

## Accidental Surrogate For Alpha Chapter 1 - 5

### Chapter 1- Betray

*Ella*

“I’m sorry Ella.” My physician says gently. “I’m afraid you have very few viable eggs remaining. Frankly, I normally see these numbers in women ten or fifteen years your senior.”

“What?” I murmur, not believing my ears. I’ve been trying to get pregnant for years. I’m only 30, I should have plenty of eggs left.

“In terms of fertility, you have very little time left.” She continues. “If you want to conceive, you need to do so before your next cycle begins.”

“My next cycle?” I repeat, my mouth hanging open in shock. I love kids more than anything, and though it might not be everyone’s ambition, I want nothing more than to be a mother.

I have to get home and tell my boyfriend this news, and there’s not a moment to waste.

I make it home in record time, bursting through the door and opening my mouth to call for Mike, but stopping dead in my tracks. As soon as I walk inside I see a pair of high heels and a handbag by the door – neither of which belong to me.

I c\*\*k my ears towards the bedroom, and my stomach churns when I hear the unmistakable sound of moaning, accompanied by a steady *thump thump thump*, as the bed collides with the wall. Worse even than realizing that Mike is clearly in there with another woman, is realizing who he’s with. I know that handbag, and I know those shoes – they belong to my best friend, Kate.

“f\*\*k, Ella is so stupid.” Mike laughs, “can you believe she actually expects me to have a baby with her?”

Kate snorts, “she’s delusional. I don’t know how you put up with her for so long in the first place.”

“If she wasn’t so beautiful I never would have given her the time of day.” Mike scoffs. “Thankfully daily doses of plan B kept her from ever conceiving.”

“The morning after pill?” Kate asks, “how did you manage to give it to her without her realizing?”

“I put it in her morning coffee.” Mike chortles, sounding far too proud of himself.

My vision goes completely red as everything finally falls into place. Suddenly it’s clear why I’ve never been able to get pregnant, despite having unprotected s\*x multiple times a week for years. It’s even clear how I could have the eggs of a 45-year-old, if my despicable partner has been secretly feeding me emergency contraceptives every day – there’s no telling what other damage that might have done to my reproductive system.

Before I can think better of it, I pull the smoke alarm on the wall, wanting to frighten and punish the pair in the bedroom so fiercely that I fear I might attack them when they emerge. Water immediately sprays down from the sprinkler system mounted to the ceiling as a shrill siren fills the air, and I hear Mike and Kate cry out in surprise.

A few moments later they come rushing out of the bedroom, stopping in their tracks when they see me looming in the doorway. Mike’s eyes go comically wide, “What are you doing home so early?” The snake has the nerve to sound affronted that I surprised him, when he’s the one who’s been sneaking around behind my back for God knows how long. He seems to realize how suspicious it looks that he and Kate are standing there in their underwear and quickly adds, “Kate came to see me so we could plan a surprise for your birthday, but then we spilled coffee all over our clothes so we had to change.”

Fire blazes in my veins, he must truly believe I’m an i\*\*\*t if he expects me to buy such a feeble excuse.

It’s a testament to their horrifically low opinion of me that they buy my act, and I vow to get my revenge one way or another. I can’t believe I wasted so many years – my best years – on this scumbag. And now he may have cost me my future too. As soon as the thought enters my head, I know I can’t afford to waste another moment on Mike, I have more important things to take care of.

I make my excuses and rush across town for the second time that afternoon, running to the comforting arms of my surrogate sister, Cora. Not only did we grow up together in the orphanage, but she became an OBGYN and now works for the most exclusive sperm

bank in the city. I've never gone to her before because I always imagined Mike and I would eventually conceive the natural way, but that clearly isn't an option anymore.

Even if I could find a man willing to have a baby with me in time, I'm not eager to trust anyone after Mike's betrayal. I'm going to have to do this on my own, and I know Cora can help me. I don't have much money, but I have enough savings to pay for the insemination, especially since I basically have one shot and one shot only.

When I arrive, all my plans to lay out my situation for Cora clearly and concisely go out the window, because the moment I see my sister I fall to pieces. She hugs and kisses me until my tears subside, slowly extracting the story from me piece by piece. When she hears about Mike and Kate she swears up a storm, but that's nothing compared to her reaction when I explain about my fertility.

"That little s\*\*t! I'll kill him!" She fumes, studying me with a worried expression. "Ella, if your doctor was right this means you only have one chance to conceive."

"I know." I sniffle. "And if this is going to be my only baby, I don't want to take any chances. I want the best donor we can find."

"Don't you worry about that." Cora assures me, "We've got donations from actors, models, scientists – it's only the creme de la creme here." She glances at the door and lowers her voice. "You didn't hear it from me, but even Dominic Sinclair sent his samples here for testing."

"Dominic Sinclair? I repeat, 'the billionaire?'" I've seen the man around town, but we don't exactly run in the same circles. He lives in the same neighborhood as my wealthy employer and often says hello to the children I nanny, but he's always surrounded by bodyguards and is so intimidating I get goosebumps just thinking about him.

"Oh my god!" Cora slaps her hand over her mouth. "I wasn't supposed to tell you that! I don't know what I was thinking. Apparently he's no stranger to fertility issues himself, and he trusted us to handle his swimmers over every other lab in the country. I've got his sperm in the other room at this very moment." She frets, "But Ella you can't tell anyone, you have to promise me."

"Of course!" I agree immediately. "I know how important confidentiality is here."

“Thank you,” Cora breathes. “Now, I’m going to give you a dossier of our clients so you can pick a donor, and once you’ve chosen we’ll get you knocked up before you can even blink.”

It’s not an easy decision, but eventually I choose a handsome surgeon whose photo practically makes me swoon. Cora leaves the room only long enough to prepare the sample, and though she looks a bit flustered when she returns, she quickly and professionally completes the insemination, holding my hand when the procedure is finished. “It’s all take care of now, Ella.” She promises, “You can come back in ten days to see if it worked.”

*Ten days. I think dazedly. Ten days to decide my entire future.*

If only I’d known that by the time those ten days were up, my future would no longer belong to me – but to Dominic Sinclair himself.

## **Chapter 2 – Be Fired**

*Ella*

*Six days to go. I think, staring at the date circled on my calendar. Six days until I find out if my dreams are finally going to come true... or if I have to figure out an entirely different plan for my life.*

I’ve thought about nothing else since Cora inseminated me last week, I’m so anxious to find out if I’m pregnant I haven’t even begun to process Mike’s betrayal.

I’m trying to keep a level head, yet I can’t help but imagine my future with this new baby. Try as I might, I catch myself daydreaming about it constantly. I even find myself humming as I get ready for work in the morning.

When I arrive at my employer’s estate in the most exclusive neighborhood in Moon Valley – which basically makes it the most exclusive neighborhood in the world, since Moon Valley is one of the most expensive cities on the planet – I’m immediately greeted by two little voices shouting my name in excitement. “Ella!”

The next thing I know, 3-year-old Millie is hugging my legs while her older brother, Jake, wraps his arms around my middle. “Good morning love puddles!” I exclaim, returning their hugs. “Are you ready for the museum?”

“Yeah!” They cheer, racing out the door without even stopping to put on coats. It takes a bit of wrangling to get them back inside and bundled up for the cold winter day, but before long we set out into the snow.

Jake races ahead of Millie and I, impatient to get to the science museum and not seeming to notice that his sister’s tiny legs simply don’t move that fast. Chuckling, I lift Millie into my arms and settle her on my hip. “Goodness, you’re getting too big for this, munchkin.”

“Nuh-uh,” Millie grins, “You’re just too little.”

She might have a point. At five foot one, I don’t exactly have the kind of build suited to heavy lifting. I’m in great shape, but I’ve never been particularly strong. “Smarty pants.” I tease, laughing with the little girl.

When I look back towards Jake, I realize he’s stopped a few feet ahead of us. My heart skips a beat when I realize why. We’re in front of the Sinclair mansion, and its owner is currently standing in the middle of the sidewalk, his gaze searing me like a firebrand as I approach with Millie. Dominic Sinclair is just about the most handsome man I’ve ever seen, but he’s also one of the most terrifying.

With dark hair and piercing green eyes, chiseled features and a body so muscular I could swoon, it doesn’t seem fair he gets to look so good and also be so rich. If I didn’t know better I might think it was his wealth or imposing height that makes him so intimidating, after all he’s at least six foot four, which means he towers over me and everyone else around him. However it’s neither of those things, there’s simply an indefinable quality about the man that I can’t put my finger on, one which screams *danger*. He gives off this energy that’s so raw and animalistic one forgets there’s anyone else in the room.

Taking a steadying breath, I close the distance between us so Millie can say hello. When she greets him, Dominic drags his attention from me and offers her a smile so genuine that it tugs at my heartstrings. As I watch him talk to my two young charges, I remember what Cora told me about his infertility struggles. He clearly loves children, and I feel a wave of empathy for him. If anyone knows what it’s like to yearn for a family of their own, it’s me.

Jake is currently showing Dominic his new toy airplane, pulling the matchbox model from his pocket and demonstrating how far it can fly. With a great heave, he sends the toy gliding through the air, only to land in the middle of the street. Before any of us can say a word, Jake races after it, right into the busy road.

“Jake no, be careful!” I cry, watching him dart out into the path of an oncoming car but feeling frozen by my fear. Before I can contemplate putting Millie down to go after him, a blur of movement whirrs past my vision. I’ve never seen anyone move so fast in my life. Dominic became little more than a hazy outline of himself, chasing after Jake and pulling him out of the way just before the car slams into them. The vehicle’s tires are still screeching when Dominic sets Jake down beside me, his expression suddenly very stern.

“That was very dangerous.” He scolds gently. “You should never go into the street without looking both ways first.”

Jake hangs his head. “I’m sorry, I didn’t want my plane to get runned over.”

“You are a million times more important than a toy.” Dominic tells him firmly, “and you scared your nanny half to death.”

“I’m sorry, Ella.” Jake snuffles, looking up at me with wide eyes.

“I know sweetheart, just don’t ever do that again.” I breathe, cuddling him against my side. “Thank you so much.” I say to Dominic, feeling more grateful than I can express. “I have no idea how you moved so fast! It was like something out of a superhero film.”

“Must have been the adrenaline.” Dominic shrugs, giving Millie another smile before taking his leave. “Enjoy the rest of your day, and stay out of the road young man!”

“Yes sir!” Jake calls after him, pocketing his airplane. “I really am sorry.” He adds to me.

“It’s forgotten.” I tell him softly, though I take his hand so that he can’t run off again.

“It all happened so fast.” I tell Cora later that night. “I mean the more I think about it, the more amazing it seems. One moment he was there, and the next he was gone. It was like magic.”

“Thank goodness Jake is alright.” She replies, but rather than looking relieved, her face is twisted into a deep grimace.

Studying my sister's expression, I realize her grim demeanor is not just about Jake's near miss. Something else is wrong, and I actually feel guilty for not noticing sooner. "Is everything okay?"

Cora frowns, "Not really. But you've got so much going on right now, it's not important."

"Cora, don't be ridiculous." I admonish. "What's going on?"

"Well, speaking of Dominic Sinclair," She begins cryptically, "you know that sperm he sent to us for testing?"

"Yeah," I confirm, wondering where on earth this was going.

"It's gone missing... and I'm the last person who saw it, not to mention it was in my custody." She explains, her voice becoming thick with emotion. "Ella, I think... I think I'm going to be fired. And if there's an investigation I could lose my medical license."

"What?" I exclaim. "What do you mean it's missing? A vial of sperm can't just get up and walk away."

"I know, I think someone had to steal it, but there's no way of knowing who's responsible. And it looks like I'm going to have to take the blame." She shares, her eyes shining with tears.

"Cora, I can't believe you didn't tell me this sooner!" I lament, "They can't fire you, it isn't fair."

"You don't understand, Dominic is one of our biggest donors." Cora explains. "And he's furious, he basically wants my head on a platter."

A week ago I might have believed there was no hope for Cora, but seeing how kind and understanding Dominic was with the kids today makes me wonder if he could really be so heartless. Surely if he understood that Cora would never be so irresponsible he'd show some leniency? I have to try and help her, I would do anything for my sister – even begging a ruthless billionaire for mercy.

### **Chapter 3 – Request**

**Ella** Three days to go. I repeat these words to myself as I walk down the street, still preoccupied with my possible pregnancy, even as I prepare to go to bat for my sister. In

some ways it's a coping mechanism: I'm about to beg Dominic Sinclair to save Cora's job, and I need a comforting thought to help me get through this.

His bodyguards see me first, and I can see their mouths moving as they watch me move closer, no doubt notifying him of my presence. Approaching nervously behind Dominic, I wonder for the hundredth time if this is a mistake. Who am I to ask a favor from one of the most powerful men on the planet? Shaking myself, I tell the little voice in the back of my mind to shut up – this is for Cora. I might not be brave for myself, but I can be brave for her.

“Mr. Sinclair?” I ask hesitantly, feeling my heart pound violently against my ribcage.

He turns around and gazes imperiously down at me. “Yes?”

“I'm Ella Reina, I nanny for Jake and Millie Graves.” I begin, gnawing on my lower lip.

His dark eyes catch on my mouth, and suddenly I feel like a frightened rabbit in front of a hungry wolf. “I know who you are, Ella.” The sound of my name on his lips sends a shiver down my spine. He speaks the familiar syllables with so much purpose, as if they truly mean something to him.

“Oh... well, I don't mean to be impertinent, but I'm friends with Dr Cora Daniels...” As soon as I say her name, his expression closes off, and some unidentified emotion flashes in his eyes.

“She told me she's in trouble at work, and I know you're one of the bank's donors.” I improvise. “I don't know what Cora is being accused of, but I'm sure she's innocent. She takes her job incredibly seriously, and she would never do anything to risk her career.”

“And what do you expect me to do about it?” Dominic asks ominously. I can tell he doesn't believe my weak story, his body language has changed completely, and I can feel his rising anger vibrating in the air around us.

“I just thought... I hoped that if you had any sway there, you might be able to put in a good word for her.” I finish, feeling color flood my cheeks. I'm both ashamed of myself for such a feeble attempt, but unsure how else to handle such a delicate topic. The last thing I want is to get Cora in even more trouble than before.

Dominic's jaw ticks as he watches me, and the voice in the back of my head urges me to run for it. “From what I've heard, your friend made a very serious mistake, and the



consequences have been more than appropriate. The best thing she can do now is take responsibility for her mistakes, not sending you to do her dirty work for her.”

“I – she didn’t, she doesn’t even know I’m here! I swear.” I plead.

“I’ve said all I’m going to say on this matter.” Dominic declares, turning away from me and striding into his house. The door slams shut behind him, and I’m left with his various bodyguards.

“You need to leave now, miss.” One of the men announces sharply.

“I can’t.” I moan, “he has to understand, she’s going to lose everything!”

“We’re not going to ask you again.” A second guard growls, a clear threat in his words.

“Please, she’s innocent.” I beg, “you have to –” before I can say anything more, the men grab me by the arms and begin trying to lead me off the property. Feeling truly desperate, I dig in my heels, deciding that my dignity is worth Cora’s entire future. “I’m begging you, if I could just talk to Mr. Sinclair.”

“You’ve already talked to him.” The first guard grumbles, “and frankly you’re lucky he was as generous to you as he was. Your friend clearly told you things she shouldn’t.”

The next thing I know, they’ve thrown me off the property and onto the sidewalk so forcefully that I lose my balance, tumbling to the ground as tears spark in my eyes. The iron gates slam shut behind me, and I have no choice but to slink off before I can embarrass myself further.

Of course, this was only the beginning of my misfortune. When I arrived at work the next day, I found that my keys no longer fit the locks on the front door. I knocked, overwhelmed with confusion, and a few minutes later the door swung open to reveal Jake and Millie’s furious mother.

“My keys aren’t working.” I tell her, wondering why she’s glaring at me so fiercely.

“They’re not meant to.” She answers coldly, “as of yesterday afternoon, your services were no longer required.”

“I... you’re firing me?” I squeak, not believing my ears. “Why?”

“We got a call from the neighbors.” She explains haughtily, “apparently you let Jake run into the road the other day where he was almost hit by a car! And then yesterday you were seen making a fool of yourself at Dominic Sinclair’s home – they said his bodyguards had to drag you off the grounds like a common criminal.”

“That isn’t fair, that isn’t what happened!” I plead. “Jake through his toy into the road and ran after it, I didn’t let it happen, and what happened with Mr. Sinclair was a misunderstanding.”

“I don’t want to hear it.” She hisses. “Now leave before I call the police.”

“Please, can’t I at least say goodbye to the kids?” I request, praying she’ll grant me this one kindness.

“I’m dialing.” She tells me simply, pulling her cell phone from her pocket.

“No!” I raise my palms in supplication, “It’s okay, I’ll go.”

For the second time this week, I find myself shamefully retreating through this opulent neighborhood with tears streaming down my face. What hurts even worse than losing my job is the fact I didn’t get to explain the situation to Jake and Millie, or see them one last time. I’m sure their mother will tell them horrible things about me, despite the fact that I’ve been lovingly raising for them for the last two years.

I know Dominic Sinclair is responsible for this. I don’t believe my ex-boss’s story about the neighbors for one moment. He clearly wanted to punish me, just like he’s having Cora punished. A rush of fury takes hold of me, and suddenly I wish I could punish him somehow. It’s not like me to be so vindictive, but right now it truly feels like my entire life is falling apart, and it’s partly his fault.

I spent all my money on the insemination, and without a job I have almost nothing. How am I ever going to afford to have a baby now? I guarantee I’m not going to get a good reference from Jake and Millie’s mother.

As if things weren’t already bad enough, when I return home I find a stack of bills in the mailbox and I don’t even recognize half the senders. I open them one by one, feeling my confusion and disbelief grow by the minute.

As I look at the stores on the breakdown of charges, my suspicion grows: they’re all Mike’s favorite places. Is it possible he did this behind my back? That he’s been hiding

the bills from me for months... or years? I know he'll deny it if I confront him, which leaves me only one option.

I have to call Kate. My former best friend might have betrayed me completely with her affair, but if anyone knows what Mike has been up to, it's her.

## **Chapter 4 – Desperation**

Ella

My hands are shaking as I dial Kate's number. Have I ever been this angry? If I have I certainly can't remember it now.

"Hello?" Kate answers almost immediately, using a sickly sweet tone that screams of fakeness.

"Kate?" I state bluntly. "Are you with Mike right now?"

There's a pregnant pause on the other end of the line, before she weakly responds, "What? Of course not."

"Come off it Kate, do you really think I don't know about your s\*\*t?" I demand. "I'm not a complete idiot."

"Ella listen—" She begins, obviously gearing up to give me some sort of excuse.

"No, I don't even care about your little affair anymore – but I need to talk to him right now." I declare fiercely.

There's another pause, and then Kate's voice drops its innocent tone. "You don't care?" She repeats, sounding truly shocked. "You know I'm already pregnant?"

I wasn't prepared for that particular piece of news. I clench my hands into fists, feeling so furious I think I might actually break the phone with my tight grip, "And what, you think that's some sort of victory?" I bite.

"Does he know you're pregnant?" I ask sharply, "because a man who's so afraid of responsibility that he'd poison me for years is probably willing to do it to anyone."

"Well no, but he loves me, he would never –" She tried to explain.

“He loved me too once.” I cut her off. “At least he said he did. It’s amazing how charming he can be, considering what a bastard he truly is. How do you think he’s going to support you and your child? He doesn’t even have a job.”

“Of course he does!” She objects, “He just didn’t tell you about it because he didn’t want you to bleed him dry. He’s a stock broker.”

“Oh Kate,” I sigh, “Poor, gullible, stupid Kate. He’s as much a stock broker as I am a wizard.”

“Don’t talk to me like that! He’s got money, he lavishes it on me all the time!” She insists.

“With fraudulent credit cards he took out in my name!” I shout, losing my temper completely.

“What?” She squeaks.

“That’s right. I’ve only just found out – he’s completely bankrupted me. I’m calling the police and if I were you, I’d check your own credit rating immediately, because I’d be willing to be you’re next.” I snap.

“No,” she repeats weakly, “you’re wrong, it’s different with me.”

My voice is getting thick with emotion now, but I can’t help it. “And frankly I don’t really care what happens to you Kate, but if you’re really pregnant then your baby deserves better than to be raised in a homeless shelter, and that’s exactly where Mike will land you.”

I hang up before I start crying, not giving her a chance to respond. Why did I buy his lies about looking for work for so long? He crushed me little by little, all the while pretending to be so nice, and I let it happen.

Never again. I decide. I won’t ever let myself be fooled that way again.

I still want to get my revenge on Mike, but first I’ve got to try and salvage what’s left of my life. I have to go to the police and see if I can resolve these financial issues... I can’t have a baby if I’m bankrupt, and I can only pray the police will help.

“I’m very sorry Miss. Reina, but if your ex-partner has left the area, there’s not much we can do about this.” The police officer breaks this news to me about as gently as he might smash an ant beneath his boot. “I’ll give you the police report to send to the credit card company, but that’s the most help you’re going to get from us.”

Anger fills me to the brim. I guarantee he’d never treat my case with so little consideration or respect if I wasn’t an impoverished nanny. If I was a wealthy man like Dominic Sinclair, he’d be fawning at my feet, offering to go to any lengths to solve my problems. I storm out of the station before I can lose my temper and verbally assault the man, immediately calling the credit card companies.

One by one they crush my hopes, telling me in no uncertain terms that unless a culprit is arrested in my case, I’ll be held responsible for the charges.

As I hang up on the final call, I can feel the earth crumbling beneath my feet. How did it come to this? I literally have nothing. No one will hire me without a recommendation from my previous employer, which means I won’t be able to pay rent or keep food on the table. Normally I might turn to Cora in such a time, but I can’t burden her with this when she’s in the same boat.

Tomorrow I’ll finally find out whether or not I’m pregnant, and up until now the strange sensation I’ve been experiencing the last few days has been a comfort and source of hope. I don’t know how to explain it: it’s as if I’m suddenly different somehow – even though I can’t see any changes, I just have this intense knowing that I’m no longer the same woman I was a week ago.

I thought it was a sign the insemination worked, but now I’m praying that it’s my imagination going overboard.

At first I try to distract myself, turning on the TV and freezing when I see Dominic Sinclair on the news talking about all his good will initiatives in the community. “When our work is finished, the Moon Valley children’s home will be a place of love and community, motivated to find the best homes for every child in need. Our initiative not only ensures that the permanent residents in the home have the best possible conditions, but that there is continuous follow up with children placed with adoptive families to ensure they thrive in their new homes.”

So much for the supposed philanthropist, I think bitterly. Turning a blind eye to the lives he’s selfishly ruining all the while pretending to be a friend of the downtrodden. A week

ago I might have been touched by such a broadcast. I grew up in an orphanage just like the one he's describing, and I know just how terrible the conditions can be. Now however, I see nothing but his hypocrisy. Cora was an orphan too, she didn't do anything wrong – where is his compassion for her? Clearly it's only for the TV cameras. It's a shame. He's very convincing... then again, so was Mike.

Of course Mike was never as handsome as Dominic Sinclair, nor did he ever have his charisma or imposing presence. I don't know if I've ever met anyone like him. Even while he was refusing to help me, scolding me and having me thrown out the door, part of me was still taken in by his handsome features and pure magnetism.

