't. Not when I really thought about it.

For weeks when we were first together, I'd seen the way her face lit up when she spotted something cute in a shop window. The way her eyes softened at the sight of bright colors, how she always gravitated toward softness—whether it was a stuffed animal while shopping for Ellie's nursery or a pastel hoodie she was stealing from my closet.

She's always been this way. I just didn't see it before. Hell, I'm not even sure Ellie knows about this side of her. And that just goes to show how alike Tati and I are. We've both been hiding little pieces of ourselves, thinking the other wouldn't understand.

But I do.

And now? Now I'm gonna make damn sure she knows there's no need to hide anymore.

With that decision made, I head toward the kitchen, focusing on what to prepare for breakfast. I'm halfway through mentally designing an artisan spread—poached eggs, hand-twisted pastries, fresh fruit laid out like some overpriced Instagram brunch—when I freeze.

Tati.

Her voice echoes in my head from last night, that playful little edge she always gets when she's challenging me. "Sometimes food doesn't have to be a masterpiece, Alpha. Sometimes it can just be... easy. Or fun."

I huff out a small laugh, shaking my head as I move toward the pantry. Alright, fine. We'll keep it simple. But simple doesn't mean half-assed, not in this kitchen.

I grab a carton of eggs from the fridge, setting them gently on the counter before pulling out the loaf of fresh sourdough I baked yesterday. It's crusty and golden, the kind of bread that fills the whole house with that warm, yeasty smell when it's in the oven.

Eggs and toast. Simple. Easy.

I fill a pot with water, set it on the stove, and wait for it to boil before gently dropping in the eggs. Meanwhile, I slice up the sourdough before tossing a few pieces into the toaster. The sound of the water bubbling fills the kitchen and I lean against the counter, letting my mind wander as I wait.

This moment feels perfect. Domestic. Calm. Like the kind of morning I used to dream about when I thought about having someone. Not just someone to share my bed, not just someone to come home to after a long day, but someone to build something with. For years, I gave up, thinking that there wouldn't be someone who'd understand.

Even when I thought I had found the perfect person, everything fell apart when I couldn't give them what they needed. I tried to help them understand that it wasn't just a choice but my entire being. They called me a liar and in return, I stuffed down my emotions and pretended it didn't hurt.

But Tati's not just anyone. She's everything and I can't fucking wait until the moment I'm ready to give it all to her.

The toaster pops and I jump slightly, laughing at myself as I grab the warm slices and set them on plates. The eggs follow shortly after. A sprinkle of salt, a little cracked pepper—done. It's not extravagant, but it's right. It's what she asked for.

My phone buzzes from the counter and I glance over, expecting a text from a client or maybe even a cheeky one from Tati if she's woken up. But instead, Ellie's name is lighting up the screen along with an incoming video call.

I fumble to dry my hands on a dish towel before swiping the screen. "Morning, little sister."

Ellie's face fills the screen and even through the pixelated connection, I can see the exhaustion in her eyes. But there's something else too—something soft and warm and content. Aria is swaddled tightly against Ellie's chest, only a tiny tuft of dark hair peeking out from the blanket. And curled into Ellie's side like he's made of glass and the couch is the only thing keeping him together is Savin.

"Oh, Ellie..." I murmur, my voice softer now. "You look like a momma bear guarding her cubs."

Ellie laughs lightly, her voice still hoarse from exhaustion. "That's exactly how it feels, Carlie. These little potatoes have me wrapped around their fingers already."

I can't stop the grin that pulls at my lips. "Aria's already claimed you, huh? That little one is going to be glued to your hip for the rest of your life. Calling it now."

Ellie tilts her head down slightly, her lips pressing against the top of Aria's swaddled head. "Don't remind me. Macon's already joking about getting me one of those baby

carrier backpacks for when she refuses to let me put her down.”

We both laugh at that and for a brief moment, it feels like the weight of the last few weeks lifts just a little. I tilt my head slightly, trying to catch a glimpse beyond Ellie. “Where are the boys? Don’t tell me you’ve figured out how to phase out the crying.”

Ellie snorts softly. “I wish. No, Macon took them out to the living room. They were in rare form this morning, and Savin hasn’t been able to sleep much these last few days, so Macon’s trying to give him a break.”

My eyes flick to Savin, curled up so tightly against Ellie that he looks more like a shadow than a person. His face is pale, almost too pale, and the faint circles under his eyes look bruised.

Ellie must catch the shift in my expression because she adjusts the phone slightly, her voice quieter now. “He’s okay, Carlie. Really. He’s just... tired. He was there for every single second the last few weeks before the babies came. Every false contraction, every doctor’s appointment, every late-night craving. He didn’t let me out of his sight and now it’s catching up to him.”

I nod slowly, my throat tightening as I watch Savin’s chest rise and fall steadily. “He needs time to recover, Ellie. He’s got to let his body catch up.”

She gives me a tired smile, her fingers brushing through Savin’s soft hair as he stirs slightly but doesn’t wake. “That’s why Macon took time off work. He wants Savin to have the space to rest without worrying about me or the babies. And honestly, Carleen... we’re okay. I mean, I’m tired and overwhelmed, and sometimes I cry because I can’t find a clean burp cloth, but we’re okay. ”

I let out a long breath, leaning against the counter as I watch her face. “You’ve got your hands full, Ellie, but you’ve never looked happier.”

Ellie's face lights up and despite the exhaustion, despite the dark circles and the faint crack in her voice, she looks radiant . "I am happy, Carleen. Tired, yes. Stressed, absolutely. But happy."

For a moment, we just look at each other—sisters across a screen, both carrying different weights on our shoulders but holding onto something solid and real. Then Ellie's brows lift a faint smirk gracing her lips. "Alright, enough about me. What about you? You look..." She squints, her smirk widening. "You look soft , Carleen. Suspiciously soft. What's going on over there?"

I let out a breathy laugh, shaking my head as I rub the back of my neck. "It's... good, Ellie. Better than good. It feels like we didn't even stop, you know? Like we picked up right where we left off and I'm so mad at myself for ever pushing her away. For ever thinking I wouldn't be enough for her."

Ellie smiles softly, nodding. "You two always made sense, Carlie. Even when you tried to convince yourself otherwise."

We say our goodbyes shortly after, Ellie shifting Aria as Savin sighs softly in his sleep. When the call ends, I stand there for a moment, my phone still in my hand, the weight of everything settling deep in my chest. Before I can put my phone down, an email notification pops up on the screen.

Culinova Corp Event Management – Inquiry

I blink, my brows furrowing as I tap the notification open.

"Dear Ms. Monroe, We are hosting a series of exclusive fall events for high-profile clients this upcoming season and would love to discuss catering partnerships with Eclectic Catering. Your work has come highly recommended, and we believe your expertise would be a perfect match for our upcoming events. To ensure synergy,

we're inviting selected chefs to submit a one-week trial menu before final contracts are signed."

Culinova. Holy shit.

They're massive—luxury events, celebrity galas, exclusive yacht parties. This could change everything for my small ass company. And a trial week? That's bold. And honestly? Kind of brilliant. It's not just about making food—it's about proving I can handle them. Their clients, their vision, their expectations. And let's be real—Culinova's expectations are sky-high.

My phone buzzes in my hand, the name on the screen lighting up: Culinova – R. Alexander .

My eyebrows shoot up. They sure don't waste any time. I swipe to answer, clearing my throat to put on my customer service voice. It's been a few months since I've had a full catering job and while I don't need the money, it would give me something to do. "This is Carleen Monroe."

A deep, smooth voice comes through the line. Confident. Polished. Absolutely Alpha.

"Ms. Monroe, this is Robert Alexander, CEO of Culinova Events. Thank you for taking my call."

"Mr. Alexander, the pleasure's mine. I just received your email."

"I assumed as much." There's a faint chuckle on the other end, but it's brief. "I'm reaching out directly because we have... a situation."

My brows knit together and I shift my weight, crossing one arm over my chest. "What kind of situation?" I try not to let the excitement or desperation show through

my voice but emailing and calling at six am means that it's not just a situation. It's more of an emergency.

"One of our previously confirmed chefs backed out. Personal reasons, they said, though I suspect it's more about nerves. Our fall event isn't just a party, Ms. Monroe—it's an experience. We can't afford missteps."

I nod, even though he can't see me. "I understand. And you need someone who can step in, last minute, and deliver without a hitch."

"Exactly." His voice sharpens, the authority in it impossible to miss. "Your name was referred to me by someone I trust. I took a look at your portfolio, your reviews, your work—and let me be clear, Ms. Monroe, we don't usually extend offers to chefs outside our inner circle. But... you impressed me."

I exhale slowly, my chest tightening with a mix of nerves and excitement. Impressing the head of Culinova is no small feat. They're on the face of every culinary magazine, showing off their competitions and events in a way that I'll never reach on my own. "Thank you, Mr. Alexander. I'd be honored to work with Culinova."

"I'm glad to hear that," he replies. "I'm sending two of my best to assist you—Ryder and Ashton St. James. They'll be working with you on logistics, prep, and quality control during your trial week. They're efficient, professional, and sharp as knives. You'll be in good hands."

Ryder and Ashton St. James. The names ring faint bells—well-known chefs and event coordinators in their own right. Alphas, from what I remember. And if they're part of Culinova's top team, they're damn good at what they do.

"I look forward to meeting them," I say, my voice steady despite the way my mind is already spinning with prep ideas and menu drafts. Only a week to prepare the biggest

menu of my entire career. Fuck, I need to go shopping for ingredients.

“We have your address down as 356 Hedon Lane, Apt 32, correct?” I manage a yes but it’s almost as if my response isn’t important. “They’re on their way, then. I hope everything works out, Ms. Monroe.”

The second I hang up the phone with Robert, I realize two very important things:

One—this could be the biggest break of my career. Two—I might’ve just signed my death warrant.

“They’re on their way,” I mutter to myself, staring down at the now-ominous black screen of my phone.

They’re on their way.

As in Ryder and Ashton St. James —Culinova’s golden boys, the Alphas who could probably turn water into wine and raw dough into a Michelin-starred dish.

And they have my home address .

My apartment .

The two-bedroom apartment where my Beta is still asleep in a nest tucked into a closet and where my fridge is stocked with leftover sourdough and eggs. Well, there's other items as well but not nearly on the level of motherfucking Culinova's golden boys. I glance at the clock above the stove. 7:06 a.m.

The St. James are coming here, now .

“Shit. Shit. Shit. ”

My brain goes into overdrive and I'm already moving before I realize what I'm doing. I shove the plates of breakfast off to the side, rushing toward my room to grab clean clothes and a towel. I can't meet two of the most influential Alphas in the culinary world wearing sweatpants and yesterday's eyeliner.

I slam the bathroom door shut, lean against it for half a second to catch my breath, and then turn on the shower. The water is ice cold because of course it is. "Goddess, give me strength."

I don't think I've ever taken a faster shower in my life. My hair is barely rinsed and I'm still scrubbing shampoo out of my ear as I wrap a towel around me and rush back into my room. I pull on black tailored pants and a crisp white button-up, rolling up the sleeves to my elbows. Professional, clean, sharp.

I pause at my reflection, my face still flushed, my hair damp and curling slightly against my forehead. It'll have to do. And now it's time to wake up my sweet Beta so she's not thrown off when the two most important people of my career show up in my kitchen.

I'm definitely going to die today.

Chapter ten

TATI

The smell of toast and something warm and buttery drags me out of sleep. My nest is soft, cozy, and honestly? I could stay here forever. But the scent keeps pulling me—carbs and something savory, with just a faint hint of citrus.

A shadow falls across the doorway of my room and then there's Carleen. Hair still damp from a rushed shower, sleeves rolled up on her crisp button-up, and a sharpness in her brown eyes that means business. But when she looks at me, when she takes in the sleepy mess I am, her whole face softens.

"Morning, sunshine," she murmurs, stepping forward and kneeling next to my nest.

"Morning..." I croak out, voice raspy and thick with sleep.

Before I can fully process what's happening, Carleen leans in and starts pressing quick, feather-light kisses all over my face—my forehead, my cheeks, the tip of my nose. I giggle and squirm, trying to push her away, but she just huffs out a warm laugh and keeps going.

"Alpha!" I whine, burying my face in my hands.

"Up and at 'em, sweetheart," she says, her voice lilting with amusement. "I've got a busy morning, and you're coming with me—well, to the living room, at least."

She grabs me under the arms and hauls me out of the nest like I weigh nothing, guiding me out of the room with steady hands and gentle nudges. I stumble down the hallway, still half-asleep, until she deposits me onto the couch.

I blink up at her, wide-eyed and still tangled in the hoodie I slept in. “Am I being exiled? Did I do something wrong?”

Carleen snorts, setting a plate of golden toast, perfectly boiled eggs, and a tall glass of orange juice down in front of me. “You’re not in trouble but I need you out of the kitchen for a little while.” She playfully taps my nose like she knows I would have woken, stumbled in, and started making a mess of her counters.

I grab a piece of toast and shove it in my mouth, chewing as I eye her suspiciously. “Why?”

She sighs, scrubbing a hand down her face before giving me one of those patient-but-firm looks that makes my stomach flip. “I’ve got people coming over. Important people. From Culinova. ”

The toast nearly falls out of my mouth. “ Culinova? Like... the Culinova?”

Carleen nods, her lips twitching as she fights back a smile at my dramatics.

“Alpha!” I squeal, bouncing slightly on the couch. “That’s amazing! Do you know how huge that is? Oh my goddess, are you going to do one of those insane luxury parties where people drink gold flakes and eat flowers carved into swans?” I’ve only been part of the entertainment at parties like that but I make sure to steal a few bites of food because I’ll never get another chance otherwise.

Carleen crosses her arms over her chest, one eyebrow raised. “Something like that.”

I'm still vibrating with excitement, my toast wobbling in my hand as I gesture wildly. "You're gonna kill this, Carleen. They're going to love you. They'll be stupid not to sign you right then and there."

Her shoulders relax slightly and she reaches forward to squeeze my hand. "Thanks, sunshine. That means a lot." Then her stern face is back, her hand still in mine as she levels me with a look. "Which is exactly why you need to stay out of the kitchen today."

I gasp, mock-offended. "Excuse me? Are you saying my peanut butter and jelly masterpieces aren't Michelin-star material?"

Carleen snorts, rolling her eyes. "Sweetheart, I loved your PB&J, but let's be honest—they're not going to impress the St. James pack."

My smile freezes. My eyes go wide. "Wait... what pack?"

Carleen's lips press together, like she's already regretting letting that slip.

"The St. James pack," she says carefully, trying to keep her voice neutral.

I blink at her, processing. And then it hits me.

"The St. James pack? Like, the two Alphas on every food magazine cover in your house? The ones everyone lowkey obsesses over because of their 'flavor balance' and 'artistic presentation? And well, because they're fucking hot? Those St. James Alphas? Ryder and Ashton St. James?" I slap a hand over my mouth, my eyes going wide. "Carleen! They're coming here? To this apartment? To your kitchen?!"

Carleen pinches the bridge of her nose and nods once. "Yes. They're on their way. And yes, I may have agreed to this without thinking it through. Don't remind me."

The second Carleen disappears into the kitchen, I'm left alone on the couch with my half-eaten toast, my brain absolutely buzzing . Ryder and Ashton St. James. In this apartment. In Carleen's kitchen.

My heart is racing and I can't even blame it on the caffeine because I haven't touched the coffee Carleen brought me yet. My eyes dart to the stack of magazines on the rack next to the armchair—glossy pages filled with sharp angles, sultry gazes, and dishes so beautiful they look like art. Without thinking, I snatch one of them from the top, nearly spilling my juice in the process.

Culinova's Power Duo: Ryder & Ashton St. James Take Culinary Perfection to New Heights

The cover is ridiculous . Ryder, all sharp blue eyes and dirty blonde hair styled to perfection, stands with his arms crossed, a faint scar slicing through one eyebrow. Ashton leans casually beside him, his warm brown skin practically glowing under the studio lights, his easy grin offset by the sharp glint of the diamond studs in his ears.

They look untouchable. Unreal. And now they're coming here .

“Okay, okay, deep breaths,” I mumble around a mouthful of toast, flipping through the pages.

The article talks about their rise to fame—the way Ryder handles precision and artistry while Ashton brings soul and warmth to every dish. Together, they've become Culinova's golden boys, headlining the world's most exclusive events.

While most people are out here drooling over actors and models—people like Macon and Savin , Ellie's mates—I've always been a food girl. Give me a beautifully seared steak over a red carpet walk any day.

I'd eat anything. Sweet, salty, savory—I don't care. Food is a language, one I've always understood. And being so close to Carleen all these years has only sharpened that love. She taught me about balance and seasoning, about letting ingredients speak for themselves even if I prefer a mean peanut butter and jelly sandwich. And now? Now I might get to see Ashton and Ryder in action.

This is a dream.

Except... my stomach feels tight, a knot curling deep in my belly that has nothing to do with excitement and everything to do with... something else. I set the magazine down and lean back onto the couch, chewing nervously on my bottom lip as I stare at the door. Then, like fate decided to play the most wicked trick on me, there's a sharp knock that echoes through the apartment.

Carleen's voice carries from the kitchen, sharp and confident. "Stay put, Tati."

I freeze as Carleen strides to the door. Her entire posture has shifted—her shoulders squared, her chin lifted, every bit of her radiating that no-nonsense Alpha energy that makes me want to... well, it makes me want something .

She swings the door open and I swear I forget how to breathe.

Because there they are.

Ryder and Ashton St. James.

The pictures don't do them justice. Not even close.

Ryder is taller than I expected, his shoulders broad under a fitted black button-up. His blue eyes are sharp as they scan the apartment before settling on Carleen. The faint scar through his brow adds an edge to his already severe expression.

And Ashton? Ashton is... heat. He's all relaxed confidence, his grin sharp and playful as he adjusts the sleeves of his blazer. His brown skin practically glows under the warm light filtering through the window, and those diamond studs in his ears catch every flicker of it.

But it's not just the way they look .

It's the way they feel.

I stuff another piece of toast into my mouth, trying to swallow down the moan creeping up the back of my throat. Ryder and Ashton both bow their heads respectfully and I swear my toast nearly falls out of my mouth when they actually take off their shoes at the entrance.

What kind of fever dream is this?

Their scents hit me like a brick wall—bourbon, deep and heady, mixed with something bright and sharp like earthy citrus. It fills every corner of the living room, curling into my lungs, making my knees weak even though I'm sitting down .

My chest feels tight and a flush creeps up my neck, my skin prickling with heat as something deep, deep in my chest stirs.

My body knows them.

No.

No, no, no.

I press my palm over my mouth, whispering into it, "There's no fucking way."

And yet... my brain short-circuits because all I can think about is climbing into Ryder's lap—or Ashton's, I'm not choosy—and burying my face in the crook of his neck, inhaling their combined earthy bourbon-and-citrus scent until I'm dizzy from it.

I let out a small, breathy giggle under my breath, half-choked around my toast. "So it's like that," I mutter to myself, a smirk pulling at my lips. I'm gonna need so much therapy . And several hours with a vibrator after these few moments.

Ryder leans back against the counter, attentively listening to every word falling from Carleen's lips but it's Ashton that now has my full attention. He's studying Carleen as she talks, but his lips are tugged into a faint grin, the corner of his mouth twitching like he's holding back a laugh. His bottom lip is pulled between his teeth, one of his brows raised in what seems like awe as Carleen speaks.

Everything about him is fucking perfect and don't even get me started on his eyelashes—thick, dark, criminally pretty, and fluttering every time he blinks.

Oh, goddess, help me.

Because all I can picture now is Ashton above me, those beautiful brown eyes locked on mine as he pins my wrists down, his breath warm against my neck. The sharp jolt of heat that zips through me at the thought makes me choke on my food and I scramble for my juice, grabbing the glass and downing it in one go.

My stomach is doing Olympic-level gymnastics, my skin feels too tight, and my head is spinning with the scent of bourbon, citrus, and peaches.

Too much.

I fumble for my phone, my hands trembling as I unlock it and pull up my chat with Ellie. If anyone can help me sort through this tangled mess of feelings and biology

and... whatever the hell is happening right now, it's her.

SOS. Emergency.

?? What happened? Are you okay? Is Carleen okay??

I'm fine. Carleen's fine. But Ryder and Ashton St. James are HERE.

Like... in your HOUSE? THE St. James pack?

YES.

Holy shit. Okay. Deep breath. What's happening?

They smell really good, Ellie.

Oh no.

Like, REALLY good. Like, I-want-to-crawl-into-Ryder's-lap-and-hide good. Like-I-want-Ashton-to-look-at-me-from-above-me good.

Tati!

I KNOW.

I chew on my bottom lip, my fingers hesitating over the keyboard before I type out the next message.

El, this feels like... like what I felt with Carleen. But worse. More intense. Like my whole body just KNOWS them.

Ellie doesn't reply right away, and I can picture her frowning at her phone, her forehead creased in thought as she processes what I just said.

Finally, my phone buzzes again.

Is it the same, though? Like, the same pull you felt with Carleen? The same... connection?

It is. And I can't handle it. It's too much. This complicates everything.

Love and biology are ALWAYS complicated. Look at me, Macon, and Savin. It's messy, but we make it work. You don't have to have all the answers right now.

But this isn't just messy, Ellie. This is... terrifying.

I know, Tati. But maybe it doesn't have to be. Take a breath. Don't run from it. Just feel it out.

I let out a long, shaky breath, my fingers hovering over the screen.

You're too wise for someone who just had triplets.

It's the sleep deprivation. Makes me sound profound.

How are you, by the way?

I'm okay. Macon's being bossy, though. Limiting my screen time so I'll "rest." Whatever that means.

LOL. Macon being bossy? Shocking.

Ellie: I know, right? And Casey texted, asked when I'm coming back. Said it's not the same at Euphoria with the unstoppable duo.

You just popped out three children! Casey is a mess. Alright. I'll figure this out. Go rest before Macon catches you.

Love you, Tati. You've got this.

I smile faintly at the screen before locking my phone and setting it face-down on my lap. Ellie's right. I don't need to have all the answers right now. But the weight of their scents, the way my body is reacting—it's not something I can ignore. Especially when I shift in my chair and the most embarrassing moan slips through my lips. If I could just reach down between my thighs and alleviate the...

I glance back toward the kitchen, only to realize— They're all staring at me.

Carleen's leaning over the counter, arms crossed, her sharp brown eyes glittering with mischief. Ryder's still standing near the counter, his icy blue eyes locked onto me like he's trying to read my soul . And Ashton...

Oh goddess.

Ashton is stepping away from the counter, his gaze locked on me as he slowly crosses the space between the kitchen and the living room. His movements are smooth, predatory, like he's stalking prey, and the faint smirk on his lips doesn't help at all. I swallow hard, my fingers clutching the edge of the armchair as he stops just a few feet away from me.

He tilts his head slightly, those thick lashes of his fluttering as he licks his bottom lip, his brown eyes trailing slowly over me. "Oh," he purrs, his voice deep and syrup-smooth, "you're a pretty little doe."

My breath catches and I can feel the heat creeping up my neck, flooding my cheeks, and settling low in my stomach.

Ashton doesn't look away from me. "Carleen, is this Beta yours?"

I look over at Carleen, wide-eyed, my chest rising and falling rapidly. Her smirk widens, and she leans a little further over the counter, her brown eyes sparkling like she's enjoying every second of this.

"Yes," she says.

A mixture of relief and disappointment washes over me, but before I can process it, Ashton tilts his head again, one brow quirking up as he asks, "So... off-limits, then?"

The room goes still. Ryder's gaze flickers between Carleen and Ashton. My chest feels tight, my hands trembling slightly as I clutch the armrest. Carleen's lips curve into a slow, wicked grin. "I didn't say that. "

I squeak.

Like, an actual squeak escapes my mouth, and I immediately slap a hand over my face, mortified.

Ashton chuckles low in his throat, his brown eyes flashing with amusement and Ryder's lips twitch slightly—like he's fighting back a smile. I'm doomed . My breath stutters in my chest, my thighs press together instinctively, and I swear my scent grows sweeter.

Oh no.

His lips twitch into a smirk and his head tilts slightly as he leans down. He gently

catches my chin between his thumb and forefinger, tilting my head up until our faces are so close I can feel his breath ghost across my lips. His voice is low, dark, and smooth as silk. There's something familiar about it but I can't place it. "Oh, I'm going to have fun with you."

The sharp breath I suck in feels loud in the dead silence of the room. My stomach flips, my skin tingles, and I'm pretty sure if Carleen and Ryder weren't here, I'd already be a puddle on the floor.

"Ashton."

Ryder's voice cuts through the tension like a knife—low and commanding, with just a hint of irritation. In an instant, Ryder is there, one large hand curling around the back of Ashton's neck, yanking him back just slightly. Ashton's lips curl up even further, his eyes glowing with equal parts amusement and something darker, something hungrier .

"Hands off, Ash," Ryder growls. "Not everyone enjoys that."

But Ashton doesn't move far, doesn't let go of me right away, and that stupid, sinful smirk stays plastered across his face. His tongue darts out, wetting his bottom lip as his gaze flickers between me and Ryder, like he's enjoying every second of this.

And goddess help me, so am I.

Because the way Ryder is holding Ashton—firm, authoritative, their bodies so close together—makes my head spin. Ryder's icy blue eyes are locked on Ashton, and Ashton's brown ones flicker with heat and mischief.

I can't stop the way my mind spirals. The fantasies rush in as I imagine what it would feel like to be between them—to have Ryder on one side and Ashton on the other.

I'm burning.

And Carleen?

Carleen is grinning from the kitchen, her arms crossed over her chest, her brown eyes dancing as she casually leans back against the counter like this isn't the single most unhinged moment of my entire life.

Her lips curl up in a deviant, predatory smile. "I have a feeling Tati would love that."

Oh.

Oh no.

Ashton's smirk widens, and he licks his lips again, his eyes trailing down my flushed face to my trembling hands. Ryder, still holding him by the neck, sighs deeply, his thumb pressing briefly into Ashton's nape before letting go. But Ashton doesn't step back. Neither of them do.

They're both looking at me now—one with sharp blue intensity, the other with warm, predatory brown eyes.

And I can't breathe .

My skin feels too tight, my scent is filling the space around me, sweet and inviting, and I know if I stay here any longer, I'm going to combust . A whimper catches in my throat and I slap a hand over my mouth before it escapes, their eyes darkening in response.

I'm going to die. Right here. In this armchair.

I scramble to my feet, nearly tripping over my own toes as I clutch my empty glass to my chest like it's some kind of shield. "I—I'm late!" I blurt out, my voice way too high-pitched and trembling.

Three pairs of eyes snap to me—Carleen, Ryder, Ashton—and they're all varying shades of amused .

"Late for what, sunshine?" Carleen drawls, her grin spreading.

"I... a thing! A very important thing! "

I back away, holding one hand up like I'm warding off a pack of hungry wolves, which—let's face it—I basically am.

Chapter eleven

TATI

I slam the door behind me, leaning against it like I can somehow barricade myself from the chaos outside. My heart's still racing, my breath coming in sharp, uneven gasps as I stare at the empty space of my room like it's suddenly supposed to give me answers.

It doesn't.

Instead, all I can think about is them—Ryder with his sharp blue eyes, Ashton with his wicked smirk, and Carleen with her amused little grin as she let them toy with me.

I groan, letting my head thunk back against the door as I slide down until I'm sitting on the floor. My whole body feels like it's vibrating—every nerve ending on fire, my scent still sweet and thick in the air. I can smell myself, and if I can smell myself, then they definitely can too.

Goddess, this is a disaster .

I pull my knees up to my chest, the glass discarded, resting my forehead on them as I try to slow my breathing. I'm not due at Euphoria until tonight, which means I've got hours to sit here and stew in my own embarrassment and frustration .

I briefly consider texting Ellie again. She'd have something wise and comforting to say, probably in between changing diapers and fending off Macon's insistence that

she “rest.” But she’s not ready for visitors, and honestly? I’m not ready to face her either.

My eyes flick to the corner of my room, where a few of my unpacked bags are still slumped against the wall. I sigh, pushing myself up and wandering over. Might as well make myself useful, right?

I spend the next hour or so fussing around my room—hanging up clothes, shoving shoes into the closet, and setting up little knick-knacks on my nightstand. A framed photo of Ellie and me at some forgotten summer fair. A tiny glass snow globe I bought on a whim during a weekend trip.

It’s all so... normal.

But normal doesn’t feel right right now.

Because every few minutes, I catch myself pausing—staring blankly at the floor as my body buzzes with this low, insistent heat curling deep in my belly.

I know what it wants.

I know who it wants.

And I hate it.

With a frustrated sigh, I turn away from the mess of half-unpacked bags and head for the closet. My nest is still tucked neatly in the corner, piled high with soft blankets, pillows, and one of Carleen’s sweatshirts buried somewhere in the middle.

I hesitate for half a second before I cave, crawling into the space and wrapping one of the heavier blankets around me as I sink into the cozy warmth. The scent of fresh rain

and peaches clings to one of the pillows and I bury my face into it with a groan.

I thought I had everything figured out when I came back here. I thought Carleen and I would take things slow, build something real . And now Ryder and Ashton St. James are in our kitchen and my body is acting like it's already decided they're part of this.

Part of us .

I can't stop thinking about Ashton's smirk, the way his lips curved around those wicked words as he called me a pretty little doe . And Ryder... those sharp, ice-blue eyes watching me like he was trying to read me. Like he could see every little thought flitting through my mind and was just waiting for me to crack. I let out a soft whimper into the pillow, my thighs pressing together as another wave of heat rolls through me.

It's not just physical—it's deeper than that. It's in the way their scents linger in my head, in the way my chest aches when I think about being near them again.

My Omega friends used to talk about this. About how sometimes their body knows before their mind does. About how scents can wrap around them like chains, binding them to people they can't escape even if they wanted to.

But I'm not an Omega.

I'm a Beta.

This shouldn't be happening to me.