Shaking myself, I turn the TV off. What the hell is wrong with me? The man is a heartless billionaire and I'm still sitting here mooning over him like a silly schoolgirl.

I end up going to bed early, trying not to think about tomorrow. Of course, I still lie awake late into the night – I know what it means to grow up an orphan, and I can't countenance bringing a child into the world just to abandon it to that bleak existence. The more my life unravels, the more stark my options become.

If I am pregnant... Am I going to abort the child? Even though it's what I've wanted my entire life!

## **Chapter 5 – Pregnancy test**

Ella

“No, I understand.” I murmur into the phone. “Thanks for listening at least.”

I wearily hang up the line, burying my head in my hands. I spent all morning calling in every favor and loan I possibly could, throwing my dignity right out the window to beg my friends and acquaintances in my time of need.

I've never thought of myself as a proud woman, but begging this way was more of a challenge than I could have imagined.

I only wish I could help Cora as well as myself. She's still waiting to hear if she'll be fired, and while she's not supposed to be handling any samples, she got permission to do my tests this afternoon. After all, I've already been inseminated, so her supervisor didn't see any risk of further negligence.

Still, I'm far from excited when I walk through the front doors of the sperm bank. Ten days ago I was heartsore but optimistic for the future, yearning for a baby more than anything else in the world. Now I'm dreading the exam.

However my trepidation soon gives way to surprise, because as soon as I enter the facility I have the strangest feeling that Dominic Sinclair is near. It takes me a while to actually find him, behind closed doors with Cora's bosses in a luxurious, glass-walled conference room, but I don't have the faintest idea how I knew he was present. I also don't understand why I feel drawn to him: after all, he's ruined both my sister's and my own life. I shouldn't be excited to see him.

It was dumb luck that I stumbled across his path, the conference room is on the way to Cora's office, but I find myself stopping to observe the meeting inside. I'm struck speechless when I lay eyes on him. Is it possible that he's gotten more attractive since the last time I saw him? It was already unfair that somebody that powerful and intelligent could be so handsome, but now it truly just feels like being kicked while I'm down. The bastard has a heart of stone, and still the universe has rained endless gifts upon him while people like Cora and I have nothing.

Shaking myself out of my trance, I continue down the hall, though I feel the weight of dark eyes on my back as I retreat. Cora has clearly been crying when I arrive. Her eyes are red and her cheeks splotchy, though she tries to hide it.

"Hey." I greet her gently, wrapping her up in a hug. She leans into me, squeezing tight and lingering far longer than she usually would. "Is there any news?"

"Sinclair is in there finalizing it all now. I'm going to be given formal termination notice this afternoon." She shares, sniffing slightly.

"I'm so sorry, honey." I croon, rubbing her back.

"It's okay." She lies, pulling away. "How are you hanging in there?"

"Not very well." I confess. "I'm sort of dreading this, to be honest."

"It's amazing how fast things can change, huh?" She asks, looking as though she might burst into tears. "I mean, what are we going to do, Elle?"

“Well figure it out.” I promise. “We’ve been in tight spots before.” I remind her, “remember the summer we slept in boxes on the street after we ran away from the orphanage?”

“Yeah,” She nods with a sad smile. “But it’s winter now, I don’t think we’ll last long in the elements. And you weren’t pregnant then.”

“Yeah well, if I’m pregnant now...” I can’t look her in the eyes as I say this, “I don’t think I’m going to stay that way.”

“What?” Cora exclaims, looking horrified. “But this is your only chance! And we aren’t completely hopeless, you’ve got time to try to figure out a plan B.”

That phrase alone reminds me of Mike, and I realize I haven’t shared my latest news with Cora. “I can’t afford a baby even if I do find a job. I’m going to be paying off my debts for years to come.” I share, filling her in on the details of Mike and Kate’s latest betrayal.

“I can’t believe this!” She bursts out when I’m finished. “It just isn’t fair, Ella! I mean, I thought we paid our dues, I thought we were done with suffering. After everything we’ve been through, we deserve a better future than this! You deserve to be a mom – no one loves children more than you do.”

“And you deserve to be a doctor.” I reply. “You worked so hard.”

“I still don’t think you should give up yet.” She frowns. “You can terminate the pregnancy up until the end of the first trimester. It would be a tragedy if you aborted it, then pulled off a miracle and it turned out you could have kept it. Don’t take that risk. Keep the baby until the very last moment.”

“I don’t think miracles happen to people like me.” I remark softly. “Besides that seems kind of like it’s own form of torture – the longer I carry the baby the more attached I’m going to get. I don’t want this to hurt any worse than it has to.”

“It’s going to hurt no matter what.” Cora reasons, “You ought to give yourself a chance – keep the door open. Don’t give up hope completely.”

“Let’s just find out if I have to make that decision in the first place.” I state, changing the subject. “I may not even be pregnant.” Yet even as I say it, I can feel in my heart that I am.



“Okay.” Cora agrees, pulling a sterile cup wrapped in plastic from one of her cabinets. “You know what to do.”

I take the cup and quickly duck into the bathroom to provide a urine sample, returning it to her almost immediately. I pace back and forth across the office as Cora runs the tests. “Well?” I press, seeing the results pop up on her computer screen.

She offers me a sad smile. “Congratulations little sister, you’re going to have a baby.”

I told myself that I wouldn’t fall to pieces no matter the results, but as soon as the words are out of her mouth I’m crying. I’ve been waiting to hear those words for years and was beginning to think I never would. It’s both unimaginable joy, and unimaginable pain. I never knew my heart could hold such conflicting emotions at the same time, let alone in such extremes. “Really?”

“Really.” Cora confirms, hugging me. “Come on, let’s do an ultrasound. You can hear the heartbeat.”

“Isn’t it too early?” I squeak.

“Just one of the benefits of being at the finest lab in the country.” Cora quips, the words bittersweet on her tongue. “Our technology is years ahead of what’s available in public hospitals.”

Climbing onto the raised exam table, I lay back and lift my top, not bothering to change into a gown or cover my clothes with a sheet, I simply expose my flat belly as Cora wheels in an ultrasound on a cart. Within minutes the machine is emitting a strange whoosh woosh woosh, and Cora squirts a dollop of jelly on my tummy. She pressed the wand to my skin, and before long a tiny heartbeat sounds – making me cry all over again.

However Cora is frowning deeply. “This is so strange, the baby seems awfully large, but we tested you at your last visit to be sure you weren’t already pregnant.”

“What does that mean?” I ask anxiously. “Is the father just a big guy?”

“I don’t just mean size – I mean development.” Cora purses her lips and furrows her brows as she studies the images, suddenly looking very worried. She’s whispering now, speaking to herself more than to me. “It doesn’t look human... but that can’t be... it’s not possible.”

“What are you talking about?” I inquire, “How can you tell? Isn’t it just a tiny blob?”

“As I said, our tech is state of the art. It doesn’t just highlight shapes – it analyzes the molecular structure.” Before she can say another word, the door bursts open, startling us both. To my shock and horror, Dominic Sinclair is standing in the doorway, glaring at us as if we’ve done something terrible. “What’s the meaning of this?” He demands.

“What’s the meaning of this? I repeat in shock, “what’s the meaning of you barging into a private exam?!”

“Because,” He declares fiercely, and I swear his eyes are almost glowing with rage. “I can smell my pup.”

## Chapter 6

Ella

“Your pup?” I parrot, realizing I must sound like an idiot the way I keep repeating him – but it’s all too strange and surreal, I feel like ‘m having a dream — one that may or may not be a nightmare. “What are you talking about?”

I might have been admiring his physical prowess a little while ago, but now I’m back to thinking Dominic Sinclair is just plain terrifying. I’ve known my fair share of bad men, but none of them have ever intimidated me the way he does. It’s like he’s superhuman, giving off waves of energy that make me want to curl up into a little ball at his feet.

“You.” He narrows his eyes at Cora, then gestures to me. “Is this what you did with my sperm, you inseminated your friend?”

“Of course not!” She objects hotly, though there’s a noted shake in her voice. “Yes, I inseminated Ella last week, but not with your sperm. She chose a donor from our client dossier.

You’re lying.” He accuses, stating the accusation as if it’s fact. “Ella clearly knew about the samples – since she came to plead your case -“

“You did that?” Cora blinks at me

“Yes, but I was only trying to help. I thought he might show you mercy if he realized you would never do anything to risk your career” I apologize, “I’m so sorry, I just wanted to help.

“It’s okay.” She tells me gently, patting my hand and turning back to Sinclair. “That doesn’t mean anything... mean, yes I inseminated her on the same day your sample disappeared but... no – it’s not possible, your sample was in a separate fridge...” She trails off again, looking back at the ultrasound screen with wide eyes Oh my god...

What?” I inquire, beyond confused.

“It’s not human.” She murmurs again, so quietly I can barely hear her. Suddenly she whirls around, looking up at Dominic Sinclair with true fear. “I swear, I didn’t do it on purpose. I don’t know how it happened!”

“Why do you keep saying that it’s not human?” I question, beyond exasperated. “What else could it be – an alien?”

“Don’t pretend like you don’t know.” The infuriated man growls. “Don’t pretend like you two didn’t plan this precisely for this reason.”

Cora’s hand is shaking on mine now. “Ella, when I told you about the samples, I only told you half the story She explains. “I had to sign a thousand confidentiality documents, because certain secrets came along with

running tests on Mr. Sinclair’s samples.”

“What secrets?” I demand, feeling as if everyone around me is speaking in code.

He’s not...” She begins, glancing at the huge man nervously. “He’s not human... he’s a werewolf.

Before I can stop myself, I burst out into laughter. “No really, what is it?”

“Really.” Cora whispers urgently. “He’s a werewolf.”

Cora” I tell her, almost certain I’m dreaming now. “Werewolves aren’t real.

i didn’t believe they were either.” She confesses, “until I started working here. This lab is as renowned as it is because there’s two sides of the business. Half of our bank is

dedicated to shifter samples, in fact very few humans work here because so few are trusted with the truth

'm starting to truly worry for my sister, "Are you high?" ask under my breath

He's not high " Sinclair rumbles drawing my attention back to his face. Now 'm sure his eyes are glowing with light, The evidence is right in front of me usually with Sinclair in front of me, but my brain can't figure out how to process it, Instead it shuts down. I feel a sudden wave of vertigo is black

When I wake, Cora is gone. I sit up on the exam table, trying to remember what happened. Of course it doesn't take long for me to recall the strange events that came to faint. because Dominic Sinclair is sitting in front of me. watching me closely, His eyes aren't allowing anymore. but I remember the way they'd lit up from within, I also remember the way he'd moved faster than should have been possible to rescue Jake At the time I wrote it off as adrenaline but now I'm not so sure.

"How are you feeling, Ella?" He asks me, much calmer than he'd seemed earlier

"I think I'm losing my mind." I answer weakly. "This can't be real."

"It is real" He assures me. "Your friend should never have agreed to let you try to entrap me when she knew the truth."

"I just wanted a baby." I argue (Cora didn't let me do anything and wasn't trying to entrap

me.) Please." He scoffs, "I've had my men run your background, I know you're bankrupt. Obviously you thought that if you were pregnant with my child I would pay your debts for you. You simply miscalculated – you didn't know what you were getting yourself into, or expect Cora to lose her job for the "mistake." The horrible man has the nerve to use air quotes around his final word.

"That's insane!" I hiss. "I didn't bankrupt myself- my identity was stolen and I didn't even know about it until after the insemination. I'm not an irresponsible person, or the type of woman who expects a man to solve her

problems. I would never do what you're suggesting.

"I don't want to hear your excuses." He answers harshly. "The evidence is against you."

“We don’t even know that it’s your child!” I remind him. “Maybe it isn’t...” I have to give myself a shake before I can continue. “Maybe it isn’t human, but that doesn’t mean it’s yours.

“I know it’s mine.” Sinclair snarls, making me tremble with instinctive fear. “I can smell it, I can sense my

bloodline in your womb.

I can only gape at him. He can smell it? Sense his bloodline? It’s like I’ve left reality and entered a different universe. “This is crazy” I can feel myself sliding back into denial, “if werewolves were real, people would know about it!”

Sinclair rolls his eyes and lifts a hand the size of a dinner plate. While I watch, five claws extend where his fingernails were a moment ago. I stare at the odd and slightly sickening sight with abject disbelief. “How are you doing that?”

“I’m going to give you the benefit of the doubt and assume that’s your shock speaking, rather than your intelligence.” Sinclair drawls.

I glower at him, temporarily forgetting that he’s not only a man twice my size, but apparently a lethal predator. “You don’t get to talk to me like that just because you have money and howl at the moon.

He arches one dark brow, challenging my defiance. “Is that so?”

Yes,” I snap, crossing my arms over chest and tilting my chin up stubbornly. “It is. If I didn’t know any better, I’d think he wanted to smile. I swear the corners of his mouth twitched. “You’re a gutsy little thing, I’ll give you that.”

I don’t want you to give me anything.” I growl, “I want you to leave me alone.

His eyes flash dangerously, “That’s not going to happen. You’re carrying my pup.

Pup.” I say, feeling my stomach churn uncomfortably, “like., four legs and a tail?

“No.” He answers, not unkindly, “It doesn’t work that way.

Well how does it work?” I question, more subdued now. “How does any of this work?”

Well in a lot of ways werewolves are just like humans”” Sinclair explains leaning back in his chair but not taking his eyes off me. In fact, his gaze is so intense I’m finding it increasingly difficult not to squirm. “Welcome into the world in human form and we live most of our lives the same way. Most shifters don’t make their first transformation until they’re a few years old there – heightened instincts, sights as adults make them appear to look. It’s like learning to speak during the early years.”

“But how can I be pregnant

For the first time Sinclair looks less sure of himself. “I’m actually not sure. I’ve never heard of such a thing happening. Our society exists parallel to your own. A few people – like your friend – are occasionally let in on the secret, but it’s only in very special cases and they never truly integrate. It’s only when someone has certain knowledge or expertise that’s very valuable to us.

So there’s just like... a shadow world full of werewolves that exists right under human’s noses?” I summarize.

“That’s a nice way of putting it, yes.” He confirms.

And packs and alphas... all the things we read in paranormal novels -is that all real?”

“Well our transformations have nothing to do with the full moon, but other than that many things are correct. We’re much faster and stronger than humans, and our society is divided into packs but they’re very large. You can think of them like provinces or states in a larger kingdom.” Sinclair shares.

“Kingdom?” I ask, “Like with a king and queen and everything?”

“Yes” His answer seems strangely loaded, as if he’s omitting something very important – but I don’t know what it might be.

“Now, if you’re done asking questions, can we finally talk seriously?”

“Talk seriously?” What could be more serious than turning my entire world upside down?

He stares pointedly at my “About this baby.”

## Chapter 7

Ella

“This baby is mine.” I tell him possessively. “You can’t just tell me you’re magic and expect me to take that as proof you’re the father.”

“My senses don’t lie, little human.” Sinclair declares, leaving no room for argument. “Nor do my investigators. You’re not in any position to care for this child. Your income is too low to pay off your debts in time, and no woman who claims to be responsible would ever get pregnant in such a situation.”

“My income?” I force the words out through clenched teeth, “what income? You got me fired!”

The big man... or wolf, I suppose, blinks in surprise. “You were fired?”

“Now who’s playing dumb?” I demand wryly. “You called the Graves after I asked you to help Cora, you got me fired and ruined my reputation.”

“I did no such thing.” He insists. “I didn’t even know you were no longer employed.”

“I thought your investigators were the best?” I taunt, and I can feel myself toeing the line of his temper.

“Clearly this was very recent.” He bites back. “And I don’t blame you for becoming desperate, but you have to admit the only explanation for this,” He gestures to my tummy, “is that you needed money and hoped to extort it from me in exchange for the child.”

“I wanted this child more than anything in the world!” I exclaim, surging to my feet. “I’ve been trying to get pregnant for years and when I came to Cora I didn’t know about the identity theft or that I was going to lose my job. This was my last chance and you have no idea how hard it’s been... how painful it is to think I might have to abort it because of everything that’s happened since.” I didn’t mean to tell him so much, but the words poured out of me before I could stop them. I’ve been so preoccupied with these thoughts the last few days I clearly couldn’t keep them contained.

“Abort it!?” Sinclair rises to his feet in a blur, suddenly towering over me despite the fact that I’m still standing on the exam table’s step. “So now you’re threatening me?”

“What?!” I cry, “no! It doesn’t have anything to do with you, as you said I can’t afford to have a baby so I was trying to do the right thing!”

“Werewolves don’t abort their pups.” He growls. “Our children are too precious and Cora knows that. I’m sure that’s what she was thinking when she suggested using my sperm.”

“Argh!” I explode, clenching my hands into fists. “You’re impossible! How many times do I have to tell you that if this child is yours, it was an accident! Cora didn’t switch the samples on purpose and I didn’t get pregnant because I wanted you to pay off my debts!”

He narrows his eyes at me. “You’re a very good actress, you know that?”

“And you’re a snake.” I snap. “I wouldn’t be surprised if you have scales when you shift instead of fur!”

A true growl sounds in his chest, so full of raw power that my knees go weak. “Be careful Ella, I’m showing you a lot of lenience right now because you don’t know our ways, but keep speaking to me like that and I’ll –”

“You’ll what?” I hiss, “you just told me how precious your pups are so I know you’re not going to hurt me.” To my horror, I feel my eyes burning with tears. Swiping at them angrily, I continue, “and I’ve already lost everything else I care about, so it’s not like you can punish me some other way.”

I spin away so that he can’t see me cry. I don’t know what to do – I know how suspicious our situation looks. If I didn’t know better, I would think the same thing he did. It was all too suspicious, especially now that I know the truth about Cora’s lab. It couldn’t be easy to mix up samples of different species... wait a minute. The little voice in the back of my head whispers, and I turn back to Sinclair.

“If you didn’t know it was possible for a human to be impregnated by a werewolf, why would Cora have ever attempted to use your sperm?” I interrogate. “She couldn’t have known it was the wrong sample. She wouldn’t have believed it would work even if we were as calculating as you seem to think. And if all I wanted was to extort your money, why haven’t I asked for it? Why haven’t I admitted it?”

The huge werewolf blinks, processing this information with a grimace. Silence stretches between us and eventually he sighs, scrubbing a hand over his face. “I’m not saying I believe you, but however it happened, we need to come to an agreement.”



I eye him warily, “what sort of agreement?”

“Just name your price, Ella.” He mutters, pinching the bridge of his nose. “How much do you want?”

“For what? The baby?” I sputter, “You want me to sell you my child?”

“It’s my child, and it will be raised by me.” He insists. “You don’t belong in my world. So how much is it going to take for you to give it up?”

“I’m not going to negotiate a price for my baby, like it’s a bag of rice or a car! Nor do I want it raised by someone who thinks of it as nothing more than a commodity!” I’m raising my voice now, feeling beyond offended for the tiny being in my womb.

“You don’t know what you’re talking about!” Sinclair grumbles, “do you have any idea how long I’ve been waiting for an heir?”

“An heir, not a child – not a son or daughter, but an heir – is that all it is to you? Some hypothetical legacy? I might not be able to prevent myself from losing this child now, but I’m not going to hand it over to someone who doesn’t give a damn about it beyond what it can offer them.” I state ferociously, my maternal instincts kicking into high gear.

“As I said, you don’t know what you’re talking about.” He repeats gutturally. “I will give this baby a life you never could, it will want for absolutely nothing! With you its best chance is to scrounge and scrape in poverty, assuming you have the decency to let it live. With me it will be treated like a prince or princess.”

“Money can’t buy everything.” I remind him coolly. “I notice you said nothing about love.”

“Because I already love it!” He snarls, “I have a connection to my pup you will never understand. How dare you speak to me about love when you contemplated killing it!”

“That was also out of love!” I exclaim, “I didn’t want it to suffer, I didn’t want it to grow up like...” I almost said, ‘like I did’, but I stop myself just in time. “I love it more than myself, and I was willing to sacrifice my own happiness for its sake.”

“Then do as much now.” Sinclair commands, “Give it a life you can’t, by signing over custody to me. Carry the baby and deliver it, then leave it with me where it belongs.”

“You don’t understand, if I do that I’ll never be able to walk away from it.” I beseech him. “I’m not that strong. If I carry it to term, I’ll never be able to give it up – I need to be there to care for and protect it.”

“That’s simply not possible.” Sinclair proclaims. “You aren’t fit to be a mother to any child and especially not mine. You can’t even care for yourself, that much is obvious by your debts—”

“I already told you—” I try to object, however he keeps talking over me.

“And your excuse about Cora assumes she understands enough about werewolf society to know we don’t cross breed. All she knows is that we exist, and how to inseminate our women. She probably assumed we occasionally mate with humans and just lucked out!” He accuses.

“She’s a doctor who works with your samples all the time, she probably knows a lot more about your organic chemistry than you do yourselves.” I defend, realizing too late that this could also incriminate her.

He arches his brow, clearly thinking along the same lines. “Either way, she proved she wasn’t to be trusted as soon as she betrayed her confidentiality agreement about my sperm to you, and you’ve proved you can’t be trusted by changing your story every ten seconds. You can’t love the baby enough to abort it but not love it enough to give it up to a better life. I clearly just haven’t offered you a high enough price yet.”

“That isn’t fair,” I object, shaking my head. I’ve just learned everything I believe to be true was actually false, at the height of an extremely emotional moment. I wasn’t even conscious the whole time. How can he expect me to think or communicate clearly?

He doesn’t budge. “It’s alright, Ella. You don’t need to make excuses. I’m going to make you an offer you can’t refuse.”

## Chapter 8

Ella

Up until this point of my life, I’ve hated a handful of people. At the moment Mike and Kate are at the top of my list, but they aren’t alone. However Dominic Sinclair is very

quickly rising through the ranks and making a play for the top spot. Mike and Kate's betrayal hurt so much because I cared for them both, but Sinclair might be the first person I've encountered who I dislike this strongly after so short a time.

He's looking me up and down with the bearing of a wolf deciding how to devour the rabbit in its claws, and I realize that's all I am to him. All those intense looks over the last couple of years, every encounter, every smile – the entire time he's been thinking I'm some lesser being, the prey to his predator. Maybe he's like Mike and thought I was a particularly attractive specimen, but in the end they're the same sort of monster.

"There is no offer you could ever make me that would convince me to give you my child." I tell him sharply. "I am not for sale, and neither is my baby."

"Now you're just being stubborn." Sinclair sighs, "digging in your heels because you don't like me."

"What gave it away?" I deride. For the second time, it seems like he wants to smile despite his better judgment, but again he holds back.

"Use your head, Ella." He instructs patronizingly. "Let's say I believe you didn't do this just to cash in on a big pay day."

"You obviously don't!" I interrupt, earning myself a look so stern a shiver runs down my spine.

"Let's say I do. What are your options? How are you going to raise this child? If you try to abort it I will take you to court and I guarantee the judge will prevent you from going through with it – which means you can either keep the baby and try to get by on your own, or let me have it."

"Take me to court if you like." I challenge, even though my will to go through with terminating the pregnancy has gotten weaker and weaker from the moment I learned it was real. "You forget it's my body."

"Which you intentionally inseminated. It's not like you got knocked up after a one night stand or were assaulted. I'm offering a child a good life and I have more political sway than you can imagine." He flashes his teeth at me, teeth that look alarmingly like fangs. "Not to mention I'm a donor at every hospital in the city, no physician will perform the procedure and risk me defunding their entire facility."