I squeeze my eyes shut, pressing my face deeper into Carleen's pillow as I try to focus on the scent—the one that feels safe. The one that feels like home. But instead, all I can think about is how good Ryder smelled when he leaned in to pull Ashton

back. That faint hint of bourbon and something sharp, earthy, and citrusy.

I groan again, rolling onto my side and pulling the blanket tighter around me. This is ridiculous .

I need to get out of my own head. I need to do something . But my body feels heavy, my limbs useless as I curl tighter into myself, sinking further into the plush nest I've built. I resist the urge to pleasure myself, to stick two fingers deep into my pussy and let myself fall apart to my fantasies. Mostly because I don't believe how fast this is happening and also because then every goddamn Alpha would be able to smell me throughout the entire apartment if they can't already.

I don't remember falling asleep. One minute, I'm tangled in a mess of blankets, my body still thrumming with the weight of scents and instincts I don't know how to process, and the next, there's warmth against my cheek. A thumb, maybe. Stroking gently along my jaw, brushing over the faint curve of my bottom lip.

My eyes flutter open and the first thing I see is Carleen—her warm brown eyes watching me. She's crouched next to my nest, her knees pressed into the edge of the blankets, a steaming bowl in one hand. "Morning again, sleepyhead," she murmurs.

I blink up at her, still half tangled in the haze of sleep and then before my stomach makes a decidedly loud noise.

Carleen grins, holding up the bowl. "Thought you might be hungry."

I sit up, my nest shifting around me as I push myself into a more upright position. Carleen hands me the bowl, and the smell hits me first—tomato soup . Rich, tangy, with hints of herbs and something creamy swirling through it.

I don't even hesitate. I scoop a spoonful into my mouth and—oh.

Oh.

I moan, the sound muffled around the spoon, as the flavors hit my tongue. It's perfect. Smooth and velvety, just the right balance of acidity and warmth. Carleen chuckles, leaning back slightly as she watches me devour another spoonful. "Good?" she asks, her lips twitching upward.

"Are you kidding me?" I manage around a mouthful. "This might be the single best thing I've ever eaten."

Her grin softens and she reaches over to hand me something else—a grilled cheese sandwich, perfectly golden and cut into two triangles. I practically snatch it from her hand, dipping one corner into the soup before taking a bite. It's heaven. Warm, cheesy, buttery heaven. The moan I let out is borderline indecent, Carleen raising an eyebrow, her smile turning sly.

"Careful, sweetheart," she teases. "Keep making noises like that and Ryder and Ashton are going to come running."

I choke slightly on my bite, glaring at her over the sandwich. "Carleen!"

But she just laughs, leaning back on her heels and watching me eat. For a few minutes, it's quiet—comfortable, even. Just the sound of me enjoying the world's most perfect comfort food and Carleen's soft, amused presence beside me. Eventually, though, the silence stretches just long enough to feel... heavy.

Carleen tilts her head slightly, her voice softer now. "You okay, Tati?"

I pause, my sandwich halfway to my mouth, before setting it carefully back on the plate. She must see something on my face because she sighs, running a hand through her hair as her brows draw together. "I want to apologize for earlier. Did I read the

moment wrong?”

I blush, staring down at the last bit of soup in my bowl. “Yeah, I mean no! It wasn’t—Ashton was fine. My scent gave me away, didn’t it?”

Carleen leans forward, her elbows resting on her knees as she watches me carefully. “Sweetheart, they didn’t even know you were here until your scent thickened. It hit them like a freight train and I could tell they were trying to keep their distance before Ashton gave in.”

I groan, setting the bowl aside and burying my face in my hands. “Oh, Goddess, it was that obvious?”

Carleen laughs softly, reaching out to gently pull my hands away from my face. “It was pretty obvious, yeah.”

I drop my head back against the nest, groaning again as my face heats up. “This is too fast, right? Like... this isn’t normal.”

Carleen shrugs one shoulder, her lips curving into a faint smile. “Things work as fast as you let them, Tati. There’s no timeline, no rules. If it feels right, it feels right. If it doesn’t, then we step back. Simple as that. We could’ve had this months ago, you and me. If I hadn’t been so scared, so caught up in my own head, we could’ve been building this all along.”

She’s right. We could’ve had this—this warmth, this safety, this something—so much sooner if Carleen hadn’t pulled away—if I hadn’t so easily left. But at the same time, maybe we needed that time apart. Maybe we needed to grow into who we are now before we could make this work.

I nod slowly, reaching for my sandwich again. But as I chew, my eyes keep flicking

back to Carleen—her warm brown eyes, the faint smile tugging at her lips, the way she’s still crouched beside my nest like she belongs there. The words slip out before I can stop them. “Alpha, will you come in here with me?”

Her eyebrows shoot up slightly, her lips parting just a little in surprise. “Into your nest?”

I nod, chewing on my bottom lip as I wait for her answer.

For a moment, she doesn’t say anything. Then Carleen shifts into my nest and the world feels smaller, quieter—like it’s just us and nothing else matters. She moves carefully, like she’s aware of every crinkle of the blankets, every pillow she displaces. Her warm brown eyes flick to mine briefly, her lips curling into the faintest of smiles as she settles herself beside me.

And then—oh goddess —she pulls me into her lap.

Her strong arms wrap around my waist as she guides me into place. My back fits snug against her chest, my head resting just under her chin. I’m giddy. Like, full-body butterflies, face-flushed, can’t-stop-smiling giddy. I can’t help the little hum of contentment that escapes me as I snuggle closer into her arms, feeling her warmth seep into me through the soft fabric of my hoodie.

But it’s not just her scent wrapping around me now—it’s theirs .

Ryder and Ashton.

Bourbon and citrus—it’s all there, tangled together with Carleen’s sharp rain and ripe peaches. It’s like some unfairly perfect perfume that I want to bottle up and keep in my nest forever. I don’t even realize I’m sighing into her shoulder until Carleen chuckles softly, her chest vibrating against my back. Her arms tighten around me

briefly and I swear I can feel the smile pressed against the top of my head.

For a few minutes, we just exist like this—me eating, her holding me. It's so easy, so natural, like this is exactly where we're supposed to be. When I finish the soup, Carleen carefully takes the bowl and sets it aside before picking up the grilled cheese sandwich. "Here," she murmurs, holding up a bite-sized piece to my lips.

I hesitate, my face flushing with heat as I glance back at her. This is the first time anyone has held me in my nest and seen me the way I need them to. Sure, Carleen held me last night but being awake, sharing this moment is everything to me. I hum softly as I chew, Carleen's eyes focused on me the entire time.

She feeds me another bite, and then another, until the sandwich is gone and my stomach feels full in the best possible way. I let out a happy sigh, leaning back against her and tilting my head so I can look up at her properly. She brushes her thumb across my cheek, ever so softly, almost as if it isn't even there.

I don't know who leans in first—her or me—but suddenly, our lips meet in the softest, sweetest kiss. It's gentle. Like the slow unfolding of a flower in the morning sun. Her lips are warm against mine and they move against mine with such care, such purpose, that it makes my chest ache.

When we pull away, I'm breathless, my eyes fluttering open to meet hers.

For a long moment, neither of us says anything.

Then Carleen clears her throat softly, her voice low and warm. "I still have a few things to handle with Ryder and Ashton, but..." Her thumb brushes over my bottom lip, her eyes lingering there for half a second before flicking back up to mine. "You're welcome to come out and meet them properly, sweetheart."

Panic shoots through me and I sit up a little straighter in her lap. Especially when I look down at my sweatshirt and realize the state I was in this morning. I hadn't even washed up or done anything with my hair. The St. James' pack saw me like that and Ashton still called me 'doe'? Oh, I might die of shame. "Yeah, no. I have some errands today. It's fine."

Carleen raises an eyebrow, her lips tugging upward in amusement. "Errands?" She knows I'm full of shit and all of those 'errands' could wait for another day.

"Yep!" I nod way too quickly, trying to scramble out of her lap. "So many errands. Very busy Beta over here."

Carleen's arms drop away from me as I wiggle free, but she doesn't let me go easily. She catches my wrist, holding me just long enough for me to meet her gaze again. She grants me another quick kiss before I rush toward the bathroom and shut the door behind me so that I can gather my thoughts.

My reflection stares back at me from the mirror—flushed cheeks, bright hazel eyes, lips still pink from Carleen's kiss. My chest rises and falls rapidly, my hands gripping the edge of the sink as I try to process the mess in my head. It hasn't even been that long since I teased Carleen about a large pack and babies running around and now there are two Alphas in the kitchen that my heart and my Beta so desperately want.

It wasn't supposed to happen this fast.

And yet my attraction to Carleen was unsuspected and felt like it happened overnight.

Just let it happen, I tell myself.

But that's going to be hard when I now have three Alphas who can look at me and turn me into a puddle. And yet, it's kind of exactly the thing I've always wanted. To

be the center of a small pack, to feel cherished and nourished and loved.

And then my brain throws another fantasy at me with all three of the Alphas taking me apart in my nest, my pussy constricting, telling me that it wants to be filled. Stuffed. Stretched.

Great. Just great.

Chapter twelve

CARLEEN

The faint clink of utensils against metal and the low murmur of voices weave through the air as I step back into the space I know better than the back of my hand. There's groceries sitting on my counter—most likely from their car because I definitely didn't have whatever they're currently working with. Ryder is at the counter, a large mixing bowl cradled in one arm while he whisks something with slow, deliberate precision. His sharp blue eyes flicker up the second I cross the threshold, locking onto me with the kind of intensity that makes my stomach flip.

He sees me. Not just looks at me— sees me.

It's unnerving, how quickly he seems to understand the energy in the room, how easily he adjusts to it. Like he's absorbing every detail—where I'm standing, how I'm breathing, what kind of mood I'm in—before making his next move.

Ashton, on the other hand, is half-perched on the edge of the counter, sleeves pushed up to his elbows, his bronze skin glowing under the soft kitchen lights. He's piping something into tiny chocolate shells with a grin stretched across his face, his tongue poking out at the corner of his mouth as he works.

“Back so soon, Chef?” Ashton asks without looking up, but there's a knowing edge to his voice like he can feel me watching him.

I cross my arms over my chest and lean against the doorframe, one eyebrow raised.

“Would you rather I leave you two unsupervised?”

Ryder’s lips twitch slightly—almost a smile—but he doesn’t stop whisking. Ashton, though? Oh, Ashton smirks. “I mean... depends on how much you trust us, darling.”

His voice is warm, low, and playful, but it sends a spark of something sharp through me. I roll my eyes, fighting down the flush threatening to creep up my neck. Tati isn’t the only one flustered with these men in my kitchen.

“Darling,” I repeat flatly, pushing off the doorframe and striding further into the kitchen. “If you set one thing on fire in here, I’ll have your head.”

Ashton grins wider, but Ryder clears his throat softly, cutting through whatever nonsense Ashton is about to fire back with.

“We’re working on a dessert concept for the trial menu,” Ryder says evenly. “Ashton insisted it would be the centerpiece.”

Ashton gestures grandly to the chocolate shells he’s been filling, his brown eyes flicking up to meet mine. “Insisted is a strong word, Chef Monroe. I strongly suggested it would be a showstopper.”

I can’t stop the small laugh that escapes me as I move to the other side of the counter, surveying their work. The chocolate shells are intricate—fragile-looking, with delicate swirls of caramelized sugar draped over them like lace. Whatever’s inside them must be good because even without tasting it, the air is thick with the scent of rich chocolate, orange zest, and something... spiced.

“You better hope these taste as good as they smell,” I say, tapping one lightly with my finger.

“They will,” Ryder replies. “We don’t miss.”

His confidence hits me square in the chest, and for a brief moment, I let myself feel it . The way Ryder’s calm steadiness grounds me. The way Ashton’s playful energy keeps the air light, even when the stakes are high.

It feels like... balance .

I shake the thought away, turning toward the stove and pulling out the fresh ingredients I’d prepped earlier. There’s an entrée I’ve been working on—something Ashton swore would “win over the entire board.” It’s not that I don’t trust his instincts, but... No. That’s a lie. I do trust him. Both of them.

That’s what’s throwing me off.

I’m used to fighting for every inch of ground in this industry, used to Alphas undermining me, second-guessing me, talking over me. But Ryder and Ashton? They’re just... here . They’re following my lead, slipping into my kitchen like they’ve always belonged. It’s disarming.

I focus on chopping herbs, the rhythmic thud, thud, thud of the knife against the cutting board grounding me. Unfortunately, the solace I usually find in my kitchen is nowhere to be found. Their presence and heavy scents are distracting and knowing that I’m just as bothered as Tati is, is messing with my head.

The knife slips.

It’s barely a flicker of movement, but the sharp edge skims past my knuckle, and I flinch, jerking my hand back just in time to avoid drawing blood. I’ve never made such a rookie mistake before, my focus anywhere but in the kitchen where it should be.

Before I can even process what happened, Ryder is at my side. He crosses the kitchen in two steps, his large hand wrapping around my wrist while his other plucks the knife from my trembling fingers. “Sit.” His voice is low, steady, and carries an authority that settles deep in my chest. I freeze, my lips parting slightly as I stare up at him. “Sit,” he commands again, his blue eyes locking onto mine with a sharpness that leaves no room for argument.

But I’m Carleen Monroe. I don’t get told what to do in my own kitchen. My spine straightens, and my mouth opens to protest, but Ryder tilts his head slightly, his expression unreadable .

“You don’t need to prove yourself here, Carleen.”

The words hit me harder than I expect them to.

You don’t need to prove yourself.

Not in my kitchen. Not in my space. Not to them.

My shoulders slump slightly, the weight of his words pressing into me, and without realizing it, I’m lowering myself onto one of the stools by the island. Ryder places the knife safely on the counter, his sharp gaze never leaving mine as he takes a small step back, arms crossing over his chest.

The tension in the room is palpable. Ashton, who’s been buzzing with energy and sharp wit, doesn’t say a word. He’s watching Ryder carefully, his arms still folded, a flicker of something serious in his warm brown eyes. My chest rises and falls too fast, my breathing shallow as I try to find my footing again. I try to sigh—to exhale all this tension , all this heat—but it comes out... well, it comes out sounding far more like a moan than I intended.

Ashton's lips part slightly, his tongue darting out to wet his bottom lip as his eyes flicker to me, but—for once—he doesn't laugh. He doesn't crack a joke.

He just looks to Ryder.

It's a silent exchange, something unspoken passing between them. Ryder steps closer, crouching down in front of me so that his sharp blue eyes are level with mine.

"We need to have a conversation," he says softly. "Because whatever this is, we all feel it. And I don't think we can keep ignoring it."

I swallow thickly, my throat suddenly dry. "I know."

The words come out quiet, almost a whisper, but Ryder hears them. His gaze softens just a fraction, and for a moment, it feels like the world narrows to just the two of us.

"I—" I start, my voice faltering as I try to find the right words. How do I even begin to explain what's been swirling inside me since they walked into this kitchen?

But before I can speak, there's a sound—soft footsteps, the faint creak of a door opening. Tati's standing in the doorway to the kitchen, her hazel eyes wide, her lips slightly parted, and her scent thickens in the air almost immediately.

For a second, none of us move.

She's frozen in place, her gaze darting between me, Ryder crouched in front of me, and Ashton leaning against the counter with his arms crossed. Ashton perks up immediately, his shoulders straightening, his brown eyes brightening but he doesn't move.

He doesn't step forward. And I realize—it's Ryder. Ryder hasn't given him

permission to move. The tension stretches tight like a wire between us and Tati looks like she might bolt. Ryder clears his throat softly, breaking the silence as his gaze flickers to me briefly before landing on Tati. “Why don’t we move this conversation to the living room?” he suggests.

He pats my knee lightly before standing, his large frame unfolding with a grace that shouldn’t belong to someone that size. Ashton pushes off the counter as he follows Ryder out of the kitchen without a word. Tati stays in the doorway, still frozen, her hazel eyes wide as they flick between me and the two retreating Alphas.

I move to the living room and drop into the armchair, sinking into the worn cushions, trying to steady the pounding in my chest. It’s the same chair Tati had curled up in earlier, and now she’s standing there, looking hesitant, her gaze flicking between me and the couch where Ryder and Ashton are settling in.

“Tati,” I say softly, patting my thigh. “Come here, sunshine.”

Her cheeks flush instantly, her gaze darting to Ashton, whose lips curl with a hint of desire. His eyes darken slightly, a flicker of lust dancing there, and Ryder—well, Ryder looks faintly amused, his sharp blue gaze sweeping over the scene like he’s cataloging every detail.

Tati doesn’t hesitate long. She steps forward and crawls delicately into my lap, curling into me like she belongs there. I wrap an arm around her waist, pulling her closer until her head tucks neatly under my chin. Her scent drifts up, mixing with the sharp citrus and warm bourbon still clinging faintly to me from earlier.

Ashton shifts slightly on the couch, his gaze locked on us, his lips parting slightly as his tongue swipes along his bottom lip. The man looks starved. Ryder, seated on the other end of the lounge, smirks faintly, his broad shoulders relaxed, one arm draped casually along the back of the couch. His icy gaze flickers between Ashton and me

then lands on Tati.

“We’re all feeling it,” Ryder begins. “This... pull. The way our scents are reacting to each other. It’s undeniable.”

Tati’s shoulders stiffen slightly under my arm and I press a soft kiss to the top of her head, hoping to settle her. My instincts are drawing me to unleash my purr but I’m not sure what that would start in this situation.

Ryder’s gaze doesn’t waver as he continues. “None of us planned this. Hell, I don’t think any of us expected this. But here we are.”

No one argues. No one even tries .

Because he’s right.

Whatever this is—it’s deep and primal and real .

But it’s also fast. Too fast. And for someone like me—someone who’s always had to plan, to calculate, to control —it’s terrifying . I hold Tati a little tighter, my thumb rubbing slow circles against her hip.

“I know it’s sudden,” Ryder continues, his eyes softening slightly. “And I know it’s a lot. So maybe... we take it slow. Give it time. A week, let’s say—the same length as the Culinova trial. We’ll see how this feels, how it fits.”

“I think that’s fair,” I muse, breaking the silence. “A week. We’ll see where it goes from there.”

Tati shifts slightly in my lap, her hands folding nervously in her lap as her gaze flickers between Ryder, Ashton, and me. She looks flustered. Overwhelmed. Her

cheeks are bright pink and her lips are parted slightly like she wants to say something but doesn't know how . I tilt her chin up gently with two fingers, brushing my thumb over the curve of her cheek.

“You okay, sunshine?” I murmur.

She nods quickly, biting her bottom lip. “Y-Yeah. I’m okay. Just... a lot. I... I should get on those errands,” she blurts out, her voice tight.

Ashton leans forward, resting his forearms on his thighs, and his warm brown eyes lock onto her. “Can I come with you?” he asks, his voice smooth and devastatingly charming. He’s going to be trouble, I already know it.

Tati’s eyes go wide, her cheeks flushing to an even deeper shade of pink as her scent grows thicker in the room. “If you’d like? It’s going to be boring.”

Ashton’s grin widens and Ryder lets out a soft sigh from across the couch, pinching the bridge of his nose like he’s already anticipating whatever chaos Ashton is about to cause. Before anyone can say anything else, Tati practically scrambles out of my lap, nearly tripping over her own feet as she bolts toward the door.

Ashton follows at a much more leisurely pace, his grin sharp and wicked as he tosses a wink in my direction. “Don’t wait up, Chef.”

And then he’s gone, leaving me and Ryder alone in the now too-quiet living room. For a long moment, neither of us speaks. Then Ryder clears his throat softly, his blue eyes locking onto mine.

“You okay with this?” he asks carefully.

I nod, exhaling a slow breath. “Yeah. I think so.”

But even as I sit there and try to convince myself that a week is enough, I can't shake the feeling in my chest—the sharp, possessive tug that tells me this isn't just casual.

This is everything.

Chapter thirteen

RYDER

The door closes behind Ashton and Tati with a soft click , leaving the room steeped in quiet. The faint scent of melon and citrus lingers in the air, but it's Carleen's sweet rain that anchors me, grounding me in this moment. I lean back into the couch, one arm stretched lazily along the backrest, my gaze tracking Carleen as she exhales, tilting her head back against the armchair with her eyes closed for just a moment.

She looks tired—not physically, but... emotionally . Like she's been carrying too much weight for too long.

I had no expectations walking into this apartment earlier today. Culinova sent Ashton and me because of our reputation, because we're good at what we do. But the second I stepped into this space and caught her scent, felt the weight of her presence, something shifted inside me.

Carleen Monroe.

I've wanted to meet her for a long time.

Her name carries weight in the culinary world. Not just because her dishes are practically art, but because she's built something out of nothing—an empire carved out with her own two hands and stubborn grit. But her reputation isn't just about her food—it's about her as an Alpha.

And that's where the stories get messy.

Leo, one of my former colleagues at another kitchen, had a lot to say about Carleen Monroe. None of it flattering. "She's cold, man," Leo had said one night after too many drinks. "Won't give you the time of day unless you're on her level. And even if you are, she's all tease, no follow-through. She'll pull you in, string you along, and then leave you wanting. No sex, barely a kiss, and definitely no bond."

At the time, I'd taken his words with a grain of salt. Leo was the kind of Alpha who measured value in what someone could give him—emotionally, physically, financially. If Carleen didn't entertain his advances, it probably bruised his ego. But now, sitting across from her, watching the way her brow creases in thought, the way her hand lingers briefly over the spot where Tati had been curled in her lap...

I know Leo's full of shit.

Carleen isn't cold. She isn't some manipulative tease, stringing people along for sport. She's guarded.

She's careful.

And with good reason.

She opens her eyes, catching me watching her. Her brow arches slightly, and the corner of her lips pulls into a faint smirk.

"You're staring, St. James," she muses. I didn't really see her when I first walked in, trying to be professional, and keep distance between us. But now that we've agreed to trial these feelings, I catalog her soft features. The pixie curls, the sharp lines of her jaw, the lines of muscle running down her arms. She's fucking gorgeous.

I let out a slow exhale, tilting my head slightly as I study her. “Can you blame me?”

Her smirk widens slightly, but then it falters. Her gaze flickers to the door Tati and Ashton disappeared through, and something shifts in her expression—something softer, something more vulnerable.

“Did you agree to this for her?” The question slips out before I can stop it, but I don’t regret asking. “Did you agree to this—this trial, this... thing —because of her? Because she wanted it?”

Carleen stands, her shoulders straightening as she moves toward the kitchen. Her scent trails after her, wrapping around me. I stay seated for a moment, watching the way her jaw tightens, the way her hands clench briefly at her sides before she releases them with a sigh. She stops at the counter, her fingers running along the smooth marble surface before she turns her head just slightly to look at me.

“I’ve always wanted a big pack,” she says softly, her voice steady but threaded with something heavier. “The noise, the chaos, the love—it’s what I’ve always imagined for myself. But Tati and I... we move at different speeds.”

I stand, slowly making my way to the kitchen, careful not to crowd her. Carleen is all sharp edges and soft vulnerabilities right now and I’m not about to make her feel cornered.

“She deserves everything,” she continues, her fingers curling around the edge of the counter. “Every bit of love and care and attention. And I...”

I stop a few feet from her, leaning one hip against the counter as I cross my arms over my chest. “Why can’t you have both?”

She doesn’t answer right away and I can see the war playing out on her face—the

hesitation, the longing, the stubbornness that's kept her walls up for so long. I push away from the counter, taking a slow step toward her, my movements deliberate.

"You deserve everything too, Carleen," I say softly, my voice dipping low, rough around the edges. My purr is just beneath the surface but I hold it back, unsure of how Carleen would take it in this moment.

Her eyes snap open, wide and searching. Both of us are caught in this electric pull—this undeniable thing vibrating in the air between us.

"Can I kiss you?" I ask, my voice barely more than a whisper.

Her lips part slightly, her breath hitching again as she stares at me. She doesn't move at first, doesn't breathe. And then, slowly— so slowly —she nods.

I don't waste a second.

My hands come up to cup her face, my thumbs brushing gently along her cheekbones as I tilt her head up. Her skin is warm beneath my palms, her scent overwhelming as I lean down and press my lips to hers.

It's not a soft kiss. It's deep and consuming, a tangle of breath and heat and something sharp and needy. Her lips are soft, yielding under mine, and I swear she tastes better than the dessert we've been perfecting all morning. But then, just for a split second, I feel it—the faintest stiffening in her shoulders, the slightest tension in her spine.

I pull back immediately, my hands lingering on her cheeks as I search her face. Her brown eyes are wide, her lips slightly swollen, her breathing uneven. I step back, letting my hands drop away as I give her space. "Carleen..." I start, my voice rough with restraint.

The last thing I want is to make her feel trapped. I lean casually against the counter, crossing my arms over my chest to make myself look a little less... big . Less imposing. She glances at me briefly, her brown eyes flicking up and then away again, like she's trying to pull herself back together.

I offer her a small smile—soft, easy, something meant to reassure . “Carleen,” I start, keeping my voice low and steady, “I want you to know that I understand. You and Tati are different people. How you respond to me, to Ashton, to this —it’s going to be different. And that’s okay.”

Her shoulders drop slightly, her hands stilling as she takes a slow breath.

I press on, my tone firm but gentle. “But what I need you to know—what I need you to believe—is that I will never push farther than you’re comfortable with. Not now, not ever.”

Carleen’s gaze finally meets mine, something vulnerable and raw flashing in her brown eyes. Relief, maybe. Or gratitude.

“Thank you,” she says softly, her voice barely above a whisper.

I nod, holding her gaze. “I don’t know who put that fear in your eyes, who made you doubt that your ‘no’ would ever matter, but I swear to you—I will never disregard it. If you say stop, I stop. No questions, no arguments, no hesitation. But,” I continue, “I need something from you too. If one of us—me, Ashton, even Tati—ever crosses a line, if something feels wrong or too much, I need you to speak up. I need you to tell me. Can you do that?”

Carleen nods slowly, her brow creasing slightly. “Yeah... yeah, I think I can.”

“A simple word works,” I say, tilting my head slightly. “Something short, something

easy. Like red. ”

Her lips part slightly, her head tilting as she processes that. “A safe word?” she asks, her voice laced with curiosity.

“Exactly. A safe word. It’s about trust, Carleen. If this trial—if we —are going to work, it needs to be built on trust from the ground up. And that means knowing when to stop, knowing when to back off, and knowing when to listen . ”

“Okay. Yeah. I can do that.” She shoots me a warm smile before pointing to the mess that is her kitchen. I know she’s deflecting but I don’t mention it, knowing that we all need a bit of time to process this. “We should probably finish cooking before those two tornadoes come back and devour everything in sight.”

I chuckle, pushing off the counter and moving back to the station where Ashton and I had been working earlier. “You’re not wrong,” I say, picking up a spoon and giving the dessert mixture one final stir.

We settle into an easy rhythm, something more comfortable than this morning. Carleen is no longer distracted and I feel a weight off my shoulders, seeing a future with the two women we’ve just met. The best part is seeing Carleen a bit more relaxed in this moment. There’s something softer about her now, more vulnerable.

Even as untraditional as Ashton and I always were, I thought there would be an Omega and maybe a Beta in our future. Seeing this now, being in Carleen’s kitchen, I can’t think of anything else I could have wanted.

As we work in silence, I can’t help but think about earlier—about the way she looked at me when I said her ‘no’ would always matter. Carleen Monroe isn’t cold. She isn’t cruel. She’s just... careful.

And if it takes a week, a month, or a year, I'll make damn sure she knows she's safe with me.

With us .

No matter how long it takes.

Chapter fourteen

TATI

The air outside is crisp, biting at my cheeks as Ashton and I walk side by side down the sidewalk. My heart's still doing this stupid tap-dance routine in my chest, my hands shoved deep into the pockets of my hoodie to keep from fidgeting.

Ashton, on the other hand, is the epitome of casual. Hands tucked into the pockets of his leather jacket, his long legs eating up the pavement effortlessly as he strolls beside me like we've been doing this for years. His rich citrusy scent wraps around me in a way that's almost suffocating but also soothing? I don't know. It's too much and not enough, all at once.

"Alright, little doe," he drawls, tilting his head slightly as he glances over at me with those stupidly pretty brown eyes. "Where are we headed?"

I freeze mid-step, turning my wide eyes to him like a deer caught in headlights. "Uh... nowhere?"

One of his brows arches, amusement flickering across his face. "Nowhere?"

I sigh, kicking a stray pebble down the street before looking away. "It's not like I had a plan, okay? I just... it was too much. Back there. In the house. Your scent, Ryder's scent, Carleen's scent—it was just..." I groan, throwing my head back and letting out an exaggerated noise of frustration. "Too much."

When I look back at Ashton, he's grinning. Like, full-on grinning , dimples showing, and everything. "Too much, huh?" he murmurs, taking a slow step closer to me.

I freeze again, my breath hitching in my throat as his large hand reaches out and gently takes mine. My heart stutters as his thumb brushes lightly over my knuckles before he lifts my hand toward his face. His lips press against the back of my hand, his eyes never leaving mine.

It's like the entire street disappears.

It's just him . Just Ashton.

And then it hits me.

Like a freight train.

Those eyes—those ridiculously pretty brown eyes, framed by thick lashes, with just a glint of mischief and heat behind them—I know those eyes. My breath catches as realization slams into me. " You! "

The word bursts out of me and I yank my hand back, stumbling a step away from him. Ashton tilts his head, his smirk growing wider as his hands drop back into his pockets. "Me," he confirms, his voice low and playful.

I point at him, my finger trembling slightly as my face turns a shade of red I didn't even know was possible. "You—you were at Euphoria! You—you've been there before!"

His grin turns downright wicked as he takes a lazy step toward me. "I wondered how long it'd take you to figure it out, little doe."

Little doe.

That word. That name .

I've heard it before—softly whispered in the dark, barely audible over the pulse of the music, from a figure tucked away in the shadows of the club. A man whose eyes always followed me as I danced, whose presence felt heavy and warm even from across the room. There were a few times I served his table but seeing Ashton here—my secret admirer and now my Alpha here, everything just becomes a bit too much—more than it already was.

“You’re—oh my Goddess—you’re him! ”

Ashton chuckles, the sound deep and smooth, like velvet being dragged across gravel. “Guilty as charged, sweetheart.”

My face is on fire . I can barely breathe, let alone process what’s happening right now. “You—you knew it was me?” I sputter.

He shrugs, his smirk softening slightly into something more gentle, worry etching into his brows. “Not at first. But then I caught your scent back at the house, and... yeah. It clicked.”

I groan, covering my face with my hands. “This is too much. Too much. Nope. Can’t do this.”

I spin on my heel, ready to bolt, but Ashton’s hand closes gently around my wrist, stopping me in my tracks. “Tati,” he says softly. “Hey. Breathe. I didn’t mean to freak you out.”

I freeze, my back still to him, my chest rising and falling way too fast. He steps

closer, all of those gorgeously hard ridges pressed up against me. “Look, we don’t have to go anywhere. You don’t have to run errands and I don’t have to follow you around like some lovesick puppy. But I think maybe you just need a break from all the chaos. Yeah?”

I turn my head slightly, just enough to catch his expression. His face is soft now, his smirk gone, replaced with something concerned. Ashton tilts his head toward a little café across the street—a tiny corner spot with fairy lights strung up on the awning and mismatched chairs scattered around the outdoor patio.

“Come on,” he says, his voice coaxing. “Let me buy you a coffee—or tea, or whatever you like. Just... let’s sit down for a minute. No pressure, no expectations.”

I hesitate, my heart still hammering in my chest but I agree because Ashton is right. I need a minute to sort all the chaos in my head. He releases my wrist, his hand lingering for just a second before he steps back and gestures toward the café.

“After you, little doe.”

I roll my eyes at the nickname, but my lips twitch upward despite myself.

“Stop calling me that,” I mutter, shoving my hands back into my pockets as I start walking across the street.

“Can’t make any promises,” he calls after me, his warm laugh chasing me all the way to the café doors.

The café is warm and cozy, smelling like roasted coffee beans, vanilla syrup, and something sugary that makes my stomach growl despite the tight knot of nerves sitting in it. Ashton holds the door open for me, one brow quirked as I shuffle inside, my hoodie sleeves pulled down over my hands.

He's too relaxed. Too effortlessly cool as he strolls up to the counter like he owns the place, pulling out his black card with a flick of his wrist. "Espresso," he says casually, flashing the barista that charming, wicked grin of his.

The barista—a Beta with bright pink hair and tired eyes—types it in before turning to me expectantly.

My mouth opens. Then closes. I don't know what to order. Or rather, I do, but the idea of saying it out loud in front of Ashton freaking St. James makes me want to evaporate into mist. When I don't say anything, the barista tilts her head slightly, her lips twitching into a soft smile.

"Your usual?" she asks gently.

I freeze. The usual? Oh no.

"Do you want the mocha latte with triple whip and chocolate chips?"

Kill me. Just... kill me now.

I sigh heavily, my face heating as I nod. "Yeah. That one."

Out of the corner of my eye, Ashton's grin stretches impossibly wider and I swear his shoulders are shaking like he's holding back a laugh.

We grab our drinks—his tiny cup of espresso looking positively judgmental next to my towering monstrosity of whipped cream and chocolate—and Ashton leads us to a spot by the counter. It's not crowded here, the stools tucked away against the large window. Outside, people bustle past, living their lives, unaware that my entire existence is currently imploding.

Ashton sets his espresso down, slides onto a stool, and watches me as I settle awkwardly beside him, the silence stretching between us. His brown eyes flicker down to my untouched drink, still piled high with whipped cream and chocolate shavings. He looks back up at me, his brows furrowing slightly. “Everything okay, Tati?”

I blink at him, clutching my drink with both hands but not taking a sip. “Uh, yeah. Totally fine. Why wouldn’t it be fine? Everything’s fine. Totally normal,” I ramble, my voice cracking slightly at the end.

Ashton tilts his head, his smirk twitching back to life. “Tati,” he purrs, leaning on his forearms and lowering his voice like he’s letting me in on some grand secret, “why aren’t you drinking it?”

I freeze, staring at the whipped cream like it might offer me salvation. “I... I don’t know,” I mumble.

Ashton snorts softly, shaking his head before leaning back slightly on his stool. “Let me guess,” he says smoothly, tilting his head as he studies me. “You think I’m judging you for it, don’t you?”

My head snaps up, my eyes wide. “No!”

His smirk deepens. “Yes, you do. You think I’m over here with my espresso, looking down my nose at your sugary monstrosity of a drink.”

I sputter, my face heating further. “I mean—it’s not that sugary.”

Ashton laughs, the sound warm and deep, and for a moment, I forget how to breathe. “Tati,” he says softly, reaching across the narrow table until his knuckles brush against my cheek.

I go stock-still, my breath catching as his thumb hovers just under my jaw. His brown eyes soften, his expression morphing into something that feels like home.

“I think it’s wonderful you like sugar,” he says. “Honestly, it’s one of my favorite things to make. Desserts, pastries... sugar is fun , little doe. It makes people happy. And me?” Ashton murmurs, his lips curling back into that slow, wicked smile. “I like sweet things too.”

Oh. Oh no.

I make a noise—somewhere between a squeak and a hiccup—and immediately lift my mocha latte monstrosity to my lips. I take the biggest sip I can manage, whipped cream smearing across my upper lip and chocolate chips crunching between my teeth.

Ashton grins, full teeth this time, leaning his chin against his fist as he watches me like I’m the most entertaining thing he’s seen all day. “Good?” he asks innocently.

I narrow my eyes at him over the rim of my cup and refuse to answer as I sip my drink, my shoulders relaxing bit by bit. Ashton starts talking—about desserts he’s made, about kitchen disasters he and Ryder have had on the road, about the time he nearly set a ten-thousand-dollar oven on fire because he “got distracted by the view.”

He’s funny. Like, really funny. And not in an over-the-top, trying-too-hard kind of way. It’s effortless, easy, the kind of humor that puts me at ease and makes me forget that I was a blushing mess five minutes ago.

Eventually, my cup is empty, and his espresso is long gone. We sit there, watching the world outside the window for a moment. Finally, Ashton stretches, his arms flexing as he rolls his shoulders back. “Alright, little doe. What do you say we head back before Carleen starts pacing holes into the floor?”

I snort, standing up and brushing whipped cream residue off my hoodie. “You act like she’s a worried mom or something.”

Ashton grins, holding the café door open for me as we step back into the chilly afternoon air. “Tati, if you think she’s not pacing right now, you haven’t been paying attention.” And for the first time since we left the apartment, I find myself laughing .

Walking back with Ashton feels easy .

Too easy, maybe, considering how my brain’s been doing backflips ever since we left the café. But Ashton? He’s just here . Chatting, gesturing with his hands, flashing me that sharp grin every time I laugh at one of his jokes.

And I laugh a lot.

I learn that Ashton and Ryder have been a pack for years—first as friends, then something more. They met at a culinary school event that Ashton only attended because he’d heard the catering would be “absolutely bomb.” Turns out, Ryder was the head chef for the event, all stoic silence and focused energy, and Ashton was the loud, sarcastic student sneaking extra hors d'oeuvres off the platters.

“He caught me red-handed,” Ashton says, stuffing his hands into his pockets with a crooked grin. “I had three crab puffs stuffed into my mouth like a damn chipmunk.”

I snort, nearly choking on my laugh. “Oh my goddess, shut up.”

“True story,” he muses, eyes glinting with mischief. “The man didn’t even blink. Just stared me down with those icy blue eyes and said, ‘If you’re going to eat that many, at least have the decency to pair them with the right sauce.’”

I double over laughing, clutching my stomach. “You mean to tell me Ryder— the

Ryder—read you for sauce pairings while you were in full chipmunk mode?”

Ashton shrugs, grinning. “Dead serious. And listen, little doe—it worked. I paired those crab puffs with the damn sauce, and the rest is history.”

I’m still laughing when Ashton shifts closer, his warm brown eyes softening as they linger on my face. There’s something about the way he’s looking at me—like he’s memorizing every line, every freckle, every flicker of amusement across my face—that makes me feel seen .

As we near the apartment building, the easy rhythm of our conversation slows, replaced by something heavier. It’s not awkward, not exactly, but there’s something else in the air now.

Something thick .

Something expectant.

I don’t want to leave this moment. I don’t want to head back to my room, back to the nest I hid in earlier. I like this—being here, being with him. The realization hits me like a ton of bricks—I want what they’re offering.

A pack. Love. Safety. A place where I can just be.

I want it so badly my chest aches with it.

“I should head in,” I murmur, my voice softer now. “I need to change, eat something, and then head off to Euphoria.”

Ashton nods, his brown eyes never leaving mine. He holds out a hand, palm up, waiting. I hesitate for only a second before slipping my smaller hand into his.

His fingers close around mine and then he's tugging me gently until I'm right there, pressed against his chest. Ashton stares down at me, his face softer now, the sharp edges of his grin replaced with something more serious .

“Little doe...”

It's just my nickname, but the way he says it—low and husky—makes something in my chest snap . Before I can process what's happening, Ashton dips his head and kisses me. His lips are warm, firm, and absolutely commanding. He doesn't hesitate, doesn't second-guess—he just takes .

And goddess, do I let him.

I melt against him, my hands lifting to clutch the front of his jacket as his other hand finds its way to the small of my back, holding me there. The kiss isn't rushed, but it's not gentle either. It's intentional . Like he's trying to tell me something without saying a single word.

When we finally break apart, I'm breathless, my forehead pressed against his chest as I try to steady the frantic pounding of my heart. Ashton's breathing just as heavily, his thumb brushing along the side of my waist in slow, soothing circles. I can feel him against me again, as well as his interest thickening against my belly. My fantasies run wild before I can stop them and of course, my body works faster than my head, a moan filtering through my lips.

Ashton takes it in stride, grinning down at me as he kisses me again. “I'll give you that later, Tati. Whenever you're ready.”

“Way to ruin the moment,” I mumble, slapping his chest as I detangle myself from him but I'm not mad. I like Ashton's laid back demeanor. And the fact that we already kind of know each other—as crazy as that is—makes this all better.

Chapter fifteen

TATI

Ashton's right behind me as I enter the apartment, whistling some tune under his breath like he didn't just kiss the life out of me ten minutes ago. He's still hard too—an impressive package at that—and he's made no effort to hide it or resituate himself. Lovely. Just perfect.

The smell of something mouthwateringly delicious hits me the second I step into the apartment. My stomach growls on instinct, loud enough that Ashton snorts behind me.

“Oh, they've been busy ,” he murmurs.

Carleen and Ryder are in the kitchen, moving in perfect harmony. It's the kind of dance you only see in kitchens where the chefs know each other's rhythms, where every step and reach is precise. Carleen's focused on a sizzling pan, her brow furrowed in concentration, while Ryder is plating something that looks like it belongs in a magazine.

Both of them glance up when we walk in.

Carleen's brown eyes flick over me briefly before landing on my very red cheeks. Her lips twitch upward, a knowing smirk creeping onto her face. “You okay there, sunshine?” she asks, a teasing edge to her voice.

I clear my throat, ignoring the way my face feels like it's on fire. "I'm fine but I have to get ready for work. I've got a shift at Euphoria tonight. Where, fun fact, Ashton used to be one of my regulars."

Silence.

Absolute silence .

I freeze, realizing what I just said. My eyes dart over to Ryder, who's standing completely still, arms crossed over his broad chest, his gaze fixed squarely on Ashton. But Ryder doesn't look surprised. Not even a little bit.

My mouth falls open slightly. "Wait... you knew?"

Ryder shrugs one shoulder, his lips twitching upward slightly. "We don't police each other's lives but every night he'd come back with that sweet melon scent lingering around him, I made sure he didn't sleep that night or passed out from a little too much... cardio. Smelling you here, it was pretty easy to connect the dots but I wasn't going to bring it up unless you did, little doe. "

Yep, I need the floor to open up and swallow me whole because that means Ryder and Ashton have been licking my scent off each other every time Ashton went to the club. "Fantastic. I bet you all want to show up as well, right?" I shouldn't have asked because now they're all looking at each other, faint smiles being shared between the three Alphas. "Fuck."

Ashton bursts out laughing. "Tati, you asked."

"I did but I didn't think—"

Ashton just continues, making it worse. "Round it up. Our Beta just asked us out on a

date and I'm more than excited to share tonight together on our first official trial day as a pack."

I groan, throwing my head back dramatically before storming off to my room to get ready. I'm in trouble.

By the time I step back out into the living room, I'm in full Tati mode. My outfit is sleek, black, and accentuates every curve. My makeup is sharp, my eyeliner winged to perfection, and my earrings glint under the warm apartment light.

But it's not the living room that catches my attention—it's the kitchen because the smell is heavenly .

There's a spread on the counter—crispy catfish fillets, golden and flaky, paired with creamy mashed potatoes, roasted vegetables, and some kind of sauce drizzled in perfect arcs across each plate.

Carleen catches my wide-eyed stare and smirks. "Dinner's ready."

I slide into one of the chairs at the counter, my stomach growling audibly. Ashton takes the seat next to me, his arm immediately draping around the back of my chair, his fingers lightly grazing my shoulder.

Carleen points a wooden spoon at Ryder. "He's the one you can thank for the catfish."

My gaze swings to Ryder, who looks mildly uncomfortable with the sudden attention, his gaze flicking away briefly before landing back on me. "Ryder..." I say, dragging out his name with a grin. "You spoil me already."

Ryder huffs out a soft breath, shaking his head. "Just eat, sweetheart."

I pick up my fork and dive in without hesitation, moaning softly as the first bite practically melts on my tongue. “Oh my goddess, I could get used to this,” I mumble around a mouthful of mashed potatoes.

Ashton chuckles beside me, his fingers still grazing my shoulder as he leans closer. “Careful, Tati. Keep moaning like that and Ryder’s gonna start blushing.”

I nearly choke on my food as Ryder levels Ashton with a sharp glare. Carleen snorts from across the counter, shaking her head as she starts wiping down a cutting board. The four of us settle into an easy rhythm—eating, laughing, Ashton making sly remarks while Ryder rolls his eyes and Carleen keeps a steady, watchful eye on us all.

But the scene becomes absolutely perfect when Ryder nudges Carleen and shoves a plate into her hands before mouthing ‘Eat’. She opens her mouth to protest, Ryder just raising a brow before she sighs and places it on the counter to take a bite. I wasn’t sure how the dynamic between us four would work but seeing Ryder so easily support Carleen has my heart in a chokehold.

The lights are low, the music thrums through the air like a living thing, and the stage is mine . The crowd is loud but distant, a buzzing backdrop as I make my way to center stage. I’ve changed into my real number—a fitted black bodysuit with sheer panels and thigh-high boots that cling to my legs like second skin.

But none of them matter.

Not the drunk groups waving dollar bills, not the occasional catcalls, not the glances from strangers.

Because they’re here.

Carleen. Ryder. Ashton.

Front row.

And holy hell , they look good .

Carleen sits in the middle, one arm slung casually over the back of the booth. She's sipping whiskey, her sharp brown eyes glued to me like I'm the only thing worth watching in the entire building. Her expression is unreadable, but her aura screams Alpha . Possessive. Protective. Proud.

Ryder's next to her, relaxed but still commanding. He's got a whiskey glass too, the amber liquid swirling lazily as he leans back in his seat, his icy blue gaze watching me with unnerving focus. Like he's cataloging every flick of my wrist, every arch of my back, every step of my heels.

And then there's Ashton.

The man's got a bright pink drink in front of him, complete with a little umbrella and a cherry on top. He hasn't touched it. Instead, his chin is resting in one hand, his brown eyes fixed on me with a look that could melt steel . His grin is sharp, teasing, and when I catch his gaze, he winks.

I nearly miss my step.

Focus, Tati. Focus.

The music kicks in—a sultry beat with heavy bass—and I move.

Dancing isn't just movement for me; it's storytelling. It's expression. It's freedom.

My body sways, bends, arches. Every step, every flick of my hair, every spin feels deliberate. My gaze flickers between them—Carleen’s smirk, Ryder’s sharp focus, Ashton’s slow perusal—and it sets me on fire.

I feel seen. Not as a Beta. Not as some performer. But as me .

My hips roll in time with the music, my movements sharp but fluid. Every time I look back at them, I find the three of them devouring me with their gazes. I finish my set with one last spin, my chest heaving as the music fades. Applause erupts, dollar bills scatter at my feet, but my gaze stays locked on them until it’s time to leave the stage.

Back in the dressing room, I peel off the bodysuit and replace it with something much more comfortable—black shorts and a cropped tee that will still get me tips for the rest of the evening. My makeup’s still on point, my hair’s tousled but perfect, and my heart? Yeah, it’s still racing.

I step back into the club, weaving through the crowd until I spot them.

Carleen’s the first to notice me. She stands as I approach, and before I can say a word, her hands are on me—gripping my waist and pulling me flush against her chest and then she kisses me. She’s claiming me once again in front of everyone, letting them all know who I belong to. Her lips move against mine with purpose, her fingers digging slightly into my sides as her scent wraps around me, drowning me in it.

When she pulls back, I’m breathless, my knees weak. She smirks, brushing her thumb across my bottom lip as her brown eyes glimmer with satisfaction. “You were incredible, sunshine,” she murmurs.

Carleen turns me slightly, her hands still on my waist, and suddenly I’m facing Ryder and Ashton.

Ryder's watching me with that steady, piercing gaze of his, his broad shoulders relaxed but imposing. Ashton, on the other hand, has that slow grin back on his face, his eyes practically dripping with heat. Ryder leans back slightly in his chair, spreading his arms across the backrest like he's making space just for me. "Come here, sweetheart," he says, his voice smooth and low.

My feet move before my brain catches up and suddenly I'm standing right in front of him. Ryder reaches out, his large hands settling gently on my hips as he guides me down until I'm straddling his lap. His eyes search mine, his thumbs rubbing slow circles against my hips. "You like being seen, don't you, sweetheart?"

I bite my bottom lip, nodding slightly. "Yeah, I do."

Ashton snorts softly, leaning in close enough that I can feel his breath against the side of my face. "You like being seen by us, don't you, little doe?"

My face burns and I nod again as Carleen sits across from us in the booth, a smirk on her lips as she sips her whiskey. His head tilts slightly, his sharp blue eyes flicking down to my mouth and then back up again. And just like that, I lean in. My heart pounds so loudly I swear he can hear it. His lips meet mine with a soft brush, a testing slide, before Ryder cups the back of my neck and takes .

The kiss is deliberate, confident, hungry without being overwhelming. His lips move against mine in perfect rhythm, coaxing, tasting. I moan softly against him, my hands tangling into his shirt, and that's when he moves me. With effortless strength, Ryder adjusts my position, pulling me over his lap and settling me down so I'm pressed between him and Ashton.

I'm surrounded—boxed in—and every inch of my body feels alive .

Ashton leans in from behind me, his breath warm against my neck as his lips press

against the sensitive spot just below my ear. His mouth trails down, featherlight kisses along the column of my neck, his beard scratching slightly against my skin in a way that sends shivers down my spine.

I squirm between them, my body reacting on instinct as I press back against Ashton and forward against Ryder. My head falls back against Ashton's shoulder and a soft moan escapes me before I can stop it. Ryder groans softly, his hand tightening on my thigh.

"Careful, sweetheart," he murmurs, his voice low and dangerous. "You're playing with fire."

Ashton chuckles against my neck, his lips lingering on my skin for just another moment before he pulls back, leaving me buzzing. The two of them lean back, giving me just enough space to breathe, and I'm left sitting between them—flushed, breathless, and completely wrecked by two fully clothed Alphas in a crowded club. Ashton pushes his untouched pink drink with the tiny umbrella toward me across the table.

I blink at it, still trying to piece my brain back together. "Uh... what?"

Ashton smirks, his arms casually draping over the back of the booth. "Drink up, Tati. You look like you need a second to cool down."

Ryder snorts softly beside me, shaking his head but not saying anything as he takes another sip of his whiskey. I glance over at Carleen, who's been watching this entire exchange with amusement. She smirks, setting her glass down and leaning her elbows on the table. "We already agreed to come watch," she muses. "But we actually wanted to spend time with you."

I let out a breathless laugh, shaking my head as I pick up Ashton's ridiculous pink

drink and take a long sip. It's fruity and sweet, almost offensively sugary, but it cools the burn in my throat and gives me a second to regroup. Carleen chuckles, swirling the whiskey in her glass. "It's just a few drinks, sunshine. Then we'll let you get back to your night."

The words are casual, but her tone? Oh, her tone drips with something deeper. Something Alpha .

My eyes flick between the three of them—Ryder, still calm and solid as ever; Ashton, smirking like he's got a secret; and Carleen, watching me with that slow, calculating gaze of hers.

Goddess help me.

I'm in so much trouble.

But it's the kind of trouble I want .

Ashton leans in a little closer, his voice dropping low as he speaks just beside my ear. "Relax, little doe. Enjoy the moment. We're not going anywhere."

Ashton hums against my ear, one of his hands slowly moving to sit on my thigh. There's nothing innocent about his touch as I choke on the fruity drink and still between the three of them. "What's happening here?" I whisper, my voice strained with sudden need.

"Whatever you want to happen, little doe," he purrs.

Chapter sixteen

TATI

My skin feels too warm, my breathing a little too shallow. The weight of their attention is heavy. I shift slightly, trying to adjust my position, but Ashton's hand just tightens the faintest bit on my thigh, his thumb brushing over the fabric of my shorts. Whatever they've started talking about fades into the background as Ashton's hand continues to inch upward.

Carleen says something sharp and witty, and Ashton laughs, a low sound rumbling from deep in his chest but then her gaze snaps back to me, her lips curling into something wicked. She leans forward, setting her whiskey glass down on the table with a soft clink. "Something wrong, sweetheart?" she asks, her voice low and syrupy smooth, dripping with knowing amusement.

I try to force a casual laugh, but it comes out thin. Ashton's hand is sitting inches from the apex of my thighs—his thumb tracing idle circles that are doing absolutely nothing to help the ache building low in my stomach. I reach down, my fingers curling gently around his wrist, holding him in place—not pulling him away, just... anchoring myself.

"Carleen," I murmur, my voice trembling slightly. "Are you... are you okay with this?"

Carleen's lips pull into a slow, satisfied smirk. She tilts her head slightly, her dark brown eyes glinting in the neon glow of the club lights. "Oh, Tati," she purrs, her

voice dipping even lower, “just because I need to move slow doesn’t mean I don’t enjoy watching my Beta being taken care of.”

My stomach flips and something in my chest snaps at her words. I feel Ashton’s chest rise and fall against my back as he chuckles softly, his voice low and gravelly against the shell of my ear. “You heard her, little doe.”

His hand shifts slightly beneath mine, his thumb now brushing higher, catching the seam of my shorts between my thighs. I’m breathing too fast, my body wound so tightly I might snap in half if anyone so much as breathes on me. But then Ashton leans in, his breath hot against my ear, and—oh goddess—he drags his lips up the side of my neck.

My head tilts on instinct, my throat exposed, my breath hitching as a sound escapes me—soft and breathless and completely involuntary. Ashton pulls back just enough to murmur, his voice a low rasp, “Do you want me to stop, little doe?”

I can feel Ryder’s gaze on me. Carleen hasn’t looked away, her brown eyes locked onto mine with unwavering intensity. The air feels thick, electric, like the moment before a thunderstorm cracks open the sky. For a long, fragile moment, no one moves. No one breathes. And then, still holding Carleen’s gaze, I shake my head slowly. “No,” I whisper.

Ashton groans softly behind me, the sound reverberating through my chest as his hand squeezes my thigh gently. Ryder leans back slightly, his icy blue eyes glimmering with approval, his lips curving into the faintest smirk.

"You look stunning tonight, Tati," he murmurs, his voice low and seductive. He presses two fingers against my clit, my back bowing forward as I set my drink down and grip the edge of the table. It’s going to be impossible to keep my mouth closed and even if Euphoria is a sex club, I’ve never partaken in anything like this.

I don't have to worry, though, Ryder slowly reaching over to wrap his large hand around the front of my neck. He tugs me forward just a little, twisting my torso to face him. "May I?" He asks, his voice several octaves deeper, a rasp to his words as his gaze dips to my lips and then returns to my eyes. I nod, unable to form words, my heart pounding in my chest.

His lips meet mine, gentle at first, but soon demanding, hungry. I melt into the kiss, my hands gripping the edge of the table as he explores my mouth. As the kiss deepens, Ashton's fingers resume their journey, slipping inside my shorts. I gasp into Ryder's mouth as those long, skilled fingers brush against my soaked panties, teasing my clit through the thin fabric. My body arches involuntarily, seeking more of his touch.

"Fuck, Tati," Ashton whispers, his voice hoarse with desire. "You're so wet." His fingers push aside the flimsy barrier of my panties, and he slides two fingers into my throbbing heat. I moan, the sound muffled by Ryder's demanding kiss.

Ryder pulls back slightly, his eyes dark with lust as he watches Ashton's hand move between my legs. "Let go, Tati. We've got you."

His words are like a trigger, releasing the tension I've been holding. I tense as Ashton's fingers curl inside me, hitting all the right spots. His thumb circles my clit, sending waves of pleasure through my body. I'm on the edge, teetering between ecstasy and the fear of being so exposed.

"Easy, baby," Ryder whispers, sensing my hesitation. "It's okay, we're here for you."

I nod, my eyes flitting between the two men, seeking reassurance. Ashton's fingers still, Ryder's hand on my neck providing a sense of grounding. I take a shaky breath, my body trembling with the effort to hold back the impending orgasm.

"It's okay, Tati," Carleen's soft voice floats across the table. "Let it happen. We want to see you lose control."

Her words, laced with desire, push me over the edge. I arch my back, pressing my body into Ashton's hand, seeking more of his touch. He obliges, his fingers moving in a steady rhythm, stroking my sensitive flesh. Ryder's hand tightens on my neck, his thumb rubbing soothingly as if to say, I've got you .

My orgasm hits me like a freight train, stealing my breath and rendering me speechless. I moan, a raw, primal sound, as my body convulses around Ashton's fingers. Ryder's mouth covers mine, swallowing my cries, his tongue mimicking the rhythm of my release.

As the waves of pleasure subside, I slump back in the booth, my body boneless and my mind spinning. I felt exposed, raw, and utterly satisfied. Ashton withdraws his hand, his fingers glistening with evidence of my pleasure. He raises them to his lips, sucking them into his mouth, his eyes never leaving mine.

"Tati, my little doe," he purrs, his voice thick with emotion. "You taste incredible."

I manage a weak smile, my heart overflowing with affection for these three people who make me feel so desired. Carleen's eyes are locked on Ashton's fingers, her lips parted, and her breath coming in shallow gasps. Before I can blink, Ashton is offering his fingers to my other Alpha, Carleen giving an experimental lick before cleaning them off.

And now I need more.

The moment she's done, I settle on my knees and lean across the table, pulling Carleen into a kiss of our own. I can taste myself on her lips as she cups my cheeks in her hands. Goddess, this is everything . Pleasure is still thrumming through my body

and the fantasies of me beneath one or more of these Alphas is now the only thing I want.

Soon, I tell myself.

“That was amazing,” I mumble as I sit back in my seat, Ashton dragging me into his lap and nestling his face in the curve of my shoulder. Ryder hands me my drink, Carleen smiling from across the table, content. I may only have a few more minutes before Eugene yells at me for slacking off but I’m going to cherish every last second.

Chapter seventeen

CARLEEN

The night drags on in a slow, honeyed haze. Euphoria buzzes with energy, the low thrum of music vibrating beneath my feet and the dim lights painting everyone in soft blues and purples. It's been hours, but I still feel the ghost of Tati's weight in my lap, her warmth lingering in the spaces where our bodies had touched.

She's out on the floor now, clearing tables and flashing her bright grin at the lingering patrons who refuse to leave, even though last call was announced ages ago.

I should have known she wouldn't stay tucked away with us all night but that doesn't mean I didn't prepare for this. Before we arrived tonight, I'd pulled Eugene aside and asked—okay, paid—to reserve her for a little extra time. Just the thought of Tati finding out I bribed her boss makes me snort softly into my whiskey glass. She'd have my head for it.

But I needed this. We needed this.

Tonight wasn't just about seeing Tati in her element—it was about seeing how the four of us would fit together, how our puzzle pieces would align in this strange, messy dynamic we've stumbled into.

And goddess, it's better than I ever could have hoped. It's only been a day and now I understand how much turmoil my younger sister went through, trying to wade through the bullshit of biology, scents, and love.

Ryder's leaning back in his seat, his broad shoulders taking up too much space in the booth, his blue eyes flicking between me and Ashton with quiet amusement. Ashton, on the other hand, is draped across the corner of the booth like he owns the damn place, his fingers drumming a lazy beat against the table, those sharp brown eyes glinting with mischief every time they meet mine.

And me? Well, I'm sitting here, holding my whiskey and wondering how the hell I got so lucky.

Because Ashton is already halfway in love with Tati. I can see it in the way Ashton watches her like she's a spark of light in a dark room. And Ryder is the perfect rock in this chaotic little quad. Like a protective aura that feels amazing to lean into. I can see it in the way his gaze softens every time it lands on Ashton. It's only a matter of time before he starts looking at Tati the same way.

Ashton clears his throat, dragging me back to the present. "Alright, boss lady," he drawls, leaning forward and resting his elbows on the table. "About this menu."

I raise a brow, smirking slightly as I take a sip of my whiskey. "You two ready to impress me or are we still playing nice?"

Ashton grins, his teeth flashing white in the dim light. "We don't play nice, Carleen. You'll learn that soon enough."

Ryder huffs out a quiet laugh beside him, shaking his head. "What Ashton means is—we've got some ideas. You sign the contract and we'll make sure this event goes down as one of the best in Culinova history."