Suddenly I can see how this man acquired so much money and power, he has more cunning than I know how to contemplate, with a clear killer instinct. All at once I realize he's right, the judges and doctors will side with him, whether he convinces them or bribes them – he'll win.

He's trapped me and I didn't even realize it was happening. I have no doubt he's every bit as ruthless as he seems, which means I'm going to have to carry this baby to term whether I can afford it or not. My best hope is to find some other job in that time, but even then the best life I'd be able to offer my baby is an impoverished one. It's not like disgraced nannies get hired as CEOs.

Sinclair can clearly read my dismay, because he strikes again. "If you cooperate, I'll pay off your debts. I'll help you find a job and cover every last one of your medical and living expenses. If you deliver me an heir, I will also pay you a handsome bonus, and give you anything else you like – a house? A car? A business investment? Be my surrogate and you can have anything your little heart desires."

"But I'm not just a surrogate." I remind him, feeling as though my heart was crumbling to pieces in my chest. "I'm this child's mother. It has my DNA and it will be half human. It has a right to that heritage as well as yours."

He shakes his head. "This child will be a werewolf, and a powerful one at that – my genes guarantee it. It will be raised with its own kind. And it will have a wonderful life, Ella – I promise."

"Why should I trust you?" I wonder aloud, "you clearly don't trust me, why do you expect me to give you something you refuse to offer in return?"

"I have good reason not to trust you, but you have no reason not to trust me. I've never wronged you." He says, as if this justifies everything.

"Bull," I combat, "you cost Cora her job, you cost me mine – even if you didn't make the call, whoever did reported that I was begging at your gates."

"Cora cost herself her job." He claims firmly. "Mistake or malice, my sperm ended up in your womb – a place it never should have been." His foreboding expression softens for a moment. "And I truly am sorry about your job – I know how much Jake and Millie loved you. If you want your job back, I can make it happen."

I don't know what I think of that possibility. I'd love to see my precious charges again, but I don't know if I can get past their mother's cruelty. "Money can't fix everything." I reply, "and all your promises – what good is having everything I need if I'll never have the thing I want most?"

"If it's a child you want, I can help you adopt a human baby." He offers, circling me as if he's some sort of wolfish vulture. He clearly senses he's closing in on the kill, and he's not wrong.

I can feel my lip begin to tremble as fresh tears threaten. It feels selfish to say 'but I want this baby', especially when I grew up an orphan and know how many children need good homes. In truth Sinclair is offering me the world on a platter – my baby gets to live and have a good life, all my problems will be solved, and I can adopt a child that needs a mother as badly as I need to be one. Am I being silly, holding onto my childhood baggage about wanting to be part of a family bonded through more than just affection, a family bonded by blood? After all, blood is no guarantee of love – how many kids did I grow up with whose natural parents abandoned or abused them?

In the end, I don't think I have a choice. I have to do this. Knowing my baby will be loved and cared for, will have to be enough. It's the best solution for us both, and the fact that it hurts so badly doesn't mean it's wrong.

"Draft a contract before I change my mind." I grind out, hating this man more than I can express.

Sinclair nods, and strides to the door. A little while later one of his men comes in with a heavy stack of documents, which takes me almost a full hour to read through. When I finally close the last page and nod in approval, the lawyer places the contract in front of Sinclair, who promptly turns to add his signatures to all the appropriate pages.

"You're doing the right thing, Ella." He tosses over his shoulder, triumph clear in his voice.

"That's easy for you to say." I gripe, watching him lean over the document brandishing a fountain pen. "Are you proud of yourself? Bullying a weak little human into giving you the only child she'll ever have?" I inquire to his back. "You sent your sperm here because you struggled with infertility too, didn't you? How would you feel if you and your wife finally conceived and someone took the baby from you?"

Sinclair straightens up, going very still but not acknowledging my words. When he turns around his expression is completely closed off. “Actually I’m not married.” He tells me. “Not anymore.”

“Way to miss the point.” I mutter under my breath, snatching the pen from his hand and moving in front of the contract. Before I can add my signature to the pages, I feel the room begin to spin. I brace my hands against the low table, clamping my eyes shut then blinking them open and trying to clear my vision, which is suddenly very blurry. The blood is rushing in my ears.

“How long have we been in this room?” I ask, feeling as if my body is being slowly doused in warm water. All my senses are fuzzy, and it’s not until Sinclair appears at my side that I realize I slurred my words. “Are you alright, Ella?”

My legs give out, and I suddenly find myself slumping into a very large, very hard wall of concerned werewolf. Powerful arms come around me, and Sinclair’s scent fills my nose. It’s deep and rich, like being deep in the forest on a moonlit night. “You smell nice.” I murmur, sounding completely drunk, before the world goes black for the second time in as many hours.

However this time, I hear an odd grumbling noise as I sink into the darkness. At first I think it’s Sinclair, but the sound isn’t coming from his chest, it almost sounds like it’s coming from... inside me?

## Chapter 9

I blink my eyes open warily, knowing I’m not at home in my own bed solely by the luxurious mattress and beddings surrounding me. The last thing I remember, I was in Cora’s office with none other than Dominic Sinclair, who was single-handedly offering to save my future and break my heart in one fell swoop.

I was about to sign away my rights to my baby... my baby, I think dazedly, pressing one hand to my belly. Am I really pregnant? After all this time?

The idea that I have to give up my child because life dealt me yet another ruthless blow makes me feel sick to my stomach... in fact, I lurch from the bed and race for the

bathroom, feeling my insides roil and clench. I make it to the toilet just in time, emptying my stomach into the porcelain bowl and dropping to my knees with a groan of misery.

I suppose that's all the proof I need. I really am going to be a mother... but for how long? 30 seconds? Five minutes? Will Dominic Sinclair give me the opportunity to even hold my baby before ripping it from my arms? Do I want that torture? Yes, I decide instantly. I have to hold my baby in my arms, even if it's only for a fraction of a second.... Even if we aren't technically the same species.

That particular thought sends my head spinning so quickly I have to clench my eyes shut. Werewolves are real. Not only are they real, but I'm pregnant with one... Dominic Sinclair, who I've mooned over a thousand times, is a creature I believed only existed in novels and films. And what was that grumbling noise when I passed out, why did it feel like I could hear his voice in my head?

All of a sudden it's just too much to handle. I slip back into the bedroom and climb back into the opulent bed, for the first time realizing I must be in the Sinclair mansion. There's no other explanation. I've never been in a room this beautiful, or with such expensive furnishings. It must all belong to him.

But why would he bring me home with him? I have a home of my own. Peeking out of the plush covers, I scan the room, my eyes landing on a table by the door. There's a vase of flowers and a folded note, which appears to have my name scrawled across the front. Gingerly regaining my feet, I collect the parchment and open it, my heart beating a mile a minute.

Ella,

Please make yourself at home. I'll be at the office until this evening, but as soon as I return we can finish our talk. Ask the servants for anything you require.

Yours,

Dominic

And if I want to go home? I think defiantly, What then Mr. Bossy?

The suggestion that there's a discussion to conclude between us grates on my nerves. He basically left me with no choice, leveraging safety, stability and my child's wellbeing over my head so that I'd be forced to agree to his terms. It's not as if I really stood a

chance against him. He has all the power in the world while I have nothing, and he made it very clear that there was no wiggle room in our agreement.

Maybe passing out was my brain's subconscious way of protecting me, giving me more time to process and think before signing away my baby. Or if not my brain, whatever higher power created shifters and humans – this entire crazy planet. I never considered myself religious before, but if magic is real, who's to say what else is possible?

Tears well in my eyes, and unlike earlier, they have nothing to do with my joy over being pregnant, or my grief about everything I'm losing. These tears are nothing but pure, righteous anger over everything that's happened to me over the last few days. Cora's words ring in my head, "It isn't fair." It isn't fair that I have to lose everything because of the actions and cruelty of other people. It isn't fair that Dominic Sinclair should hold my future ransom when he could fix it with the snap of his fingers. The amount of money it will take to repay my debts isn't even a drop in the bucket to him, and I'm pregnant with his child. He could easily help me without also robbing me of my baby – as if he has no concept of the value of a mother's love.

Before I can change my mind, I gather myself and slip out the bedroom door, sneaking through the hallways until I finally find my way out of the maze of a house. Only once does a servant try to stop me. I'm almost to the front door when a guard steps in front of me, "Miss, you don't have permission to leave."

I notch my chin up and glare at the man. "Are you going to stop me?"

He looks as though he wants to do just that. He frowns deeply, eyeing me closely. I can almost see the thoughts scrolling through his head. Yes he has orders not to let me leave, but he also knows I'm pregnant with his boss's precious heir. He can't risk roughing me up if I fight back.

After a moment I decide to test the strength of his resolve, storming past him without another word. When I arrive home a little while later, I head straight for my computer, pulling up the internet browser and typing in Dominic Sinclair's name. He might have fancy investigators to look into my past, but I'm no simpleton, I can do research as well as anyone.

At first I find only fawning business articles about his genius intellect and cunning as a negotiator and investor. It seems like everyone who's ever decided to look into the man has fallen in love with him. Nevermind the fact that he was born with a silver spoon in



his mouth, they make it sound as though he's a completely self made man. The articles lament his difficult childhood growing up without a mother, and a number of interviews actually detail how deeply this affected him. The way they tell it, being raised by a single parent is the worst upbringing a child could have.

After I've read through all the financial analyses and rave reviews, I dig deeper, looking into his philanthropic record and secret identity. I'm mildly dismayed to find all his charitable efforts are completely legitimate and he actually does donate half his revenues to those in need (of course, half a colossal fortune still leaves a fortune behind). The internet is chock-full of reports and speeches he's made, good will efforts to better mankind.

Things are less clear when I try digging into his true status as a werewolf. At first my searches result in little more than illuminati conspiracy theories and nonsense, and I realize keeping an entire species secret must require more discretion. It occurs to me that there might be a dark or parallel web for werewolves, just like there are for illicit activities.

It takes most of the afternoon, but eventually I figure out that I can download a special browser to access the dark web, and before long I've dived deep into the annals of werewolf society. Here I find a very different image of the perfect businessman touted in the human media (Don't even get me started on how bizarre it is to discover that there really is a sprawling werewolf society thriving in the shadows of my own).

Apparently Dominic Sinclair isn't just any werewolf, but the Alpha of the Moon Valley pack and prospective King of the entire bloody continent. No wonder he'd been so vague and guarded when I asked about ruling monarchs! He's poised to become the next King himself, if he can pull off his upcoming campaign.

There aren't many contenders in the race, but Sinclair's been undermined by his family situation. The last king died without an heir and left werewolf society with a dangerous power vacuum – it's the reason they have to select a new king in the first place. No one wants to repeat this cycle with another childless King, and the fact that Sinclair has been unable to produce an heir is only half the problem. He also doesn't have a mate, or Luna – not anymore at least.

I read until my eyes grow sore, learning that Sinclair was once married to a she-wolf who left him when he couldn't give her a child – despite the fact that they were fated mates (another concept I can't wrap my mind around). It's no wonder he was so intense about

finally having an heir – I thought he was just a domineering jerk who believed he needed to pass down his business legacy or something, not that the entire future of his society might depend on it. The articles made it very clear that werewolves would be in serious trouble if he doesn't take the throne. A few of his competitors can only be described as power mad and unhinged, and they're doing their best to discredit Sinclair.

When I finally finish, sitting back in my chair and dragging my hand over my face, I try to wrap my brain around all this. Sinclair needs an heir, he needs a Luna, and he knows how difficult it can be for a child to grow up without a mother. For all his cunning, I now know all his weak spots. If I play my cards right, I just might be able to talk the terrifying Alpha into letting me stick around after the baby is born. Then I can prove how critical it is for a child to be with its mother – I can give us all a chance.

Even as I think these optimistic words, a knock sounds on the door, and somehow I know it's Dominic Sinclair before I can even get up off the couch. Taking a deep breath I stride across the room and pull the heavy door open, revealing one very large, very angry werewolf bearing down on me.

## Chapter 10

### 3rd Person

Sinclair glared down at the tiny human in front of him. It seemed every time he saw Ella she grew more beautiful, especially since he learned she was carrying his pup. She'd been an enchanting distraction before, now she was almost irresistible. With fair skin, rose gold hair and eyes so amber they almost seemed metallic, he found it hard to believe she was not a wolf herself. However, as delectable as her scent was, she was clearly nothing extraordinary.

“Why did you leave?” Sinclair demanded, scanning his sharp eyes over her body to make sure she was unharmed. His attention lingered on her flat tummy, where his pup safely rested. He could still smell it, hear its tiny heartbeat and feel an inexplicable connection to the miniscule bundle of cells.

“Because I'm not a dog. I don't sit and stay just because you tell me to.” Ella announced, crossing her arms over her chest.

“I didn’t order you to do anything.” Sinclair argued, baffled by the way his wolf purred in response to her sass.

“And yet you seem displeased that I didn’t sit by and obediently wait for you to come home and dictate more decisions about my future.” Ella quipped, leaning against the doorframe.

“I didn’t dictate anything.” Sinclair argued. “We negotiated fair and square.”

“If that’s what you call fair it’s no wonder you earned your ruthless reputation.” Ella remarked slyly, “I wasn’t in any state to have such an important conversation, let alone make such a momentous decision.”

Sinclair didn’t seem to hear her, instead he’d slipped past her into the apartment. “Is this where you live?”

“Obviously.” Ella rolled her eyes.

He shook his head, “This won’t due.”

“Excuse me?” Ella gaped, “you’ve got some nerve you know –

“I won’t have the mother of my pup staying in such poor conditions.” Sinclair decided, “You’ll move into my estate as soon as possible.”

Ella clenched her fists at her sides and took a deep breath. “I make my own decisions.”

“Not since you agreed to our deal.” Sinclair countered. “The moment you said yes, you handed over authority to me.”

“I didn’t sign anything!” Ella reminded him.

A verbal agreement is enough in werewolf law – the contract was really for you.” Sinclair announced, smirking like the cat who ate the canary.

“Then why did your note say we needed to finish our conversation, what was there to finish if not signing the deal?” Ella demanded hotly.

“Everything, including you moving in with me, your prenatal regimen, birth plan, financial arrangements.” Sinclair explained, striding into Ella’s bedroom and pulling open

the closet doors. By the time Ella reached him, he was already pulling a suitcase from the top shelf.

“Stop that!” Ella insisted, vigorously attempting to wrest the suitcase from his hand. She tugged the large bag so forcefully she almost lost her balance. In fact she was pulling with all her strength and weight, if Sinclair had chosen to release his end of the bag she would certainly topple to the ground. “I never agreed to move in with you!”

The next thing Ella knew, the huge shifter’s hand was circling her nape, applying just enough pressure to freeze her in her tracks but not enough to hurt. “Listen closely, itle human” He rumbled authoritatively, radiating power. ” appreciate your spirit, but as long as you’re carrying my pup, you will be careful, and wrestling with wolves twice your size over heavy luggage is not allowed.”

Ella narrowed her eyes at the attractive Alpha. Her instincts were going a bit haywire at the moment. Her insides were in puddles over being so near him, her knees were weak in the face of his stern scolding, and her heart was in full revolt. No one had ever cared about her enough when she was young to set rules and discipline, so she’d been running wild for as long as she could remember. And she did not take kindly to being told what to do now. With a fiery flash in her amber eyes, she stomped her small foot right onto his, sending pain vibrating up through her own bones, and not even phasing him.

Ella couldn’t smother her whimper, “What are you made of, steel?”

“That’s what tussling with a wolf will get you” He responded unsympathetically, releasing her and stalking to the bed, where he neatly unfolded the suitcase. “Now be a good girl, and pack your bags.

“I would sooner set everything I own on fire.” Ella replied coolly, resisting the urge to rub her aching foot.

That might not be the worst idea.” Sinclair muttered, glancing at her wardrobe. “If you’re going to live with me, you might as well look the part too. Should I fetch a lighter?”

“No!” Ella yelled, moving to protect her things. “They might not be up to your standards but I like my things, and I like my apartment” In truth, this apartment reminded Ella too much of Mike, and she hadn’t picked out any of her furniture or appliances they were all hand-me downs. til, she didn’t appreciate the way Sinclair was trying to order her around.

There might be an exchange of money or services in their arrangement, but she wasn't one of his servants, and it was important they establish that if her plan was going to work.

Sinclair cocked his head to the side, eyeing her as if she were a profound curiosity. "And how are you going to pay your rent on this place?"

Ella's mouth opened and closed helplessly. "That's not the point."

Sinclair wasn't sure what to make of the beautiful human. The more time he spent around her, the more his wolf began to sit up and pay attention. His wolf had always perked up with interest when he saw Ella around the neighborhood. but he'd never allowed himself to explore those feelings because she was a human. Now however.. now he had every excuse to figure out the puzzle that was Ella. "It's part of the arrangement." He dictated firmly, "you' be back on your feet faster if you don't have to worry about living expenses, and I want you close – this baby is too important to me."

It was true Sinclair didn't want to let her out of his sight, but that was also because he'd been dreaming of becoming a father for years. He didn't want to miss a moment of Ella's pregnancy. The little human was beginning to squirm beneath the weight of his gaze, and he could see her working through the problem in her mind. She had to realize it made more sense for her to stay with him, she might be feisty, but she was far from stupid.

"Fine," Ella finally conceded, shooting Sinclair a sulky pout. "But I want to talk to you about a few things first."

"Are you going to keep glaring at me that way while you do?" Sinclair asked, his mischievous wolf egging him on. He wasn't sure what it was about seeing Ella all riled up, but he couldn't seem to stop himself from pushing her buttons.

"Ye—" Ella bit back her response, seeming to think better of losing her temper with him. She needed to convince him, to persuade him – not alienate him. "No." She amended, taking a deep breath. "I want to talk to you about our arrangement. What's going to happen to the baby in the early years? Who's going to care for it?"

"I'll pay someone." Sinclair responded simply, "A nursemaid."

"Why would you ever pay someone when the baby's mother is there and dying to do all the things a servant would? It will need milk and lullabies and love, I can provide that better than anyone. Forgive me, but I know you aren't married, and a child needs a mother." Ella was hoping this would be an emotional subject for the man – it can't have

been easy to grow up without a mother. “It’s healthier for the baby to have me around, especially given how busy you are. You can’t exactly take a newborn to the office with you every day.”

Sinclair hesitated. He knew she was right, it was better for the pup to have Ella near, and he didn’t want his heir to grow up the way he did. Still, Ella didn’t belong in his world. She was human and she couldn’t be trusted – this was probably another scheme to swindle him somehow. She’d already proven what a good actress she was back at the sperm bank. It was a clever ploy, but he wasn’t going to let another conniving woman ruin his life. He’d learned his lesson with his ex-wife, Lydia.

Ella was watching him closely, reading his expression and scrambling for another argument. Her eyes lit up after a moment’s thought, and her pink lips parted for the battle. “It would help you politically as well. I’ve been doing some research, I know you’re campaigning to become Alpha King and you’ll appear stronger with a family by your side. How would it look, if you have to hire a human to carry your child? Wouldn’t you prefer to simply tell everyone I’m your girlfriend?”

So much cunning in such a small package – it was honestly impressive. “So you want to be a queen, is that it?” Sinclair growled suspiciously.

“No!” Ella exclaimed, “I’m not suggesting we actually become a couple, I can pretend to be a... a werewolf...” She couldn’t believe she was saying those words. “And we can put on a show in public so that you can say we’re in a relationship and you’re finally having a baby.” Ella shrugged, the idea still forming as she spoke. “It could be an extension in our contract – you get a family in public and the baby gets two parents.”

Sinclair considered her words carefully. “You’re serious?”

“Yes.” Ella insisted. “What do you think?”

Sinclair shook his head almost as soon as the words were out of Ella's mouth. The idea was intriguing, but it would never succeed. "That's not how it works – we aren't mates. My kind only gets one, and everyone already knows I found mine many years ago." Sinclair informed her coolly.

"But... you got divorced." Ella's words were tremulous and hesitant, as if she was afraid to bring up the subject. She'd clearly been very busy with her research. He was about to tell her off, when his wolf roared in his head. Enough! Stop this, you know she's right – it's better for everyone this way.

Sinclair was taken aback, his wolf never disagreed with him – they'd always been on the same page about everything. The pup is most important, it needs its mother. His wolf continued, besides, she's not asking you for anything – if she was just a gold-digger like Lydia, she'd be eager to move in with you.

I don't know. Sinclair thought. It's worth taking a second look at Ella's background but – No buts! His wolf interrupted. Give her what she wants.

Why are you so determined about this? Sinclair demanded, surprised by his inner canine's insistence.

We can't hurt Ella. His wolf proclaimed fiercely. She'll suffer if we take the pup away.

Sinclair had to admit he didn't want the lovely human to be in pain, but he still didn't trust her. His wolf on the other hand was absolutely adamant, and all shifters knew better than to question their animal instincts. Intuition didn't lie – not when it came to the supernatural.

"Fine." He grumbled. "But only if you help with my campaign. It won't be easy, there's more to being a Luna than standing on my arm and looking pretty."

Ella's face lit up so brightly Sinclair had to fight his smile. His wolf on the other hand, actually wagged his tail like an excited puppy. What the hell is going on with me? He thought, speaking more to himself than his wolf – who was clearly losing his mind.

“What's a Luna?” Ella asked curiously, barely able to contain her joy but trying to remain engaged in the conversation.

“It's an Alpha's mate.” Sinclair explained, realizing just how much he was going to have to teach her. “And for the record, this little arrangement will only last until I meet a she-wolf who might fill the role for real.”

“But you just told me werewolves only get one mate.” Ella questioned, not understanding.

“We only get one fated mate. Chosen mates are completely different. We can choose as many as we like, but the Goddess only grants us one fated love.” Sinclair informed her. “The bond is different” “Different, as in weaker?” Ella clarified. “No —just different” Sinclair corrected. “Not all fated mates are a good fit, and some chosen couples are much happier together.” “So if you find another mate, I won't be allowed to see the baby anymore?” Ella asked, gnawing on her lower lip.

“We can talk about it if and when it happens.” Sinclair stated after a moment “But I want to be very clear that this agreement only lasts as long as it works. If we can't find a way to get along well enough to convince people or if I learn that this is all another one of your tricks—” Ella's eyes flared with anger, but Sinclair forged on ahead. “The deal is off.”

Though Ella's cheeks were flushed bright pink, she set her shoulders as if preparing herself to take on a great challenge. “Fine. Have your people draw up the contracts.”



“I will.” Sinclair agreed, “As soon as you pack your bags.”

Ella sent another glower his way, and though his wolf was preoccupied thinking how adorable she was when she was grumpy, Sinclair couldn't help but take her in hand. He Reached out and caught her chin between his thumb and forefinger, tilting her pretty face up to his. “And Ella — the first rule of being a shifter? The Alpha makes the rules.”

Sinclair watched as his words sunk in. Ella's eyes narrowed, and she was squirming again, positively overflowing with defiance. He had to give her credit, for someone who'd only just learned about the existence of werewolves, she certainly wasn't afraid of him. In fact, she was showing much more bravery than many fully grown wolves did facing down an Alpha.

Of course, there were Alphas, and then there was Sinclair- who was strong enough to bring even the most dominant pack leaders in line. Though perhaps it was simply that Ella didn't realize just how dangerous he was.

After a moment Ella settled, looking up at Sinclair from beneath her lashes. “Yes, sir.” She ground out, clearly hating being forced to submit.