The confidence in his voice makes something settle in my chest. Ryder isn't the type to overpromise, and I respect the hell out of that. I set my glass down, letting my gaze sweep between the two of them. "Fine. I'll sign it. But only because I think we can

make something incredible together. And—” I smirk, leaning back in my seat, “—I want to see what you two can do under pressure.”

Ashton’s grin widens, and he waggles his eyebrows at me. “Oh, darling, we perform best under pressure.”

Ryder rolls his eyes but doesn’t contradict him. The three of us settle into easy conversation after that—discussing menu ideas, ingredient sourcing, and logistics for the trial week. Ashton flirts shamelessly through most of it, and Ryder watches me with those sharp, observant eyes of his. It’s almost too easy, the way we fall into rhythm. But even as we talk, my eyes keep drifting back to Tati.

Everything they’re giving her—the attention, the adoration, the focus, I selfishly also want for myself. I didn’t think I would. I thought I would be satisfied just focusing on Tati but watching how attentive they’ve been with her even over just a few hours makes me ache. Even the simple touches that Ryder offers Ashton that are just so easy, so natural.

It’s gentle, almost tender—the way Ryder’s large hand cups the side of Ashton’s face, his thumb tracing the shell of his ear in slow, deliberate motions. Ashton’s eyes flutter closed for a moment, his body visibly relaxing, shoulders dropping, his breath slowing. I’ve seen it before—this moment of quiet between them—but it still feels so intimate. Like watching something sacred unfold.

And it makes me ache .

I wonder how often Ryder does this for Ashton—how often Ashton needs someone to quiet the storm inside him. It’s clear that this simple touch grounds him, centers him in a way that words never could. When Ashton opens his eyes again, they’re clearer, softer. He sits up in the booth, folding his arms across his chest as his grin returns, but it’s less sharp this time.

“I know we talked about putting Tati as the focus, as the priority. Ryder talked to me too,” Ashton says casually, tilting his head slightly toward Ryder. “We agreed we wouldn’t push. Not with you, not with Tati. We’re here for the long haul if you’ll have us.” A few hours ago, we were talking about making this a trial and now it feels like they’re softly asking for, forever.

“Thank you. Both of you.”

Ryder’s lips twitch slightly, his blue eyes glinting with something soft, something kind. “You don’t have to thank us, Carleen,” he says. “This isn’t just about one of us—it’s about all of us. And that means moving at a pace that feels good for everyone.”

Ashton hums in agreement, flashing me another grin as he shifts in his seat. “Besides, darling, if there’s one thing I’m good at, it’s patience.”

I snort, the tension cracking slightly as I shake my head. “Somehow, Ashton, I don’t believe that.” I’m about to add onto that retort when the sour tang of melon hits me like a slap to the face—sharp, burnt, and so wrong it makes my stomach turn. Tati’s scent, usually so sweet and ripe, is twisted with fear and something else I can’t quite place.

I’m out of the booth before my brain even catches up to my body. Ryder and Ashton are already moving behind me, both of them tense and alert. My head snaps across the dimly lit venue, searching, scanning—where is she?

Tati’s cornered near the edge of the bar, her body half-turned away from a man who’s got a vice grip on her wrist. He’s swaying slightly, drunk and leering, his free hand gesturing wildly as he talks—or yells; I can’t tell. Tati’s face is tight, her jaw clenched as she tries to pull back, but she’s not strong enough to break his hold.

The sound that leaves my throat is primal . A guttural growl rips from my chest and everything around me blurs. I don't remember crossing the floor, don't remember the gasps of the few lingering patrons, don't remember Ryder and Ashton's sharp voices calling after me.

I just know—nobody touches my Beta like that.

I reach them in seconds and before the man even has a chance to turn his head, my fist connects with his jaw. The crack of bone-on-bone reverberates through my arm and the man stumbles backward, releasing Tati instantly. She stumbles into me, gasping as she clutches at my shirt, her body trembling so hard I can feel it through the fabric. I curl my arms around her protectively, my chest heaving as I watch the man stagger, holding his face with a look of dumb shock.

“Are you okay, sunshine?” I murmur into Tati's hair, my voice soft despite the rage simmering just below the surface.

She doesn't answer—just sobs into my chest, her fingers fisted into the collar of my shirt. The man—this pathetic excuse for a human—straightens, his bloodshot eyes locking onto me with rage. He lunges forward, but Ryder and Ashton are right there. Ashton grips the man's arm, twisting it behind his back so fast the guy yelps in pain. Ryder steps forward, his gaze sharp and menacing as he places a hand on the man's chest and shoves him backward.

“Stay down , ” Ryder growls, his voice low and deadly.

The man freezes, his chest heaving, eyes wide with fear.

“Enough!”

Eugene pushes through the small crowd that's gathered, his face tight with irritation

and worry. His gaze flickers over me, over Tati trembling in my arms, then over to Ryder and Ashton, still holding the drunk guy in place. “What the hell is going on here?” Eugene snaps.

I turn my head slowly, leveling him with a glare so sharp I swear I see him flinch. “You want to know what’s going on, Eugene?” I hiss, my voice dripping with venom. “One of your customers decided it was perfectly acceptable to put his hands on my Beta. To drag her around like she’s some toy while she was just trying to do her damn job.”

Eugene’s face pales as his eyes flicker back to the man on the floor. “I—Carleen, I—”

“No,” I snap, cutting him off. “I don’t want excuses. I don’t want apologies. I want to know that this will never happen again. I want to know that every single person who walks into this club knows that Tati is off-limits. ” I don’t even know where this possession is coming from but my Alpha is furious that anyone tried to hurt Tati. Some part of me is just chanting ‘Mine’ over and over again.

Eugene stammers, his hands held up in surrender. “Of course! Absolutely, Carleen. I’ll handle it. I swear.”

“Let’s go,” Ashton says, his voice softer now as he looks at me.

I nod, tightening my hold on Tati. Her body feels too small, too fragile in my arms, and the sour edge of her scent still lingers in the air, making my stomach churn. Without another word, I scoop her up bridal style, her arms instinctively wrapping around my neck as she buries her face into my shoulder. Her small voice whispers against my ear, “I’m sorry.”

My chest tightens. “Don’t you dare apologize, Tati.”

Ashton and Ryder flank me on either side as we push through the club's back exit and out into the cool night air. The silence outside feels deafening after the chaos inside and Tati's soft sobs are the only sound breaking the stillness. Ryder moves ahead, pulling open the passenger door of Ashton's sleek black car. Ashton stands beside me, his hand on my back, grounding me in the moment.

I slide into the backseat with Tati still in my arms, her head resting against my chest as her breathing slowly evens out. Tati is safe now but safe isn't enough. Safe doesn't erase the terror in her eyes, the way her body trembled in my arms or the sour edge of her scent still clinging to my clothes.

Safe doesn't fix the knot of rage still coiled tight in my stomach.

But right now, as I hold Tati close and listen to her quiet breathing, I remind myself of one simple truth—she's with us .

And as long as I'm breathing, nothing—and no one—will ever hurt her again.

Chapter eighteen

TATI

The drive home is silent. Not the comfortable kind of silence, either—the kind that’s heavy and thick, where every breath feels too loud and every creak of the car feels like an accusation.

I’m curled up in Carleen’s lap, my body still trembling slightly despite how tightly her arms are wrapped around me. Her scent wraps around me, chasing away the sour edge of fear still clinging to me. She’s running her nose along my cheek, inhaling deeply every few seconds like she’s trying to memorize my scent, like she’s making sure it’s me —safe, whole, hers .

Her lips brush over my temple every now and then, soft, featherlight, but she doesn’t say anything. I’m grateful for that. I don’t think I could handle words right now.

In the front seat, Ryder drives with his usual calm precision, but his knuckles are white against the steering wheel, and his sharp blue eyes flick to the rearview mirror every few seconds, landing on me and Carleen.

Ashton is slouched in the passenger seat, his arms crossed tightly over his chest, his jaw clenched so hard I can see the sharp edge of it standing out against his skin. He hasn’t said a word since we got in the car, and the anger practically radiating off him feels like static electricity prickling against my skin.

I close my eyes and bury my face against Carleen’s chest, my breath stuttering as I

try to calm myself down.

I'm fine .

I keep repeating it in my head, over and over. I'm fine. I'm safe. I'm with them.

But the memory of that guy's hand wrapped around my wrist, the way his fingers dug into my skin, the way his eyes looked at me... it's still there, stuck in the back of my mind like a splinter I can't get out. In all the time I've worked at Euphoria, I've never been grabbed so tightly I couldn't escape.

Carleen hums softly, her Alpha purr vibrating through her chest and into me. Her hand runs slowly up and down my back, her other arm wrapped firmly around my waist. "You're safe, sunshine," she murmurs softly into my ear. "I've got you. We've got you."

Carleen doesn't let me go, even when the car comes to a stop, as she steps out of the car with me still wrapped in her arms. I clutch at her shirt, my fingers tangled in the fabric as she carries me up the stairs and into the apartment. The second we're inside, the door clicks shut behind Ryder, and Carleen adjusts me slightly in her arms so she can look at me. Her brown eyes search mine, sharp and focused, like she's cataloging every bruise, every scratch, every tiny thing that might be wrong with me. "Where do you want to be, Tati?" she asks softly, her voice low but steady.

The question hits me harder than I expect it to.

I should have an answer. I should know. But the weight of the night is still pressing down on me and the fear—the helplessness—it's still clinging to me like cobwebs I can't shake off. I open my mouth, but no words come out.

Carleen's eyes soften, her grip on me tightening just slightly. "Tati..." A soft sigh

falls from her lips, her brows knitting together as she tries again. “Alright, first things first—are you okay, Tati?”

I nod. It’s a small nod, hesitant, but it’s honest.

Carleen’s lips twitch into something soft, almost a smile, as she brushes her thumb along my cheek again. “Good. That’s good, sweetheart.” Her voice feels like a balm to my frayed nerves, something grounding amidst the swirling storm in my head. She shifts slightly, setting me on my feet. “Now, tell me—where do you want to be?”

That question hits harder and my chest tightens again. I look down at my hands, tears blurring my vision. This time I do know the answer but it’s not something Ashton or Ryder know about it. “M-my nest,” I whisper, barely able to get the words out.

Carleen nods, her fingers briefly brushing through my hair. “Okay, your nest. We can do that.” But then she asks the real question, the one I’ve been dreading. “And who do you want with you, sweetheart?”

My stomach twists into knots. Because that feels... selfish. How am I supposed to pick? How am I supposed to choose when each of them feels like a lifeline right now?

My lower lip trembles as my eyes dart between Carleen, Ashton, and Ryder, who’s standing silently near the door. I open my mouth, close it again, and then murmur so softly I’m not sure they’ll hear me, “Can... can I be selfish?”

Carleen’s face softens in a way I’ve rarely seen. Her brown eyes shine, her lips part slightly as if she wasn’t expecting that. “Oh, Tati,” she breathes, leaning closer until her forehead nearly touches mine. “Of course you can. You can be as selfish as you need to be right now. There’s nothing wrong with that.”

I let out a shaky breath, the tight knot in my chest loosening just enough. My voice wobbles as I finally say, “I... I want all of you.”

The silence that follows isn’t heavy—it’s warm. It wraps around me like a cocoon as Carleen nods slowly, a small smile tugging at her lips. “Alright,” she whispers. “All of us, then.”

Ashton’s grin is soft, his usual playful smirk replaced by something gentler, something warmer. “Whatever you need, little doe. We’re here.”

Chapter nineteen

ASHTON

She wasn't kidding when she said "nest."

I glance over at Ryder, and he's frozen behind me, his sharp blue eyes flicking over the scene, taking everything in. I lean back slightly into him, my shoulder meeting his chest, and his arms instinctively slide around my waist.

It's grounding, the way he holds me—firm and steady, like he's anchoring me in place.

Tati stands a few feet away, still tucked against Carleen's side, her tear-stained hazel eyes wide as she glances between us and the closet. She looks so small, so fragile, and all I want to do is pull her into my arms and keep her there forever.

Carleen clears her throat softly, her lips twitching upward in that soft smirk of hers. "We're not all going to fit in the closet, sunshine," she says gently, her voice warm and teasing. "The pillows are going to have to come out."

Tati blinks, her brows knitting together slightly, and for a second, she looks so unsure—so lost. But then she nods slowly, her fingers trembling as she starts pulling the pillows out of the closet and arranging them on the floor. It's a slow process—careful, deliberate—but there's something calming about watching her work. Each pillow is placed with purpose, each blanket smoothed out until the nest spreads out into a large, inviting space in the middle of the bedroom floor.

I swallow hard. I never thought about having an Omega before. Ryder and I have always been enough for each other even if we thought about having another one or two people in our pack. Ryder always thought we'd end up with an Omega. I wasn't so sure.

But now, standing here, watching Tati arrange this little sanctuary, something in my chest clicks .

I want this.

I want her.

And not just her—but this. The nest, the safety, the quiet intimacy of it all.

I want to sprawl out with my mates and just exist .

Tati finally stops, sitting back on her heels as she surveys her work. Her tear-streaked face is soft now, her hazel eyes glistening as she glances up at us. She looks beautiful. Vulnerable and strong and so herself .

I kick off my shoes and step forward, my chest aching with something I can't put into words. Tati watches me, her lips parting slightly as I kneel down at the edge of the nest. Her small hand reaches out toward me, her fingers trembling and I don't even hesitate—I slide into the nest beside her, letting her pull me close. She curls into my side immediately, her face pressing against my chest, her sweet scent filling my senses.

“Hey, little doe,” I murmur softly, my fingers brushing through her short dark hair.

She doesn't say anything, just takes a deep, shuddering breath, her small body relaxing against mine as if she's finally letting go of something heavy. I feel

movement behind me, and then Ryder slides in, his broad chest pressing against my back, his arm draping over both me and Tati. For a moment, it's just the three of us—tangled together in the center of Tati's carefully built sanctuary.

And then Carleen kneels at the edge of the nest, her brown eyes flickering over us before settling on Tati. "Is there room for me in there, sunshine?" she asks softly.

Tati nods, her voice barely above a whisper. "Always."

Carleen smiles—a soft, genuine smile that makes something warm bloom in my chest—before she slides into the nest on Tati's other side. Her strong arms wrap around Tati from behind, her face nuzzling into the crook of Tati's neck as she lets out a slow breath. And just like that, the four of us are settled.

Tangled limbs, warm bodies, soft breaths filling the air.

No one speaks. No one moves.

I want to make her feel better. I want to take away every single bad thing that happened tonight, erase the fear from her hazel eyes, and replace it with something warm, something soft .

But I don't know how.

I don't know if I can .

Because as much as I want to touch her, kiss her, hold her—I know this isn't just about me. It's not even just about Tati. It's about Carleen too. And that? That's a whole other tangled mess I don't know how to unravel.

Because I want her .

God, do I want her.

Carleen—the sharp-eyed Alpha with a spine of steel and a heart so big she tries to lock it away. The woman who watches over Tati like she’s the most precious thing in the world, who stepped in and punched a guy square in the face for hurting her Beta without a second thought.

She’s everything .

And what kills me is that I don’t just want her in some fleeting, surface-level way. I want to worship her.

I want to lay her down on soft sheets, kiss every inch of her skin, and make her feel like the most cherished, adored creature on the planet. I want to hear her voice crack when she moans my name, see her head fall back, and know that I’m the one who put that look on her face.

But she’s guarded—so, so guarded.

And the last thing I want to do is cross a line.

I twist to look at Ryder. He’s watching me, those sharp blue eyes locking onto mine like he can see straight into my soul. He raises one brow, his lips twitching slightly at the corners, and I know what that look means. Breathe, Ash. Slow down.

He’s always been the calm to my chaos, the steady hand on my shoulder when I start to spiral. And at some point, he’ll probably drag me into our room, push me face-down into the mattress, and remind me exactly who’s in charge when things get too loud in my head.

It’s always been the two of us—perfectly balanced, perfectly in sync. But somewhere

along the way, it stopped being enough. Not because I don't love him—because God , do I love him—but because we were both missing something.

And now I'm sure, with every fiber of my being, that something is Carleen and Tati.

Even if it's only been one day, even if it feels insane to admit—it's true.

They fit with us. Perfectly. Seamlessly.

It's like the four of us were carved out of the same stone, and it just took this moment, this night, to realize it.

Tati shifts slightly in her sleep, her small hand curling into the fabric of my shirt, and my heart squeezes so tight I have to close my eyes for a second.

How the hell did we get here?

How is it possible to feel so much after so little time?

Ryder's hand squeezes my hip gently, his thumb brushing slow, deliberate circles against the fabric of my pants. It's such a simple touch, but it's grounding. "Stop overthinking," he mutters softly, his deep voice vibrating against my back.

Tati flops over and smushes her face against Carleen's chest, her breath coming in soft, even puffs as she finally drifts into a deep sleep. Her small hand curls in Carleen's shirt, like she's afraid letting go will make everything fall apart. I watch her for a moment, my head resting against Ryder's chest, his slow breaths brushing against the back of my neck. The nest is warm, and despite the chaos of the night, despite the storm still lingering in my chest, this feels right.

I glance up at Carleen across the nest. She's stroking Tati's hair, her brown eyes

softer than I've ever seen them. There's something achingly tender in the way she holds her Beta, something fiercely protective, and I feel it like a weight in my chest.

"She's precious," I murmur softly, careful not to break the fragile peace hanging over us.

Carleen looks up, her lips twitching into the smallest smile. "She is. I fought it for so long—these feelings, this... thing between us. But it's been so much easier now that I stopped running from it."

"Is it wrong," I start, hesitating just a little, "to say that this feels... perfect? That it's been, what, a day? Less than a day and it feels like it's supposed to be like this?"

Carleen's smile widens just a little, her head tilting as she looks at me, really looks at me. "No, Ashton," she says softly. "It's not wrong. The heart wants what it wants and we can overthink it all we want, but it doesn't change anything." She pauses, her gaze flicking briefly to Ryder before landing back on me. "Biology might tell us we're compatible, but this?" She gestures lightly to the nest, to the four of us tangled together in this fragile moment of peace. "This only happens because we want it to. Because we're choosing it."

Carleen leans down slightly, pressing a soft kiss to Tati's forehead, her lips lingering for a moment before she pulls back. But her gaze catches something, and her face tightens. Her eyes drop to Tati's wrist—the faint, angry bruise starting to bloom against her soft skin. Carleen's nostrils flare slightly and I see her shoulders tense.

"It's not going to be easy," she says softly, her voice tight with emotion. "There are going to be bumps in the road—nights like tonight. Times when we're scared, or hurt, or unsure. But..." She looks back up at me, her brown eyes fierce and unwavering. "But this can work. We can work. If we want it badly enough, if we're willing to fight for it, it can work." For some reason, I feel like those words are more for her

than for me.

“This is worth fighting for,” I respond.

The bruise on her wrist seems to mock us, a reminder of how close tonight came to being something so much worse. I hate it. I hate that someone touched her like that but as I look at her now—safe, warm, surrounded by people who care about her—I remind myself that she’s here. She’s with us.

“She deserves this,” Carleen says, her voice cracking slightly before she clears her throat. “She deserves us. ”

Ryder hums low behind me, his voice deep and steady. “And she’s going to have us. Both of you will.”

Chapter twenty

TATI

Waking up in Ryder's arms feels like being wrapped in a weighted blanket dipped in pure comfort and safety. His body is so warm , solid in a way that makes me feel protected, cherished even. The scent of something sharp fills my lungs with every inhale, grounding me instantly. But it's not just Ryder—it's all of them. Ashton's rich citrus scent lingers faintly in the pillows, bright and familiar, and Carleen's peaches-and-rain sweetness clings to the blankets wrapped around me.

I shift slightly, nuzzling my face against Ryder's chest, and it hits me— the bourbon. That deep, heady scent that makes me want to crawl closer, bury myself deeper in him. My hands fist into his soft shirt, clutching it like it's my only lifeline.

Then I hear it—the low, vibrating rumble coming from deep in his chest.

Ryder is purring .

The sound rolls over me in waves, deep and soothing, lighting something warm in the pit of my stomach. My body relaxes instantly, melting against him. His arm tightens around me, one massive hand smoothing slowly up and down my back. I feel his head dip closer, his nose pressing into my hair as he takes a deep breath.

“Morning, sweetheart,” he murmurs, his voice gravelly from sleep, vibrating low in his chest. The purring doesn't stop; if anything, it gets louder, like he's content—no, happy. “How'd you sleep?”

I can't stop the way my fingers curl tighter into his shirt or the way I let out a soft, content sound against his chest. His scent fills every part of me, wrapping around me like a cocoon, and his purr seems to echo inside me, like it's resonating in my very bones.

"Good morning," I mumble, my voice muffled against his chest.

He laughs—a soft, deep chuckle that makes the purr vibrate stronger and I feel it everywhere.

"Waking up with you in my arms is amazing," Ryder says softly, his hand still moving along my back. The words hit somewhere deep in my chest, and I press my face further into his shirt, trying to hide the flush creeping up my neck.

"How are you so warm?" I mutter against him.

His chest rumbles with another laugh, and he presses a soft kiss against the top of my head. "Not sure, sweetheart. I've always been like a furnace. Ashton says the same thing."

I hum softly in response, soaking in every second of this moment. Ryder's arms feel like a shield against the world, like nothing bad can touch me as long as he's holding me like this. But eventually, curiosity starts to creep in, and I glance up at him, my cheek still pressed against his chest. "Where are the others?"

Ryder's lips quirk into a soft smile as his sharp blue eyes meet mine. They're softer now, warmer than I've ever seen them before. "Carleen wanted to get the contract signed and delivered," he says, his voice still low and soothing. "But she didn't want you waking up alone. Ashton went with her."

I nod slowly, letting the information settle. Of course, Carleen wouldn't want me

waking up by myself—not after last night. “She didn’t have to do that,” I mumble.

Ryder’s brow raises slightly and he tilts his head down to look at me more closely. “Tati, sweetheart, you’re important to her. To us. Don’t downplay that.”

Ryder doesn’t push. He just holds me tighter, his big hand cradling the back of my head as his purr continues, steady and unrelenting. Eventually, Ryder shifts slightly, his hand sliding down to gently stroke my arm. “Do you want to get up or do you want to stay here for a little longer?”

I know I should probably move—get out of the nest, have some breakfast, maybe text Carleen to see how things are going. But the thought of leaving this bubble of safety feels impossible right now.

“Just... a little longer,” I whisper.

I probably should have just gotten up as Ryder shifts beside me, his thigh moving between mine. My breath catches in my throat as I cling to him, eyes widening as he presses his thigh against my heat. “Stop or keep going, sweetheart?”

“Keep going,” I push out, gasping as he slides his leg against my pussy through the thin shorts I didn’t change out of. Goddess, I’m going to be ruined between these Alphas. My face heats as Ryder repeats the movement, the rough brush of his leg just the right amount of friction that I need. “Holy shit,” I breathe out as he grips my hips and grinds me down on his thigh.

He pushes himself closer to me, widening my thighs to make room for him as my hips move of their own accord, seeking more friction. He moves slowly, torturously, directing the pace until my body is shaking with need.

His purr heightens, thrumming through my ears. “That’s it, sweetheart. Let go for me.

Drench me with your scent.”

I whimper, my body trembling as pleasure coils tight within me. Ryder's thigh moves in a steady rhythm, his dominant gaze holding me captive as he watches me fall apart. My breath comes in short gasps, my hips bucking against his thigh as I ride the wave of pleasure.

"Ryder!" I cry out, my voice hoarse as I climax, my body convulsing around his thigh. This isn't embarrassing, I tell myself. Nope, not at all as I come all over my Alpha, my scent blooming throughout the room.

I'll just give myself a few seconds before I slink off into the bathroom and not look back to see the wet spot I definitely left on his pants. I take it back. This is embarrassing.

Chapter twenty-one

RYDER

Waking up with Tati pressed against Ashton and me felt like holding sunlight in my arms—warm, fleeting, everything . And watching her fall apart on my thigh, I realize just how addicting these women are going to be.

Tati, with her sweet melon scent and those wide, trusting hazel eyes. Carleen, with her sharp tongue, steady hands, and that flicker of vulnerability she tries so damn hard to hide.

I run a hand through my hair, trying to shake off the buzz still lingering in my chest. I'm ecstatic that Carleen's signing the contract. Not just because she's the best for the event—although she is—but because it means we have time. Time to settle, time to grow, time to prove that this isn't just biology.

It's something real .

Ashton will obsess over Tati—I already know it. He's going to be draped over her, doting on her, teasing her, worshiping her every second he gets. And honestly? I'm right there with him.

But Carleen...

God, Carleen.

She's something else entirely. She's fire and steel, wrapped in soft brown curls and sharp eyes that see everything. There's a weight to her presence, an unshakable calm that makes me want to drop to my knees and promise her the world.

And hell, I would .

Because under all that strength, there's something fragile. Something she's been holding back, afraid to show anyone—afraid to show us. But I see it. I feel it every time she looks at Tati with those protective eyes, every time she glances at Ashton and me with hesitation and hope warring on her face.

I need her to trust me. To trust us.

And we have time now.

I step into the kitchen, my eyes catching on Carleen immediately. She's standing by the counter, arms crossed over her chest, her brow furrowed as she watches Ashton hover over a mixing bowl. She looks exasperated, her lips pressed into a thin line, but there's amusement dancing in her eyes. "What is this supposed to be?" she asks, unimpressed.

I smirk as I get closer, leaning against the archway to watch the scene unfold.

Ashton, completely unbothered, grins over his shoulder at her, a streak of flour dusting the edge of his cheek. "Banana pudding."

Carleen's brow rises, her eyes flicking to the countertop—a disaster zone of scattered ingredients, sticky banana peels, and what looks suspiciously like marshmallow fluff. "That is not banana pudding," she growls, pinching the bridge of her nose.

Ashton's grin widens, his brown eyes glinting with mischief. "It's my version of

banana pudding.”

“It’s chaos,” she snaps back, but there’s no real heat in her voice.

Ashton shrugs, completely unashamed. “All great masterpieces start with a little chaos.”

Carleen huffs out a breath, muttering something under her breath about ‘messy Alphas’ and ‘useless kitchen etiquette.’ Carleen turns so that her back is to me as she leans over the counter, brow furrowed as she stares at Ashton’s chaotic concoction of supposedly banana pudding. Her hands are braced against the edge, knuckles white, like she’s trying so hard not to reach out and fix the mess in front of her.

I step into the kitchen, letting my presence fill the space, and I see the way her shoulders subtly relax when she notices me out of the corner of her eye. She doesn’t turn, but her breathing slows just slightly.

“Carleen,” I say softly, my voice low, steady.

She glances over her shoulder, her brown eyes sharp but tired around the edges. I nod toward one of the barstools tucked against the counter. “Come sit,” I murmur, keeping my tone light but firm.

Her lips twitch, like she’s about to argue, but then she sighs and steps back from the counter, walking around to the stool. She sits down, crossing her long legs, her hands folding neatly in her lap as she stares at me expectantly.

I step forward slowly, giving her space to move away if she wants. But she doesn’t. She stays exactly where she is, her chin tilted up as her brown eyes lock onto mine. When I’m close enough, I let my chest brush against her arm—just slightly, just enough to feel her warmth, to let her know I’m here.

She doesn't pull away.

In fact, she leans into me—barely, just a fraction of an inch—but it's enough to make something warm bloom in my chest.

"It's easier to let him do what he does," I say casually, tilting my head toward Ashton.

Carleen's lips quirk into something that almost looks like a smile, and the tension in her shoulders melts just slightly. "I can see that," she says, her voice softer than usual. "Tati mentioned something like that once—how food is meant to be enjoyed . " She pauses, her brow furrowing as she glances at the mess Ashton is making. "But it's hard to let go of the structure, you know? When everything has been about presentation and competition for so long, it's hard to just let go . "

Her words settle in my chest, and suddenly, I know exactly what I want to do.

"You know," I start, my thumb brushing softly over her elbow, "I think maybe some of the issue is that you're always trying to be perfect. Always trying to meet some invisible standard that only you can see."

Her lips part slightly, her brow knitting together, but she doesn't interrupt. She just watches me.

"What if..." I continue, tilting my head slightly, "just for one day, you let that go? What if you let yourself be messy, be loud, be— free ?"

Carleen's lips twitch, just slightly, like she wants to argue. Like she wants to tell me that perfection is necessary , that it's expected. But she doesn't. Instead, she just stares at me, her brown eyes searching my face, like she's looking for something. Maybe a crack in my resolve. Maybe a lie.

But there isn't one.

I offer her a slow, easy smile and ask the question that's been hanging in the air between us since the moment we met. "Do you trust me?"

Her breath catches in her throat, and for a second, she doesn't move. Doesn't blink. Just stares at me with those big brown eyes, her lips slightly parted like she's processing the weight of that question.

It's more than just words. It's a promise.

Finally— finally —she exhales a soft breath, her shoulders dropping slightly as if some invisible weight has been lifted. And then, for maybe the second or third time since I've met her, she gives me a real, genuine smile.

It's not the polite one she gives clients. It's not the tight-lipped one she uses when she's trying not to lose her patience with Ashton. It's soft, and warm, and real.

"Just one day?" she asks softly, her voice barely above a whisper.

I nod, my smile widening. "That's all I need to prove it to you."

Her lips quirk again, and I swear she almost laughs. But then, she just nods, her eyes holding mine with an intensity that makes something in my chest squeeze tight.

"Okay, Ryder. One day."

Before I can stop myself, I lean forward and press a kiss to her forehead. When I lean away, her eyes are still locked on mine, something raw and vulnerable shining there.

Carleen clears her throat softly, her hands still gripping the counter behind her. She

glances briefly at Ashton, who's watching us from the other side of the kitchen with one brow raised and a smirk tugging at his lips. "What?" Carleen says, her voice sharp as she levels him with a look.

Ashton shrugs, the smirk widening into a grin. "Nothing. Just enjoying the show."

Carleen rolls her eyes, but I see the faint pink that rises in her cheeks before she looks back at me. "Fine," she says, her voice firmer now, more herself. "One day. But don't think this means you get to turn my kitchen into whatever that is."

She gestures vaguely at Ashton's banana-marshmallow... thing .

Ashton clutches his chest dramatically, stumbling back a step. "Carleen, you wound me."

I can't help but chuckle as Carleen rolls her eyes again, turning back toward the counter and muttering something under her breath about 'messy Alphas.'

But she's still smiling.

And that? That's enough for now.

Because I meant what I said—I'm going to prove to her that letting go, just for a little while, is worth it.

And if I'm lucky, maybe—just maybe —she'll let me be the one who catches her when she finally does.

Chapter twenty-two

TATI

Walking hand in hand with Carleen feels like breathing after holding my breath for too long. Her palm is warm against mine, like she's holding me and anchoring me at the same time.

It's been hours since we left the apartment—hours of weaving through farmer's markets and boutique grocery stores, filling our baskets with fresh vegetables, cheeses, spices, and things I can't even pronounce but Ryder insists are essential .

The banter flows easily between the four of us. Ashton, with his ridiculous charm and ever-present grin, keeps calling me little doe. Every time he does it, my face heats up, and Carleen gives him the look —that sharp, narrow-eyed warning that should send lesser men running. But Ashton just laughs, flashing those dimples like they're weapons of mass destruction.

“Careful, little doe,” he purrs, leaning down close enough that his breath tickles my ear. “Keep looking at me like that and Carleen's going to have to drag me out of here by the scruff of my neck.”

I squeak, swatting at him as he saunters off to grab another bundle of something green and leafy.

Meanwhile, Ryder has appointed himself pillow scout. At every stall, every shop, he finds a pillow, holds it up, and tilts his head slightly. “This one, sweetheart?” he asks,

his voice all low gravel and honey.

Every single time, I'm blushing and stammering like a mess, and every single time, he smiles like he's proud of himself.

Carleen, though... she's right here. Her hand stays wrapped around mine, her thumb rubbing slow, grounding circles into the back of my hand. She doesn't stray far, and if Ashton or Ryder get a little too bold with their flirting, she tugs me close to her side with a look that says, mine.

And yeah, it makes me feel all soft and gooey inside.

It's easy. It's so easy.

I've always dreamed about this—walking through aisles with a pack, laughing and arguing about ingredients, holding hands with someone who looks at me like I'm their whole world. But even as I bask in the warmth of this little daydream turned reality, I know we're not done yet. Because the real mission of today—the best part—is still coming.

I wait until our bags are full, until Carleen's shoulders have finally started to drop, and Ashton and Ryder look ready to follow me anywhere. Then I drop the bombshell.

"We're going to Francine's for lunch," I announce, planting my hands on my hips.

Carleen freezes mid-step, her brows pulling together in confusion. "Francine's? The burger place? Tati, that's—"

"One of the sloppiest, greasiest, messiest places in the city," I finish for her, grinning ear to ear. "Exactly. That's the point. "

Ashton's grin spreads wide across his face, and he claps his hands together. "Oh, I love this plan."

Ryder hums in approval, his lips twitching into a rare smile. "Can't say no to a good burger."

Carleen lets out a long-suffering sigh, pinching the bridge of her nose like she's deeply, deeply regretting every decision that led her to this moment. "Please tell me they at least have napkins," she mutters.

I reach up and pat her cheek lightly, grinning. "They've got napkins, Leenie. They bathe in napkins."

Carleen gives me a flat look at using the childhood name only reserved for Ellie, but there's a flicker of amusement in her brown eyes. "Fine. But if Ashton gets ketchup on my shirt, I'm taking it out on his hide."

Ashton gasps, clutching his chest in mock horror. "Carleen, you wound me."

Ryder smirks, already walking ahead of us, his hands stuffed into the pockets of his dark jeans.

Carleen looks down at me, her lips twitching as if she's trying not to smile.

"This better be worth it, Tati," she says, her voice low and warm.

I squeeze her hand tightly, tilting my head up to meet her gaze. "It will be. I promise."

Francine's is chaos. The greasy scent of sizzling burgers, melted cheese, and frying oil clings to the air like a second skin. There's chatter everywhere, the kind that

bounces off the walls and makes everything feel a little too loud but perfectly alive.

And then there's us.

Crammed into a tiny booth in the far corner, looking so painfully out of place that it's almost comical. Carleen is horrified. I can see it in the tight line of her jaw, the way her hands grip the edge of the table like she's preparing for battle. Ryder, calm and steady as always, slides in beside her, one of his broad arms resting casually on the back of the booth. Ashton pulls me into his side, draping one arm across my shoulders like I'm something precious, and yeah... my heart does a little somersault at the feeling.

Carleen's eyes flick between all three of us, and I swear I can see her mentally calculating the odds of survival in this grease-and-chaos-filled arena.

"This is..." she starts, her voice tight as she stares down at the laminated menu, "...not what I was expecting."

Ashton snorts beside me, his grin wicked. "Come on, darling, live a little. No tiny portions. No tweezers. Just good old-fashioned messy food."

Ryder hums in agreement, his lips twitching as he leans slightly closer to Carleen. "It'll be good for you, Carleen. Promise."

I bite my lip to keep from giggling at the look she shoots Ryder, like he's personally offended her chef sensibilities. But then—then she leans into his touch, just slightly, just enough for me to notice. And my heart does another somersault because it's fucking perfect .

I grin up at Ryder, my eyes sparkling with mischief. "Don't worry, Ryder. I've got her covered."

Carleen raises a brow at me. “What do you mean by that, Tati?”

I snatch up a menu and flip it open dramatically, scanning the greasy, delicious options. “It means I’m ordering for you. Trust me, you’ll thank me later.”

Ashton presses a loud, exaggerated kiss to my cheek and I burst into giggles as Carleen rolls her eyes with a long-suffering sigh. “Why are you like this?” Carleen asks, her voice flat but her lips twitching slightly like she’s fighting a smile.

“Because you love us,” Ashton says, grinning like he’s won the lottery.

Carleen pinches the bridge of her nose, muttering something about disasters, but she doesn’t argue. The server comes by—a bored-looking teenager with a visor that looks two sizes too big—and I order with confidence. “Two double-stacked bacon cheeseburgers, chili fries, onion rings, and a strawberry milkshake for her.” I point to Carleen proudly.

The server blinks, scribbles something down, and moves on like it’s totally normal for a Beta to order for her intimidating Alpha girlfriend in front of two towering, unfairly attractive Alphas. When the server walks away, Carleen stares at me, her brows raised so high I’m genuinely worried they might get stuck like that. “A strawberry milkshake?” she asks flatly.

“Trust the process, Alpha,” I say sweetly, fluttering my lashes at her.

Ashton leans into me, his face buried against my neck as he lets out a muffled snort. Carleen narrows her eyes at us both, and Ryder—ever the composed one—just shakes his head with a soft chuckle. “You two are torturing me on purpose,” Carleen mutters.

“Oh, absolutely,” Ashton says without hesitation.

The food arrives about fifteen minutes later, and the smell alone is enough to make my mouth water. Plates are practically piled onto the table—burgers stacked high, fries dripping in chili and cheese, golden onion rings glistening under the fluorescent lights.

And then there's Carleen.

She's staring at her burger like it personally offended her. In one hand, she holds a fork. In the other, a knife.

A fork and knife. At Francine's.

"Ashton," I whisper, nudging him slightly.

Before either of us can intervene, Ryder swoops in like the silent menace he is. With one smooth motion, he reaches over and plucks the fork and knife straight out of Carleen's hands, setting them carefully to the side.

"Try it the way you used to when you were a kid," he says softly, his deep voice practically dripping with amusement.

Carleen's mouth opens—then closes—then opens again. For a moment, she looks like she might argue, but then... she exhales sharply. Her hands move slowly as she picks up the burger, her fingers sinking slightly into the bun, sauce already threatening to drip onto her fingers. She hesitates.

"Come on, darling," Ashton says, his voice low, coaxing. "Just one bite."

I watch her carefully, holding my breath as she finally leans down and takes a bite.

The sauce drips onto her fingers, cheese stretches from her lips to the burger, and for

a second, Carleen looks so scandalized that I can't stop myself from giggling. But then she closes her eyes, lets out a soft hum of approval, and her shoulders drop. "This is ridiculous," she mutters after swallowing.

I beam at her, practically glowing with pride. "But is it good ridiculous?"

Carleen narrows her eyes at me, but there's a smile tugging at the corner of her lips. "Yes, Tati. It's good ridiculous."

Ashton claps his hands once. "Mission accomplished!"

A few more bites in and Carleen is smiling.

Not her usual tight-lipped, composed, everything-is-under-control smile. No, this one is soft and real, stretched wide across her face as she takes another messy bite of her burger. There's sauce smeared across the corner of her mouth, and cheese is threatening to slide down her chin, but she doesn't care.

She's laughing softly at something Ryder said, her shoulders finally loose, her brown eyes sparkling in a way I've never seen before. I feel like I'm witnessing something sacred. Like I'm peeking behind the curtain and seeing the Carleen who exists when no one's watching—the Carleen who doesn't have to be Alpha all the time.

It's messy. It's chaotic.

And it's perfect.

She reaches for a napkin, her fingers already smudged with sauce, but Ryder stops her with one big hand wrapping gently around her wrist.

"May I?" he asks softly, his deep voice smooth, like he's asking for something far

more intimate than wiping ketchup off her lips.

Carleen hesitates, her brown eyes flicking up to his face before she nods and Ryder leans in. He cups her jaw with one hand, his thumb brushing gently over her cheek as he tilts her face up. Then he leans down and kisses her—soft, slow, deliberate. I can feel the way Carleen melts into it, the way her shoulders drop just a little more, the way her hand comes up to lightly grip Ryder's wrist.

It's not just a kiss—it's trust. It's surrender. It's her letting him in, letting him see her when she's vulnerable. I hum softly, the sound escaping before I can stop it. My body feels warm all over, my chest tight with something I can't quite name. Ashton, who's been quietly watching the scene unfold beside me, presses a kiss to my temple, his lips lingering there for a moment before he speaks.

"They look pretty together, don't they, little doe?" he murmurs against my skin.

I nod, my voice catching in my throat. "Yeah, they really do."

Ashton tilts his head slightly, his brown eyes locking onto mine, filled with something soft and knowing. "Almost as pretty as you," he says softly before leaning in and capturing my lips in a kiss of his own.

When we pull back, Ryder and Carleen are both watching us. Carleen's face is flushed, her lips still slightly parted from her kiss with Ryder. Ryder's gaze flicks between Ashton and me, a slow smile pulling at the corner of his mouth.

There's a beat of silence—a pause in the chaos of the diner, like the four of us are wrapped in a bubble, a space carved out just for us.

But then—my stomach growls.

Loudly.

Ashton throws his head back and laughs, this deep, full-bodied sound that makes my cheeks heat up instantly. Carleen raises a brow at me, her lips twitching in amusement.

“Alright, alright,” I mutter, grabbing my sandwich. “I’m eating, okay?”

I take a big, messy bite, sauce dripping onto my fingers as I hum in satisfaction. Ashton nudges me with his elbow, his grin still wide as he picks up a fry and pops it into his mouth. “Good girl,” he teases, his voice dropping slightly on the last word.

I glare at him, cheeks full of burger, but it’s pointless because my face is already flushed, and Ashton knows what he’s doing.

Ryder snorts softly, shaking his head as he picks at the onion rings in front of him, Carleen continuing what’s left of her burger. She even approves of her strawberry shake, although she tries to hide how much she truly loves it. I already know she’s planning a way to remake it at home.

Ashton teases me relentlessly, sneaking fries off my plate whenever I’m not looking and calling me little doe with that stupid, playful grin on his face. This isn’t some grand romantic moment. It’s not candlelit dinners or whispered confessions under moonlight.

It’s greasy burgers and sticky fingers. It’s loud chatter and stolen glances. It’s us.

And somehow, it feels more perfect than anything else ever could.

Chapter twenty-three

CARLEEN

The day stretches out in a hazy glow of easy laughter, casual touches, and warmth that settles somewhere deep in my chest. I didn't expect this—not the way Ryder watches me like he can see every wall I've ever built, not the way Ashton effortlessly pulls Tati into peals of giggles, not the way Tati blooms like a flower in sunlight under their attention.

It's so much.

But it's good. It's safe .

Ryder is thoughtful, almost painfully so. He notices when I'm too quiet, when my shoulders get tight again, and he gently nudges me back into the moment without ever making it feel forced. His blue eyes track every little detail, every flicker of emotion, and somehow, he doesn't make me feel exposed.

Ashton, on the other hand, is loud and playful. He's a constant stream of commentary, mostly aimed at making Tati laugh or drawing her attention back to him every time she gets distracted by something sparkly in a store window. But underneath that teasing charm, there's something sharp—an awareness that rivals Ryder's quiet observation. Ashton sees things. He watches Tati with a focus that's almost reverent, like she's some rare piece of art he's been lucky enough to stumble across.

And Tati...

God, Tati.

She's thriving. Her smile is bright, her laughter unrestrained. She's got this glow about her—like she's soaking in every ounce of affection and attention and letting herself enjoy it without guilt. She's holding onto Ashton's hand half the time and leaning into Ryder's shoulder the other, and yet, her eyes still flick back to me. Checking. Making sure I'm still here.

I'm here, Tati. I'm not going anywhere.

At some point, Ryder manages to sneak a pillow into one of the shopping bags after Tati spends a good five minutes cooing over it. It's obnoxiously soft, with pastel colors that remind me of cotton candy. When she realizes it's hers, she hugs it to her chest, her face lighting up like Ryder handed her the moon.

"She's never letting that thing out of her sight," I mutter to Ryder, who just chuckles low in his chest, his blue eyes soft with something warm and fond as he watches her.

"She deserves nice things," he says simply, like it's the easiest truth in the world.

It's strange, being here with them—these three people who are so unlike me, so open with their affection, so comfortable in their own skin. But it doesn't feel wrong.

It feels... good.

And then we pass by the perfume shop.

The storefront is small and intimate, warm lighting spilling out onto the sidewalk. Ashton practically drags Tati inside while Ryder holds the door open for me, his hand

resting briefly on the small of my back as I walk past him.

The air inside is thick with floral and musky notes, bottles lining every shelf in jewel-toned glass that catches the light.

Tati is in her element.

She flits from display to display, picking up bottles, sniffing them, wrinkling her nose, then grinning when she finds one she likes. Ashton stays close, arms crossed over his chest as he watches her with an amused little smile. Ryder, meanwhile, moves deeper into the store, his attention sharp as he scans the shelves like he's hunting for something specific.

And me?

I linger by the front counter, running my fingertips along the edge of a glass display. It's Ryder who finds me first. He comes up beside me, close enough that his arm brushes against mine. His hand finds mine naturally, like he's done it a thousand times before. His palm is warm, his fingers strong but gentle as they twine with mine.

I should pull away. I should say something. But I don't. I let him hold me, let myself lean into him slightly. His thumb brushes softly over the back of my hand, and I feel my shoulders relax, just a fraction. "Carleen," he says softly, his deep voice a low rumble in the space between us. I glance up at him and there's something steady and certain in his blue eyes, like he's already decided that this— us —is going to work. "It's okay to let go," he murmurs.

Tati appears a few minutes later, three bottles cradled in her arms like precious gems. Her hazel eyes are bright, her smile wide as she holds them out for me to see. Ryder squeezes my hand once before letting go, stepping back slightly as Tati skips toward the counter to pay. Ashton sidles up to me, nudging me lightly with his elbow. "See?

Food, perfume, pillows—what more could a pack need?”

I huff out a quiet laugh, shaking my head. “You’re insufferable.”

“But you love it,” Ashton says, his grin positively wicked.

Tati finishes paying, the bottles tucked carefully into a small velvet bag, and we step back out onto the street, the sun dipping low on the horizon, casting everything in shades of gold and pink.

The ride home is full of soft laughter and easy chatter, the kind that feels so natural it makes me ache a little. Tati’s nestled between Ashton and me in the back seat while Ryder drives, his sharp blue eyes focused on the road ahead. Ashton’s arm is draped lazily across the back of the seat, fingers occasionally brushing over Tati’s shoulder as he throws out some ridiculous comment that makes her giggle.

The perfume bag is still clutched tightly in Tati’s lap, her fingers grazing over the velvet like she’s holding something sacred. I can’t help but glance at it, curiosity getting the better of me.

“So, Tati,” I say softly, tilting my head toward her. “Why three perfumes?”

Her head snaps up, wide hazel eyes locking onto mine as a blush spreads across her cheeks.

“They... they smell like you guys,” she mumbles, her voice barely above a whisper.

I blink. “Like us?”

She nods, glancing down at the bottles in her lap before continuing. “Yeah. I picked them because they remind me of your scents. Ryder’s smells like bourbon, Ashton’s

is all citrus and spice, and yours, Carleen...” She looks up at me again, her voice soft. “Yours smells like peaches. Like fresh ones, right off the tree after a good summer rain.”

My chest tightens and I can feel Ryder’s gaze flicking up to the rearview mirror, watching her carefully. Tati clutches the bag closer to her chest, her voice dropping even lower. “I want them in my nest. I want your scents around me when you’re not there.”

Ashton makes a soft sound—something between a hum and a sigh—as he leans closer to her. “That’s... really sweet, little doe.”

Ryder doesn’t say anything, but I can see the way his hands tighten slightly on the wheel, the corner of his mouth twitching like he’s fighting a smile.

“That’s a beautiful thing, Tati,” I say softly, my thumb brushing over her knuckles.

Her face lights up, and it’s like watching the sun break through clouds after a storm. The rest of the drive is light—Ashton teasing Ryder about his ‘serious driver face,’ Tati humming softly along with the faint music playing through the speakers, and Ryder throwing in the occasional dry remark that makes Ashton snort.

When we pull up to the apartment, Ashton hops out first, opening the door for Tati with a playful wink as he helps her out. Ryder comes around the other side as I step out. The four of us stand there for a moment, the cool evening air wrapping around us, the glow from the streetlights casting soft shadows across their faces.

Ashton and Ryder grab all of the bags before we walk up to my apartment. They help us inside, so easily putting everything away, a seamless effort as if we’ve practiced this over the years. The room suddenly feels heavy as everything is put away.

“Well,” Ashton says, rocking back on his heels. “Guess this is where we say goodnight.”

Both Alphas dole out soft kisses to Tati, our Beta preening beneath the attention before they reach out to me and kiss my cheeks. I catch Ryder, placing a kiss on his cheek as well. “Thank you. Today was fun.” His lips curl up in a smile.

“Remember that feeling Carleen. People can see that in your food—not just how good you are, or how long you’ve practiced but how much fun you have with your craft. Take care of our Beta. We’ll see you tomorrow.”

Chapter twenty-four

ASHTON

Seconds after we stumble through our front door, Ryder's mouth is on mine. Our tongues dance, tasting each other, and I inhale his scent, a mix of bourbon and something uniquely Ryder.

"Goddess, I've missed this," I murmur between kisses, licking Carleen's taste off his lips, my hands already working on the buttons of his shirt. I want to feel his skin against mine, to mark him as mine all over again with the lingering scent of our other mates between us.

Ryder chuckles, his fingers deftly undoing my own shirt, revealing my bare chest. "You're insatiable."

"Have you seen our mates?" I growl, nipping at his jawline, leaving a trail of kisses down his neck. I can smell the faint traces of Carleen's scent on him and it's driving me wild. He is as turned on as I am, his hands gripping my hips, pulling me closer. "We should take this upstairs," he breathes, his voice hoarse with desire.

But I'm too far gone to care about being polite. I need him and I need him now. With a growl, I spin him around, pushing him against the door, my hands roaming over his chest, mapping every inch of his defined muscles.

"Fuck, Ryder," I whisper, my breath hot against his ear. "I've been thinking about this all day. About you, about them. I need you, now."

Ryder's eyes darken at my words, a possessive glint shining through. "You're mine, Ashton. Always have been, always will be." He turns his head, capturing my lips in a fierce kiss, his tongue demanding entrance.

I moan into his mouth, my hands tugging at his belt, eager to free him from his clothes. The impressive bulge between his legs is straining against the fabric, his cock slapping against his stomach as I shove open his pants. "Goddess, that's beautiful," I murmur, not ashamed in the slightest as I lick my lips, staring at his cock in my hands. I lean down, giving the tip an experimental lick, Ryder's hand tightening in my hair.

He guides my movements as I take him deeper into my mouth. My parents and society always taught me that I shouldn't want another Alpha but it's been me and Ryder for so long, I can't imagine anyone else being my rock. Not when Ryder is everything I could fucking dream of.

I hum around his length, enjoying the salty taste mixed with his bourbon scent, my tongue swirling around the sensitive underside. Using one hand to brace myself on his thigh, I use the other to pump the base, running over his knot as his hips match the rhythm of my mouth.

"Ah, fuck, Ash," Ryder groans, his fingers tightening in my hair. "You're gonna make me come if you don't stop."

I pull back, my lips glistening with his precum, and smile up at him. "That's the plan. I want you to come for me." We both know that Ryder isn't coming down my throat tonight. We're both too pent up to be satisfied with that. No, I need his dick in my ass while he tells me all the dirty things he wants to do to Tati or Carleen. Hell, both of them.

Ryder chuckles, observing the glee in my expression. "Calm down, Ash. We're both

excited but while Tati is ready for what you're putting out. Carleen isn't. Baby steps. " Oh, I can do fucking baby steps. Carleen won't know what hit her. I'm going to woo her off her feet until she falls right into my arms. But that's a tomorrow problem.

"Fuck me, Alpha," I purr, standing up straight. I put a few feet of distance between us as I slowly shed my clothes, grinning as Ryder's gaze darkens until there's only the primal, animalistic desire left in those blue eyes.

He wastes no time closing the distance between us before roughly grabbing the front of my neck. I grin, happy that my lure worked as I submit to him, waiting for him to direct the rest of this night. Ryder pushes us toward the couch, swiping the bottle of lube from the coffee table. That's when I get to share my good news.

"I already prepped." I turn around, baring my back to him, and then slowly bend down to touch my toes, showing off the large black butt plug I've been walking around with. I almost forgot it was there, so trained to using in the first days I met Ryder that it's become second nature. An inhuman growl tears from my Alpha's throat as his fingers slowly work the plug, pulling it out inch by inch. I moan, the sensation of being filled and stretched at the same time exquisite.

"You like that, don't you?" Ryder purrs in my ear as he continues to tease me, his fingers dipping inside, brushing my prostate, making me squirm.

" Fuck, yes," I breath as I stand up, my head falling back against his shoulder. "I've been hard all day, thinking about this. About you."

Ryder chuckles, his warm breath sending shivers down my spine. "I can tell. You're so fucking responsive. Goddess, I'd mate you again if I could, Ash." With the plug removed, I hear the familiar snap of the lube cap before Ryder positions himself behind me, his hands on my hips, guiding his thick cock to my entrance. I brace myself against the edge of the couch, my breath coming in short gasps as the tip

pushes inside my ass, stretching me further.

"You're so tight, Ash," he groans, his voice strained as he enters me. "So fucking perfect."

I push back against him, eager to take him in, to feel him deep inside me. He obliges my silent request, his hands gripping my hips tightly as he thrusts forward, filling me completely. I let out a strangled cry, my body adjusting to his size, my muscles clenching around him.

Ryder begins to move, his hips snapping forward, his cock sliding in and out of my ass. The sound of skin slapping against skin fills the room, mingling with our heavy breathing and the occasional moan.

"You feel incredible," he grunts, his hands roaming up and down my sides. "I love seeing you like this, all mine." He bends over me, his lips grazing the Alpha bite he gave me almost a year ago before claiming again, his release following seconds later. "Come, Ash. Come with me."

His words are all I need. I let go, my body convulsing around him, my cock pulsing as I come, my release coating the floor beneath me. Ryder moves backward, my ass empty all over again, the feeling of his cum slowly dribbling from my ass making it worse. "Holy fuck, that's what I needed." I crumble to the floor, catching my breath as I look up at Ryder with a silly grin. He's standing as assertive and possessive as he always is, everything about him impressive from the width of his shoulders to the tattoos spread across his chest to the cock hanging between his legs.

I've always wondered what it would feel like to be knotted, to truly submit to Ryder but I'm not entirely sure my ass can stretch that far.

"I thought you were going to pounce on one of them at one point," Ryder drawls as

he moves into the kitchen. The faucet turns on and off and then he returns with a washcloth to clean up the tiled floor. Thank fuck we didn't spring for carpet. "But I like it. I like seeing the smile on your face while you doted on Tati, the way your eyes got all expressive every time she giggled or paid you a little more attention."

A warm smile touches my lips as I lean back against the cushions, my lids fluttering closed at all the memories we made today. Tati is pure sunshine, just like the nickname Carleen gave—my little doe, our Beta. But she's not the only one that has my attention. Carleen just has it in a different way. I crave her acceptance, her attention, her everything.

Ryder chuckles as he pulls me to my feet, pressing a kiss to my lips. "Talk to her, Ash. We said we wouldn't push but that doesn't mean you can't open yourself up to her and let her know what's waiting for her when she's ready."

Talking isn't my strong suit. I'm the fun Alpha, the one that breaks the boundaries with innuendos and jokes. The one that's around to lighten the mood. And yet, the only way to show Carleen that I'm here for her just like Ryder is—is to have that conversation. Goddess, this is going to suck, isn't it?

"The conversation can happen tomorrow, Ash. Right now, I'm going to fuck you a few more times until we've both released the pent-up energy from our systems. No need to terrify our new mates."

I can get behind that.

Well, Ryder will.

Chapter twenty-five

TATI

The couch is warm, soft, and smells like peaches and something faintly sugary—probably from the candle that was lit earlier. The glow from the TV flickers across the living room, casting lazy shadows on the walls. Some action movie is playing, but neither of us is really watching. The volume is low, the occasional burst of dialogue barely registering over the hum of our quiet breathing.

Carleen's arm is draped across the back of the couch, her fingers tracing slow, absentminded patterns on my shoulder. I'm curled against her side, my legs tucked under me, head resting just below her chin. Her scent wraps around me—calming, steady. I'm not even sure how long we've been sitting here, just existing in this space, but at some point, I sigh softly and shift to look up at her.

Her brown eyes flicker down to meet mine, her lips pulling into a soft, curious smile. "What's on your mind, sunshine?"

I hesitate, chewing the inside of my cheek as I try to untangle the mess of emotions sitting heavy in my chest. "Do you... do you think it's crazy that I miss them already?"

Carleen's fingers still on my shoulder for a second before she shifts, turning so she can face me better. "No," she says softly. "I don't think it's crazy at all."

"It's just—it feels like there's this empty spot in my chest, like something's missing,

and it's them . Like Ryder's steadiness and Ashton's... Ashton-ness. ”

Carleen chuckles at that, the sound soft and real, her lips twitching into a smile. “Ashton-ness is definitely a thing.”

We fall quiet for a moment, the distant sound of gunfire and car chases from the TV filling the silence. Then Carleen speaks again, her voice steady but thoughtful. “I feel it too, Tati. I thought... I don't know, I thought I'd feel suffocated, or like this was all too much, too fast. But it doesn't . ”

My chest tightens, and I nod, snuggling closer into her side.

“I don't know what the future holds,” Carleen continues, her fingers starting their slow tracing again. “But they're the first Alphas I've felt truly safe around in a long time. Maybe ever. Ryder said something to me earlier,” she adds after a moment. “He said he won't push me. That he wants me to speak up if something feels too fast, too much. That he wants me to feel safe . ”

I swallow hard, my eyes stinging slightly. “That's good. That's really good, Alpha.”

She nods, her gaze distant for a second before focusing back on me. “It's a wonderful feeling, Tati. To feel seen. Not just for what I can offer, not just for what I can do in the kitchen or as an Alpha, but for me. ”

There's a crack in her voice, just the smallest one, but it hits me like a punch to the chest.

I reach up and cup her cheek, brushing my thumb over her smooth skin. “You deserve that, Carleen. You deserve all of it.”

Her eyes soften, and she leans into my touch slightly, her lips pressing into a faint

smile. “The thing is,” she continues after a moment, “today showed me something I didn’t even realize I’d been missing. I’ve put so much of myself into work, into proving myself, that I forgot what it felt like to just... let go.”

I nod, because same.

She tilts her head slightly, her gaze searching mine. “I forgot that chaos can be... good. That sometimes it’s okay to get messy, to laugh, to let someone else shoulder some of the weight.”

“Like ketchup on your fingers,” I tease softly, grinning up at her.

She huffs a quiet laugh, her smile finally breaking free in full. “Exactly like ketchup on my fingers. Which is why I’m done waiting. I’m done waiting for the perfect moment because there will never be one. I’ll always find an excuse, a reason, a why. So, right now is perfect. Hell, six months ago was perfect.”

My breath catches in my throat as I realize where this conversation is heading. I’ve been waiting for this moment, anticipating it, yet now that it’s here, I’m nervous and excited all at once.

“I want to take the next step, Tati—with just you and me here because I know that it’s going to be all four of us soon enough. Are you ready for that?”

I nod, unable to find my voice. The anticipation is killing me and I want her so badly it hurts. Carleen smiles, a slow, sensual smile that makes my knees weak. She leans in, her lips brushing against my ear, sending a shiver down my spine. "Good. Because I've been dreaming of this moment."

Her hands move to my waist, gently pulling me closer. I can feel her warm breath on my neck and I tilt my head to the side, granting her better access. Carleen's lips trail

soft kisses down my neck, pulling a soft moan from me.

"You're so beautiful, Tati," she whispers, her hands undoing the clasp on my crop top. "I've wanted to undress you for a long fucking time."

My shirt falls open, revealing the lace bra underneath and the swell of my breasts. Carleen's eyes darken with desire as she takes in the sight, her fingers gently tracing the curves of my body.

"You're all mine tonight," she murmurs, her lips finding the sensitive skin of my collarbone. I arch into her touch, craving more. Her hands move to my bra, unhooking it with practiced ease. My breasts spill free, the cool air causing my nipples to pebble.