“I like the sound of that.” He praised, dragging his thumb over her full bottom lip. “But if we're going to pull this off, you should call me Dominic.”

A visible shiver ran down Ella's spine, and Sinclair's wolf purred with pleasure. Her amber eyes were so wide he could see every glimmering shade of gold in her irises. Her dark lashes fluttered as he stared her down, and eventually she lowered her eyes any murmured, “Yes, Dominic.”

When Ella arrived back at Dominic Sinclair's mansion, she was beside herself with confusion. She'd started her negotiation with him feeling completely in control, but now

it seemed like he'd completely turned the tables on her. She wasn't sure when or how it had happened, but the bossy werewolf had somehow managed to get the better of her. In the moment it had seemed like he had some strange power over her, like she'd been hypnotized by his dark gaze.

Her mind was absolutely overflowing with thoughts, but the moment she stepped into the bedroom Sinclair had prepared for her, her mind went entirely blank. It was the same room she'd woken up in that afternoon, but everything was different now.

The beautiful space was full of candles and music, the air scented with essential oils. Ella felt as if she was walking into a spa, in fact there were even servants running a hot bath in the massive whirlpool tub in the bathroom, just waiting for her to arrive. Ella could barely take in all the finery and amenities Sinclair had brought in, including a craft table and miniature fridge full of drinks and snacks. There was even a massage table set up along the far wall. "You did all this for me?" Ella gaped, staring up at Sinclair's handsome face in abject disbelief.

He blinked down at her, not seeming to understand why she was so surprised. "Pups are more important than anything."

Of course. Ella thought, somewhat bitterly. It's not for me, it's for the pup.

"Here." Sinclair offered Ella a small golden bell. "Ring this whenever you need anything."

Ella shook her head, trying to push the bell away. "I don't feel comfortable being waited on by servants."

"It's not for the servants." Sinclair informed her, guiding her to wrap her fingers around the bell, "it's for me. If you need me for anything, ring that and I'll come."

Ella reeled, “But... couldn’t I just come find you, am I not allowed to leave this room.”

Sinclair rolled his eyes. “Of course you can. I’m just trying to make things easy on you – you should be as relaxed as possible for the next six months!”

“Six months?” Ella repeated, feeling as though she was missing something. “Should I be stressed after that?”

“I think that’s unavoidable. Since you’ll have a new baby.” Sinclair quipped, catching sight of her confused expression. “Shifter pregnancies are shorter than humans, around six months – that’s why the baby was so large at your ultrasound.”

“Oh.” Ella was still busy processing that detail when Sinclair excused himself for a phone call. Six months? She thought fearfully. That doesn’t give me nearly as much time to prepare.

Suddenly needing some fresh air, Ella went to the window and pulled it open, heaving in two very large lungfuls. The brisk winter air felt good on her flushed skin, even if opening the window had unleashed a torrent of sound on her ears. In the yard below men or wolves, she supposed – were sparring on a snow covered lawn. They violently clashed with bare hands and weapons, openly shouting, growling and laughing. The tumult was so uproarious that Ella was tempted to slam the window shut, but she didn’t want to lose the refreshing air.

Ella eyed the bell in her hand, curious to see if it really would bring Sinclair to her side – even in the middle of a business call. With a mischievous smile, she rang the bell and waited. Within thirty seconds, Sinclair was in front of her, looking down at her with amusement – as if he knew exactly what she was up to. “You rang?”

“Would it be possible for them to do... that,” Ella gestured at the commotion on the lawn, “somewhere else? It’s very loud.”

Without hesitation Sinclair leaned out the window and told the sparring sentries to go elsewhere, ordering them not to train outside this window anymore. Ella watched in amazement as the men immediately raced to obey – what must it be like to be so powerful that people fell over themselves to do your bidding? It struck her that Sinclair was the most powerful person in every room he walked into, yet here he was, deferring to her – doing whatever she asked.

“Thank you.” Ella murmured.

“You’re welcome.” Sinclair answered, still fighting his smile. The more time he spent with Ella, the more endearing he found the little human. In fact, it was enough to make him question everything he’d been thinking the last couple of days. He’d already ordered a second investigation into her background, and he could barely stand the thought of waiting two days for the results. He’d have to keep his distance until then, until he knew whether he could trust her – once and for all.

Two days. He thought impatiently, That’s nothing, you can easily stay away that long... right?

## Chapter 12

Sinclair was sitting in his office, trying not to think about Ella.

Two days had dragged past at a snail’s pace, and the Alpha was finding it more and more difficult to stay away from the pretty human. His wolf was driving him up the wall, constantly suggesting that they go and check on her, just to make sure she was alright.

It was ridiculous – he knew she was perfectly fine. The mischievous creature rang her bell every few hours, just to see if he'd come to her. In fact, he was starting to think the bell had been a bad idea. He was beginning to crave hearing it, hoping she would ring the damned thing so he could give in to his wolf and go see her.

Of course, every time it happened, Ella would scramble for some anemic excuse to explain the call – yet he was never bothered. Sinclair could tell she was just testing her limits and amusing herself, this was probably the first time in her life anyone had taken care of her, and he couldn't bear to spoil her fun.

Ella was so unlike his ex, Lydia, that it made his head spin. Sinclair had loved his mate and wanted to give her everything her heart desired, but she wasn't the most easy-going of she-wolves. Even before she'd shown her true colors and betrayed him, he'd known going through a pregnancy with her would be very difficult.

He could imagine her in Ella's shoes now, demanding every unreasonable extravagance she could imagine and complaining non-stop. She would have made a wondrous experience a trial – something not to relish but endure- whereas Ella was sweetly reveling in the magic of creating life, overwhelmed to find herself in comfort rather than constantly struggling.

Sinclair's thoughts were interrupted by a knock on the door, and he promptly called, "come in."

His heart leapt when the investigator he'd hired to look into Ella poked his head through the door, "Is now a good time, Alpha?"

"Yes." He agreed, more than eager to hear what the man had discovered.

"Well you were right." The investigator announced as he entered and plopped into the chair opposite Sinclair's. "I checked with the police, Ella Reina reported a stolen identity a couple of days after the insemination, and until a few months ago her financial history was perfectly sound."

Sinclair's wolf howled triumphantly in his head. I knew it! I knew she wasn't bad.

"Do the police have any leads?" Sinclair questioned.

“Oh she told them exactly who was responsible.” The investigator shared. “She claimed her ex-boyfriend had opened about a dozen credit cards in her name, and the story tracks. All of the credit cards she opened herself have no debt on them whatsoever.

She pays off her balance every month like clockwork, and all the charges are very modest. The new cards were maxed out almost immediately on luxury items which certainly weren't in her home based on your description. It's a completely different spending pattern. I think she was telling you the truth, at the time of the insemination, she didn't know she was in financial trouble.”

“Then how did my sperm end up getting switched with the donor she chose?” Sinclair questioned, beyond relieved to hear the mother of his pup was not another shallow, gold-digging schemer like Lydia.

“I don't know, but you said yourself she hasn't asked you for anything other than the right to stay with the baby. Her file at the clinic indicated she's been trying to get pregnant for years.” The investigator reasoned. “That doesn't sound like someone who set out to entrap you.”

Sinclair felt a pang deep in his chest. Like him, Ella had struggled with fertility for years, only to be betrayed by her partner. For all their differences, he was beginning to think they had more in common than they realized. However there was one thing he didn't understand, and he was tired of going through the investigator. It was time to get the story straight from the source... and this time he'd actually listen.

When he arrived at Ella's room, he found her curled up in the window seat with a sunbeam bathing her in golden light, sound asleep. She was wearing some of the silk pajamas he'd purchased for her when he saw her shabby sleep clothes on day one, and looked so sweet it actually hurt to look at her. He was reluctant to disturb her, knowing she needed her rest, and started to retreat. However the sound of his footsteps must have roused her, because a moment later Ella opened her eyes and yawned. Stretching like a sleepy kitten and offering him a welcoming smile. “Good morning.”

“I think you mean, good afternoon.” Sinclair teased, fighting the urge to brush the hair from her face. “How are you feeling?”..

Ella's stomach answered for her, growling pointedly and making her flush. “Sorry.”

“Don’t apologize.” Sinclair insisted, “I’ll get you something to eat. What would you like?”

Ella peeked up at him from beneath her lashes, “does it have to be healthy?”

Chuckling, Sinclair strode forward and kneeled down beside her. He pressed one hug palm to her belly, making her flinch. with surprise, then shushing her gently and petting her hair. “Shh, I just want to feel the baby.” He focused on the tiny being in Ella’s womb, trying to pick up on their developing mental link.

Once he did, he began laughing again, a rich cozy sound that wrapped Ella in warmth. “So, pickles and ice cream, is that it?”

“How did you know that!” Ella exclaimed, her eyes wide.

“All shifter parents have a mental link with their pups, even in the womb.” He explained.

“Is that why I can hear you in my head sometimes?” Ella questioned. “Like when I passed out, I swear I could hear you from inside me.” Sinclair nodded.

He was surprised that a human was able to pick up on it, but it was the only explanation. “That’s right. Now, sit tight and I’ll get your snack.” Ella was surprised that Sinclair planned on preparing it himself. She assumed he’d send a servant, if he’d even allow her to have something so unhealthy. He’d been so adamant about prenatal vitamins, exercise and care.

Apparently cravings were a different matter though — he must have understood how powerful the hunger was. When he returned, with a heaping bowl of ice cream and a plate of pickles, Ella almost wanted to hug him she was so grateful. Of course, she put that idea out of her head immediately. Dominic Sinclair was many things, but she seriously doubted he was a hugger.

Ella tucked into the snack, sighing with pleasure and making Sinclair grin... though it didn’t last for long. “I hate to ruin your good mood,” he began apologetically, “but I wanted to ask — why did you go to a sperm bank to get pregnant, if you didn’t know about your boyfriend’s betrayal until afterwards?”

Ella blinked, “You’ve decided you believe me about the debt, then?”

“My investigators took a closer look at your situation.” He agreed. “I’m sorry I didn’t trust you at first... trust doesn’t always come easily for me.”

“I suppose I can understand that.” Ella answered, somewhat cryptically. Working up the courage to tell this intimidating man her story, she took a deep breath. “But I did know about Mike’s betrayal beforehand – just not the identity theft.

The truth is that he kept me around for years because... well, basically he wanted a trophy in his bed. All the time I was trying to get pregnant, he was sleeping with my best friend and giving me the morning after pill every morning in my coffee. I caught him in the affair the same day I learned that my eggs were so diminished that if I didn’t get pregnant now, I never would.”

Tears were streaming down her face now, and she couldn’t bring herself to look at Sinclair. Setting the ice cream down, she concluded. “So you see, this baby is my last chance... my only chance. That’s why I went to Cora – I couldn’t risk failing again.”

Before she knew what was happening, Sinclair had pulled her out of the window and into his arms. Suddenly Ella found herself cushioned by warm muscles on all sides. She was so completely enveloped in his embrace, she wasn’t sure where she ended and he began. So much for not being a hugger. “I’m so sorry, Ella.” He rumbled against her hair.

She nodded pitifully, trying to hold herself together despite the growing temptation to let this strange man comfort her. He smelled so wonderful, and she felt so safe – safer than she could ever remember feeling, though that shouldn’t be possible. After all, she barely knew the man and he’d caused her nothing but trouble. “I won’t take the baby from you.” Sinclair declared then, astonishing Ella. “If I do find a new mate, you can have visitation rights.”

“Really?” Ella sniffled, not believing her ears.

“Yes. I’m sorry I’ve been so harsh.” Sinclair purred, stroking her spine.

That was all it took. The next thing Ella knew, she was sobbing her heart out into Sinclair’s collar, while he rocked and soothed her. As gentle as he was with the fragile human, Sinclair was furious inside. He couldn’t recall ever feeling so much rage for anyone.



His wolf was going berserk with the need to find and punish Ella's ex-boyfriend. He wanted to destroy the man who had broken her heart. She was the mother of his pup, and no one had the right to harm her.

Even as he held her, a plan formed in his mind. A plan to make Mike pay for his crimes. The police might not be able to help Ella, but he certainly could.

## Chapter 13

Ella

This is confusing. It was much easier for me to hate Sinclair when he was being overbearing and bossy, I'm not sure what to make of all this kindness. It seems too good to be true, and that's a guaranteed red flag. I learned the hard way growing up as an orphan, if it seems too good to be true, it's because it is.

At the same time, I can't bring myself to pull away from Sinclair. He's still holding and rocking me more tenderly than I ever could have imagined. Has anyone ever held me this way? Mike certainly didn't, and while Cora has always comforted me in times of need, this does not feel like cuddling Cora. I'm aware of Sinclair's touch in a way that is far from sisterly, I feel as though I'm being scalded by his heat, and wonder if werewolves run higher temperatures than humans.

It strikes me quite suddenly that if Sinclair is half this attentive with his children, my baby will have more love than I could have possibly hoped for. He really will make a wonderful father – assuming this isn't some act to make me agree to some new condition on our agreement. Then again, I remember how kind he's always been to Jake and Millie, how obviously he loves children.

I'm not sure where it comes from, but suddenly I feel a rush of jealousy for the woman who will become his mate. She will be very lucky indeed, and it's obvious his sperm wasn't the problem with his past fertility struggles now. They'll probably have many children together, and my baby can have siblings to love and play with. I might not be able to have a big family, but my child will be part of one – and that's what's important, right? So why do I feel so bitter at the thought of another woman being with Sinclair?

I might suspect that a she-wolf would feel threatened by my baby, because it would prevent one of her own pups from becoming Sinclair's heir, but I know that's not it either. I snuggle closer as my tears slow, and Sinclair purrs, sending a delicious shiver down my spine. Why is it so hard to pull away from him? Why does the idea of leaving his arms make me so disappointed?

I can't be attracted to him. I can't. It's a recipe for disaster!

"What are you thinking about?" His deep voice sounds in my ear, and I jolt as if I've been shocked. I can feel myself coloring already, and when I look up at him, there's a knowing smirk on his face.

I try to conjure an excuse that would explain my embarrassment, so I confess a half truth, "I was thinking I want more ice cream."

Sinclair frowns now, eyeing the bowl I've just finished. "I think that might be overdoing it. The doctor said you needed a very nutritious diet."

The baby doesn't care for this, and neither do I. My craving hasn't been satisfied yet, and no one has ever deigned to tell me what I can or cannot eat. "I'm an adult, Sinclair. I can see to my own health."

"I've asked you to call me Dominic." He reminds me, catching me in the crosshairs of his piercing eyes.

"My point remains the same no matter what I call you." I state tritely, pulling away from him at last. I slip off his knee and rise to my feet. His collar is soaked through with my tears, and though I'm standing and he's kneeling, he's still almost as tall as I am. I place my hands on my hips, trying not to cower in the face of his stern expression.

"What if I make you something else, what's your favorite dish?" Sinclair questions.

Rolling my eyes, I retrieve my bowl and circle around him, heading for the door. My fingers are inches from the handle when a tree trunk arm circles my middle and I'm lifted off my feet. "Hey! Put me down!"

"Such a naughty little human." Sinclair clucks in disapproval, setting me down on the couch.

“You said I was free to go wherever I wish here.” I remind him. “I want to go to the kitchen.”

“You may go to the kitchen if you like,” He agrees, “but not if you’re only going to fill up on ice cream. That baby needs more than sugar and fat to grow big and strong.”

The more this goes on, the more I feel like a child. Here I am, demanding sweets when I know it isn’t best for my child, but I can’t help the cravings I’m experiencing. The baby wants what it wants, and there’s no reasoning with my hormones. They are stronger than any PMS or mood swing I’ve ever experienced before, it makes me feel like a different person. I’m a mature adult, I’ve been on my own my whole life – I raised myself and Cora, even though she’s older. So why do I feel like crying again simply because I’m not going to get my way?

I’m still caught up in my thoughts when I feel calloused fingers stroke my cheek, drawing my attention up to Sinclair. “Has no one ever cared for you enough to set limits?” He asks, searching my face. In the wrong tone it might have sounded like a cruel reminder, but he speaks with true sympathy.

“I’m an orphan, remember?” I bite, my voice thick with emotion. “No one has ever cared for me at all – not the way you mean.”

“Well that changes now.” Sinclair proclaimed firmly, leaving no room for argument. “I’ll be back in a minute.”

I remain in my room, trying to get hold of myself and wrap my brain around this strange new relationship with Sinclair. I feel very confused by his behavior, and my own feelings. My body is responding to him like it’s never responded to anyone – it feels as if I’ve come alive after a very long sleep – but I have to wonder whether that’s only the baby? Surely if there is such a strong bond between Sinclair and the pup that they have a mental link, I must be affected too.

I’m so lost in my thoughts that I almost don’t realize it when the man in question returns, carrying a tray. He sets it down in front of me and though I’m feeling contrary enough that I’m tempted to reject it on principle, that impulse evaporates as soon as he raises the cloche to reveal the meal he’s prepared. It’s macaroni and cheese with broccoli, not exactly healthy, but certainly better than ice cream. Not to mention, it’s my absolute favorite dish from childhood.

“How did you know?” I ask, astonished. This is not something he could have possibly learned from his link with the baby. It’s not a craving, but a personal fact very few people know.

“I have my ways.” Sinclair answers slyly, offering me a fork.

I accept it gladly, and wonder again at this mysterious man... wolf. There’s so much about him I don’t understand, things that have nothing to do with being a werewolf, and everything to do with his human side.

“What happened between you and your mate?” I ask, not sure if this is an appropriate question for me to ask, but deciding to test my luck. “When you said not all fated mates are good fits, were you talking about yourself?”

Sinclair blinks, and at first I don’t think he’ll answer, but after a moment he sighs and sits beside me. He leans forward and rests his elbows on my knees. “Yes.” He admits, watching me take my first bite of food with laser sharp focus. I moan with pleasure when the flavors hit my tongue, and some unreadable emotion flashes in his green eyes. “Lydia was beautiful, intelligent, and incredibly calculated. I don’t know if there was ever really love between us, or just the bond. We married because... that’s what you do when you find your mate. I knew she’d make a good Luna, and I wanted a family. I wanted to give her everything she desired – that’s the way it is with mates, even when the feelings are complicated, you feel compelled to make them happy.”

“Unfortunately what Lydia wanted was a baby.” Sinclair continued grimly. “And when I could not give her one, she left me for another Alpha – without a second thought. In the end I’m not sure if she loved me, or my money and power. She was a very materialistic woman, and the status of being a Luna wasn’t worth nearly as much if she didn’t produce an heir.”

“That’s awful.” I murmur, wanting to reach for his hand, but not feeling quite brave enough. “I’m so sorry.”

Before he can respond, a woman’s voice sounds on the other side of the door. “Knock knock!”

When Sinclair rises to open the door, I look at my phone and see a series of texts from Cora. Why did Dominic Sinclair just call me to ask your favorite meal? How are you? What’s going on? Are you with him?

Well that's one mystery solved. I think. However I don't have time to dwell on it, because Sinclair is ushering a woman I don't recognize inside.

"Ah Aileen, come in." Sinclair invites, showing her into the room. "Ella this is Aileen, she's my Beta's wife, and she's going to teach you everything you need to play the part of a Luna."

As curious as I am about the role, I'm more curious about Sinclair. I want to keep talking, but he's already departing, and Aileen is offering me a wide smile. "Are you ready to begin?"

## Chapter 14

Ella

For a moment I don't know how to answer the strange woman. Am I ready to begin learning how to be a queen? Is anyone ever?

That's the kind of job that takes a lifetime of preparation, and I still don't even recognize half the words these people are using.

"Am I supposed to know what a beta is?" I whisper to Aileen, watching Sinclair stride out the door with an unreadable expression on his face.

"A beta is like a second in command." She smiles warmly, coming forward and taking both of my hands in hers. Now that we're alone, she looks me over with an approving nod. "Well you are a stunning little thing, I have to say. When Sinclair explained the situation to us I wasn't sure what to think, but now that I see you it makes a bit more sense. Any man would be lucky to have your genes passed down to their pups."

I bristle at this statement. I don't mind the compliment, but after what happened with Mike, I'm not overly fond of people commenting on my looks. I've already had one man reduce all of my value to physical beauty, so I'm definitely not crazy about an entire society of werewolves looking at me through the same lens. Luckily if we pull this off, they'll all believe I'm a shifter, but I suspect there will still be some questions. I'll have to talk to Sinclair about giving me a good backstory.

“But being a beta is more than just a job, isn’t it?” I say, pushing past the awkwardness of the abrupt subject change. “It’s something you’re born into?”

Aileen seems to notice my discomfort, and takes her hands away. “Well yes, all wolves are born as alphas, betas or omegas.”

“And what do those things actually mean?” I press, not understanding.

“You can think about it like a class system, though it’s more complicated than that. Every wolf is born into their role, and there isn’t any way of changing it. Alphas are the strongest both physically and in personality. That’s why they lead our packs, they are the only ones dominant enough to rule a lot of very powerful beings.” Aileen shares.

“But not all Alpha’s rule, do they?” I wonder aloud.

“No, only the strongest of the strong actually take control.” She clarifies patiently.

“So Sinclair?” Why does his name feel so electric on my tongue, why does the mere thought of him send a shiver down my spine?

“Is the most powerful of the pack leaders. That’s why he’s campaigning to be king.” Aileen reveals.

“But why is it a campaign?” I inquire. “If it just comes down to brute strength.”

“Well in the old days they would just fight, but we’re more evolved now. Now we don’t just want a ruler who can beat the competition into the ground, we want someone intelligent and compassionate.” Aileen explains.

“I have a hard time thinking of Sinclair as compassionate.” I admit. He was certainly ruthless when it came to our dealings. Then again, a little voice says in the back of my head. He did hold you when you cried.

Aileen looks as though she’s reading my mind. “Don’t let Dominic fool you.” She advises. “He’s had a rough go of it with his mate. Trust me, once you get past all his walls and sharp edges, there’s a very loving man underneath.”

“I don’t think I’ll be the one to get past those things.” I murmur doubtfully.

“I wouldn’t be so sure.” She muses. “You’re giving him a pup – after all this time.”

I don't know what to make of this statement, and before I can consider it, Aileen is forging on ahead. "Now betas are born mediators. They aren't so bossy as Alphas, so they don't butt heads with the leader vying for control. They're more mellow and even-tempered, they balance the Alpha out. That's what my husband, Hugo, does for Dominic."

"And omegas?" I ask.

"Omegas are on the bottom of the food chain, literally and figuratively. They're smaller and weaker, and they have naturally submissive natures. They're followers, not leaders."

"So compared to a human," I probe, "where would an omega stand?"

Aileen's lip twitches, "All wolves are stronger, faster and have sharper senses than humans, no matter their rank. We're different species, even the weakest wolf will be stronger than you." She pauses thoughtfully. "I wonder how Dominic will cope with that."

"What do you mean?" I question anxiously.

"Alpha's are very protective, very possessive. He's not going to like the idea that you'll be so vulnerable among our kind." She surmises, still halfway in her thoughts.

I can't focus on this at the moment however – it's not exactly news that Sinclair is bossy, and I'm still trying to wrap my head around the fact that magical creatures are real. "But how do shifters even exist?" I burst out. "I mean, do we have some common ancestor?"

"No, the goddess created us separate from humans." Aileen corrects gently.

Well this is new information. "The goddess?"

"The moon goddess, she rules over all creatures." Aileen informs me, as if this should be common sense.