Carleen's eyes glittered with satisfaction as she leans down, her warm breath ghosting over my nipples, making them tighten further. "I've been dreaming of tasting you," she says, before taking a taut peak into her mouth. Goddess, her tongue feels amazing as it swirls and sucks, a gasp tumbling from my lips as pleasure bleeds through me. She suckles one breast while her hand gently kneads the other, her thumb brushing over the sensitive tip.

My Alpha's mouth is magic, my body responding, my core growing wet and needy. Carleen switches to my other breast, lavishing it with the same attention, her fingers now dipping lower, tracing the waistband of my shorts. I squirm, eager for more, my hips pushing forward involuntarily.

"Patience, sunshine," she purrs, her breath hot against my skin. "I want to savor every moment of this."

Her fingers work at the button and zipper of my shorts, slowly revealing my lacy panties and the dampness between my thighs when they're discarded. Carleen's eyes

meet mine, dark with desire. She hooks her fingers in the waistband of my panties and slowly slides them down my legs, exposing me completely to her.

Carleen's eyes feast on the sight of my nakedness, her tongue darting out to lick my lips. I've never felt so bare in front of someone before and yet I wouldn't want to be anywhere else in this moment, laid out for my Alpha. She moves to her knees, her gaze settled between my legs. "I'm already addicted and I haven't even truly tasted you yet. Goddess, Tati, I want it all. Let me be your Alpha."

My eyes widen at the promise in her words. I've been waiting to hear those very words for months. I've dreamt about this moment, cried about it, yelled to the stars—and now that it's here? I don't hesitate. "Fuck yes. Make me yours," I cry out, running my fingers through her curls and tugging her against my pussy.

The first swipe of her tongue is heaven. It's everything I dreamed it would be, my entire body responding to her touch. She wraps her arms beneath my thighs and thrusts her tongue inside of me. It isn't gentle. She's truly feasting on me, taking what she wants, and giving me pleasure in return. Especially when she stuffs two fingers into my pussy and starts sucking on my clit.

Goddess, I've died and gone to heaven.

I won't last long either, riding my Alpha's face but the pleasure wanes as she pulls away. A grunt of disappointment tears from my throat, Carleen chuckling at the pout on my face. "Sunshine, unless you want me to bite your clit, we have to resituate." I hadn't thought about that, my face turning a lovely shade of red as I move to lay across the lounge, Carleen hovering on top of me.

She kisses me, my taste on her lips as her fingers slide down my torso and plunge into my sex again. I wrap my legs around her waist, my hips meeting each of her thrusts. Her lips trail down to my jaw and then my neck, hovering delicately near my scent

gland. This is it. This is the moment I've been waiting for my entire life.

The moment when an Alpha claims me as theirs.

At first, there's nothing—just the feather-light brush of Carleen's lips against my shoulder and then a brief white-hot searing pain that spreads through me. In the next second, it's gone, replaced by pure pleasure, her name on my lips as I come on her fingers.

And then—perfection. That little tendril connecting me to Carleen, a fierce, beautiful bond strengthening with every moment. She licks at the new wound on my shoulder, purring into my skin, the sound running down my spine as her fingers begin moving again.

"I can feel you, Carleen. Fuck, it's everything. "

Her contentment ripples through the bond as she tends to her bite, ramping me up to another orgasm. I knew it would be amazing but I didn't know it could feel like this. Carleen slowly pulls back when a second, smaller orgasm washes over me, my body deflating into the pillows. She rolls us onto our side, gently kissing my forehead. "You're mine, now, Tati. No more running away, deflecting, hiding. My Beta. Goddess, I should have told you before but I love you. I love you so much my heart hurts thinking what could have happened had I pushed you too far away."

"You have no idea how much I've longed to hear you say those words, Alpha. I love you so fucking much and you're mine too, you know." I say, cuddling up to her chest. Her purr starts up again, drawing me into a contented sleep, the bond thick and heavy between us. I can't fucking wait to show everyone just who my Alpha is. And I still need to call Ellie and my parents and let them know—

"Tati, think those thoughts later."

I snort and burrow myself impossibly closer. “Yes, Alpha.”

The first thing I notice when I wake up is warmth. The second is the gentle, steady rhythm of Carleen’s breathing beneath me. My nest is soft, perfectly arranged, and the scent of peaches and something earthy and warm wraps around me like a second blanket. I can only guess that she carried us to my bedroom but I’m not complaining.

I let out a soft sigh, nuzzling closer into Carleen’s chest. Her arm tightens instinctively around me, her hand stroking lightly along my spine. For a moment, I don’t move. I let myself soak it in—the safety, the comfort, the quiet intimacy of waking up wrapped around my Alpha.

Her lips press lightly against the top of my head, her voice still heavy with sleep when she murmurs, “Morning, sunshine.”

I tilt my head up, blinking sleepily as her brown eyes meet mine. Her smile is soft, her hair a little messy, and there’s something so unguarded about her in this moment that it makes my chest ache.

“Morning,” I whisper back, my voice rough from sleep. Her head dips to nurse the bite on my shoulder, pleasure shooting down my spine as I wiggle against her. Ellie explained what that felt like once but I always thought it was bullshit but it really is a magic pussy button.

I can’t determine whether or not I hate it.

As I wake up a little further, I realize that she’s also dressed us—Carleen in that large shirt she always wore to bed and me in one of her shirts as well. That part I fucking love, being clothed in my Alpha’s stuff and I’m about to milk that every chance I get. Carleen finally leans back, searching my sleepy expression. “How are you, Tati? After everything? After the other night?”

“You mean when we said I love you?”

Her face darkens, telling me that that’s not what she was referring to. I’ve been avoiding talking or even thinking about it because cuddling in my nest with all three Alphas had made it all better. Or so I hoped.

“Tati...”

“I’m okay. I think. For the most part? It was terrifying but you were there. You all were. I’m not sure what happens next time because there will be a next time. And you can’t always be there to save me. It was always Ellie and me against the world and now she’s started a family and I just want a stage to express myself.” I let out a heavy sigh, wondering how stupid that sounds. “Carleen, I want to go back but...”

“You don’t need to force yourself. I’m sure that Eugene will have no problems giving you a day or two off to collect yourself. He should have never touched you.” There’s a cute little growl to her words that makes me curl up to her chest and throw my arm over her hip.

“I don’t want to think about it. Can we just stay here for today or do you have to work?”

Carleen hums thoughtfully and then I feel her shift. A moment later, I hear the soft chime of her phone as she pulls it from somewhere behind her. She types something quickly, her brows furrowing in concentration before her lips curve into a smile. “Done,” she says, tossing her phone gently onto one of the pillows beside us.

I blink up at her. “What did you do?”

“Cleared my schedule,” she says simply. “It’s just us today, sunshine.”

A giddy, fluttery feeling bubbles up in my chest, and I can't stop the grin that stretches across my face.

“Really?”

“Really.”

I practically tackle her, giggling as I press soft, playful kisses across her face. Carleen laughs, her arms wrapping tightly around me as she pulls me close, tilting her head so our lips meet in a proper kiss. It's soft at first, slow and lazy, but it deepens quickly. Carleen's hands slide down my back, pulling me tighter against her as her tongue sweeps into my mouth. I melt against her, sighing into the kiss as my fingers tangle in her messy curls.

When we finally pull back, we're both breathless, our foreheads pressed together as we try to steady ourselves. And just like that, we're back to cuddling—soft, warm, wrapped in each other.

The hours pass in a blur of slow kisses, whispered words, and long stretches of comfortable silence as Carleen nurses the bond on my shoulder. At some point, Carleen carries me to the kitchen and makes us something light to eat—toast and fruit and warm tea. We eat curled up on the couch, our knees touching, her eyes soft every time they meet mine.

I don't know how long we stay like this, wrapped up in our little world, but I don't care. I don't want to care. I'm dozing lightly in Carleen's arms again when my phone buzzes on the edge of the couch. I groan, fumbling around until I find it and squinting at the screen.

It's a text. From Ashton.

Hey, doe. Ryder and I were wondering if we could steal you and Carleen for dinner tonight? Say yes. Please say yes.

My heart does a little flip, and a goofy grin stretches across my face as I clutch the phone to my chest.

Carleen raises a brow, smirking slightly. “Good news?”

“It’s Ashton,” I say, biting my lip. “He wants to take us out to dinner. Him and Ryder.”

Carleen’s smirk softens into a smile, her fingers tracing lightly over my cheek. “What do you want to do, sunshine?”

I shake my head, hating that it’s still her putting my needs first. If this is going to work, it’s going to be our pack. “No, what do we want to do? Do you want to go out on a date with them?”

“Yes, I’d love that.”

That’s all the confirmation I need as I text him back.

What time?

The reply comes almost immediately.

Pick you up at seven, little doe. Wear something pretty for me.

I roll my eyes, grinning as I show the text to Carleen.

She snorts softly, shaking her head. “That man is relentless.”

“You love it,” I tease, nudging her lightly.

Carleen just smirks, leaning back against the cushions as she pulls me closer into her chest. I settle in against her, letting my eyes flutter shut as her hand strokes softly through my hair. We have a date tonight. A real date. And it’s not just with Carleen. It’s with them. With our pack. I press a soft kiss against Carleen’s collarbone before letting out a happy sigh.

Chapter twenty-six

ASHTON

When I said nice , I should have known that our women were going to outdo us. My nice sweater and dress pants don't carry a torch to the form-fitted evening dress Tati is cloaked in or the sleek black pants suit, complete with a tie Carleen is donned in. Even Ryder's usually put-together appearance pales in comparison. Tati's dark makeup brings out the hazel of her eyes, that wide smile on her lips only lengthens as we pull up to the parking lot.

I wanted to do all of this right. After Carleen asked for a day off to spend with Tati, I wanted to get my foot in the door and truly show our women what we had to offer. I knew Tati would agree because she's so easy to please but I want Carleen to want to be here as well. The desperate need for her approval—the way I sometimes need Ryder's has always made me wonder if I'm more of a Beta.

But the knot in my pants tells me otherwise.

Focus, Ash.

I clear my throat and step out of the car to open the door for Carleen, Ryder helping Tati out on his side. He's so much larger than her, the size difference almost comical, and yet it fits a few fantasies in my head. And when his hand swallows hers as he leads her inside, I nearly melt against the car right then and there. Except Carleen is just staring at me, one brow raised, wondering what the hell is going on.

“You good, Ashton?”

Fuck, I’m already messing this up.

“I really wanted this night to be perfect, Carleen. You even marked our Beta. Goddess, your bite looks perfect on her and—”

Suddenly, I’m facing Carleen, my back against the car, her hands cupping my cheeks. “Breathe. There you go. Everything is perfect. Tati is over the moon. She’s been squealing about it for hours, even said she had to dress me because we had to match.” Her smile is genuine but there’s something I still need from her.

“And you? You wanted to come too, right?”

Her chest rumbles with a laugh that slowly turns into a purr as she dips in low, brushing her lips across mine. “Tati asked me the same thing and yes, I want to be here. Tati might be the center of my world but that doesn’t mean I don’t want you too.”

There.

That confirmation. I close the distance between us, gently grabbing her tie and pulling it toward me so her lips meet mine. Goddess, they’re so soft. She moans into the kiss as I let her direct the pace, keeping my hand tightened around her tie so I don’t start wandering and push her too far. My eagerness has never been a hindrance until this moment.

And it’s too perfect to ruin.

When she pulls away, I’m chasing her lips, the taste of peaches and fresh rain as I slowly switch our positions. Her back is flat against the car, her eyes wide as they

search my expression. “I just wanted you to know, darling, that I want you too. Tati is going to be my obsession. My little doe, my perfect Beta. But you? You’re going to break me in the best of ways. I just know it. I’m falling in love with you, Carleen.” I drag the back of my hand down her cheek, Carleen leaning into the touch before kissing my knuckles.

“It’s really nice to be wanted, Ashton. You have no fucking idea. And, as chaotic as you are, in everything you do, I think I’m falling for you just the same.” Carleen lays one last kiss to my lips before I straighten her tie and then guide her inside.

Goddess, I’m going to be proving that to her every day of my life if she’ll let me.

The restaurant is cozy—low lighting, dark wood tables, and little flickering candles that make everything feel soft and intimate. Ryder chose the place, and of course, it’s perfect. It’s not overly fancy or pretentious, just comfortable enough for us to relax .

Tati is sandwiched between Carleen and me, and Ryder’s sitting on the other side of Carleen, leaning back in his chair like he owns the damn place. His sharp blue eyes scan the room occasionally, but mostly, they’re focused on us—on this. And I can’t blame him.

Because this? This feels right.

Especially after that moment outside. I feel closer to Carleen, like all of this can be part of our forever and not just a trial.

Carleen’s leaning in close to Tati, her fingers ghosting over the faint bonding bite on Tati’s shoulder. Her brows are furrowed, her lips pressed in a thin line as she inspects it like she’s assessing a five-star meal. “Does it hurt, sunshine?” Carleen murmurs softly.

Tati shakes her head, her hazel eyes shining under the dim light. “Nope. It’s fine. Promise.”

Carleen doesn’t look convinced. She presses a soft kiss just above the mark, and Tati melts into her side, letting out this tiny, satisfied hum that makes my chest ache with how sweet it is. Ryder watches them both, his face unreadable but his eyes are full of something warm and proud. Family.

That’s what it feels like. We’re building something here. Something fragile, something tentative, but real.

I lean back slightly, swirling the glass of whiskey in my hand as I watch Carleen fuss over Tati. It’s rare to see Carleen let her guard down like this, to see her so tender and soft. Normally, she’s all sharp edges and focus, but outside with me and here, with Tati tucked against her side, she’s softer. She’s herself.

The server arrives with our plates and the conversation shifts naturally to the food, to Culinova, to what comes next.

“So, Carleen,” I say, leaning forward and resting my elbows on the table, my whiskey glass dangling lazily between my fingers. “How are you feeling about the menu submission? Confident?”

Carleen looks up at me, her brown eyes sharp but glittering with something almost playful. “There are a few finishing touches I need to add,” she says, cutting into her steak with precision, “but yeah. I’m confident. I wouldn’t have agreed to this if I wasn’t.”

Ryder hums his agreement, lifting his wine glass in a small toast. “You should be confident, Carleen. From what we’ve seen so far, it’s exceptional.”

The restaurant hums with quiet conversation and clinking cutlery, but all I can focus on is us. The four of us tucked into this cozy little corner, surrounded by soft candlelight and the faint scent of wine and herbs.

Tati's beside me, her hazel eyes bright as she beams up at Carleen, who's currently trying—and failing—not to blush as Ryder leans in close, his nose skimming along the curve of her cheek.

Carleen's trying to keep her composure, pretending she's focused on her steak, but Ryder isn't having it. His hand rests gently on her lower back, his thumb moving in slow, reassuring circles. The way he holds her—it's so tender, so delicate. He's scenting her openly, marking her with his calm, steady presence, and Carleen's letting him.

I don't know if she realizes it yet, but she's leaning into him, her shoulders relaxing under his touch.

Tati giggles at something Carleen mutters under her breath and I turn my focus back to her. She's got this glow about her tonight, like she's soaked up all the warmth and attention and is now radiating it back tenfold. Her plate's still half-full, though, because every time she picks up her fork, her attention gets pulled elsewhere—usually by me or Ryder or Carleen.

“Here, little doe,” I murmur, reaching over with my knife and fork to cut her steak into neat little slices. “You'll never finish if you keep getting distracted.”

Her eyes snap to me, her cheeks flushing as she presses her lips together in a shy smile. “I was gonna get to it...”

I smirk, spearing a slice of steak with my fork before holding it up to her lips. “Open up, Tati.”

She stares at me for half a second before her lips part, her tongue flicking briefly against the fork as she takes the bite. I don't miss the soft sound she makes as she chews, her eyes fluttering closed for a moment like she's savoring every flavor.

"That good?" I ask softly, my voice dipping just enough to make her cheeks turn pink again.

She nods, her voice muffled as she answers, "Steak is always good."

Carleen snorts lightly, and Ryder chuckles low in his chest, but I'm still focused on Tati. She's beaming under the attention— under my attention. I want to ask them. I want to look around this table and say it out loud— let me be your Alpha. Let me be part of this family.

But I hold back.

Not yet. Not tonight.

Tonight, I'm just going to let myself be here . I'm going to relish every smile, every soft laugh, every flicker of connection that passes between us. Tati shifts beside me, leaning into my shoulder slightly as she sighs contentedly.

"Full already, little doe?" I ask softly, nudging her plate closer to her.

She shakes her head, her smile sleepy but happy. "No, just... happy. Really, really happy."

I can't help it—I lean down and press a soft kiss to her temple. "You deserve happy, Tati."

Her hand finds my thigh under the table, her fingers curling slightly into the fabric of

my pants. Next to us, Ryder's still scenting Carleen, his nose running lightly along her jaw now. Her cheeks are flushed, her lips parted slightly, but she's not pulling away. If anything, she's leaning closer.

She trusts him.

As the night winds down and the check is paid, we step out into the cool night air, the faint hum of the city wrapping around us like a blanket. Tati's tucked close to Carleen's side, her head resting against Carleen's shoulder as they walk a few steps ahead.

Ryder falls into step beside me, his sharp blue gaze focused on the two women in front of us. Neither of us speaks for a long moment. But then Ryder exhales softly and says, "We're lucky, Ash."

I nod, my voice low and certain as I reply, "Yeah. We really are."

The trial might be ending but this little pack is just beginning.

Chapter twenty-seven

TATI

The past few days have been perfect.

I wake up surrounded by warmth and the lingering scents of my Alphas. My nest has never felt more like home, and it's not even fully mine. But with them curled around me, tangled in soft blankets and pillows, it feels right .

Every day starts with a kiss from Carleen or Ashton pressing a warm cup of coffee into my hands. Ryder usually gives me one of those quiet smiles, the kind that feels like it's reserved just for me. It makes my heart stutter every single time.

I've been floating— thriving.

At Euphoria, my sets have been on fire. I feel lighter, more confident, and when I step off stage, I know I'm coming home to them. To all of them. But even as the days blur into each other, a routine forming effortlessly, something's been nagging at the edges of my mind.

Carleen.

She's been working herself raw in the kitchen. From sun-up to long past sunset, she's hunched over counters, sleeves rolled up, her brow furrowed in concentration. Ashton and Ryder try to keep her in check—bringing her water, stealing bites of her creations to make her laugh, pulling her into fleeting moments of rest.

But it's not enough. She's stressing over the final touches—as if nothing we've done all week has loosened her up in the kitchen. I'm at my wit's end and I don't know what to do.

And today, as I'm curled up on the couch with an oversized sweater swallowing me whole, watching Carleen dart around the kitchen while Ashton chops something and Ryder stirs a pot, I feel that worry gnawing at my chest. The bond is tight, rigid, compared to the warmth from when Carleen and I first bonded. I don't know what's wrong.

I'm munching on something citrusy and sticky—an orange-glazed pastry that Ashton practically shoved into my mouth earlier with a playful wink. But my appetite's fading as I watch Carleen pause, one hand braced against the counter, the other pressing into her lower back.

She looks tired . Her cheeks are a little pale, the glow of her peaches-and-rain scent duller than usual. Ashton notices too. His knife stills against the cutting board, his head tilting as he watches her. Ryder catches on seconds later, setting down the wooden spoon and stepping closer. But before either of them can reach her, Carleen takes one step back from the counter—then stumbles.

The plate in my hand drops onto the coffee table with a loud clink.

“Carleen!” Ashton's voice is sharp as he lunges forward, catching her before she hits the floor.

Ryder's there too, his strong arms wrapping around her waist as they ease her gently onto one of the kitchen stools. I'm off the couch before I can even think, my bare feet slapping against the hardwood as I rush over. My breath is caught somewhere in my chest and my hands are trembling.

Carleen's head is tilted back, her eyes squeezed shut as she tries to steady herself. Ryder's kneeling in front of her, one large hand braced on her knee, the other hovering near her cheek. Ashton is crouched on her other side, his brow furrowed, his hand clutching hers tightly.

"Alpha..." My voice comes out small, shaky.

Her eyes flutter open, brown meeting hazel, her lips pulling into a faint smile. "I'm okay, sunshine. I just... got a little lightheaded."

"No," Ryder growls. "You're not okay, Carleen. When was the last time you actually ate something? Or sat down for more than ten minutes?"

Ashton's jaw ticks as he exhales sharply through his nose. "He's right. You've been pushing yourself way too hard. The menu is fine. "

Carleen tries to wave them off, but her hand trembles in Ashton's grip and it only makes my stomach twist harder.

"Enough," Ryder says, standing and crossing his arms over his chest. His blue eyes are hard as they lock onto Carleen's. "You're done for today. That's not a suggestion."

Carleen's lips press into a thin line like she's about to argue, but then she catches my expression. My hands are clutched to my chest, my lower lip trembling as I try to keep the tears from spilling over.

Her shoulders sag. "Okay," she whispers.

Ryder nods once, his sharp gaze softening slightly before he looks at Ashton. "Get her some water. And something to eat. I'll get her settled on the couch."

Ashton moves quickly, grabbing a glass from the counter and filling it with water while Ryder bends down, one arm sliding under Carleen's knees, the other supporting her back. Carleen grumbles under her breath, something about not being an invalid, but she doesn't fight him as he lifts her effortlessly.

I step back, wringing my hands as Ryder carries her to the couch and gently sets her down. Her head falls back against the cushions, her brown eyes briefly closing before fluttering open again to look at me.

"Tati, sweetheart," she says softly, her voice weaker than I want it to be. "Don't look so worried. I'm okay."

"You're not okay, Carleen," I whisper, stepping closer until I'm perched on the arm of the couch. "You scared me."

Ryder takes a blanket from the back of the couch and drapes it over her lap, his movements careful, precise. Ashton appears a second later with the water and a small bowl of something—soup, maybe? I can't quite tell because my focus is locked on Carleen's pale face.

"I've been watching you for too long, Carleen," Ryder begins as Ashton hands her the bottle of water. "You push yourself. Over and over. Until you've got nothing left to give. And it's too much."

"I'm fine," she insists, but her voice wavers just enough to betray her words.

Ryder shakes his head, his thumbs brushing lightly against her knees. "No, you're not. And it's okay not to be. But what's not okay is you thinking you have to earn your place here by exhausting yourself."

Carleen opens her mouth, probably to snap back, but Ryder's already leaning in

closer, his gaze locked onto hers as they snap open to meet his.

“You don’t have to prove yourself to anyone. Not to me. Not to Ashton. Not to Tati. You’re ours, Carleen. And we’re yours. No one here is keeping score and no one here is going to let you run yourself into the ground just to feel like you’re enough.”

The words hang heavy in the air and I can see Carleen’s shoulders start to relax, just slightly. Her gaze drops to Ryder’s hands on her knees and her lips part as if she’s going to argue again, but she doesn’t.

Ryder’s voice softens, but the steel remains. “It’s hard for you to sit still. I know that. But you’re going to do it today. You’re going to sit here and you’re going to breathe and you’re going to let yourself be . Hell, I don’t care if you go to the movies or something but no work.”

Carleen swallows hard, her eyes flicking to mine briefly before landing back on Ryder. “And if I don’t?”

Ryder raises a brow, a faint smirk ghosting across his lips. “Do you really want to test me on that?”

Some part of me loves this fierce exchange and the other part is terrified that Carleen thought she had to work so hard. Carleen huffs out a breath, her arms dropping from her chest as she sinks back into the couch cushions and takes the bowl of soup from Ashton.

“There you go,” Ryder murmurs, his thumbs still stroking slow circles against her knees. “That’s it. You’re not going into that kitchen today. Not for anything. You’re going to let someone else handle things for once.”

Something flickers in Carleen’s eyes—something soft, something vulnerable—and

before she can pull away or put her walls back up, Ryder leans in and presses a feather-light kiss to her lips. It's brief. Soft. Barely a whisper of contact. But it's enough to make Carleen's eyes flutter shut, her breath catching in her throat. When Ryder pulls back, he rises to his full height, his hand lingering on her cheek for just a moment longer before he steps back.

"I'm sorry," Carleen whispers to me. "I get so into my head sometimes. Ellie was always the one to drag me out of it because she was here."

"Then I'll be the one to drag you out of it."

She snorts, ungracefully shoveling some of the soup into her mouth. "How about we go visit Ellie then since I can't step into my own damn kitchen?" There's no bite behind her words there, a playful but tired edge to her voice. I agree, only because it'll keep her away from the menu, the kitchen, and whatever else is bothering her.

Chapter twenty-eight

CARLEEN

The sound of the shower fills the bathroom, steam curling around me like a cocoon as hot water pelts my back. I brace my hands against the cool tiles, my forehead resting between them as I let the heat seep into my aching muscles.

Moments like this—when the adrenaline fades, and the silence settles in—I start to unravel a little. My mind loops around Ryder’s words from earlier, his steady gaze, his firm voice telling me I’m enough. But it’s hard to believe him when weakness still feels like a sin in my chest. When being vulnerable still feels like failure.

Alphas aren’t supposed to stumble. We’re supposed to carry it all—every burden, every expectation, every damn thing —without breaking a sweat. But Ryder saw right through me. Ashton saw it too. And Tati... Goddess, Tati. She sees everything, even the parts I try to keep hidden.

I squeeze my eyes shut, forcing those spiraling thoughts away.

“Alpha?”

Tati’s soft voice pulls me from my thoughts and I lift my head, looking through the haze of steam. She’s peeking around the shower curtain, her short black hair damp at the ends, those hazel eyes wide and concerned.

“You okay?” she asks, stepping closer.

I nod, offering her the faintest smile. “Yeah, sunshine. Come here.”

She doesn’t hesitate. In seconds, she’s slipping into the shower with me, her soft body pressing against mine as her arms wrap around my waist. Her cheek rests against my chest, and I let out a slow exhale as I wrap my arms around her, pulling her closer. We stand there for a long moment, the water cascading over both of us, washing away the lingering weight in my chest.

“I hate seeing you like this,” Tati whispers, her voice muffled against my skin.

I press a kiss to the top of her head. “I know, Tati. I’m trying.” She’s never seen the really bad nights, the nights I would spiral into my cooking so far that Ellie had to throw me in a shower fully clothed to bring me back to reality. It isn’t even about the cooking at that point but the perfection I’ve been striving for getting into my head.

It’s not an easy world that I’ve stepped into and I fought with every fiber of my being to get there. The problem is that sometimes I lose myself in that notion without remembering how far I’ve come.

Her arms tighten around me, and for a moment, it feels like she’s holding me together, her small frame carrying far more strength than anyone gives her credit for. When she pulls back, her hands slide up to cup my face, her thumbs brushing gently along my cheeks. “Ryder’s right, you know,” she says softly. “You’re enough, Carleen. You don’t have to keep proving yourself—not to us, not to anyone.”

I nod, my throat tight, and Tati leans up to press a soft kiss to my lips. It’s gentle, sweet, and exactly what I need to pull myself out of my head. We quickly rinse off, drying each other off from head to toe in the midst of giggles and laughter. By the time we’re both dressed and headed for the front door, Ryder is glaring at us from the kitchen.

I'm basically dead on my feet but if I don't see my sister now, I'm not sure when I'll have time. "Just going to see Ellie. Don't worry, Tati's driving and I pinkie promise I'll come back and sleep." He doesn't seem convinced, Ryder moving toward me and pulling me into a firm hug. He doesn't ask this time. He just does and it's exactly what I need.

"Let us know how your sister is doing. Tati, keep an eye on our Alpha, okay?"

Tati gives him a thumbs up as he presses a kiss to the top of my head and guides me to the door. Ashton swoops in to pepper kisses all along Tati's face and then Ryder hands out kisses of his own, bending her backward as if it's competition. When Ashton comes to stand in front of me, it isn't awkward like I thought it'd be. There's been a slew of kisses and caresses these past few days, Ashton becoming my own piece of comfort.

"Take care of yourself, darling." He cups my cheek, his thumb running across the skin before he pulls me into a delicate kiss.

The drive to Ellie's is quiet, comfortable, with Tati flipping through the radio until she finds a soft playlist. I glance over at her occasionally, watching the way she hums along to the music, the other hand on the wheel. When we pull up to Ellie's house, I let out a slow breath, feeling lighter already.

Ellie's smile is warm and tired as she opens the door, Savin curled up on the couch with one of the babies tucked into his chest. Macon's in the kitchen, bouncing another baby in his arms while the third snoozes in a bassinet nearby.

The chaos is beautiful. Ellie hugs me tightly, her scent wrapping around me like a safety net, Tati slipping past us and already cooing over the baby in the bassinet.

Walking into Macon and Ellie's house feels like stepping into a warm hug. The smell

of baby powder, fresh laundry, and something sweet baking in the oven wraps around me immediately. And then there's Ellie, tired, sure—there are faint bags under her eyes, and her hair's in a messy bun that's threatening to collapse—but her smile is so wide it practically glows.

Macon grins as he shifts Oliver to one side and turns off the stove with his free hand before meeting me at the door. “Well, look who it is,” he grins. “The most stubborn Alpha in the city and her equally stubborn Beta mate.”

I roll my eyes, smirking as I fully step inside. “Nice to see you too, Macon.”

Ellie loops her arm around mine, dragging me toward the couch while Macon follows, a smirk still plastered across his face.

“So...” Macon starts, rocking Oliver gently in his arms. “Should we expect wedding bells anytime soon?”

I freeze mid-step and Tati makes a very unattractive choking noise from across the room. Ellie spins around so fast I think she might snap her neck. Her brown eyes widen, her mouth hanging open as she looks between me and Tati before zeroing in on the faint mark on Tati's neck.

“Carleen!” she screeches and Savin stirs slightly on the couch, mumbling something before resettling with Aria. I'm amazed Ellie got a few moments away from her level 5 clinger baby girl.

“Shh!” I hiss, my cheeks flaming as I glance toward the sleeping baby.

“You MATED her?!” Ellie whisper-yells and Tati's face is buried in her hands, her ears turning scarlet.