"Why haven't I ever heard of her?" I ask, holding my hands to my head in confusion.

"Humans are more distant from the divine. You don't know about her, because you can't feel her magic and influence. We can."

Aileen states matter-of-factly.

“Gosh that’s a lot to take in.” I mutter, trying to imagine what it would be like to feel celestial power, to commune with the gods of creation somehow. I never believed such a thing was possible. I never even believed in a god – how could I? My life hasn’t known manly blessings. It’s hard to believe in a higher power when all you know is suffering. While I’m lost in my thoughts, a young boy comes running through the door and Aileen catches him in a hug even as she scolds him.

“Naughty boy!” There was a huge smile on her face, and the child resembles her so clearly I know he must be her son. “You should know better than to enter a closed door without knocking!”

There’s pure maternal joy shining off her face, and I have to wonder whether it’s the first time they’ve seen each other that day, but when she speaks, it becomes clear that this is not the case. “Where’s your father, I left you with him only ten minutes ago!”

“I know but I missed you.” The boy grins up at his mother, and my heart melts in my chest. What must it be like to love someone so completely, to have such a powerful bond to another being? I want it so badly it hurts.

It’s still so surreal to think I’m really pregnant after all this time, that it takes me a moment to remember I don’t have to long hopelessly anymore. I’m going to have that kind of love soon. I press my hand to my belly with excitement. I can’t wait until my next check up, until I can hear that tiny heart beat again, and see the baby in a sonogram. Sinclair is taking me this afternoon –

to a shifter doctor this time – and I’m counting down the minutes now more than ever.

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Thump thump thump.

Has there ever been a more beautiful sound than my baby’s heartbeat? If there has, I’ve certainly never heard it. This appointment is so different from my last one. Instead of Sinclair towering over me lobbing threats and accusations, he’s by my side, staring at the ultrasound screen with the widest smile I’ve ever seen on his face – completely transfixed.

I know exactly how he feels. These last few days I’ve felt like a higher power myself. I’m creating life inside me and it’s nothing short of a miracle. In the moments I can forget my



troubles, I'm giddy with happiness. I didn't realize how low my hope had fallen until I felt such disbelief at finally becoming pregnant.

"I never thought this day would come." I didn't mean to say the words, but they fall from my tongue as fresh tears burn in my eyes – tears of joy this time.

Sinclair's face turns away from the screen for the first time, his brilliant green eyes landing on my face as a tender smile takes over his features. His massive hand slides around my crown, gently cradling my head as he lowers his brow to mine, until they're resting against each other.

"It's real." He whispers to me, and I nod happily, taking comfort in his protective hands.

"Hmm." The doctor mutters, breaking our revelry.

"What, is something wrong?" I ask anxiously. Sinclair's thumb immediately begins brushing back and forth across my hair, instinctively soothing my fraying nerves.

"The baby's just a bit small for my liking." He tells us, making my heart race with worry.

Both men hear it immediately on the machines surrounding us, and Sinclair shushes me softly. "That's not necessarily bad, is it?"

"Well babies develop at different rates, but for a man of your size and strength, I would have expected a larger fetus." The doctor shares.

My hands are shaking, but Sinclair doesn't seem bothered. He snorts, "They told my mother the same exact thing when she was carrying me, and I turned out fine. She was little, like you." He adds warmly, "your body is doing it's best, it needs to fatten up a bit before it can support a bigger baby."

I have to fight the urge to laugh, and instead bat my lashes at him. "Then you should let me have all the ice cream I want."

Sinclair tosses his head back and laughs, "You are incorrigible." He remarks wryly.

"What am I going to do with you at the campaign dinner tomorrow?"

"Campaign dinner?" I repeat, confused.

“Yes, didn’t I tell you?” He looks genuinely surprised, or I might be more upset.  
“Tomorrow it’s out of the frying pan and into the fire for our plan. I need you by my side.”

## Chapter 15

Ella

“What!” I exclaim, unable to wrap my head around this idea. “But I’m not ready!”

“You will be.” He promises. “Aileen will keep working with you tomorrow, and then we’ll go shopping so you can look the part. It’s only a meal, no one is going to be quizzing you on werewolf politics.”

“I don’t know.” I fret, “what if I say the wrong thing?”

“I’ll be with you the whole time.” Sinclair vows. “Don’t worry, I won’t let you put your foot in your mouth.”

This does make me feel better, but I’m still woefully far from feeling confident in my ability to pass as a completely different species. “Can’t we wait a little while?” I request anxiously. “I promise I’ll never miss another event, I just need a little more time.”

“Ella, the elections are in three months.” Sinclair says softly. “We don’t have much time to waste. Very few people change their minds at the last moment. My image has been marked with controversy from day one because I don’t have a family.”

“I don’t understand, why is that so controversial if the King is something people vote on. It’s not like having an heir is going to decide the future of succession.”

“Because it’s not about succession. It’s about personal stability. Unmated Alphas are viewed as being more temperamental and aggressive. If I have a mate and a pup however, people will view me as more grounded and cautious.” Sinclair explains.

“Is that true?” I ask, “that unmated alphas are wilder?”

Sinclair grimaces but nods, “To a degree, yes. Some men are more or less aggressive naturally, but it makes a difference when you have someone to take care of – someone who might be harmed if anything happened to you.”

“Okay, so you’re saying it has to be tomorrow?” I surmise, “the sooner you turn your image around, the better.”

“That’s right.” Sinclair agrees. “As long as you’re well enough, I need you there.”

“And you promise you won’t leave my side?” I question.

“You have my word.” He vows.

“Okay then.” I concur, not feeling half as confident as I sound.

The doctor – who by now has finished his exam – steps out, leaving me with Sinclair to change clothes before we check out.

However Sinclair doesn’t leave, he stays in the exam room as if he expects me to change in front of him.

“Aren’t you going to...?” I trail off, hoping he’ll pick up on my train of thought without me saying more.

“To what?” He asks, a knowing smile on his handsome face.

“I can’t change in front of you.” I protest, my cheeks going bright pink. “I’m only wearing underwear beneath this thing.”

His brow furrows, but there’s a devious glint to his intense eyes which makes me think he knows exactly what I mean. “Human modesty.” He clucks his tongue and shakes his head. “So prudish, you’ll see soon enough, wolves aren’t nearly as repressed.”

“I’m not a prude! Or repressed!” I defend hotly, climbing down from the table and regretting it instantly. A second ago I was equal to Sinclair in height, now he towers over me. .

“The Goddess made our bodies perfect as they are, why would we hide them?” He questions silkily, the same devilish smile on his face.

Narrowing my eyes at the big man, I grumble, “fine.” Whipping the gown off over my head, I stomp over to the corner where I left my clothes neatly folded. I tug them on quickly, but not so quickly that Sinclair will think I’m embarrassed about being exposed before him. When I turn back, he looks mildly impressed.

“I didn’t think you’d actually go through with it.” He confesses. “But I’m sure glad you did.”

I notch my chin up defiantly. “I don’t back down that easily. You might have seven senses or whatever, but it will take more than that to figure me out.”

His smirk only grows as he closes the distance between us, invading my space with his powerful presence. “I can’t wait.”

“What do you think?” I ask a few hours later, as I stand in front of a full length mirror in a gown which costs more than my apartment.

“I prefer the green one.” Sinclair responds thoughtfully, his penetrating gaze running up and down my body as I try on yet another dress.

I don’t know how to feel about this shopping trip. I’m enamored by the stunning clothes around us, but it seems so extravagant to spend so much on material things. I’m only too aware that orphans are starving in this very city, wouldn’t the money be better spent on charity?

I say as much to Sinclair, but he only smiles at me. How has our relationship changed so quickly? A couple of days ago he only glared at me, now he always seems to look at me fondly. “Did you find nothing about my finances when you were snooping?”

“Research is not snooping.” I answer tritely. However then the memory rises, and I recall that he gives at least half his fortune to the less fortunate. “If you still have this much to spend on mere clothes after giving away so much, maybe you should give more.”

Sinclair shocks me completely. He nods thoughtfully. “Maybe I should.” I can only blink, Mike never listened to my advice – or indeed anything I said – with so much attention. It’s only now that I see what true consideration is like, that I realize just how deficient he was as a partner.

Trying to shake myself out of my thoughts, I change the subject. “So the green one?” I confirm, knowing precisely the dress to which he’s referring. It’s the same emerald shade as his eyes, and studded with gemstones and rose gold accents that precisely match my hair.

He nods. “It suits you, besides, it covers your shoulders.”

“Why should that matter?” I question in confusion.

“Because I haven’t marked you, and I don’t want people to notice.” He explains.

“Marked me?” I squeak, not understanding what this means.

“I take it Aileen didn’t get that far?” He guesses, rising from the dressing room chair and prowling towards me. My pulse spikes as he approaches, and suddenly I realize why I’d felt like a rabbit facing a wolf when I went to plead Cora’s case with him. That’s basically what we are, he could snap me up in one bite, and I’d be helpless to stop him. “A mark,” He begins, hooking his finger under the spaghetti strap of my gown and tugging it off my shoulder, “Is the way a wolf claims his mate.”

I gulp, too focused on Sinclair to fully process his works. “Mark how?”

“It’s a bite, right here.” His traces a finger over the spot where my neck meets my shoulder. “A deep bite, one that leaves his scent permanently on her skin.”

“I – doesn’t that hurt?” I fret.

Sinclair laughs, a dark, husky sound. “No sweet Ella, not if you time it right.”

“Time it right with what?” I inquire innocently, furrowing my brow.

The next thing I know, Sinclair’s eyes are glowing with his wolf, and my knees go weak. “Maybe I’ll explain it to you one day. In the meantime I’ll just scent mark you.” He remarks cryptically. “Now stay there, I’m going to fetch one more dress to try.”

When he steps away, I realize just how attuned I am to his presence. I wasn’t aware of any of my other surroundings when he was near. He consumed my attention completely, barring all else.

Once he’s gone I notice a pretty blue frock on one of the racks just outside the dressing room. I move to examine it, but as soon as I take the dress from the rack, a second set of hands lands on the hanger and tries to yank it out of my hands. “Hey, I saw that first!”

The woman in front of me is blonde and pretty, but sneering with an awful expression. She pulls so hard on the hanger that I start to lose my balance. She must be a shifter, I

think, she's too strong to be a human. At this point, I'm only hanging onto the dress because it's the only thing holding me upright, but the woman is soon trying to pry my hands free. "I said let go!"

I'm about to simply give up and fall to the ground, when a pair of powerful hands catch my waist, guiding my feet back to the ground.

"Take your hands off of her, right now!" Sinclair barks, his snarling voice silencing everyone in the store. The petty woman releases me quickly, seeming to shrink into herself in the face of the infuriated alpha. "I'm so sorry, Alpha." She apologizes. "I didn't know she was with you."

"That shouldn't matter." He declares, coming to my side. "Are you all right?"

"I'm fine," I insist, but before I can say more, another man speaks from behind us.

"Brother, don't tell me you're attacking defenseless woman now." The shifter speaking turns his attention to me now. "And who's this?"

## Chapter 16

Ella

The stranger looks a lot like Sinclair, and the word "brother" strikes my interest. If they're siblings, why is Sinclair looking at him so harshly? They don't seem friendly at all.

"This is Ella." Sinclair announces, sliding his arm around my waist. "My future mate, and the mother of my pup."

"Our pup." The words are out of my mouth before I can stop them. I'm not sure why I said it, but the way Sinclair declared the pups as his – as if it belonged to him and not me – brought out my maternal instincts. I even growled a little as I staked my claim, making Sinclair's lips quirk with amusement.

"You don't really believe that, do you?" The man scoffs. "I've never seen or heard of you before, I didn't have the faintest idea my brother was expecting, and he hasn't even

marked you.” I realize he’s right. Sinclair had mentioned scent marking me before the campaign dinner – whatever that means – but he hasn’t done it yet. Luckily his pup’s presence is strong enough to make me smell like a wolf, but this man clearly isn’t fooled by our pretense as a couple. “Let me guess, he just picked you up off the street because you make such a pretty womb?”

A low rumble is vibrating against my side as Sinclair’s wolf begins to growl. Meanwhile I flush with embarrassment, it’s not the truth, but it’s close enough to make me want to hide behind Sinclair’s strength and dominance. Where did that come from? The little voice in my head asks. You’ve never hidden from a problem or backed down from a challenge a day in your life. That’s true, but then again, I’ve never had anyone to hide behind before.

The man is still speaking, making fun of my naivete for expecting Sinclair to honor my role as our baby’s mother. “And you actually think he’ll keep you around once you squirt the kid out? Clearly brains and beauty don’t go hand in hand.”

“Clearly ugliness and cynicism do.” I bite back, feeling bolstered by Sinclair’s steady presence at my side. “If you ask me the fact that you haven’t heard about me says more about your low status than my own. You’re obviously not important enough to warrant the Alpha’s time.”

Sinclair chuckles darkly, giving me a small squeeze to show his approval. “She has a point, Roger.”

The man, Roger, glares at his brother before offering me a look that almost appears pitying. “Mark my words, he’ll toss you to the curb at the first opportunity.”

I notch my chin up, “You underestimate me, and Dominic.” I announce, feeling a thrum of excitement to speak his given name for the first time. I think it’s actually coming from the baby, as if I can feel Sinclair’s pleasure to hear me saying it through our pup. “He has more honor in his little finger than you do in your entire body. That much is obvious and I’ve only just met you.”

Roger opens his mouth to argue back, but Sinclair stops him. “Roger, give it a rest. Show some respect to your future Luna.”

“Really Dominic, you’re going to keep up this act?” He counters fiercely. “How did you even manage this, aren’t you sterile? How do you know the brat she’s carrying is even yours?”

In a flash Roger is suspended in the air, with Sinclair’s huge hand circling his throat, holding him aloft. He squirms and tugs at Sinclair’s white knuckled fingers, but I don’t think he’s truly afraid because he shoots me a triumphant smirk. “More honorable, huh?” Roger quips. “You certainly have an interesting definition.”

“Do not speak about my pup that way.” Sinclair snarls, “I know it’s mine because we are bonded already, and I will be bonded to Ella after our formal mating ceremony. If anyone needs to learn some manners, it’s you.”

Roger shrugs. “What do you expect, we never had a mother.” He shoots another scathing look in my direction, “It’s a shame your pup won’t either. You could at least have the dignity to be honest with her.”

Before I can keep track, Sinclair has dropped him to the floor. “Get out, before I really lose my temper.”

Roger clammers to his feet and calls over the blonde woman who fought me over the blue dress. “Come on, Sasha, we’re leaving.” Before they depart however, Roger offers his brother one final scowl. “You miscalculated badly today, brother. What do you think the Alpha council is going to say when they find out you attacked your own family in broad daylight – over nothing more than a few honest words? The council wants a stable king, not a loose cannon. Clearly that pup hasn’t done a damn thing to even you out. Just you wait, your campaign is going to be over by the end of tomorrow’s dinner.”

Part of me wants to run after Roger and kick him right in the behind, I can’t believe what just happened. I don’t blame Sinclair either, I don’t think his aggression had anything to do with being unmated, I think it was because he feels so protective of his pup, and by extension – me. Besides, his brother has to know what a sore spot his fertility struggles are. How cruel does a person have to be to bring up such a thing.

“I’m sorry about that, Ella.” Sinclair’s attention is already back on me. “I shouldn’t have lost control that way.”

“If I’d been strong enough to attack him, I would have done it myself.” I confide, leaning into his warmth. His energy is still very agitated, and all my instincts are driving me to



comfort him the same way he's comforted me today. "What did you mean about a mating ceremony?"

"Oh," He shakes his head, brushing the topic aside. "That's just for show during the election. I don't expect you to actually go through with it. It's simply a way of explaining to people why you don't bear my mark."

"Oh." I murmur. Why does that disappoint me so much? I know Sinclair is handsome, but we're different species and he's completely controlling, I can't truly be attracted to him – can I?

Even as I think it, I breathe in his scent, and feel heat begin to pool low in my belly. Snap out of it! I scold myself. That's just the baby, it wants to be near its father. It's just another wolfy mindlink thing... isn't it?

I look up to Sinclair to make sure he's not watching me struggle to untangle these confusing feelings, and for once, his attention is very far away. My relief immediately gives way to sympathy as I take in his distant expression. "Don't be offended – but your brother is an asshole." I say gently.

Sinclair looks down at me, his grim features softening to a smile. "You can say that again."

"Do you want to talk about it?" I press, curious but not wanting to intrude on his private business.

"Oh," He sighs, dragging a hand through his hair. "Roger and I... we're very different people – as you saw. We've never gotten along."

"Why not?" I inquire.

Sinclair's face darkens, and I worry that I've pushed into such sensitive territory that he'll refuse to tell me any more, however he surprises me again. "I took his mother away from him. She died protecting me, and he's never forgiven me. There was already bad feelings between us – he's older, but I was always stronger. It was clear from a young age that I, and not he, would be my father's heir. So there was always jealousy and competition – then Mom sacrificed herself for me, and that was it."

"I'm so sorry." I express, intuitively wrapping my arms around him for a hug. I can tell he's surprised, I don't think many people instigate hugs with the future king, but I'm not

a wolf, and all I see is a man in need of affection in front of me. His arms come around me in reply, and his voice purrs in my ear. “You really are full of surprises, you know that?”

“What’s so surprising?” I ask against his chest, using the excuse to breathe in his delicious scent again. “You hugged me when I needed it – why shouldn’t I return the favor?”

“I’m just used to taking care of others, that’s all.” He shares. “And I don’t know anyone brave enough to touch me without permission.”

“And here I thought wolves were supposed to be all tough and brave.” I joke, pressing my nose to his pec. “They sound like a pack of scaredy-cats to me.”

Sinclair laughs, sounding like a completely different man than the haunted creature he’d been a moment ago. “You know, if you keep this up I’m not going to be able to wait until tomorrow to scent mark you.”

I’m getting ahead of myself now, feeling overconfident amidst his praise and safe to poke his buttons now that his horrible brother has gone away. “Why are you?”

“Because I want it to be strongest before the campaign dinner.” Sinclair explains.

“It wears off?” I ask, putting two and two together.

“Your scent is getting so strong sometimes I forget how little you know about our ways. Did Aileen explain anything about this to you?” He questions.

“No – I think she was more concerned with teaching me political things.”

His eyes light up, though I don’t know why. “So you don’t even know what scent marking is?”

“No.” I flush, waiting for him to continue. When he doesn’t I prompt, “are you going to tell me?”

“No.” He replies slyly. “I’m going to show you.”

## Chapter 17

Some of my confidence has waned on the ride home. Sinclair has been so mysterious about this scent marking business, and I don't like the way he keeps looking at me – as if I'm some prey to be devoured.

There's still so much I don't understand about this world, like how carrying his child can make me smell more like a wolf myself, or how someone can leave a mark which must be sensed and smelled, rather than seen with the naked eye. Not for the first time, I'm jealous of shifters' heightened abilities. The more time that passes, the more enchanted I am by the idea of transforming, of letting out one's inner animal and being truly wild and free. I don't know why I like the idea so much – it's not like I have an inner animal to release, so I'm not actually missing out.

“You look nervous.” Sinclair observes, resting one proprietary hand on my knee as the car speeds along. Of course, his touch only makes me more antsy.

“You can fix that.” I suggest, “it doesn't have to be a surprise.”

“True, but it's much more fun this way.” He smirks.

“Fun for you maybe.” I mutter mutinously. “Besides, if you want your scent to be strongest tomorrow, shouldn't we wait?”

“And deprive myself of the opportunity to do it a second time?” He arches a brow, “why on earth would I do that?”

“I...” I don't know what to make of this. If he were anyone else I'd think he was flirting with me, but that's not possible. Wolves and humans don't mix. Maybe he simply enjoys teasing me, like a cat toying with a mouse. He certainly enjoys making me squirm. I realize this must be the reason, and suddenly I find myself feeling very indignant. I don't like the idea of being some plaything to the hungry predator. I narrow my eyes at him.

“Maybe I won't let you.” I decide.

The hand on my knee tightens, but not enough to hurt. “What was rule number one, little human?”

“That I should be as relaxed and happy through my pregnancy, so you shouldn’t be making me nervous.” I reason, knowing full well he expects me to confirm that he – as Alpha – is in charge.

“You forget I have a link straight to our pup, I know when you’re stressed, and when you’re just making mischief.” Sinclair rumbles. “But if you want more justification for doing it often, it’s to avoid scenes like what just happened. If people can’t see your shoulder and also smell me on you very powerfully, they can be fooled into thinking I have marked you. We can give the mating ceremony excuse to those who ask, but it would be better to avoid the questions altogether.”

A little while later, Sinclair is standing in front of me in my room, looking so powerful and attractive I’m almost too distracted to hear him speak. “Take off your clothes.” He instructs.

“What, all of them?” I squeak.

“You can keep your underwear on, but it’s better if we’re skin-to-skin.” He says, unbuttoning his own shirt.

I watch with wide eyes as he strips down to his boxer-briefs, taking in the sight of his muscular body and feeling my jaw go slack.

I’ve never seen anyone so rugged and chiseled.

“Do I need to take them off for you?” He asks, arching a brow and stepping forward.

“What? No!” I yelp, reminding myself that he’s already seen me in my bra and panties. Taking a deep breath, I carefully lift my dress over my head, bracing myself for whatever is to come next.

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Standing beside Sinclair in a ball gown, done up from head to toe in makeup, jewelry and heels, it seems hard to believe Sinclair was rubbing his mostly naked body all over me an hour ago. Scent marking – I’ve learned – is a deeply intimate act, one that confuses me more than I care to admit.

Yesterday when he marked me the first time, he took it slow and explained every step of the process, making sure I understood why it was so important to impart his scent on

every inch of my body. This second time, however, was completely different. There were no explanations, no soothing caresses for my frazzled nerves. He came to me with a mission in mind, and slowly, sensuously covered me in his pheromones. If he noticed my body's response to his attentions – my aching breasts and liquid arousal, he gave no indication.

Now those feelings are long gone, as we're finally at the campaign dinner I've been preparing for non-stop over the last 48

hours. Sinclair quizzed me in the car on the way over, testing my knowledge of shifter society and nodding with approval when I smoothly answered each of his prompts. He hasn't said a word otherwise, which tells me just how much tension he's carrying in anticipation of the event.

When we arrive at an incredible palace, I can't keep my jaw from dropping to the floor. "I've never seen such a beautiful estate."

"This is where our pup will be raised if my campaign is successful." He shares, "The King's Palace."

"Why is the current King stepping down?" I ask as we climb the marble stairs, mostly trying to distract myself from all the flashing cameras and reporters screaming out to get Sinclair's attention.

"Alpha Dominic, over here!"

"Alpha Dominic, who's your date?"

"It wasn't his choice." Sinclair shares. "He's getting old and is no longer the strongest among us. The alpha council voted to force him to abdicate."

"Does he not have heirs of his own?" I question, trying my best to smile and wave at the crowd vying for attention around us.

"His eldest son is my biggest competition – and he would be a disaster." Sinclair intimates, ducking his head low enough that his lips brush the shell of my ear. "You're doing brilliantly by the way – look at them all, eating out of the palm of your hand."

I giggle quietly, feeling a wave of appreciation for the support. Normally I would be beside myself with nerves to walk into a room like this, surrounded by rich and powerful

people – shifters. However next to Sinclair, the blatant stares and avid attention doesn't bother me. I feel confident by his side, even as I'm bowled over by his raw power. I didn't realize how much of it he keeps reined in on a day-to-day basis. Now however I can feel it viscerally, flowing off of him in a riptide of authority.