I shrug one shoulder, trying to play it cool. “It... happened.”

Ellie gasps dramatically, clutching her chest like she’s about to faint. “You mated her and you didn’t tell me?! I’ve got a sister now! This is the best day of my life!”

Tati peeks through her fingers, a shy but amused smile tugging at her lips. “I didn’t think it was a big deal...”

“Not a big deal?!” Ellie throws her hands in the air before spinning toward Macon. “She bonded my best friend and didn’t tell me! ”

Macon’s smirking, clearly enjoying this little show. “You gotta admit, Ellie, it’s very on-brand for Carleen.”

I sigh, pinching the bridge of my nose. “Alright, alright, calm down, you two. It wasn’t planned. It just... happened. And I wasn’t letting Tati get away. That’s all you need to know.”

Ellie melts slightly, her dramatic expression softening into something more tender. “Well, yeah, okay. That’s fair.”

But then Macon raises a brow, and his smirk deepens. “But that’s not the only thing, is it, Carleen?”

I freeze again, my eyes narrowing slightly. “What are you talking about?”

Macon tilts his head, a knowing gleam in his eyes. “There are two very distinct Alpha scents clinging to you.”

Tati’s face goes crimson . This was not my idea of relaxing. I was going to come over here, hold some babies, catch up with my sister, and then go take a nap. This is the

absolute worst outcome, my entire dating life spilled out for everyone to see.

Ellie gasps again. “Oh, my goddess. Carleen. Are you—Are you seeing them ? Like, them-them? ”

“Who?” Macon prompts, looking mildly amused now.

“The St. James pack!” Ellie practically shouts, waving her hands like she’s trying to fan herself.

Macon blinks once. Twice. Then leans back against the edge of the couch, laughing softly as he shakes his head. “Well, seems like fame runs in the family after all.”

I sigh, rubbing a hand over my face. “Yes. We’re... trying something out. It’s not official, it’s not permanent. It’s just... trialing. ”

Ellie looks like she might pass out from excitement. “Tati, you lucky—”

“Ellie!” I snap, cutting her off before she can embarrass Tati further.

But Tati’s laughing now, her face still buried in her hands as she giggles uncontrollably. Macon snorts, shaking his head as he switches Oliver to his other arm. “Trialing or not, it’s written all over your face, Carleen. You’ve got it bad for them.”

I shift uncomfortably, but I don’t argue. Ellie softens again, walking over to me and wrapping me in a tight hug. “Hey,” she whispers, her voice softer now. “You deserve this. You deserve to be happy. And if they make you happy—and if Tati makes you happy—then I’m all for it.”

I squeeze her back, my throat tight as I whisper, “Thanks, sis.”

Tati's still grinning when we all settle into the living room, Oliver in Macon's arms, Quinn still in the bassinet, and Aria still curled against Savin. The conversation shifts to lighter topics—Ellie's recovery, how the babies are sleeping (hint: they're not), and the general chaos of having three newborns in one house.

But the entire time, I feel lighter. Like some invisible weight has been lifted from my shoulders. I've been working too hard toward a goal that doesn't matter. I am enough , I tell myself again. I just hope I start believing it.

We stayed for most of the day, my sorry ass passing out on the couch. They let me sleep, only until Tati started nudging my arm, saying that Ryder needed us home. I apologize to my sister and her mates, thinking the worst. Had Ashton burnt the apartment down? Did one of his creations turn out to be a monstrous mess? I have no idea because Ryder didn't provide any other details than 'Come home', the bastard.

And what we step into, isn't what I was expecting.

The apartment smells like roses the second we step inside. Soft music hums through the air, weaving between flickering candlelight that casts warm shadows along the walls. The tension in my shoulders melts away as I take it all in.

"Did we... walk into the wrong apartment?" Tati's voice is soft, her hand clutching mine as her hazel eyes dart around.

Ashton steps out from the hallway like he's starring in some over-the-top romance movie, arms wide, grin sharp and playful. "Welcome, my lovely ladies, to an evening of charm, passion, and—if I play my cards right—pure enchantment."

Tati snorts, her laughter bubbling out before she can stop it. "Ashton, what is this?"

"A masterpiece, little doe." He spins dramatically before extending a hand toward

her. “May I have this dance?”

Tati looks at me briefly, like she’s asking for permission. I nod, and before she can second-guess herself, Ashton spins her into his arms, their feet moving effortlessly across the floor. The way Tati laughs—light, unburdened—makes my chest ache in the best way. Ashton’s charm is infectious, his smile sharp but tender as he guides her in playful circles.

A warm hand brushes against mine, pulling my attention away from the two of them. Ryder stands beside me, his tall frame bathed in the soft glow of candlelight. His blue eyes are calm, steady, and so achingly sincere it knocks the air right out of my lungs. “May I?” he asks, his hand still lightly holding mine.

I let out a soft breath before nodding, placing my other hand on his shoulder as he draws me close. We sway slowly to the music, Ryder’s grip firm but gentle as his hand settles at my waist. I can feel the tension in my spine ease as he guides me, his movements smooth and confident.

I go to speak—to ask how in the world they managed to pull this off in such a short time—but Ryder shakes his head slightly, pressing one finger to his lips. “Shh,” he murmurs softly, his voice like gravel and honey. “Don’t think, Carleen. Just... let yourself be here. With us.”

The way he looks at me—it’s too much. Like he can see every guarded piece of me and isn’t afraid of any of it. I swallow hard but nod, closing my eyes for a brief moment and letting myself fall into the rhythm of the music. When I open them again, I catch a glimpse of Ashton dipping Tati low, her laughter echoing softly through the apartment. Ryder must notice too, because his lips curl into the faintest smile as he glances toward them.

“They’re good together,” he says softly.

“They are,” I agree, my voice barely above a whisper.

His gaze flicks back to me, searching my face before he speaks again. “Thank you... for trusting us. For being here.”

I shake my head, smiling faintly. “No, Ryder. Thank you. For... this. For everything.”

His thumb brushes against my waist, a fleeting but tender gesture that sends warmth curling through my chest. From across the room, Ashton’s voice cuts through the intimate bubble we’ve created. “Alright, little doe, enough teasing. Let’s get you comfortable, hmm?”

Tati’s cheeks are flushed as Ashton pulls her toward the hallway, her small frame nearly disappearing against his broad chest. But her smile is soft, her trust in him written all over her face. Ryder’s hand tightens slightly on my waist before he pulls back just enough to look me in the eye. “I want tonight to be good for her,” he says, his voice low and steady. “But more importantly, I want it to be okay for you. ”

I blink, caught off guard by how intensely he’s looking at me.

“If at any point this feels wrong, or too much, or if you just need to stop—say the word. We’ll stop. No questions asked, no hard feelings.” His sincerity wraps around me like a safety net, holding me steady when my insecurities try to pull me under.

I nod, my throat tight. “I trust you, Ryder. Both of you. But this... it feels different with you here. Safe. ”

The corner of his mouth twitches up, his eyes softening. “Good.”

With one last lingering look, he presses a feather-light kiss to my forehead and it feels

like an unspoken promise—a vow that he'll keep me safe, no matter what happens next.

The music has slowed to a faint hum now, the candles flickering as if the air itself is holding its breath. Ryder steps back, giving me space, but his eyes stay locked on mine as he gestures toward the hallway. “Shall we?”

I nod, my heart thudding in my chest as we make our way down the dimly lit hallway. This is going to be our first night together and hopefully not our last.

Chapter twenty-nine

CARLEEN

I'm not surprised as we walk into Tati's bedroom to see her sprawled across her nest, writhing beneath Ashton. He's eagerly kissing her neck, his hands roaming freely across her bare skin. I have no idea how he stripped her so quickly but I'm not complaining.

Tati, our sweet Beta, is laughing, her eyes sparkling with desire as she playfully struggles to unbutton Ashton's pants. I can hear her soft giggles, a contrast to the passionate sounds of their kissing. Ashton seems determined to drive her wild before ever even slipping inside of her, his hands cupping her breasts as his thumbs brush over her nipples.

Her back arches, a moan tearing from her throat, her eyes rolling into the back of her head. A smile plays on my lips as Ashton manages to free himself from his clothing, his cock is hard and leaking between his thighs. He positions himself between Tati's legs, our Beta's eyes widening as she stares down where his tip is pressing against her entrance. From my perch at the door, I can already see how wet she is, her lingering taste from a few days ago on my lips.

With a slow, deliberate thrust, Ashton sinks into her, filling her completely. The laughter silences, a satisfied groan filling the room as she wraps her legs around his waist, pulling him closer. Her hands dig into his shoulder as she clings to him, her face twisted in pleasure. I thought the moment at the club was perfect but this is so much better.

Ashton begins to move, his hips thrusting in a steady rhythm, each stroke eliciting a soft cry from Tati. I bite my lip, my eyes fixed on the two before me. Ashton's muscles flex with each powerful thrust, his body glistening with sweat. Tati's fingers are digging into his back as she meets his movements, her hips rising to greet each plunge. The room is filled with the sounds of their passion—the wet slapping of skin, their heavy breathing, and the thickening of their scents.

"Fuck, you feel so good," Ashton growls, his voice rough with desire. "I'm gonna make you come so hard, little doe."

Tati's eyes flutter open, meeting mine for a brief moment. There is a mixture of pleasure and mischief in her gaze and I know she is enjoying the exhibition as much as I am. Ashton's pace quickens, his hips slamming into Tati's, driving her closer to the edge. Her body tenses, her back arching off the bed as she cries out, her orgasm rippling through her. Ashton's name tumbles from her lips in a breathless chant.

"That's it, Tati," Ashton grunts, his eyes squeezed shut as he fights his own release. "Come for me, baby."

With a final, powerful thrust, Ashton buries himself deep inside Tati, his body shuddering as he empties himself into her. He collapses onto her, his chest heaving as he fights to regain his breath. Tati giggles, her hands stroking his back, her legs still wrapped tightly around him.

"That was amazing," she purrs, her voice drunk with contentment. "But, Ashton, I want more. Knot me, please. I want you to truly fill me. Stretch me." The pleas on her lips are so sweet, Ashton sputtering in shock at her request but any Alpha would be hard-pressed to deny their mate a knot in the throes of sex.

Ashton lifts his head, his eyes dark with desire as he gazes down at her. "Fuck, seriously? You say such sweet words, Tati. Goddess, you're going to feel perfect

squeezing my knot.”

He shifts his hips, his cock still buried deep within her, and I watch, fascinated, as his knot begins to swell, stretching Tati's pussy even further. Tati moans, her eyes rolling back in pleasure as she accommodates his growing size.

Needing to be part of this, to help drive Tati over the wall, to give her the pleasure I so desperately want to, I begin to undress. Ryder is doing the same on my other side, both of us eager to join the other two. I slide in on Tati's side as Ashton slowly maneuvers them so Tati's back is resting against my chest.

“How does it feel, sunshine?”

“Goddess, it's so big. I won't be able to take Ryder's. Fuck, I think I'm going to come again.” She tenses and then relaxes, letting out a wanton moan as I nurse my bite on her shoulder. If what I've seen in passing is any indication, Tati will absolutely have to work up to Ryder's knot but I can't wait to watch that moment when it happens.

Ashton purrs for our Beta, lightly kissing her until his knot comes down. Tati whines at the loss as I roll her onto her back and steal my own kiss. Some part of me wants another taste, despite the fact that Ashton just unloaded inside of her. Throwing caution to the wind, I slide down her torso and settle myself right between her legs, the temperature of the room heating up a few degrees.

Ashton's cum is slowly pooling between her thighs, mixed with her release but I don't hesitate, leaning down to lick it up. Tati squirms beneath my attention, her fingers sifting into my hair. I continue to explore, my tongue delving deeper, each moan from my beautiful Beta an invitation to keep going.

And then I hear a soft groan, a purely male sound. I look up to see Ashton's face

contorted in pleasure, his eyes squeezed shut. Ryder has his lips pressed against the bonding bite on Ashton's shoulder, but it's clear that the sounds are not just from that.

Ryder's fingers are buried deep inside Ashton's ass, slowly stretching and preparing him. I watch, transfixed, as Ryder's hand moves in a steady rhythm. Ashton's body arches, his back bowing as he pushes back against Ryder's hand, seeking more.

Tati's watching the Alphas, her breath coming in short gasps, mirroring the pleasure I'm giving her. And knowing that Ryder and Ashton together is heightening this moment, gives me all the encouragement I need.

I dive back in between her legs, my tongue circling her clit, flicking and teasing, while my fingers slip into her pussy, matching the rhythm of Ryder's hand on Ashton. The room is filled with the sounds of our pleasure—moans, gasps, and the wet, slick sounds of our bodies.

Ashton's eyes fly open, his gaze locking with mine. There is a challenge in his stare, a silent understanding of what's happening. I don't back down; instead, I increase my pace, determined to bring Tati to the edge. Ashton's lips curved into a satisfied smile, and he reaches for Tati, pulling her into a passionate kiss.

Ryder's moving faster and then I realize that his hands are firmly set on Ashton's waist. No, Ryder is fucking the smaller Alpha, the tension building in Ashton's body. He breaks the kiss with Tati, his head thrown back as he cries out. His release spills across Tati's stomach, as Ryder grunts, no doubt spilling his release into Ashton's ass. Tati's hands tighten in my hair a few seconds later and her body stiffens as she comes, her taste flooding my tongue, mixed with Ashton's lingering release.

We lay there, our bodies intertwined, catching our breath, Tati already passed out as I crawl back up her body and pull her against me. Ryder isn't done with us yet as he reaches over and drags me into a soft kiss, tasting both Ashton and Tati on my

tongue. Goddess, this is just the right amount of overwhelming.

Tati's snores fill the quiet space, her body curled up snugly in Ashton's arms, her face pressed against his chest. Her lips are slightly parted, and her lashes rest against flushed cheeks, still kissed pink from earlier. They look so perfect together as I scoot toward the edge of the nest, unable to sleep. It's not even about the lust or hunger anymore. It's just intimacy, a close bond forming between the four of us.

Ashton's eyes are closed, his face soft and boyish in sleep, one of his hands splayed protectively against Tati's lower back. Even in rest, he's anchoring her to him, his chest rising and falling in a steady rhythm that Tati seems to match. And then there's Ryder. Sitting quietly at the edge of the other side of the nest, his large hands rubbing slow circles on Tati's ankle where it pokes out from under the sheets. His blue eyes flick to mine, searching my face with a depth that makes my chest feel tight.

"Carleen," he says softly, his voice a low rumble in the quiet. "Can I... hold you tonight?"

My lips part, but no sound comes out for a second. Ryder isn't asking for anything else—just that. Just to hold me. And the way he asks, the way he waits so patiently for my answer, makes my throat close up a little. I nod, because my voice won't work.

He doesn't hesitate. Ryder shifts, sliding into the space beside me with the kind of grace that feels impossible for someone his size. I move to lay down, Ryder holding me from behind as he pulls the blankets up and over us.

"How's this?" He asks, nuzzling his nose against the back of my head.

"Perfect."

Chapter thirty

CARLEEN

The morning sun filters through the sheer curtains, casting soft golden streaks across the room. Today's the day. The day. My chest feels tight, my stomach swirling with nerves and something heavier—something that feels suspiciously like hope.

I stand in front of the full-length mirror in my bedroom, adjusting the sharp lines of my charcoal-gray pantsuit. It's perfectly tailored, hugging my curves without being restrictive, the blazer cinched just right at my waist. Underneath, a crisp white blouse sits flawlessly against my skin. Professional. Commanding. But still me.

Behind me, Tati lounges on the edge of my bed in one of my oversized hoodies, her bare legs kicking softly as she watches me with those wide hazel eyes. She's got a sleepy smile on her lips, her hair still messy from last night, but goddess, she's beautiful.

"You're staring," I murmur, my lips curving into a faint smile as I catch her reflection in the mirror.

She grins, propping her chin in her hands. "Can you blame me? Look at you, boss lady. All powerful and sexy."

I turn, rolling my eyes, but the warmth in my chest is undeniable as I cross the room and drop a soft kiss to her lips. She sighs against me, her arms looping lazily around my neck.

“You’ve got this, Alpha,” she whispers, her voice soft but certain. “You’re going to walk in there and absolutely crush it. They’d be idiots not to choose your menu.”

I exhale slowly, pressing my forehead against hers. “Thanks, sweetheart. I needed that.”

She pulls back, her eyes sparkling. “You’ll do amazing. Now, go. Ashton and Ryder are probably already there, doing Alpha things.”

That earns a snort from me, but I kiss her one more time, slow and lingering, before pulling away and grabbing my leather portfolio from the dresser. “Wish me luck,” I murmur.

Tati sits up straighter, holding up two fists like a miniature hype coach. “You don’t need luck, but good luck anyway! ”

I chuckle as I leave the apartment, her voice echoing softly behind me.

The drive to Culinova feels longer than it should, the city buzzing around me as I navigate traffic. Every red light feels like an eternity, every second ticking by sharpening the knot in my chest.

But when I finally pull into the sleek, modern building with its glass walls and steel accents, my pulse steadies. This is my element. This is where I shine.

As I step out of the car and make my way toward the entrance, I spot them immediately. Ashton, leaning casually against one of the pillars with his hands tucked into his slacks, his blazer open, his grin sharp as ever. Ryder, standing a little further back, his broad shoulders pulling at his dark suit jacket, arms crossed over his chest, his piercing blue eyes fixed on me.

They both straighten as I approach and I'm hit with a wave of their scent. It wraps around me like a weighted blanket, grounding me even as my nerves fight to bubble back up. Ashton steps forward first, his grin softening as he reaches out, his fingers brushing against the edge of my sleeve.

"Damn, Alpha. You're going to own that room."

I smirk, feeling some of the tension in my shoulders ease. "You think so?"

"I know so," he says confidently before his hand drops away.

Ryder steps closer then, his hands coming up to rest lightly on my shoulders. His thumbs brush against the fabric of my blazer, his gaze steady as he looks me over.

"You ready?" he asks, his voice low and intimate, like it's just for me.

I nod. "Yeah. I'm ready."

He gives a single, slow nod before stepping back, his presence like an anchor even as he lets me go. "Good," he says simply. "Let's do this."

Ashton gestures dramatically toward the glass doors. "After you, madam chef extraordinaire."

I snort, rolling my eyes, but my steps are steadier as I stride through the towering glass entrance of Culinova with my two Alphas flanking me on either side. The lobby is sleek, buzzing with quiet energy as staff and clients move about in their carefully tailored outfits. But the moment we step into the room reserved for the tasting presentation, all the noise fades away.

The boardroom is as intimidating as I expected—long glass walls, an imposing table

with sleek leather chairs, and a view of the city skyline that screams power. It's not my first time in a space like this, but it still feels like walking into a den of wolves. Fitting, considering the company.

R. Alexander sits at the head of the table. He's sharp, graying at the temples, with piercing green eyes that miss nothing . Around him sit a few members of the event committee, their polished smiles fixed in place as Ryder, Ashton, and I head to the front of the room.

"Ms. Monroe," R. Alexander says, standing as we approach. His hand extends, and I take it, shaking firmly.

"Mr. Alexander," I reply smoothly, flashing a confident smile. "Thank you for having us."

"Robert, please."

"Then please call me Carleen."

He nods and gestures for us to sit, Ryder and Ashton flanking me on either side, their presence grounding me. Ashton's posture is relaxed, his lazy smirk firmly in place, while Ryder sits with his hands folded on the table, his gaze sharp and unwavering.

"I understand you've had a productive week with the St. James pack," Robert says, one brow raised.

I glance briefly at Ashton and Ryder before nodding. "They were exactly what I needed. Professional, insightful, and annoyingly good at pulling me out of my head when I was spiraling."

Ashton chuckles softly and Ryder's lip twitches at the corner, but they stay silent,

letting me handle this.

Robert's lips curl into a faint smile. "I'm glad to hear that. Now, let's talk about this menu of yours. The samples, if you please?"

I reach for the leather folder I brought, sliding it across the table before pulling out the carefully packed samples. Each dish is plated with precision, the small tasting portions nestled perfectly in their containers. As I start explaining each dish, the ingredients, the inspiration, the textures—I lose myself in it. This is where I shine. The room fades away, the eyes of the committee blur into the background, and it's just me and the food.

The seared duck breast with cherry glaze, the hand-rolled gnocchi in sage butter, the citrus panna cotta with edible gold flakes—it's all me. Every dish tells a story and every story is personal.

As they taste, the silence is heavy. Forks scrape against plates, quiet murmurs exchanged. Ashton and Ryder remain still, their gazes flickering between the committee members and me. Finally, Robert sets down his fork, dabbing at his mouth with a pristine white napkin. "Carleen, this is..." He pauses, looking around the table. "Exceptional. Truly exceptional."

A rush of relief blooms in my chest, but I keep my expression composed, hands folded neatly in front of me. One of the committee members—a woman with perfectly styled dark hair and sharp crimson lipstick—leans forward. "Your flavors are bold but refined and the presentation is flawless. I don't think I've seen a menu like this in years."

"Thank you," I reply, my voice steady despite the rapid flutter of my heartbeat.

Robert leans back in his chair, his green eyes steady on me. "You've got the event,

Carleen.”

The words hit me like a freight train, and for a second, I forget how to breathe. Ashton lets out a low whistle, nudging my shoulder with his. “Told you, boss lady.”

Ryder’s hand lands on my knee under the table, a firm but reassuring weight.

I exhale a soft laugh, leaning back slightly in my chair. “I mean... you didn’t really have anyone else, right? It’s not like you had a backup plan.”

The room chuckles lightly, but Robert’s brow dips into a faint frown. “No,” he says firmly, his voice dropping into something serious. “We didn’t.” Robert’s eyes lock onto mine, his expression unyielding. “We found your catering. We saw your work. And from the moment we did, we knew we didn’t want anyone else. There was never a question of asking another chef. It was always you after we lost the original caterer, Carleen.”

My throat tightens, and for a moment, I can’t find my voice. It’s one thing to believe in your own work, to pour your soul into every dish, every detail—but to hear someone like him validate it? To know they chose me deliberately, without hesitation?

It’s overwhelming.

“Thank you,” I manage to say, my voice softer now. “That means more than I can say.”

Robert nods once, sharply. “We’ll have our team reach out with the official contract and event details this afternoon. Congratulations, Carleen. You’ve earned it.”

The meeting wraps up with a few more pleasantries, some handshakes, and a promise

to meet soon to finalize everything. The afternoon sun hits just right as we step out into the parking lot, casting everything in a warm golden glow. I did it. We did it.

Ashton practically skips ahead, digging into the inside pocket of his blazer with that signature cocky smirk on his face. Ryder stands close beside me, one large hand casually brushing against my lower back as we walk. He doesn't need to say anything—his steady presence speaks volumes.

“Alright, boss lady,” Ashton announces, turning on his heel with a dramatic flourish. In his hand is a tiny bottle of champagne, the kind they sell in little gift boxes. “Couldn't let such a moment pass without a little bubbly, could I?”

I laugh, shaking my head. “Seriously? You were carrying that in your jacket pocket during the meeting?”

He shrugs one broad shoulder, grinning. “Always prepared for success, darling.”

I take the bottle from him, twisting the cap off with a satisfying pop. The fizzy scent of champagne wafts into the air, and without hesitation, I tip the bottle back and take a long sip. The crisp bubbles tickle my tongue, the cool liquid sharp against the heat in my chest.

Ashton's watching me when I lower the bottle, his smile softer now, less teasing. I see the shift in his gaze, the way it drops briefly to my mouth before flicking back up to meet my eyes. My stomach flips, and my pulse quickens. “You want some?” I ask, holding the bottle out to him.

He shakes his head. “Nah, I'm good. But... can I have something else?”

The world narrows down to just us, the faint hum of traffic in the background fading away. His eyes are warm, filled with something deep and unspoken. My heart

hammers in my chest as I nod, my voice catching in my throat.

“Yeah,” I whisper. “Yeah, you can.”

Ashton steps closer, his hand reaching up to cup my cheek as he tilts his head down. His lips meet mine softly at first, almost hesitant, like he’s waiting for me to pull away. But I don’t. I lean in, my free hand finding his chest, fingers curling against the soft fabric of his shirt.

The kiss deepens, his mouth pressing more firmly against mine as he tilts his head to get a better angle. His other hand finds my waist, pulling me just a little closer, and I let myself fall into it. It’s warm and electric, sending a pulse of heat straight through me.

When we finally break apart, I’m breathless. Ashton’s forehead rests against mine, his grin lazy but soft. Ryder clears his throat lightly, but there’s a smirk tugging at the corner of his mouth when I turn to look at him. His blue eyes are bright, filled with amusement and something deeper that makes me want to lean into him, too.

“You two done making out in the parking lot or are we gonna head home and celebrate properly with our Beta?” Ryder drawls, one brow raised.

I grin, swatting lightly at Ashton’s chest as I step back. “He’s right. We’ve got a certain Beta waiting at home for us, and I’m pretty sure she’s going to want in on this celebration.”

Ashton chuckles, reaching down to take my free hand in his as Ryder steps closer to my other side. “Think Tati’s gonna lose her mind when she finds out?” Ashton asks as we walk toward the car, his voice filled with boyish excitement.

“Oh, absolutely,” I reply, smirking. “But it’ll be worth it. She’s been our biggest

cheerleader through this whole thing.”

Chapter thirty-one

TATI

I wake up to the soft morning light filtering through the sheer curtains, a dull throbbing in my head. The events of the previous night come rushing back to me—the celebration, the drinks, and the wild abandon with which I'd thrown myself into.

I stir in my nest, reaching out for my Alphas instinctively. My hand brushes against warm skin, and I smile, recognizing the familiar touch of Ashton. But as I move closer, I notice a hint of movement from the corner of my eye.

"Good morning, my sweetheart," a deep voice rumbles from behind me, sending shivers down my spine. Ryder's strong arms wrap around me from behind, pulling me back against his bare chest. I can feel his morning erection pressing against my lower back, and a wave of desire washes over me, dispelling the remnants of my hangover.

"Mmm, good morning to me," I purr, leaning into his embrace. I turn my head to kiss Ashton, who is now fully awake and smiling at me with those captivating brown eyes. His lips are soft and warm against mine, his hand gently caressing my thigh, slowly moving upward.

Ryder's hands are roaming too, his touch sending sparks of pleasure through me. He knows exactly how to make me feel alive, Ashton swallowing my moan as Ryder's fingers slip between my thighs and run through my folds. Holy shit, this is definitely

one way to wake up. A moan falls from my lips as I squirm between them, Ryder pushing a finger inside of me.

“Seems our Beta woke up a little needy. Ash, is there something we can do about this?”

I’m about to ask where Carleen is when Ashton just hums, still kissing me. Then he wraps a hand around my thigh and drags it over his hip, opening me up. I expect him to thrust inside of me but he’s still wearing his pants—which just leaves Ryder. The head of his cock presses against my entrance, slowly stretching me open.

Yeah, there’s no fucking way I’m ever going to be able to take his knot. Holy, fucking hell, he’s huge.

Ashton chuckles, breaking the kiss. “Big isn’t it? Like a fucking monster but it feels so fucking good, little doe. You can take it. I know you can.”

I gasp as Ryder pushes further, his purr settling any anxiety creeping in. He goes slowly, inching his way inside until he’s fully seated. "Oh, gods, Ryder," I breathe, my head falling back against his shoulder. Ashton's hands are on my breasts now, kneading and teasing my sensitive nipples, his touch contrasting with the deep, powerful thrusts of Ryder's cock.

Ryder holds me tightly, his hands gripping my hips as he begins to move, his pace slow and deliberate. Each thrust sends waves of pleasure through my body, my orgasm building quickly. I am so close but I want to hold on, to savor this moment with my Alphas.

As if reading my mind, Ashton leans down and whispers in my ear, "Let go, Tati. Come for us." His hot breath against my skin sends me over the edge. I cry out, my body convulsing around Ryder's cock as my orgasm washes over me.

Ryder grunts, his thrusts becoming more urgent as my pussy clenches around him. "That's it, sweetheart. Milk my cock," he growls, voice thick with desire.

I'm lost in a haze of pleasure, my body still trembling from the aftershocks of my orgasm, when I feel Ryder's cock swelling inside of me. Panic takes hold until I realize that his knot is pressing against my entrance but not actually inside of me. And because I'm a sucker for punishment, wanting more, wanting to be selfish, I jam myself backward, my pussy swallowing his knot whole.

And now it's swelling inside of me, my senses overwhelmed as it stretches me impossibly wider. Ryder is both growling and purring as I breathe through the stretch but it's just on the side of too much. "Oh, fuck!" It sends me spiraling into another wave of pleasure as I come again, Ryder then coming inside of me. I feel so fucking full, so completely possessed by Ryder.

"Shit, sweetheart. I didn't think you were going to take my knot."

"I really wanted it," I push out, my voice strained as my Alphas hold me through another, third, smaller orgasm. I am definitely not going to be doing this every day. Maybe once a month? Twice a month?

As I lay there, panting, I become aware of a presence at the door. Carleen's signature scent fills the room, a wild smile on her face. "I only came to say that breakfast was ready but I can always wait and watch the show if you need another round."

I groan but with nowhere to go, I just bury my face into the pillows beneath me. It's an awkward twist, made even worse as Ashton slides two fingers between us and starts playing with my pussy stretched around Ryder's knot. There's no fucking way that—

He stuffs them in beside Ryder's cock, a cry for relief tearing from my throat. I both

want more and hate this sensation. “One day, we’ll both fuck you here, little doe. Both fill you and knot you until you pass out from pleasure. Maybe we’ll overwhelm you. Let you taste Carleen while we’re filling you.”

My gaze darts to Carleen by the door, a hint of desire lingering in her expression. Oh, she wants that. But that’s a tomorrow thing or next week thing. I’m going to be sore as fuck, Ryder’s knot already deflating as Ashton slowly lets go of my thigh. I groan at the loss of Ryder’s cock but quickly push to my feet and scurry to the bathroom before someone can claim a shower with me.