Before I know it, we've left the reporters behind and are crossing the ballroom to a pair of thrones at the end of a great hall. The throngs of people part to let us pass, and I have to admit – I do feel like royalty. No one has ever shown me so much respect or admiration.

I'm still reveling in the attention we're drawing when we stop in front of the King and Queen. They're both incredibly impressive.

The king's hair is streaked with gray, but he still has an air of unquestionable strength. His Luna is lovely and dignified, with features that hint to great beauty in her younger years.

Sinclair nods to each of them, while I dip into a curtsy. "Alpha Dominic," The king greets Sinclair with a smile that doesn't reach his eyes. "Dare I say you've finally found a mate?"

"That's right." Sinclair announces, loudly enough for all to hear. "And the Goddess has blessed us with a pup."

"Well I must say you have excellent taste. You, my dear, are an incredible beauty." The Luna smiles, no more genuinely than her husband. "Congratulations to you both!"

The announcement prompts a rush of supporters to gather around us both, and before I even realize it's happened, Sinclair is no longer beside me, we're separated by a few people, but I can still see him, so I try not to panic. "You must tell us your name!" A small throng of women gush in front of me.

"I'm Ella." I share, unsure whether I should use my own surname, or his. "Soon to be Sinclair." I lie, deciding to stick with our cover.

They squeal with excitement, and more people swirl around me, until at last I'm faced by an imposing looking man. He's watching me sharply, almost with suspicion. "Tell me, Ella, where are you from? How is it we've never seen you before?"

“I come from the Shadow Pack, in the north.” I explain, repeating the lie Sinclair and I agreed upon. “I was in town visiting my cousin when I met Sinclair, and the rest is history.”

“Oh, what cousin?” He asks, zeroing in on the detail.

“Aileen Corentin.” I bluff, smiling widely.

“As in the wife of Dominic’s beta?” He presses. “And you only met him recently?”

“Yes – our families are deeply estranged. Bad blood you know, divided allegiances and all that.” I explain. “I only recently learned I had a cousin here, but once I did I reached out so we could meet.”

“Hmm,” He murmurs thoughtfully. “Still you must have been here some time, if you’re already breeding.”

“Not long at all.” I correct him, “but you know how it is when you find the one... or maybe you don’t. I didn’t believe in love at first sight myself, until I found Dominic.” I beam towards the man in question, trying to look as if I’m head over heels in love.

It must have worked, because he excuses himself and slips away into the crowd, a thoughtful expression on his face.

I watch him stride away, hoping Sinclair will return to my side soon. I can’t explain why, but I feel that wasn’t the last I’ll see of that man, and I don’t want to be alone the next time he finds me.

## Chapter 18

Ella

Where is Sinclair? I think nervously, scanning the room. He promised he wouldn’t leave my side. Why did I ever let myself get separated from him. The crowd around me is still bombarding me with questions, and though I think I’m putting up a good front, I can’t help but feel overwhelmed. My pulse is racing, and the blood is rushing in my ears. I’m not ready for this. I’ve only had two days to prepare, surely they’re going to see right through my act!

I'm getting more and more light headed by the minute, and my stomach is beginning to churn. I think I'm going to be sick, but I'm not sure if it's morning sickness, or my nerves. I might be excited about the idea of the baby making its presence known, but this is the last place I want to get sick.

I turn in place, searching the room for any kind of restroom. I can't ask any of the aristocrats around me, speaking about such a private matter with people of this stature would be considered incredibly inappropriate. However before I can figure out a possible retreat, I see Sinclair striding through the crush of shifters, his brow furrowed as he watches me.

The people around me disappear when he finally closes the distance between us, and I'm amazed to feel my nausea and my nerves settle as soon as I breathe in his scent and feel his warm presence. "Are you alright?" He asks with concern, brushing the hair out of my face.

Though I feel far better than I did a moment ago, I'm still terribly overwhelmed. My lower lip trembles, and I wonder if I'm really so stressed that I might cry, or if it's just my pregnancy hormones spinning out of control. I don't want to show weakness in front of Sinclair, I don't want him to think I'm not up to playing this role. I not only have to prove myself to all these strangers, but to the father of my child. I plaster a wide smile across my face. "I'm fine."

He narrows his eyes, sidling closer and dipping his head to my ear. "Are you being honest, sweet Ella?"

I bristle at this prompt. Who is he to demand honesty about my feelings? If I don't want to talk about them, that's my choice. I'm about to tell him as much, when his low growl ricochets through my body, and the words spill unwillingly from my lips. "It's just a bit of morning sickness." I explain in a whisper, "I think the crowd made me overheat."

"And?" He presses, clearly sensing that there's more to the story.

I don't not like how easily he can read me. Either that means I'm failing in my act, or his connection to our pup is giving him an unfair advantage sensing my emotions. To be honest, I'm not sure which possibility frightens me more. Still, I can't stop myself from speaking, though I refuse to look him in the eyes. "I got nervous." I can feel myself flushing at the admission, "you promised you wouldn't leave my side." I add petulantly, glaring up at him from beneath my lashes Sinclair's demanding growls soften to a purr,



and the next thing I know, he's tucking me to his chest, stroking his hand down my spine in a soothing caress. "Poor little mate." He murmurs, no doubt for the people around us who might overhear. "I'm sorry I've been neglecting you."

I can hear the crowd oohing and ahing at the display, an Alpha caring for his mate. Is that why he's doing this? Does he actually care about my feelings, or is he just putting on a show? It must be the latter, I decide, otherwise he wouldn't ever call me his mate.

"How sweet." I recognize the voice immediately. It belongs to the same man who was questioning me with such suspicion a little while ago. "Breeding women can be so needy, can't they, Alpha Dominic?"

A growl rises in my defense, but to my surprise, it doesn't come from Sinclair – it comes from me! I don't think I've ever growled in my life. Is that the pups influence? Sinclair probably thinks it's part of my act, trying to pass myself off as a she-wolf, but I didn't intend to do it at all!

A few chuckles pass through the crowd, though I don't know why. I feel completely serious, but I hear murmurs describing my cuteness. The other man blinks, looking up at Sinclair as if he expects him to chastise me. "My apologies, your highness."

Sinclair states simply. "She's a fierce little thing at the best of times." The words sound like an excuse for my behavior, but his tone is full of praise and his arms tighten around me affectionately.

Too late, his address for the other man filters through my brain. Your Highness. That must mean this is the prince, and Sinclair's main opponent in the election. It's no wonder I found him so imposing, or why he resembles the King so much.

"Well, what more could we want in a Luna." The Prince remarks, not sounding like he means a single word of this. "In fact, your loving display has inspired me! What's say we play a game, to celebrate your new family?"

"What kind of game do you have in mind?" Sinclair's muscles tensed, but his reply tells me saying no isn't really an option here.

After all, the entire point of this evening is to sell our relationship to the Alpha council. They're supposed to believe we're madly in love and overjoyed to be starting our family. We're being tested now, and backing down from the challenge would be a mistake.

“My own special version of the newlywed game.” The Prince gives us a sly grin. “To test the mating bond.”

I try to stay calm, but inside I’m panicking. We don’t have a mating bond, how on earth are they going to test it? We’re sure to fail, and at the very first hurdle! I look up at Sinclair for guidance, but he’s smiling at the Prince, calling his bluff. “As you wish.”

The Prince guides us towards the dais before the king and queen, placing me on one side, and Sinclair on the other. “Now the object of the game is simple.” The Prince explains, raising his voice so the entire audience can hear. “Ella and Dominic will communicate with each other through their bond, and afterwards they’ll both have to write out what the other expressed without consulting one another verbally. If their responses match perfectly, we’ll know they’re a strong couple.”

The implications are obvious, if our responses don’t match, we’ll look like a disconnected, weak couple – not the united Alpha and Luna we should be. Oh god, we’re going to fail! I think anxiously. Sinclair’s bond to the baby is strong, but the baby is so little that their mental link is still dependent on him touching me. I could hear Sinclair’s voice when I was passed out in his arms, and he could hear the pup’s craving when his hand was on my belly. Otherwise it hasn’t happened.

I look to Sinclair, but he seems completely unconcerned. Then again, I have no doubt he’s very good at hiding his emotions after spending so long in the public eye. Indeed, his face is a perfect mask, and as our eyes meet, I try to listen with all my might, praying that somehow his bond to the pup will spark to life even at this distance.

After a moment I realize it’s no use. I don’t have the first idea what he’s trying to communicate to me, so I do the only thing I can think of. I cross the dais swiftly and throw myself into the huge Alpha’s arms. I slide my arms around his neck as he catches me, and press my lips to his.

Sinclair purrs, locking me to him with one strong arm and catching the back of my head with the other, holding me in place so his talented lips can plunder my mouth. I might have instigated the kiss, but he takes charge immediately, drawing tiny whimpers from me as his tongue teases my lips and then delves inside. Fireworks explode behind my eyes as butterflies burst to life in my tummy.

I’ve never been kissed like this before, with so much skill and dominance that it feels as though he’s reaching inside me and touching my very soul. I’ve also never felt this kind

of electricity with any partner. It's as if my entire body is on fire, and he's barely even begun. My feet are hovering around his knees, and I remember Sinclair's remark about humans being prudish, so I wrap my legs around his waist as best I can through my voluminous skirts.

It's not until he pulls back, finally snapping me out of my daze, that I remember we're not alone. While his lips were on mine I wasn't aware of anything but the two of us, but now I realize cheers and wolf whistles are egging us on all sides. The crowd seems to love our display, but when I open my eyes again I find Sinclair's dark gaze boring into me so forcefully my heart stops beating completely.

Uh-oh, I think I might have just made a huge mistake.

## Chapter 19

### 3rd Person

Ella slowly untangled herself from Sinclair's body as he returned her feet to the ground, feeling terribly unsure of herself. The audience was still making a huge racket, but the imposing Alpha was studying her as if she was some sort of curious anomaly –

one he was desperate to figure out. Her cheeks were flushed scarlet, but she followed his lead. Sinclair hadn't looked away from her to acknowledge their onlookers – so she didn't either.

Ella couldn't have known how much more meaningful it was for Sinclair to be watching her this way, rather than smiling. Shifters were creatures of raw passion and intense feeling, there were many lighthearted moments of course, but the look of a successfully mated Alpha and Luna was not the lovesick expressions humans so often displayed in relationships. To those around them, Sinclair's laser focus on the little human looked like a devoted lover hungry for his mate, and her anxious energy was only further proof – a she-wolf who had just provoked her mate's lust in public, and was going to have to face the consequences when she got home.

The tableau only made them cheer louder, and this eased Ella's fears a bit. Sinclair might not be happy with her, but the crowd certainly was. It can't have been a complete mistake, could it?

“How lovely, but not exactly the point of the game.” The Prince’s drawling criticism finally broke the spell, at last tearing Ella and Sinclair’s attention away from one another.

“Wasn’t it?” Ella asked innocently, feeling less intimidated by the Prince than the wolf still holding her in an iron grip. “He told me to kiss him – was I supposed to refuse?”

The spectators laughed and applauded, and Sinclair turned glowing eyes in their direction. “No doubt you’ll forgive us taking our leave.” He declared rakishly, earning a fresh surge of wolf whistles. “My mate is in need of some attention.”

Ella blinked, wondering if he meant what she suspected. Were wolves really so open about sex? Before she could think about the matter any further, the King stood and offered them a toast, “To the happy couple.”

Sinclair led Ella back through the flood of congratulations and well wishes, past the media frenzy and back into the safety of his limousine.

She slid into the far end of the vehicle, hiding from all the camera flashes behind blacked out windows. When Sinclair slid in a moment afterwards, he zeroed in on Ella immediately. The corner of his mouth tilted up when he saw her sitting as far away as possible. “Is there a reason you’re all the way over there?”

“Are you angry?” Ella murmured in reply, wrapping her arms protectively around her middle. She was painfully aware that if she messed up badly enough, it might cost her the baby.

“How could I be angry?” Sinclair exclaimed, truly shocked. “Ella, you saved the day. That was brilliant. None of the Alphas on the council will question me now. Even the King liked you. My campaign is safe because of your quick thinking.”

“Oh,” she relaxed slightly, feeling silly now. “You looked so severe after the kiss, I just... I thought I messed up.”

“Far from it.” Sinclair announced as the car slowly began to move. “But I am curious what inspired you to kiss me.”

Ella stared at her lap. “It was the first thing that came into my mind. I knew we were going to fail if we actually had to play the game.”

“But why a kiss?” He pressed. “You were already feeling ill, you could have easily given morning sickness as an excuse. No one would have faulted you.”

“I don’t know.” She shrugged, fidgeting nervously.

“Did you like it?” He pressed, his deep voice like velvet cloaked steel.

“What?!” Ella chirped, her gold eyes going wide. “Of course not, it was just for show. Besides, I’m not a good kisser anyway.”

Sinclair’s brow furrowed. “Why the hell do you think that?” He asked.

“Mike told me, more than once.” She admitted, her voice barely louder than a whisper.

Sinclair rose from his seat, having heard more than enough. He migrated over to where Ella sat, kneeling down onto the floor of the car so he could look her in the eye. Is he going to touch me? Ella wondered anxiously. Why do I want to feel his hands on me so badly? She got her answer a moment later, when he took her chin between his thumb and forefinger, and tilted her face up to his. “Your ex was a fucking idiot.” He murmurs. “For more reason than one.”

Her heart sank, it hadn’t escaped her notice how many people had commented on her beauty that evening, or how proud Sinclair had seemed to have her on his arm. “Because I’m pretty?”

Sinclair shook his head. “You’re gorgeous, Ella, but so are lots of people. He’s an idiot because he couldn’t see past it – to the force of nature underneath.”

“I’m not a force of nature.” Ella protest. “I’m poor and weak and –”

His finger moves to cover my lips. “You are what I say you are.” Ella bristled beneath his intimate touch and domineering manner.

She wanted to challenge him, to insist that she knew herself better than he did. With great effort, she kept her mouth shut because she knew it wasn’t an argument she could win. Nodding in approval, Sinclair continued. “And I say you are brave, clever, so sweet I can’t stand it, and so much stronger than you know.” He offered her a wolfish grin then, “Not not mention the best kisser I’ve ever had the pleasure of tasting.”

Ella blushed scarlet, and Sinclair chuckled, taking the seat next to her. He slung an arm over her shoulders, encouraging her to lean into his warmth. “Thank you.” Ella murmured, sinking into his embrace.

“I didn’t say it to please you.” Sinclair remarked simply, brushing off her thanks. “I said it because it’s true.”

“Bossy wolf.” Ella muttered, earning herself another rumbling laugh.

Before long her eyelids were growing very heavy, and the exhaustion of the stressful evening threatened to take hold completely.

She tried to stay awake until they returned home, but the little voice in her head told her not to be silly. Sinclair would make sure she woke up when the time came.

Sinclair watched as Ella slowly succumbed to sleep, feeling a stab of guilt for putting her through so much when she needed her rest. He couldn’t help ducking his head to press a kiss to her hair, thinking again of their kiss. For all her flaws, he’d thought he’d been to heaven and back with Lydia when it came to sex – after all the Goddess fated couples together based on sexually compatibility. She’d been the best lover he’d ever had, but kissing her hadn’t felt anything like kissing Ella.

She threw herself into the act so freely, without any inhibitions or reluctance. Ella was clearly an incredibly affectionate woman, and it made him even angrier to imagine the world denying her the love she deserved for so many years. He couldn’t wait until Mike was finally in front of him. He’d teach that feckless human a lesson he’d never forget.

Sinclair breathed in the fragile human’s scent, calming his temper with Ella’s bewitching fragrance. His wolf purred with approval, his voice rising in the back of Sinclair’s head. She smells better and better every day. This one is special.

It’s probably just the baby. Sinclair reasoned, knowing exactly what his wolf was talking about. The more time that passed, the more Ella smelled like a she-wolf. Frankly it had been driving him crazy – pushing him to scent mark her far more frequently and intimately than was necessary, toying with his senses at every turn. He wasn’t even sure how to describe her aroma – one moment it was like fresh rain and wild orchids, the next like sultry summer nights and sweet honey.

Completely different from the pup. His wolf pointed out. You know it’s not the same scent.

That's true, but there's no other reason her scent would be changing. You forget this has never happened before, we don't know what happens to humans carrying shifter pups. I'm sure it's just the baby.

Sinclair's wolf rolled his eyes. Fine, stick your head in the sand if you're so determined. The Alpha wasn't sure what to make of this – of any of this. Why was his wolf being so difficult, arguing and being contrary just to be contrary. This had never happened before. His wolf had been with him from birth, and they'd never butted heads this way.

What on earth did it mean? And why was Ella the one to bring out this side of his inner animal? Was his wolf right? Was there something special about her? Or was it just the fact that she was carrying his baby, making his dreams come true when no one else had been able to do so? Did that alone make her special? Sinclair was not a man who was used to feeling uncertain, and he didn't like it one bit. At the same time, he couldn't bring himself to blame Ella for making him feel this way, even though she was certainly the cause.

Instead he found himself watching her sleep the rest of the ride home, completely transfixed, and perfectly content to watch her do nothing at all.

## Chapter 20

Ella

I dream that I'm on a boat, rocking gently in a starlit sea. I stare up at the night sky, bathed in the light of the full moon. My belly is swollen with my pup, and Sinclair is beside me, telling me stories about shifters – all the myths and legends of his people. His voice carries me along the waves, until he begins describing the life we'll have together with our baby. He paints a picture of perfection, a happy life as a family of three- my child and I pampered and cared for while he rules his empire, wanting for nothing.

It all seems too good to be true, and it's not until I realize I'm dreaming that I understand why. When I blink my eyes open, I realize that there are tears in them. I really am rocking, but not in any boat. Sinclair is carrying me inside from the car and clearly trying very hard not to wake me.

I must have fallen asleep. I realize dazedly.

“You don't have to carry me.” I murmur, hoping the emotion in my voice can be passed off as grogginess.

“Hush now.” He croons, “I don’t mind. You just rest.”

Another time I might argue, but I’m so sleepy, and his arms feel so good around me that I just snuggle in. To my surprise, Sinclair leans his face towards my hair and inhales a deep breath. “You smell more like a wolf every day.” He shares. “The baby must be very healthy.”

This idea makes me smile, “Will I be able to feel it move soon, if pregnancy is so much shorter?”

“After a couple of months, yes.” He confirms.

This is still sooner than human babies quicken, but I feel so impatient. “Hmph, that’s so long to wait.”

Sinclair chuckles. “Maybe, but it will be so worth the wait, sweet Ella.”

“Do... do shifter pregnancies ever have complications?” I ask, finally feeling brave enough to voice this hidden worry. It’s been on my mind ever since the doctor told me the baby was developing slowly, but Sinclair seemed so confident that I told myself everything was fine.

“Rarely.” He answers. “But it happens. That’s why I’m being so cautious with you – I don’t want anything to happen, for both our sakes.”

I scoff, pressing my nose to his chest and inhaling his own scent. “I think you just like telling people what to do – baby or not.”

Sinclair’s wolf flashes in his eyes, but he smirks; “Keep it up you naughty thing, and I’ll show you what strict really is.” Before I can respond or contemplate what this might mean, he pushes into my bedroom, striding towards my bed as if he intends to tuck me in.

“No, I want a shower first.” I object.

“Are you sure? It’s very late.” Sinclair asks.

I nod, “I hate going to bed not feeling clean.” After a childhood of almost always feeling dirty, it had become a crutch of mine.



Sinclair helps me with the zipper on my dress, and within minutes I'm standing beneath a steaming cascade of water, feeling more and more myself as more of the day washes away. I felt like a different person with all that makeup and finery on, it's such a relief to be free of it.

I'm rinsing shampoo from my hair when I hear a strange growl – violent and very close by. It isn't Sinclair, and it isn't coming through the me\*tal link with the baby. I don't know how I can recognize his growl from anyone else's, but in my heart, I know that danger is near. Did someone come into the bathroom after me? I wonder frantically, trying to peer through the fogged up glass, how did they get past Sinclair's guards!?

The snarl sounds again, reverberating around the small space, and I cry out in fear, unable to stay quiet. I don't think ten seconds passed before the door slams open and Sinclair appears, his wolf glowing in his eyes. "Ella, are you alright? What's wrong?"

He comes over to the shower stall, opening the glass door to release the steam, and finds me curled up in a ball in the corner. "I swear someone was in here with me." I confess shakily. "I could hear them growling and snarling, but I couldn't see through the steam."

Sinclair's body, already rigid, tightens even further as he begins scenting the air and searching the room. "I don't smell anything" He tells me after a moment, "but I'll have the guards search anyway, just in case" He charges out of the room only long enough to bark some orders at his guards, telling them to begin searching the grounds. While he's away, I wrap a towel around my naked body, trying to ease my trembling.

As soon as Sinclair returns, he pulls me into his arms. "It's okay Ella, you're safe." He promises.

"I'm sorry, I don't know what's wrong with me." I apologize.

"It's okay, it's probably just all the stress piling up on you." He reasons. "But if you don't feel safe you can sleep in my room tonight."

I nod into his chest, realizing it's bare for the first time. He must have been getting ready for bed himself.

My nerves are so frayed that I don't even object when he swings my legs up into his arms, or think about stopping to grab night clothes, I simply let Sinclair carry me back to his rooms. When he sets me down I realize I didn't bring anything to sleep in. I pause,

trying to decide if I want to go back or ask to borrow something, when Sinclair's voice interrupts my thoughts. "Oh no!"

"What, what's wrong?" I ask anxiously, spinning around and searching for a threat.

However Sinclair's attention is focused on me, and suddenly I'm painfully aware of the fact I'm only wearing a towel.

"You washed off my scent." He frowns, prowling closer.

"So?" I murmur, "I'm only going to sleep. No one is going to be smelling me."

He shakes his head. "We can't take that risk."

"I – what risk?" I murmur, feeling my blood heat up in response.

"Well if I have to wake up early and leave for the office, there won't be time to mark you before I go." Sinclair reasons. "I'm afraid my wolf is fairly insistent. It needs to be tonight."

"Your wolf?" I squeak.

Sinclair nods, "It's for the baby's protection, he won't let either of us rest until it's done."

He's towering me over now, and I can already feel my body getting worked up. The last couple of times he's marked me have been almost dangerously arousing. "But I'm naked." I whisper, as if it's some sort of secret.

His green eyes flash, and a shiver runs down my spine. "Do you want me to go get you some underthings?"

I gnaw on my lower lip. I don't want him to leave, and the idea of being completely naked with this man is beyond intriguing. Besides, I know it doesn't mean anything to him. Nudity to shifters is completely normal, and he might think I'm pretty or a good kisser, but at the end of the day I'm still a human. He could never want me that way.

I shake my head after a moment, hoping I won't completely embarrass myself. Sinclair nods with approval, reaching for my towel. I instinctively clutch the fabric to my skin, backing out of his reach. He arches a brow, "Second thoughts?"

“No.” I respond defiantly, unwrapping the terrycloth and revealing myself to him completely.

His dark gaze rakes over every inch of my exposed skin, and before long I have goosebumps. Sinclair strips off his own clothes, and it takes all my willpower not to look below his

waist. He backs me into the bed, and when my thighs hit the mattress I clamber up onto it, still inching out of his reach, but too afraid to turn my back on such a known predator. I know he would never hurt me, but right now his wolf is in control, and I feel his power deep in my bones.

I’m shifting backwards towards the pillows, and suddenly Sinclair is on the bed with me. He’s on all fours, stalking me with lethal grace until I’m pinned beneath him, feeling more vulnerable than I have in my entire life. A low purr sounds in his chest as his green eyes bore into mine, and somehow I feel soothed, even as he lowers his face to the curve of my neck and breathes me in. His chest is brushing mine, and I’m embarrassed to realize my nipples are already hard.

“Are you cold?” He rumbles in my ear.

I nod, not feeling brave enough to admit how turned on I am.

“Mmm, let’s see if we can do something about that.” He offers, pressing his limbs flush to mine. The next thing I know his body is undulating against mine as his hands stroke every inch of me. This is like the previous times he marked me, only even more intimate than before. We’ve never done this naked, and until now, he’s always been in total control, now I can feel his hardness pressing into my thigh, and I have to tell myself over and over again that it’s just a natural response – just the the pooling wetness between my legs is perfectly normal – considering a gorgeous man is currently rubbing himself all over me.

It takes longer this time, though I don’t know why. It seems like Sinclair is determined to be even more thorough than in the past. I’m proud that I’m able to get through it without making a fool of myself, and though I wish it could go on

forever, I’m also relieved when Sinclair finally stops, settling with his ear pressed to my belly, just above our pup. He looks so serene listening to the tiny heart beat, and who knows whatever else is coming through the me\*tal link. I actually thought he’d fallen

asleep, until of course he opens his eyes and catches me staring. “There’s someone I want to take you to meet tomorrow.”

## Chapter 21

### Sinclair

I think my wolf is broken. Legitimately. I can’t figure out what on earth is going on with him. Last night the threat against Ella made my heart practically leap out of my chest, but that’s to be expected. What was not to be expected was how upset my wolf became when he realized that Ella had washed my scent off. Despite what I told her, it had nothing to do with protecting our cover, and everything to do with him throwing a tantrum that she was no longer scent marked.

Being naked with her was both a blessing and a curse. I could happily admire her beautiful body all day long, but the intimate physical contact got me more than a little excited. My balls were so blue by the time my wolf was satisfied that the only way I could calm down was by listening to the baby’s heartbeat. It was an important reminder to be gentle with Ella, and gave me more joy than I can express.

My mental link with the pup is a fleeting thing, and most of the time all I can hear are blips of emotion. The baby is happy when it hears Ella’s voice or smells me, it likes it best when we’re together, and more often than not it simply sleeps. Still, merely being near it has given me new appreciation for my own father. I never knew it was possible to love someone I’ve yet to even meet so much, and the power of the bond astonishes me. Moreover, I want Dad to meet Ella – he’s had a rough few years, and I can’t think of anything that would make him happier than meeting the woman carrying his first grandchild.

Ella looks nervous as the car moves along through the heavy mid-day traffic. I haven’t told her who I’m taking her to meet yet and I’m getting the impression she doesn’t like surprises. She’s a fascinating puzzle, this little human. Clearly accustomed to great hardship and yet obviously used to getting her own way. I suppose after such a turbulent life, control is a crutch for her, so much so that she panics when it slips out of her fingers. Is it terrible that I enjoy throwing her off balance so much, knowing what I do about her past? She’s just so cute when she gets all riled up – I can’t help myself.

When the car finally pulls to a stop, Ella blinks up at me hopefully. “Will you tell me now?”

“Come on, trouble.” I chuckle, sliding out of the car and extending my hand to help her do the same, “You’ll find out soon enough.”

Ella grumbles mutinously under her breath as she sets off down the street, and I catch her waist, pulling her under my arm. “Would you like to say that a bit louder?” I intone ominously.

“No.” She responds tartly. “I would not.”

“You know I have supernatural hearing, right?” I question, watching her eyes widen anxiously.

She processes this for a moment, then narrows her eyes suspiciously. “Could you really hear me?”

“Not this time.” I admit, “you did a good job mumbling.”

“Then I’ll do a good job in the future too.” Ella decides, nodding in approval of her decision.

I’m reluctant to laugh and encourage her defiance, but I can’t stop the corners of my mouth from quirking up. I steer her into the house, pushing through the heavy door without pausing to knock. As we stride inside the familiar space, I’m transported back to my childhood, remembering walking these same halls as a young boy. It’s not as luxurious as my current estate, but it’s undeniably the place I consider home.

“Whose house is this?” Ella asked, surveying the comfortable rooms curiously.

“Actually, this is the house where I grew up.” I finally share, nodding towards the photos on the wall.

Ella is so preoccupied studying the images that she doesn’t seem to notice my father wheeling into the hall, seated comfortably but permanently in a high-tech wheelchair. Either Ella really is interested in the images before her, or human hearing is even worse than I realize, because she doesn’t turn around until I speak.

“Dad this is Ella.” I nudge her forward so they can meet, “Ella, this is my father.”

Ella blinks, seeming unable to find the words to reply. This was clearly the last thing she expected. My father was once a terrifying man – every bit as tall and imposing as I am myself. Now however, he’s a shadow of the man he used to be. He was paralyzed from the waist down more than five years ago now, and even though the injury stole his title, vitality and mobility, he’s never let it dampen his spirit. In intelligence and will he’s as strong as he’s always been, and I still learn from him every time we talk.

“I hoped he would bring you to meet me soon.” Dad tells Ella. “I’m so thrilled that you found each other. I’ve been waiting for a grandchild for some time now.”

“It’s an honor to meet you.” Ella replies, “I’m happy too, I think we’ve all been waiting.”

“You can say that again.” I chime in.

“Please, come in, I want to hear everything about my new daughter-in-law.” Dad encourages, wheeling into the living room. Ella, however, is frozen in place. At first I thought his allusion to our fake union might have blindsided her, but the more I watch, the more I suspect she’s more daunted by the prospect of sharing her story with him. Even though I know all the major moments in her life from my investigators, I realize Ella has never spoken about them herself. The more I think about it, the more I appreciate how little she speaks about her past at all.

I’m almost disappointed in my own powers of observation. She’s so charming and affectionate it’s easy to mistake her genial qualities for openness – but she isn’t open, not really.

Ella actually sighs with relief when her phone begins to ring, though she looks up to me for permission before actually answering it. “It’s okay, go ahead.” I permit, “I need to have a word with my Dad anyway.”

She nods appreciatively and raises the device to her ear, “Cora?”

I can hear the other woman’s voice on the other end of the line, and stride after my father to avoid eavesdropping. I really did want to introduce Ella to Dad – to connect these new members of my family with the man who raised me – but I also need to speak to my father after what happened last night.

“Ella’s taking a call from her sister.” I explain when I enter the room alone, taking a seat across from him. “And as eager as I am to catch up with you, I need to speak about something and I don’t want her to overhear.”

My father was Alpha for almost 20 years before the attack, and he understands the need for discretion and secrecy better than anyone. No one understands the drive to protect your loved ones from unseen threats better than a pack leader. “Go ahead.”

“We went to a campaign event last night at the King’s palace – it was Ella’s public debut.” I recount, “But when we came home there was a strange wolf in her room. They were gone by the time I reached her and I said it was just her imagination, but I’m afraid whoever was there wanted to hurt her.”

“She has no idea?” My father clarifies.

“I didn’t want to frighten her more than she already was. The baby is still so little – she doesn’t need the stress.” I share, even as a stab of guilt assails me. “Do you think the King or the Prince might have been behind it?”

“You know as well as I do that the King will go to any lengths necessary to hold onto his power.” My father rumbles, nodding to his mangled legs.

We’ve never been able to prove it, but the timing of my father’s injury was always beyond suspicious. Rogues beset him after an event during his own campaign to be king five years ago, after the last king died without ever producing an heir. His primary competitor became king, and probably expected to rule for far longer than he actually has. I consider it karma, if you have to sabotage your competition to seize power, it shouldn’t be any surprise when the alpha council loses faith in you afterwards.

“The King and Prince never paid any attention to me before though,” I remind him, “do you think my perceived sterility really kept them at bay? Is having a pup on the way really all it took for them to finally see me as a threat?”

“You know the history as well as I do,” My father murmurs, “They never believed the Alpha council would elect another ruler without heirs, even if you were the most qualified candidate for the job. Ella changes everything. Your pup changes everything.”

“Then why not attack me?” I growl, hating the idea that finally getting a family of my own could also bring about the end of my career. “Why target Ella?”

My father rolls his eyes then. “Come on, Dominic. Whether they admit it or not, you’re the strongest Alpha to enter the field of competition in half a century – stronger even than me.” He concedes with a smile. “Going after you would be suicidal – but a breeding

she-wolf? She's the perfect target." He shakes his head. "And if you don't have heirs, you might as well give up the throne now."

"That isn't fair." I snarl. "Ella is innocent in all this – and the pup..." I trail off, unable to comprehend the idea of anyone hurting an unborn child.

"I know." My father sighs, "But this cannot be ignored. If we're right, Ella and the pup are in grave danger."

## Chapter 22

Ella

"Wait, what!" I exclaim, not believing my own ears. "You got your job back?"

"It sounds like somebody very important called in some favors for me." My sister confirms. "They even gave me a raise to compensate for my troubles."

She doesn't need to say more. There's only one person with enough power to undo a command issued by Dominic Sinclair – and that's Dominic Sinclair himself. "I can't believe this. Why didn't he tell me?"

"You mean you didn't ask?" I can imagine the precise look on Cora's face. Stunned and reeling at once.

"I mean, not after that first time." I relate, wondering if I should have tried harder to help her. Did I misperceive my importance to Sinclair, or the power I hold now that I'm carrying his child?

"Well apparently that's all it took." She relates, her voice full of elation. "Thank you, Ella."

"Don't thank me," I object. "I'm the one who got us into this situation to begin with." I remind her ruefully.

"Of course you didn't." She refutes. "Listen, I don't know how it happened, but either I made a mistake or..."



“Or what?” I press.

“Or someone did this on purpose.” She sounds uncertain now, as if she can’t fathom the motive for such an act. I find myself equally confused.

“Why would they?” I fret, not wanting to believe my sister messed up so badly, but not seeing any logic in the alternative.

“I don’t know.” She confesses. “But that’s not important now. It’s all going to be okay from here on out. You get your baby, I get my career... the only thing we need now is to find a way to get revenge on Mike.”

“That was a much easier problem to solve before he fled halfway across the country.” I share. “I’m not sure how I’m supposed to enact any sort of plan against him when he’s so far away.”

“You could always ask for Sinclair’s help.” Cora suggests, a note of teasing in her voice – the same one children use on the playground to tease each other about crushes.

“No.” I don’t even need to think about it. “I don’t want him to think I’m high maintenance. He’s already helped me so much.” Glancing at the closed door Sinclair disappeared behind, I sidle back towards the entrance, lowering my voice to a whisper. “If I start to seem like too much trouble he might change his mind about letting me have visitation rights with the baby. It’s honestly driving me crazy – I’ve got to censor every single word that comes out of my mouth.”

“It’s not as if you were an open book before, Elle.” Cora replies wryly.

“No, this is different.” I clarify. “I’m constantly afraid that I’ll say the wrong thing and make myself seem weak or fragile, too annoying to put up with. It’s exhausting.” I drag my hand through my hair. “I end up over-analyzing everything I do with him. I shouldn’t have cried, I was too sassy, too timid, too bold. It’s like walking an emotional tightrope. And the worst part is that he can read me so damned well that even when I try to hide what I’m feeling, he still works it out.”

“I’m sorry sweetie.” Cora commiserates.

“Thanks,” I sigh, “I think I just need a little more time to get my bearings. Once I figure Sinclair out I’ll understand what I need to do to keep my head above water.”

There's a pregnant pause on the other end of the line.

"What?" I prompt my sister, knowing she wants to say something.

"It's just that I worry when I hear you talk that way." Cora admits. "It's like you're still in survival mode – 'keeping your head above water,' rather than taking care of yourself, making yourself happy and enjoying becoming a mother."

"Yeah well, like it or not, this is a survival situation." I counter cynically, "if I don't perform well I lose my baby. The best I can hope for if I do perfectly is visitation rights after Sinclair finds his mate, and even that could mean anything from every weekend to once a year. I don't want to risk landing with the latter or bungling the deal completely."

Cora sighs heavily, and lets the matter drop. "How are you otherwise? Any morning sickness?" She asks, excitement entering her tone.

I laugh. "I spent all morning in the bathroom... but I've never been happier to be sick."

"Aw, I've never been happier for you to feel miserable either." She jokes. "I hope it keeps up."

"Me too." The more the baby makes its presence known, the more secure I feel that it's growing big and strong.

"Anyway, I've gotta run. Sinclair brought me to meet his father." I confess. "It was great to talk though, let's have dinner soon."

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Lunch with Sinclair's father was surprisingly pleasant. I don't know what I imagined when I pictured the elder Alpha, but the sweet man in the wheelchair was far from the imposing figure I expected. He radiated quiet strength and dignity, but he also welcomed me to his family with genuine warmth. I could see the shadow of a powerful leader in his stoic demeanor, but also the humility of a man whose circumstances had irrevocably changed and who chose to adapt rather than rail at the world for its injustice. He was obviously incredibly proud of his son, and obviously thrilled to become a grandfather.

I felt far more at ease when we finally left his home, and I spent the rest of the day napping and reading my pregnancy books. I can't believe how tired I've been, or how hungry. I expected the changes, I just didn't think they'd happen so fast. Of course after

so much rest, I couldn't sleep when night finally fell. It took me ages to finally drift off, and when I finally found rest – nightmares awaited me.

I found myself trapped in the horrors of my past: reliving the orphanage and the foster homes, all full of cruel adults and abusive parents. In my dreams I'm always running away from someone, trying to protect Cora and my other surrogate siblings. The dreams have gotten worse since I got pregnant, no doubt driven by my raging hormones.

Tonight takes me back to one of the worst days of my life. The sounds of my own screams and pleading tears fill my head, as dreadful images fill my vision. The next thing I know someone is shouting my name, and my eyes snap open.

“Ella!” Sinclair is sitting beside me on my bed, his powerful hands gripping my shoulders as he tries to bring me back to reality. It takes me a minute to realize it's him, rather than the man who'd been attacking me in my dreams. I jerk out of his hold and scramble to the other side of the mattress, curling up into a little ball and gasping for air.

“Easy sweetheart, it's only me.” Sinclair assures me, making a soft purring sound that magically unwinds my taut muscles. How does he do that?

There are tears streaming down my face, and again I feel a stab of shame for showing this weakness in front of him. “I'm okay.” I stammer once I come back to myself. “I'm okay.”

Sinclair shushes me softly, and though I thought I was out of his reach, I clearly underestimated the length of his strong arms. He plucks me from the corner and pulls me into his lap. “You don't have to be okay, Ella.” He remarks gently, cuddling me close. “You're safe.”

Those words are like a balm on my soul, but I know where they lead. If I let him comfort me, he's going to want to know what happened. And I don't want to talk about my dreams, I don't want him to feel like I'm some fragile creature he has to soothe. I scramble for something to pull his attention away from me, landing on a question that has been burning in my mind since this afternoon. “Why didn't you tell me about Cora's job?”

Sinclair seems taken aback. “What? Were you dreaming about Cora?”

“No.” I sniffle, “I just want to know.”

“You want to distract me, more like.” Sinclair guesses shrewdly. At first I think this means he won’t answer, but then he says. “I didn’t tell you because I didn’t do it for you. I did it because it was right.”

Why does my heart sink when he says it wasn’t for me? Did I want it to be? Would it be better if he only took action to please me, rather than doing so for the sake of morality? No, of course not... so why does it sting so badly?

“Oh.” I murmur, unable to conjure any more eloquent response.

“Does that disappoint you?” He asks, sounding curious, rather than judgemental.

“No, I just didn’t expect it.” I admit.

“Because I’m the big bad wolf?” Sinclair teases, petting me in long, tender caresses.

I nod, pressing my nose to his chest. “I keep waiting for you to huff and puff, and blow my house down.” I joke through my tears.

Sinclair chuckles, and for one long moment he simply holds me, rocking me back and forth until my racing heartbeat slows. “I ought to make you tell me about your dreams.” He muses, making my limbs stiffen up again. “But I won’t.” His lips graze my hair, and butterflies burst to life in my tummy. “That said, I think you should sleep with me from now on.”

## Chapter 23

Ella

I must have misheard him. He can’t truly mean that he wants me to move into his rooms. Does he really think I’m that much of a baby, that I need constant watching?

“But it was only one dream.” I protest, my voice still shaky, “I swear it’s not a big deal.”

Sinclair purrs again, and I feel my insides melting against my will. “Maybe it is, maybe it isn’t. I just want you to sleep easily.” Before I can stop him, he’s lifting me into my arms.

“Sinclair—” He interrupts me with a growl, and I quickly amend myself, “Dominic this really isn’t necessary. I can sleep on my own.”

“I’m sure you can.” He concedes. “But I want you close.”

“And what about what I want?” The words slip out before I can stop them, and Sinclair pauses, looking down at me with an appraising look.

“And what do you want, Ella?” He asks huskily, his deep voice reverberating down my spine.

“I—” I open my mouth to tell him I want to be alone, in my own space and without his intimidating presence. However somehow I can’t make the words come. Why is it that I can’t seem to stop myself from speaking when I don’t want to, then can’t make myself talk when I do? What is this man doing to me?

Sinclair smirks. “You know the problem, don’t you?” He taunts, and I can only shake my head in reply. “You can’t lie to me. The pup is making you more and more like a wolf, and wolves can’t lie to their Alpha’s, not directly at least.”

The breath seems to evaporate from my lungs, I can’t lie to him? My eyes go wide as I realize the implications of this, and I want to protest that such a thing isn’t fair, people are entitled to their secrets! “But you’re not my Alpha.” I finally protest, my voice sounding very small indeed.

Sinclair cocks a brow. “Aren’t I?” After a beat he continues towards the door, as if this settles the matter. I don’t know why I don’t object further – maybe because he’s clearly made up his mind, maybe because I don’t really want him to change it. I let him carry me out into the hall, flushing scarlet when I see so many guards waiting outside my room. Had all these men heard me screaming like a baby? Surely I hadn’t spoken or said anything while unconscious?

“Do you always have this many guards posted at night?” I squeak.

“This pup is the most important thing to me in the world.” Sinclair responds simply. “You can expect lots of guards to be around from now on.”

Of course. I think, It’s all for the pup. I’m just an afterthought. Will I ever be anything more?

I don't need to ask Sinclair to know the answer – it's already painfully obvious: No. In a world of mystically powerful beings like wolves, a human like me could never be anything but an afterthought. The only reason he's putting up with me at all is the pregnancy. And honestly, the only reason I'm putting up with him is our arrangement... so why does it hurt so much?

The next morning I wake up to find a maid setting down a room service tray by my bedside, stacked high with my favorite foods. At first the smell of fruit and oatmeal has my stomach growling, but before I can so much as raise a spoon to my lips, a wave of nausea overtakes me. I rush to the bathroom and retch, groaning pitifully.

When I finally finish with the joys of pregnancy, I return to Sinclair's sprawling, king sized bed. The food which looked so appetizing a moment ago just makes my stomach churn now, but I notice a folded note on the tray. My name is scrawled across the front in the swooping handwriting I now recognize as Sinclair's.

Ella,

I've arranged an interview for you this morning, with the leading news outlets in the area. We've been getting a lot of requests and the reporter promised you would only have to answer questions of which I approved. Call me if you have any questions. I'll see you tonight.

Yours,

Dominic

An interview?! I've never given an interview in my life! And this won't even be an interview as myself, this will be an interview under cover, pretending to be a completely different person, a completely different species! What kind of questions are they going to ask, what on earth am I going to say to them? What am I going to wear?

Two hours later, I'm seated in front of an intimidating man in a sharp looking suit, feeling very small and out of place. A camera is poised on my face, and I'm trying to look serene – rather than panicked. I found a pretty sweater dress in the wardrobe Sinclair procured for me, and decided that simple elegance was the best foot forward. Now I wonder if I miscalculated, the reporter is watching me with sharp eyes, and I can already feel myself blushing.

“So Ella, it will come as no surprise to you that many shifters in the Moon Valley Pack and beyond are very curious about you.” He begins obliquely. “With you by his side, the Alpha is poised to become our next King, yet no one knows anything about you.”

“I can understand how that might worry some pack members.” I smile gently, trying to appear confident and self-assured.

“How did you and Dominic meet?” He presses. “When did it happen, I’d love to hear the whole story?”

Sinclair and I had discussed this at length, even before this interview arose. “Well it will be obvious to all those in the know that we aren’t fated, but I can’t help thinking that the Goddess didn’t play a hand in our meeting. For years my family in the Shadow Pack insisted we had no other relations – apparently my parents cut ties with the Moon Valley before I was even born. It wasn’t until they passed away that I learned about my cousins here – including Aileen Corentin.”

We’d decided the story should be as close to the truth as possible, so my fake identity is an orphan just like I am in reality. “I came to visit her after making contact, and of course she’s the wife of Beta Hugo. One day I was having lunch with Aileen and Hugo and Dominic walked in... and the rest is history.”

“But you haven’t known each other very long, is that correct?” The reporter inquires.

“Yes,” I confirm. “But when it’s true love, it doesn’t take long for the heart to recognize its mate. And then we were blessed with a pup without even trying.”

“Some pack members might be worried that you come from such a humble background, you have no experience leading.” The reporter states bluntly. “How would you respond to their fears?”

This was a question Sinclair hadn’t prepared me for in our earlier discussions regarding our cover. We decided on what we would tell people about how we met, nothing more. “I would say that great leaders come from all kinds of backgrounds, and in fact my humble origins give me insight into the needs of everyday shifters in a way that an aristocratic upbringing would not. I’m in touch with what regular people want and need, and I can speak for them with empathy and understanding, representing their voices in a forum where they often left out.”

The reporter arches his brows, and I know I've impressed him. Take that! I think triumphantly. People always assume I don't have a brain in my head because I'm young and attractive, not to mention I chose to work caring for children. But I'm no fool, and hopefully this will help the shifters see that.

“And what do you think our society needs most at this time in history, what is the biggest issue the future King and Queen need to address?” He asks.

I navigate his questions with more or less difficulty for the next half hour, feeling better about some responses than others, and praying that I haven't put my foot in my mouth. I think I've done well, but I'm completely exhausted. At first part of me was excited to pretend to be someone other than myself – almost like playing dress up or make believe. However that initial interest disappeared very quickly, when I realized just how stressful it is to constantly be acting.

I know what it's like to put up walls around myself, but this is the first time I've ever been forced to blatantly lie to those around me, to try to pass myself off as someone else. All at once, the gravity of this deal I've struck slams into me. If I'm exhausted now, how am I going to feel when I've been doing this for months? Years? Can I really do this for the rest of my life? What will happen if the truth comes out? What will people do when they learn I'm a fraud?

Because, I realize, that's what I am. This isn't just a game or a play we're performing, I'm actively deceiving people. I'm campaigning to take up a public office, and lying every step of the way. Guilt and worry assails me in a tidal wave, this is wrong! I think frantically. I have to talk to Sinclair.

## Chapter 24

### Sinclair

I'm sitting in my office, speaking with my cabinet, when Ella's delicious scent fills my nose. I've been thinking about her on and off all morning, wondering how she took the news of the interview, and hating that I hadn't been able to tell her about it in person. Normally I wouldn't do such a thing, but I'd needed to check in with my guards about their investigation into the intruder, and she'd been sleeping so sweetly that I couldn't bear to wake her.