As much as I love the three of them, I need a minute. Oh, goddess, I love them. I’m not even sure when that happened. Needing to say something now, I rush back out to my nest, falling to my knees and grabbing Ryder and Ashton’s hands. “I love you. Fuck, that should have been a little more romantic but I do. I know it’s too soon to say it but my feelings aren’t changing.”

Maybe I should have waited till after my shower because saying it to a naked Ryder and a half-naked Ashton after they just rocked my world makes this moment even more awkward. Ryder laughs, pulling me into a firm hug. “I love you too, sweetheart. And I don’t think there’s a timing on when you should or can say it. If it feels right, then it’s fine.”

I’m pulled away from Ryder, Ashton peppering kisses all over my face. “You already know that I love you, Tati. You’ve been my little doe for far longer than you’ve been my Beta but you’ve always been mine. And now that I get to keep you, fuck, this is probably the best day ever.”

Chapter thirty-two

TATI

We fall into an easy rhythm over the next few weeks, Ashton and Ryder consuming our every waking moment but I'm not complaining. Neither me nor Carleen can get enough of them. The trial is long over but no one has made anything official and I'm starting to get antsy. Carleen has picked up a few easy catering gigs, both of us taking time to visit Ellie around our busy lives but I just don't know what I'm supposed to make of the new pack we built.

Is there a forever or is this all I have to look forward to?

Ashton asked me out this morning to a little coffee date and I caved, mostly because time with him is better than sleeping the day away before my shift. I'm also tempted to ask him where he sees this going. Selfish? Tactless? Maybe. But I'm just... confused.

The air smells like freshly roasted coffee and a faint hint of caramel as I sip from my cup, warmth spreading through my chest. Ashton sits across from me, his long fingers wrapped around a mug that looks almost too small in his hands. He's got that easy smile on his face, the one that makes me feel like the center of the damn universe, and it's messing with my head.

"How's the mocha thing you got?"

He knows the answer to that so I just shrug, mulling with my feelings. It's the same

thing I get every time and the first few times, I was ecstatic as he ordered it for me. Now, it feels weird.

We finish our drinks, and before I know it, Ashton's grabbing my hand, lacing his fingers through mine like it's the most natural thing in the world. It feels like home, his hand solid and warm, confusing me even further.

We wander through the little shops lining the street, poking around in a tiny boutique with overpriced candles and a record store that smells like nostalgia. Ashton keeps his hand in mine the whole time, occasionally brushing his thumb over my knuckles, and I swear it's the most romantic thing that's ever happened to me.

Finally, I can't help but try to push the issue. "This," I say softly as we step out into the evening air, "this is what I've always wanted. A pack of my own, someone to hold my hand and just exist with me."

He stops walking, tugging me gently until I turn to face him. His expression is serious now, those brown eyes softer than I've ever seen them. "Tati," he says, his voice low, almost hesitant. "Can I be your Alpha?"

Holy fuck, I thought he would never ask. Some part of me thought I was looking for an actual bondmark or something to officially be his but this is priceless. So priceless that I almost forget to answer.

"Yes," I finally manage, and then louder, more sure of myself, "Yes! Of course, yes!" I launch myself at him, my arms wrapping around his neck as he catches me effortlessly, laughing into my hair. "I thought you weren't going to ask, Ashton." I'm about to keep celebrating when I remember that there's another half to this quad. "But what about Ryder? I mean, you guys are kind of a package deal. And I come with Carleen. What—"

Ashton smirks, his hand sliding up to cup my cheek. “Ryder’s handling the hard part. He’s asking Carleen.”

I blink at him, stunned. “Ryder? Asking Carleen? Are you trying to give me a heart attack?”

Ashton shrugs, his grin turning wicked. “He’s got a better shot than I do. Besides, Ryder’s good at reading people. He’ll know how to handle her.”

I shake my head, biting back a laugh. “He’s got his work cut out for him, but I know he’ll win her over. He’s stubborn like that.”

“Like someone else I know,” Ashton teases, leaning in close.

Before I can argue, he kisses me, soft and slow, like we’ve got all the time in the world. My heart pounds against my ribs, and for once, I don’t try to push it away. I kiss him back with everything I’ve got, pouring every bit of hope and want and love into it because this, right here, feels like the start of something bigger than me.

“You’re really mine? Like really, really?”

Ashton laughs, setting me back on my feet as he tucks a few stray strands behind my ear. “We wanted to ask much earlier but we both had a few commitments we had to clean up. I didn’t want to ask and then immediately run, Tati. But yeah, I’m really yours. Yours and Carleen’s and Ryder’s.”

“I accept. Now, how long do you think it’s going to take for Carleen to say yes?”

“Not long. He’s been wearing her down the past couple weeks. You should have seen them a few days ago, cuddling on the couch—”

“Wait, what? And you didn’t immediately come get me?” I can’t believe I missed that. Ryder and Carleen together are always special moments.

“You were fucked unconscious, little doe. The perfect smile was plastered on your face and I was not ruining that.”

Chapter thirty-three

CARLEEN

The kitchen feels quieter than usual, save for the faint hum of the fridge and the obnoxious slurp of Ryder sipping his coffee from across the room. I scrub at a stubborn spot on the counter, pretending I don't notice him. But I do. Oh, I definitely do. He's perched on one of the barstools, broad shoulders hunched slightly as he holds his mug with those ridiculously big hands.

Another loud slurp cuts through the silence.

I sigh, dropping the rag with a wet smack and turning around. Ryder's eyes—those sharp, clear blue ones—are already locked on me, unreadable under the faint crease of his brow.

“You're not even drinking that,” I say flatly, crossing my arms over my chest.

His lips twitch like he's fighting a smirk. “Just enjoying the atmosphere.”

“Bullshit.” I jab a finger in his direction. “What's going on, Ryder? You're acting weirder than usual. And considering your usual is lurking silently in corners like some broody gargoyle, that's saying something.”

His smirk finally breaks free and it's unfair how devastating it looks on his face. I called him a fucking gargoyle and he's just sitting here, like he walked out of a goddamn magazine. Unfortunately, he did. I have several of them in my living room.

He sets the mug down with deliberate care, his long fingers lingering around the handle. I brace myself, fully expecting some half-assed explanation or a deflection. What I don't expect is him rising from the stool and closing the distance between us in three slow, calculated steps.

His presence is huge . Ryder's always been larger-than-life, but right now, he's everywhere—crowding my senses, filling the space around me. And when he stops in front of me, just close enough that I have to tip my chin up to meet his gaze, I stop breathing altogether.

“Carleen,” he says, voice low, rough, a bit of his Alpha purr pushed into that one word. Before I can form a single thought, his hands come up—one cradling the side of my face, the other sliding around to the small of my back—and then his mouth is on mine.

I don't even think. My body reacts on instinct, arms wrapping around his neck as I melt into him. He kisses me like he's been holding back for years, like he's finally letting go of whatever leash he's had on himself. It's intense, consuming, and I'm right there with him, tilting my head to give him whatever he wants.

He lifts me without breaking the kiss, setting me down on the kitchen counter like I weigh nothing. His hands grip my thighs, keeping me anchored to him as his lips move against mine, pulling soft, breathless sounds from deep in my chest. But then my brain catches up with my body and a flicker of panic shoots through me.

“Ryder,” I whisper against his mouth, my hand pressing flat against his chest. “Red.”

He stops immediately. Like a switch has flipped, he pulls back, his forehead resting against mine as he takes a deep, steadying breath. His broad chest rises and falls under my palm, and when he finally lifts his head, his expression nearly undoes me. There's regret there, shame even, but mostly— goddess —there's so much care.

“I’m sorry,” he rasps, voice barely more than a whisper.

“Don’t,” I say quickly, wrapping my arms around his neck again and pulling him closer until his head rests on my shoulder. “Don’t apologize, Ryder. You didn’t do anything wrong. I just... I need a second.”

He nods against me, his breath warm against my neck. My fingers find their way into the short strands of his dirty blonde hair and I hold him there, my chest tight with something I can’t quite name. It feels fragile and massive all at once and I know if I let it slip away, I’ll regret it forever.

After a moment, he lifts his head, his blue eyes soft now, vulnerable in a way I rarely get to see. His hands settle on my thighs again, thumbs brushing over the fabric of my leggings.

“Carleen,” he says softly, voice steady despite the way his fingers tighten just slightly on me. “Can I be your Alpha? Will you let Ashton and I take care of you? Will you be ours?”

The weight of his question settles heavily between us, but it’s not suffocating. It feels... warm. Safe. I’ve been waiting weeks for this very moment, for Ryder or Ashton to make it official. We’ve all been busy in our own little projects, finding time for each other as life tries to drag us apart. I knew that there was never a good time but it still made it hard that we’d spend time together but it was always goodnight, watching them leave down those stairs.

My lips curl into a soft smile. “Yeah, Ryder. I’d love that.”

The relief that floods his face is immediate and so raw that it punches straight through my chest. He exhales shakily, leaning forward to press a lingering kiss to my forehead, his lips staying there for just a second longer than necessary.

I'm not sure why but Ryder and Ashton make me feel safer than any other Alpha I've ever been with. Ryder is the perfect amount of calm in every stressful situation whereas Ashton reminds me that not everything has to be perfect. That it can be messy and chaotic and still wholly ours.

Even in this moment with Ryder's hands moving slowly up and down my thighs, I don't feel as terrified or out of place as I thought I would be. Maybe it's too soon and maybe I'll freak myself out but I want more than just the kisses and his firm touch.

So, I direct his lips back to mine, silently giving him permission to take more. Ryder steps forward, pressing himself against me, his cock thickening against my inner thigh. I cling to him, waiting for the inevitable panic to surge through me but it isn't there. It's just love and adoration and something wholly Ryder. "Are you sure, Carleen?" Ryder's deep voice breaks the silence, his eyes searching mine for any hint of hesitation.

"Yes," I whisper, my voice steady despite the turmoil inside. I want this, need it, even if I don't fully understand why. I lean forward, my lips brushing against his softly, a gentle kiss that belies the intensity of our desires. As our lips parted, I speak, my voice trembling slightly. "I want to be yours and Ashton's. I want a family to call my own. I don't know why, but I feel safe with you, Ryder. I want to try..."

A single tear escapes down my cheek and I quickly wipe it away, embarrassed by my own vulnerability. I trust Ryder, but sharing my deepest insecurities isn't easy. "I want this with Ashton too..." I trail off, struggling to find the right words. This feels like a pivotal moment in our relationship and yet, I'm hoping it isn't the end. That one day it will be Ashton spending the night with me or both of the St. James overwhelming me at some point.

Ryder's eyes soften, a small smile playing on his lips. "That'll happen sooner than you know. It's only a matter of time. I see the way you two look at each other but right

now, it's just you and me, Carleen. No one else matters."

His words sent a shiver down my spine. I know he's right, but hearing him say it makes my heart race. I nod, taking a deep breath, steeling myself for what is to come.

"Use your words, Carleen," Ryder whispers, his voice hoarse with desire. "Tell me if you need me to stop. I'll respect your wishes, always."

I nod again, my heart pounding in my chest. "I want this, Ryder. I trust you."

With gentle hands, Ryder reaches for the hem of my shirt, slowly pulling it over my head, revealing my bare skin. His touch is electric, sending sparks of desire through my body. I arch my back slightly, offering myself to him, and he responds by caressing my breasts, his thumbs grazing my nipples through my bra, causing me to gasp.

"You're so beautiful," he murmurs, his warm breath tickling my ear. "So damn perfect."

I close my eyes, savoring the sensation of his hands on my body. I want more, need to feel him, to be closer. I reach for his shirt, my fingers fumbling with the buttons, eager to expose his chiseled chest. As I finally succeed, I let my hands roam over the expanse of black ink covering his skin, feeling the heat radiating from him.

Ryder steps closer, his body pressing against mine, his erection, hard and insistent, firm against my thigh. My hands find the button and zipper of his pants, and with a quick movement, I free him from his constraints. His cock springs free, thick and heavy, and I can't help but let out a soft moan.

He groans, his head falling back as I give him a few experimental strokes, his hands gripping the edge of the counter for support. "Carleen, fuck, you're going to make me

blow my load before I'm inside of you."

I smile, enjoying the power I hold over this powerful man. I want to tease him, to make him beg, but my own desire is becoming too much to bear. "I want you inside me, Ryder," I whisper, my voice husky with need. "Please..."

Ryder's eyes darken, and with a swift motion, he positions me on the counter. My legs wrap around his waist, his hardness pressing against my core, seeking entrance. "Are you sure, baby? We can take it slow," he pants, his breath hot against my neck. I can feel him at the edge of his restraint. He's wanted this since the first day I met him and I can't think of a better Alpha to share myself with.

I nod, my hands gripping his shoulders, urging him on. "Yes, absolutely sure."

With one powerful thrust, he fills me, stretching me until it's almost painful. I cry out, my body welcoming his invasion, my muscles clenching around him. Ryder begins to move, his hips snapping forward, driving into me with a primal rhythm. The counter beneath me shakes with each powerful stroke and I hold on tightly, my nails digging into his shoulders.

"Fuck, Carleen, you feel so good," he grunts, his eyes locked with mine, his expression fierce and possessive. "So tight..."

Ryder pounds into me, his pace relentless, his cock hitting my sweet spot with every thrust. I am lost in a haze of pleasure, my body on fire, my mind consumed by the raw, animalistic act of claiming and being claimed.

"You're mine, Carleen," Ryder growls, his voice rough with desire. "Always remember that. One day, I'll mark you and everyone will know it."

His words send a jolt of excitement through me. I want to be his, to bear his mark, to

belong to this powerful man. I arch my back, offering myself to him, my body demanding more. One day, I tell myself. Hopefully, I'll be ready sooner than later.

Ryder's eyes widen as my pussy clenches around him, milking his cock. With a final, powerful thrust, he buries himself deep within me, his release filling me as my orgasm explodes through me. His name is a scream on my lips as I bury my face into his shoulder, lightly dragging my teeth along his skin. One day I'll mark him too, to show everyone who Ryder St. James belongs to.

As the climax subsides, both of us are still panting, our hearts racing, our bodies slick with sweat. Ryder is still inside me, his cock still hard, and I hold him close, my arms wrapped tightly around his neck. "Is it always like this?" I ask, wondering how stupid my question sounds. After all, Alphas are supposed to be sure and steadfast in their decisions.

Ryder lovingly kisses my forehead, running his fingers through my curls. "Fuck, I hope so, Carleen. I intend on proving myself over and over to you every chance you let me."

"I like the sound of that." If I had given myself to Ryder a week ago, I would have terrified myself and possibly pushed them away, unable to understand what was going on in my head. Now? I couldn't be more sure about this choice.

Ryder's hips shift toward me and I chuckle, shaking my head, mumbling something about how he shouldn't be ready to go already. He just responds that when it comes to his mates, he will always be ready.

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Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 5:03 pm

The door clicks shut behind me and I'm practically vibrating with excitement. Ashton's hand is warm and steady in mine, thumb brushing against my knuckles like he can feel the electricity buzzing under my skin.

But something feels... off.

The kitchen is spotless. Like, suspiciously spotless. Counters wiped down, dishes put away, not a single stray crumb in sight. Carleen is perched on the counter, leaning back against Ryder's broad chest, his arms loosely wrapped around her waist. Casual. Too casual.

She won't look at me. Not really. Her gaze flickers up, meets mine for half a second, and then drops back to her lap like I'm holding some kind of spotlight on her deepest secrets.

Ryder, on the other hand, looks like the cat that swallowed the damn canary. He's smug in that quiet, brooding way of his, like he's got the best secret in the room and he knows it. My gaze narrows as I start connecting dots.

Wait a minute...

My mouth moves before my brain can catch up. "You two had sex!"

Carleen's head snaps up, her eyes wide, cheeks flooding with a deep crimson that spreads down her neck. Ryder's lips twitch like he's fighting off a grin, but I'm already moving.

“Oh my gods!” I squeal, launching myself across the kitchen. Carleen doesn’t even have time to protest before I’m climbing onto her lap, straddling her thighs, and cupping her face in both hands. “You had sex with Ryder! You did the thing!”

“Tati!” Carleen sputters, her hands automatically settling on my waist to keep me from toppling backward. “Can you not—oh my goddess —get off—”

“No!” I plant kiss after kiss all over her blushing cheeks. “You deserve all the love and all the happiness, and all the amazing Alpha se—”

“TATI!” Carleen’s voice cracks, her face so red I’m genuinely worried she might combust. Behind us, Ryder lets out a low chuckle and I know he’s enjoying every second of this.

I pull back just enough to meet her flustered gaze, my grin stretched wide across my face. “So... did you say yes?”

She hesitates for half a second, like she’s debating whether or not to throw me off her lap, but then her lips curl into a soft smile and she gives me the smallest nod.

My squeal could probably shatter glass. “YES!” I wrap my arms around her neck and squeeze her so tight I might actually be choking her. “Fuck, sorry. I’m just really excited.”

Carleen’s chest shakes with laughter as she hugs me back, her grip strong and warm. “You’re impossible, you know that?”

“I’m adorable,” I correct, pulling back just enough to beam at her again. “And you’re stuck with me forever, so deal with it.”

Before Carleen can respond, Ryder’s massive hands settle on my waist and suddenly

I'm being lifted right off Carleen's lap like I weigh nothing. A startled squeak leaves my mouth as Ryder turns me around in his arms, setting me down on the floor before immediately leaning down and capturing my mouth in a kiss that steals every last coherent thought from my brain.

Holy shit.

His lips are firm, insistent, and I can feel the control he's holding onto by a thread as one hand cradles the back of my head and the other settles on my lower back, pulling me flush against him. I melt. There's no other word for it. My knees buckle and I clutch at his shirt like it's the only thing keeping me upright.

When he finally pulls back, his breath is warm against my lips, and those piercing blue eyes of his are locked onto mine like I'm the most important thing in the world. "Welcome to the pack, Tati," he says softly, his voice a low rumble that vibrates through me.

I let out a breathless laugh, my head spinning, my chest tight with something so big and overwhelming I can barely hold it. "You guys are gonna spoil me rotten, aren't you?"

Ryder smirks, leaning down to press one last soft kiss to my forehead before stepping back. Carleen is still sitting on the counter, watching us with wide eyes and flushed cheeks, but there's a softness in her expression that makes my heart squeeze. Ashton steps up beside me, his hand finding the small of my back. "You're worth spoiling, little doe."

There's too many emotions to deal with as I make my way into the living room and flop onto the couch with a satisfied sigh, sinking into the cushions like I've melted into a puddle of happiness. Ashton plops down beside me, tossing an arm lazily across the back of the couch while Ryder settles into the armchair. Carleen takes the

other end of the couch, her long legs tucked beneath her, fingers nervously playing with the hem of her shirt.

My phone buzzes in my back pocket and I groan, reaching for it without moving anything but my arm. When I see the name flashing on the screen— Mom —my stomach flips.

“Okay,” I hiss, straightening up and holding up a finger. “Everyone. Quiet. If my mom even thinks I’m in some kind of scandalous situation, she will... I don’t know what she’ll do. Just stay quiet.”

Ashton smirks. Carleen snorts. Ryder raises a brow but complies. I answer the call, plastering on my best sweet daughter who definitely isn’t involved in anything questionable smile. “Hi, Mom!”

“Tati!” I can hear the smile in her voice. “I was beginning to think you’d forgotten your own parents.”

“Never. Been busy, that’s all.” And I have been. Dating two more Alphas, picking up my old job, falling in love...

“Oh, busy , hmm? Too busy to call your mother? Let me see you.”

Before I can respond, the call switches to video, and I curse under my breath as I scramble to adjust. The screen shifts—and there she is, my mother, her hair tied up in a silk scarf, glasses perched on the bridge of her nose as she squints at me. My father’s voice mumbles something in the background but she waves him off.

But then— oh no —I feel it before I see it.

Ryder’s hand appears in the frame as he sets a mug of tea on the table beside me. And

then he leans down. His massive shoulders, those tattoos barely peeking out from the edge of his shirt. My mother's eyes go wide .

“Tati, who is that ?”

I wince. Ashton's muffled snicker doesn't help. “Um... well, funny story, Mom...”

“Don't funny story me. Is there something you need to tell your mother ?”

I can't stop the laugh that bubbles up. Screw it. It's out in the open now. “Actually, yeah. There's been a few... developments. ” I tilt the camera, and there's Ryder, sitting back in the chair, arms crossed over his chest. Ashton, meanwhile, is sprawled beside me, grinning like he's just won the lottery. “Mom, meet Ryder and Ashton. They're my—” I pause, realizing I don't even have the words to describe what they are yet. “—Alphas.”

Her lips purse and I brace myself. But then her face softens, her eyes shining with something I can't quite place. “Welcome to the family, boys.” Her voice is soft but firm.

Ashton gives a little wave. “Nice to meet you, ma'am.”

Ryder, ever the man of few words, just nods respectfully.

“And,” I continue, angling the camera toward Carleen, who's half-hidden behind me but can't escape now. “Mom, you know Carleen.”

Carleen straightens, smiling politely but looking like she'd rather crawl under the couch and hide forever. My mother's smile grows wider. “You make sure they're not strangers, hmm? I expect to see all of you at dinner sometime soon. Your father will want to interrogate them—politely, of course.”

I snort. Politely? Sure, Mom. Sure.

“We’ll come by soon, I promise,” I say, my voice cracking slightly because, damn, this feels good. She hangs up with a quick goodbye and I set my phone down on the coffee table with trembling hands. Ashton squeezes my thigh. Ryder’s watching me with those intense blue eyes, like he’s trying to memorize every little detail of me in this moment. Carleen is smiling softly, her head tilted like she’s trying to figure out how I can still be so full of energy after all of this.

I take a deep breath, exhaling slowly before flashing them all a grin. “So... when do I get more bonds?”

Ashton lets out a low, wicked laugh as he leans in close, his voice dropping low, warm breath brushing against my ear. “Be careful what you wish for, little doe. Because if I bond you, the mark’s going right on your ass. Or maybe...” He pauses, trailing a fingertip along the inside of my thigh. “...here.”

My face goes red. Carleen is muttering something under her breath, and Ryder’s smirk has turned downright predatory.

“Okay!” I squeak, throwing my hands up. “That’s enough bonding talk for now!”

I lean back into the cushions, my heart still hammering but so, so full.

This is it.

This is home .

Even with all the chaos, intense gazes, and Ashton’s constant flirtation, this is exactly where I’ve always wanted to be.

Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 5:03 pm

TWO WEEKS LATER

TATI

The smell of garlic and tomato sauce fills the air, mixing with the faint tang of basil as warm laughter echoes from the kitchen. My parents' house is buzzing with energy—the kind that comes with full bellies and wine glasses that have been refilled one too many times. I'm seated between Ashton and Ryder at the long wooden dining table, both of them taking up way too much space and acting like they own the place. Which, let's be honest, they kind of do now.

Ashton's hand is on my neck again, his thumb rubbing slow, lazy circles just below my ear—right over the bonding mark he put there last week. And it's driving me insane. Every brush sends tingles straight down my spine and into places that are wildly inappropriate considering my father is twenty feet away.

I shoot Ashton a glare, my eyes narrowing. "Stop it," I hiss under my breath. I'm still pissed at him for putting it there. At least Ryder put it on my shoulder, right beside Carleen's.

Ashton smirks, those long lashes fluttering as he tilts his head and leans closer. "Stop what, little doe? I'm just enjoying myself."

Before I can respond, Ryder clears his throat. The sound cuts through whatever ridiculousness Ashton and I are tangled in. His blue eyes flick between us, narrowed, and he says absolutely nothing, but the look is clear: Behave.

I sit back in my chair with a dramatic sigh, crossing my arms over my chest. Ashton just grins, unbothered, like he's won this little round of our ongoing war.

The faint murmur of conversation drifts in from the kitchen where my mother is undoubtedly grilling Carleen over recipes or techniques or some other culinary nonsense.

"Tati."

I glance up to see my dad walking in from the kitchen, wiping his hands on a towel slung over his shoulder. He's wearing an old apron with *Kiss the Cook* written in faded letters across the front. He stops just in front of my chair, one brow lifted, a smile tugging at the corners of his mouth.

"You look happy, baby girl." His voice is warm, thick with emotion that makes me into a little puddle. "Happier than I've seen you in a long time."

I swallow the sudden lump in my throat and nod. "I am happy."

His eyes flick briefly to Ashton, who sits there looking all smug and golden in the candlelight. Then his gaze shifts to Ryder, who's sitting like a mountain carved out of stone, watching quietly like he's waiting for something to pounce on.

"Well," my dad says, turning back to me, "I guess this is the troublemaker." He juts his chin toward Ashton with a teasing smile.

Ashton raises both hands like he's surrendering. "Guilty as charged, sir."

My dad laughs—a deep, rumbling sound that makes me grin—and then pats Ashton on the shoulder before heading back to the kitchen, the towel still clutched in his hand. The moment he's gone, Ashton leans toward me again, his lips brushing right against my ear.

“You are happy though, right, Tati?” His voice is low, his breath warm as it skates over the sensitive skin.

A shiver runs through me and I have to bite back a moan as I press my thighs together. My nails dig into my palm as I whisper, “I swear to the goddess, Ashton, I’m going to have your ass when we get home.”

He chuckles, lips grazing my ear again. “My ass, sweetheart? That’s reserved for Ryder. Maybe Carleen.”

Before I can hiss back a response, a loud clink pulls our attention to the head of the table. Carleen emerges from the kitchen, carrying a massive pot of spaghetti that smells like it was blessed by some kind of food deity. Her curls have gotten a little long, now tied back, little wisps escaping and curling around her face as she sets the pot down with a flourish.

“What’s maybe only for Carleen?” she asks, one brow raised as she stares between Ashton and me.

My mouth opens, then closes, and then opens again because I was absolutely not prepared for Ashton’s response. Ashton, the menace, just grins and leans back in his chair, utterly shameless.

I point at him. “Ashton said his ass is only for Ryder. And maybe you.”

Carleen freezes for a fraction of a second before tilting her head, her lips twitching like she’s trying not to smile. “Did he now?”

Ashton shrugs one shoulder, still wearing that damn smirk. “What can I say? Gotta keep my options open.”

Carleen gives him a long, unimpressed look before shaking her head and turning back

toward the kitchen. “You’re all ridiculous . Behave before one of Tati’s parents overhears and decides we’re not good enough for their daughter.”

“Yes, ma’am,” Ashton says with a mock salute, but I don’t miss the way his eyes linger on her as she disappears around the corner. Ryder catches my gaze from across the table, his mouth twitching into what might almost be considered a smile. It’s fleeting, but it’s there, and it makes something warm and gooey settle deep in my chest. Ashton catches me staring and reaches over to squeeze my shoulder, his thumb rubbing little circles that feel dangerously close to the mark on my ear again.

“Stop it,” I hiss, swatting his hand away.

“Never,” he replies, his grin sharp and far too pleased with himself.

Carleen and my parents finally make it to the table, everyone doling out heaping plates of artisan spaghetti. She scoots Ryder off, taking the spot next to me, right where she belongs. This feels like home. Safe. Perfect. Even with Ashton trying to make me melt into a puddle in front of my parents.

My mom is mid-story, waving her fork in the air for emphasis while my dad shakes his head, a knowing smile tugging at his lips. Ashton’s grinning beside me, leaning back in his chair like he owns the place, while Ryder listens quietly, his lips twitching every now and then when Mama gets particularly animated.

And then there’s Carleen.

She’s next to me, her shoulder pressed against mine, her glass of wine cradled between her fingers as she listens with that quiet, observant gaze of hers. Her pixie curls are a little wild from being in the kitchen earlier, a faint flush still lingering across her cheeks. And goddess, if I’m not completely gone for her.

I don’t even remember what my mom’s talking about because Carleen’s hand slides

onto my thigh, her fingers curling just slightly as she gives me a gentle squeeze. “I love you,” she mutters under her breath, soft enough that no one else at the table could possibly hear over my dad’s booming laugh.

It’s not the first time she’s said it. We said it a few weeks ago when everything was still raw, still new. But it feels different now. Like she’s had time to think about it and decided, yeah, she still means it.

A slow grin spreads across my face as I turn to look at her fully. “I love you too,” I whisper back, my voice a little shaky but full of every ounce of warmth I can muster. “So much, Carleen. Thank you... for coming back to me.”

Her lips twitch up into a small smile, and for a moment, it feels like it’s just the two of us. The noise of the dinner fades away, the chatter and clinking silverware nothing but background static as I fall into her gaze. But then Ashton clears his throat loudly. “Are we interrupting something over there?”

Carleen startles slightly, pulling her hand back from my thigh, her cheeks turning pink as she stammers, “Shut up, Ashton.”

I shoot him a glare. “Mind your business, Alpha. ”

He grins, showing just a flash of teeth. “Oh, I love it when you call me that, little doe.”

Ryder, sitting across from us, just shakes his head, though there’s a hint of amusement in his blue eyes.

“Enough,” my mom interjects, waving her fork at Ashton like she’s about to poke him with it. “No flirting at the dinner table, please. ”

Dinner stretches on in this easy, familiar way. Plates are passed back and forth, bread

torn apart and dipped in sauce, wine glasses refilled until my mom starts giving everyone that look . My dad tells a story about how he once tried to fix the sink and ended up flooding the entire kitchen and Ryder actually chuckles—like, full-on chuckles . I think my mom might have fallen a little in love with him right then and there.

At one point, Ashton leans over and steals a bite of spaghetti straight from my plate and I nearly stab him with my fork. Carleen snorts, wine nearly spilling from her glass, and Ryder just stares at Ashton like he's personally offended on my behalf.

By the time dessert rolls around—some kind of ridiculously decadent tiramisu that my mom keeps insisting she made herself (she absolutely did not)—I'm leaning into Carleen's side, warm and content. Because while this might not be everyone's traditional happy ending, it's definitely mine— ours.

Love may come in all shapes, sizes, and flavors.

But this flavor?

This is the flavor of us.