I can sense how close she is now, and wonder if something went wrong. I'm already on my feet when I hear my assistant encouraging her to stay, "No, he'll want to see you, just wait one moment."

"I'm sorry, it's really not urgent," Ella is protesting. "I should have known he'd be busy."

She's retreating, her delicate footsteps receding, and I push through the door before she can get away. "And just where do you think you're going?"

Ella freezes in place, her little body winding tight as a spring. When she turns, she's staring at the floor, "I'm sorry." She says again, "I didn't mean to interrupt."

I glance at the wolves over my shoulder, "Leave us."

Ella gnaws on her plump lower lip as my cabinet members file past her out of the office, shifting restlessly on her feet. I can tell something is bothering her, but I also can't help but think how lovely she looks in the cream-colored dress hugging her curves. "Come here, little one." I command, not moving from the doorway.

This gets her attention, and indignation flashes in her golden eyes as her gaze snaps to mine. I can tell she wants to disobey, but I arch my brow in challenge and she slowly crosses the distance between us. I drag my knuckles over the high plane of her cheekbone when she's finally in front of me, enjoying the way her defiance becomes muddled with uncertainty once more. "How did the interview go?"

"Good – I think." She qualifies, unconsciously leaning her cheek into my hand. My wolf perks up at her obvious response to my touch, and I beckon her inside.

"Can I get you anything, have you eaten lunch?" I question, thinking of the pup.

"My stomach has been too unsettled." Ella admits, looking guilty.

I press my hand to her flat belly, feeling the pup's heartbeat and prodding the mental link. The babe seems perfectly content, but it worries me that Ella hasn't eaten. "We can order in some lunch." I suggest, resisting the urge to continue touching her.

"Sin-Dominic, I need to talk to you." She answers, ignoring the offer and just barely remembering to call me by my given name.

"Sure, what's going on?" I inquire, taking a seat behind my desk.

Ella's hands are fidgeting, and she's staring at the anxious movement rather than meeting my gaze. "I think... I think I'm having second thoughts."

This gets my attention loud and clear. "How so?"

"What we're doing... it's wrong." Ella chokes out, positively trembling. "It's fraud. I... I don't know if I can take the pressure." Her cheeks are flushing with color and she sounds as though she might cry. "I know I said I could do it, but I'm not sure I can pretend to be someone I'm not for the rest of my life... but I don't want to lose the baby." Now she really is crying, and I'm on my feet in an instant. Ella turns her back on me, shoulders shaking, as if she doesn't want me to see how upset she is. "I don't want to fail you, I can't lose the baby. I just don't know what to do."

I approach behind her, my heart aching for the poor little human. I should have foreseen this problem. Ella is honest and good-hearted, of course a life of deceit would bother her. I suppose when we made the agreement I didn't realize how much integrity she has, but I know now. Ella flinches when I take her shoulders in my hands, and I have to forcibly turn her body to face me again. "Come here," I say again, but this time it's not an order. It's an invitation, one I have to force Ella to accept by pulling her into my arms.

As soon as I envelop her in my embrace, she cracks, emitting a heartbroken sob and wrapping her slender arms around my middle. She must be clinging to me with all her might, but it feels about as powerful as a child's grip compared to my shifter strength. "I'm sorry." I profess, kissing her hair. "I should have realized how much this scheme was asking of you."

"I can still do it!" She insists defiantly, clearly beside herself with the competing needs to prove herself, keep her baby, and do the right thing.

Doubts swirl in my own mind. Can this really work? What will we do after the baby comes, and she no longer has its smell? What happens if someone connects her to Ella Reina, orphaned human and disgraced nanny? Am I really willing to put her through all this? She doesn't even know about the true dangers she faces, and already the stress is becoming too much. Is asking her to pose as my Luna hurting the pup? What will it think when it gets old enough to understand our relationship is a sham? What would happen if the pack found out the truth?

Even as all the potential calamities fill my head, my wolf surges to the forefront, insisting that we have to find a way to make it work. Ella has already proven to be my biggest

asset in this campaign – not only is she giving me an heir, but she charms everyone she meets. I need her if I'm going to win. More importantly, my wolf won't abide the thought of letting her go. I try to tell him dissolving our agreement doesn't mean letting her go, but he's absolutely determined.

"Come on, let's talk about this." I suggest. Moving to the couch. "What worries you the most about our plan?"

"I don't want to hurt anyone." Ella whispers, tears clinging to her dark lashes. "I don't want to trick honest, hardworking shifters. I don't want my life to be a lie."

"How long have you been feeling this way?" I press.

"I guess a little bit from the beginning." She confesses, "but it really hit me today during the interview. I just thought about doing this for the rest of my life and it just felt so overwhelming."

I nod, pulling her between my legs and petting her sides. "The first, and most important thing I need you to understand is that shifter society doesn't work like human society does. We are a ruthless species, and we do whatever is necessary to ensure the safety of our packs." I explain. "I know it feels like a giant fraud, but you have to remember that my campaign is the only thing standing between a lot of innocent people and a tyrant. If the Prince takes the throne, he will wipe out the Alpha council and all his political competition in order to stay in power forever. He will oppress and terrorize millions of people."

"If he's that bad, why hasn't he already staged a coup?" Ella inquires, a few notable degrees calmer as my words sink in.

"Because he doesn't have the power yet." I clarify, "He doesn't have an army – yet. His father is bad, but he's old fashioned enough to respect our political system. The Prince on the other hand..." I trail off.

"So basically you're saying that lying is the lesser evil." Ella summarizes.

"Honesty is an incredibly admirable trait." I relate gently, "but it's also a luxury that shifters can't afford right now. I know it feels wrong, but when your enemies are as abominable as the Prince, you have to bend the rules to survive."

"Like wartime spies?" Ella suggests morosely.

“A little.” I crack a smile.

She nods, thinking so deeply that her brow furrows, and I have to resist the urge to smooth out the adorable wrinkles with my fingers. “I want a safe life for my baby. If the Prince wins the election... would he...?” She trails off, unable to utter the horrible words.

“It’s highly likely” I confirm, I have no doubt the prince would try to kill my heir – he probably has already.

Ella frowns, “Then I’ll do whatever it takes to help you win.” She seems much more relaxed now, but I can still sense her lingering nerves.

“Would you feel better if you could spend more time with shifters, get to know our ways better?” I ask, suspecting that at least some of her unease is due to the fact that she’s afraid she’ll fail.

Ella nods, and I give her a squeeze. “Okay, then you and I are going to start going out more, so you can get to know my world and my people.”

“I think that would help.” Ella admits. “I’m sorry I lost it that way, I don’t know if it’s the hormones or the stress, or what! I just started spiraling and I couldn’t stop.”

“Hey,” I interrupt, “It’s okay. I want you to tell me when you lose it, I want you to talk to me when you have worries or doubts, okay?”

“Okay.” She nods, giving me a shy smile.

“Now let’s get some food into you, and tonight – we’ll go out.”

I don’t say what I’m thinking, what my wolf so desperately wants to add to that sentence. I know it’s too soon, and Ella is still too skittish of me. Still, it feels too exciting to deny. Tonight we’re going out together – On our first real date.

## Chapter 25

Ella

It’s not a date, it’s not a date, it’s not a date. I’ve been repeating the same thought over and over again. I know Sinclair is only taking me out tonight because I fell to complete

pieces this afternoon. I'm still kicking myself, totally ashamed of my weakness and determined to prove myself to him after all. I spent the better part of an hour picking out my dress for tonight, eventually deciding on a little black dress that shows off my figure and makes me feel strong and sexy, nothing like my usual self.

I wrap a heavy winter coat around my body after Sinclair's makeup artists and hairdressers finish making me up, sliding on a pair of strappy stilettos and taking a few deep breaths before heading downstairs. Sinclair is waiting for me at the bottom of the stairs, his emerald gaze raking up my bare legs and lingering on my coat, as if he's tempted to unwrap it and get a preview of what's underneath. It's amazing how overheated he can make me feel from a single glance – he's already seen me naked, and it's not as if there's any true feeling behind it anyway.

“Ready?” He asks, his deep voice making my heart stop for just a few beats.

I nod shyly, and let him guide me out the door with a hand on the small of my back. However as soon as I take a step outside, I find myself backing into Sinclair's protective shelter. A sea of reporters is gathered just outside the estate's gates, cameras flashing and voices raised in shouts for our attention. It's precisely like the scene which had awaited us outside the King's palace, only this is a random Tuesday evening – at the place I'm gradually beginning to think of as home.

“Dominic?” I squeak.

“It's okay,” His lips brush my ear as he tucks me under his arm, “your interview aired this evening, that's all. Early feedback would indicate you're a hit.”

“You mean, they're here because of me?” I whisper, praying I can walk gracefully in my heels, and that Sinclair will catch me if I start to fall flat on my face.

“That's right.” He grins, waving at the reporters. “If you feel nervous just take a deep breath, and remember it will all be over in a few seconds.”

I do as he advises, and sure enough the next thing I know, I'm safely ensconced in the back seat of his limousine. “Do you ever get used to it?” I ask shakily.

“No.” Sinclair admits, “but it gets easier.”

“So are you going to tell me where we're headed, or is it another surprise?” I guess, trying not to sound too petulant.

“This time I’ll tell you.” Sinclair conceded, in a tone that sounded as though this was a grave sacrifice. “I think you’ve had a hard enough day already.”

“Thank you.” I note primly, gazing at him expectantly.

The corner of his mouth tilts upwards, “It’s just so tempting.”

“Dominic!” I exclaim in exasperation.

He laughs. “Okay, okay. We’re going to a little French restaurant I know, and afterwards we’ll go dancing at a popular shifter club.”

I find myself practically bursting with curiosity. “Is shifter food very different from human food? Do shifters have their own dance styles?”

Sinclair smiles, and I suddenly wish I’d chosen to sit beside him, rather than across the car. “We eat more red meat than humans – rarer steaks too – but otherwise it’s not so different.” A low rumble, somewhere between a purr and a growl sounds in his chest. “And our dancing can be a bit more.... Sensual, but don’t worry, I’m looking forward to teaching you.”

Oh god. His intense focus and scintillating tone has my body heating up like a bonfire, and I have to squeeze my thighs together to relieve the sudden ache at their center. It’s not a real date, it’s not a real date, it’s not a real date.

To my dismay, the reporters have followed us to the restaurant, and they’re waiting when Sinclair helps me from the car. Their cameras are still flashing when the hostess helps me out of my coat, capturing images through the glass of my slinky black dress and Sinclair’s ravenous expression when he takes in the sight. It speaks volumes that despite their blatant observation, all I could focus on in that moment was Sinclair, and his glowing green eyes.

Before I know it he’s pulled me into his arms and is claiming my mouth in an earth-shattering kiss. I’m sure it’s only for the benefit of the cameras, but I melt against him immediately, letting him ravish me for all to see. My heart is hammering so powerfully when he finally releases me that I almost don’t hear him tell me how incredible I look. I’m in a complete daze as he guides me to the back of the restaurant, trying to recall if I’ve ever felt so overpowered by lust. I’m a grown woman who’s had a healthy sex-life, but I can’t ever recall feeling as though I’ll die if someone doesn’t make love to me in the next five minutes. But that’s exactly how I feel now.

“Ella?” Sinclair’s voice drags me back into the present, and I realize more time has passed than I realize. We’re seated at the table, and a waitress is standing beside him, watching me with an expectant smile. “Something to drink?”

“Just water.” I manage huskily, trying to pull myself together.

“You still with me?” Sinclair teases a moment later.

I’m beginning to wonder if werewolf pheromones are extra powerful on humans, the more time I spend with this man, the more I feel like I’m being drugged by desire.

“Mhmm,” I murmur, my voice much higher than I intended. “Do you have any recommendations?”

I was talking about the menu, but Sinclair’s sultry reply comes back, “I always recommend sitting side by side, rather than across from one another.”

“I don’t know.” I answer coyly, “It’s awfully warm in here, I wouldn’t want to overheat.”

“You do look a bit flushed.” Sinclair observes, “should I have them turn up the air conditioning?”

“Then I’ll be cold.” I argue.

Sinclair arches a brow, “then you’d better come over here so I can keep you warm.” It wasn’t a request. I rise from my chair and circle the table, sliding into the booth next to Sinclair even as he signals the waitress to lower the temperature in the room. He slides an arm around me and purrs with contentment. “There, much better.”

Maybe for him, I’m squirming in my seat, painfully aware of the wetness pooling between my legs. In hindsight I can’t even begin to follow the circular logic that brought us here – but I’m not complaining. I feel safe being so close to Sinclair, and the butterflies in my belly are fluttering out of control. It’s not a date, it’s not a date, it’s not a date.

Of course it only gets worse as the night progresses. Our intimate dinner turns into him hand feeding me dessert, then leading me around a darkened dance floor with our bodies pressed flush together, whirling through unfamiliar, infinitely seductive steps. I haven’t had a drop of alcohol given my condition, but I feel completely drunk on Sinclair. The evening flashes before my eyes, and I spiral into my desire: my world reduces to the feeling of his body moving against mine, his hands gliding over my waist and hips.

It's a good thing Sinclair is so intimidating or I might have tried to make a move, and I'm not sure I could survive getting involved with this powerful wolf. My body might want him, but when my senses return I'll remember how completely mismatched we are. We could never be together, and indulging my physical desires can only lead to disaster.

I'm slowly beginning to suspect that Sinclair isn't completely immune to me, but I know it could never be more than physical attraction on his part, and I'm not the sort of woman who can handle casual sex. I know I'll catch feelings sooner or later, and then I'll get my heart broken. Sinclair could never want me as more than an amusing distraction or plaything and more importantly, I'm carrying his child. I have to be able to get along with him for the rest of my life, and I know I'm not what he wants.

I fall asleep tossing and turning, until Sinclair loses his patience and pulls my body to his, spooning me and purring until I drift off. We went to bed late, but I wake up when it's still dark out, a sense of dread flooding my form.

Something is wrong.

There's wetness between my legs, but not the slick desire that tormented me earlier. I reach down and when I withdraw my fingers again, they're stained with sticky, red, blood.

Trying not to panic, I shake Sinclair awake. He groans and opens his eyes to slits, mumbling blearily.

"Sinclair, something's wrong!" I murmur frantically. "I'm bleeding. I think... I think I might be having a miscarriage."

## Chapter 26

Ella

Sinclair is instantly alert. He sits up in bed and pulls the covers back, staring at the red stain on my nightgown with an unreadable expression. He presses his palm to my belly, undoubtedly trying to communicate with the pup through their mental link. I'm trembling while I wait for him to give his verdict, terrified that the new life inside me might already be coming to a heartbreaking end.



“I think he’s okay.” Sinclair murmurs after a moment, looking up at me with a furrowed brow. “But we should get you to the hospital right away.”

I slide out of bed on autopilot, my mind spinning with all the terrible possibilities. What if my ovaries were too damaged by Mike’s sabotage to support a healthy baby? What if my uterus isn’t strong enough to carry the child to term? Was the doctor right at our last appointment, was something wrong from the start? Is that why it was so small?

I can only wrap my arms around myself to try and cease shaking as the blood rushes in my ears. Please don’t take this baby from me. I silently beg the universe, it’s all I have, I won’t survive losing it.

Sinclair dresses quickly, but I’m only vaguely aware of him moving around in my periphery. I’m standing there frozen, too afraid to move in case I somehow make the bleeding worse. Without asking, Sinclair comes over and sweeps me up into his arms. He only pauses to wrap me in a coat before heading out into the snow, then bundles me into the car and takes off into the night.

We arrive at the emergency room in minutes and Sinclair doesn’t even bother parking. Instead he skids to a stop in front of the main entrance, once again scooping me up and charging inside. I’ve been to the hospital before, and it’s always been a long, drawn out process of triages and waiting to be seen for hours on end.

Not this time.

The moment the staff sees Sinclair they leap into motion, eager to do his bidding. I’ve never been more grateful for his wealth and influence than I am in this moment. Nurses and orderlies gather around us, leading us straight into the treatment area. The nurses bring forward a wheelchair, but Sinclair holds onto me tightly. “She’s three weeks pregnant and bleeding.”

Seeming to realize he’s not going to release me, the nurses take the wheelchair away and direct us into a consultation room,

“Okay honey, just hold on.” They advise, “we’ll get someone over to take a look at you right away.”

No sooner has Sinclair set me down onto a reclining gurney that an orderly comes in with a scratchy hospital gown and an ultrasound machine, shortly followed by a doctor in a white coat. The man nods to Sinclair, “Alpha.” Suddenly I realize the special treatment

we're receiving isn't only because of Sinclair's wealth. This must be a shifter hospital, which makes a lot of sense in hindsight. He wouldn't take a werewolf child to a human facility.

Sinclair greets the man stiffly, still hovering protectively over me. I haven't had time to change into the gown or even get comfortable on the gurney, and I find myself leaning towards Sinclair's solid strength, finding relief in his presence amidst all the hubbub and uncertainty.

"Is it alright if I examine her?" The doctor asks, nodding towards me.

This strikes me as a very odd question – first because it was directed at Sinclair and not me, and second because an exam is the entire reason we're here. Of course it's alright! However a low rumble sounds in Sinclair's chest, and when I look up at him I realize how menacing his outward energy has become. He's glaring at anyone who comes near me, and strategically placing his body between me and everyone else. He wouldn't appreciate the comparison, but his behavior sort of reminds me of a dog guarding a bone.

I hiccup a hysterical laugh as the image forms in my mind – the big bad Alpha getting possessive about his new human pet- but when the doctor and Sinclair look down at me with concern I quickly sober. "Sorry, my nerves are fraying a bit." I explain, prompting Sinclair to wrap one of his muscular arms around me.

Turning towards the doctor, I add. "I don't know how long I've been bleeding, I just woke up and felt it."

The doctor looks back to Sinclair, waiting until he gives his permission before approaching me. "Have you had any other symptoms?"

I shake my head, "nothing out of the ordinary. A bit of morning sickness, mood swings, cravings – everything you'd expect."

"That's good." The doctor confirmed, offering me a smile before looking to Sinclair. "And the mental link?"

"Strong heartbeat and consistent emotional blips," My stomach is quickly becoming Sinclair's favorite spot to rest his hand, and it returns there now. "It's sleeping – I think."

The doctor nods, "Alright, then what I'd like to do is run some tests and make sure everything is alright with mother and pup.

Spotting isn't unusual in the early stages, though there's a bit more blood than I'd like. Ella, why don't you get changed and then a nurse will be in to run your vitals – then we'll take some blood and do an ultrasound.”

He steps out, and before I can even think about changing, I find Sinclair pulling my nightgown off over my head. “Oh! Dominic, I can do that myself.”

“Just let me take care of you, Ella.” He responds sternly, leaving no room for argument as he fits the loose gown around my body. In the end, I think fussing over me is his way of finding some control in a helpless situation, so I comply without further complaint, telling myself it's all for his benefit rather than my own. I don't let myself think about how nice it feels to have someone helping me – not to have to go it all alone for once.

“Lie back now,” Sinclair encourages once the ties are secure, helping me recline on the gurney. He leans his elbow on the mattress near my head, looking down at me intently. “How are you doing?”

His scrutiny feels too intense, and I can't bring myself to look him in the eye. I shrug, “I'll decide how I feel when we know what's going on.”

Before he can respond the nurse returns and begins taking all my vital signs. Everything seems perfectly normal until she takes my blood pressure. She purses her lips at the numbers on the screen, and I feel my pulse race even faster when I follow her gaze. One forty over one hundred! I think frantically. My blood pressure has never been so high in my entire life.

“Is that reading normal for you?” The nurse asks with false nonchalance.

“No, my blood pressure is usually below average.” I squeak, causing Sinclair to shift closer still.

He returns his hand to my belly, circling his fingers in soothing caresses over my skin. “You've had a scare.” He reasons, looking to the nurse for reassurance, “I'm sure that's all this is.”

She doesn't respond to his statement, instead eyeing me with concern. “You need to try to calm down, Ella. Take some deep breaths and let your mate worry about the pup.”

“Let my mate worry about the pup?” I repeat indignantly, sitting up. “I'm its mother, I can't just turn off my love for it.”

“She wasn’t suggesting that, sweetheart.” Sinclair croons, gathering me to his chest and purring in that infuriating way that never ceases to make me unravel. Against my will I find myself leaning into his protective hold, falling victim to that strange power once again.

“That’s it.” The nurse encourages with a smile, “everything else looks good, we’ll check your pressure again in a bit, and I’ll inform the doctor of the situation.”

I’m sulkily snuggling closer to Sinclair as she retreats and glaring daggers at her back. “How do you do that?” I inquire sullenly, breathing in the Alpha’s familiar scent.

“Do what?” He asks, stroking my hair.

“That purring thing!” I clarify, resenting him for making me feel better when my baby might be in danger, then feeling guilty for resenting him. My moods are so variable these days I can barely keep up with them. I’ve always heard how wild one’s emotions can become when pregnant, but I didn’t realize it would happen this fast.

Sinclair chuckles warmly, and an unwelcome shiver runs down my spine. “It’s something all male wolves can do – it’s how we soothe our mates when they’re upset.”

“Oh.” I blink. “How did you know it would work on a human?”

“I didn’t.” He shares, “I didn’t even mean to do it the first time – it was simply instinct, but you responded so beautifully.”

“Hmph.” I murmur, not sure if I like the idea of him having that kind of power over me. “Do female wolves have some way of soothing their mates?”

Sinclair laughs again, a deep sultry sound.. “Lots of ways.”

“Like what?” I press.

“That’s a conversation for another day.” Sinclair remarks slyly, piquing my curiosity.

I want to object, to ask more, but the doctor reappears before I can respond. He does my ultrasound with quick professionalism, and I’m relieved to hear the baby’s steady heartbeat through the machine. Still, I won’t be able to truly relax until I know everything is okay. When he finally concludes the exam, I’m practically breathless for news.

“Well?” I ask anxiously. “Is the baby okay?”

## Chapter 27

### 3rd Person

The doctor smiled at Ella and Sinclair, pleased to be able to deliver good news for once. “Your baby is just fine.” He shared, watching the tension seep out of the expectant parents in front of him. “As I said, some spotting is perfectly normal in the early stages, and everything else looks perfect.”

Sinclair squeezed Ella to his chest, kissing her hair while she tried not to burst into tears of joy. The doctor let them have a moment to celebrate before continuing, “I am worried about Ella’s blood pressure, however. It was probably just the stress of the emergency, but it’s something we have to be very careful of. If hypertension persists, it could develop into a condition called preeclampsia, which can be very dangerous for both mother and pup.”

Ella was still reveling in their good news, but Sinclair was immediately alert at the mention of a potential danger. “So what do we do? Just keep an eye on it?”

“I’m going to send you home with a portable test kit so you can check her blood pressure at home, you should do it every day until it stabilizes and then every week until delivery. Of course if it remains high you need to see your regular OBGYN right away.

And more than anything else, you need to avoid stress, Ella.” The physician advised.

Ella nodded in agreement, though in truth she wasn’t sure this goal was entirely achievable. She was about to be a first time mother, all the while grappling with a false identity, supernatural society, and political campaign. Stress seemed like an inevitability.

“Thank you doctor,” Sinclair professed, “we’ll do everything we can to keep her relaxed.” Ella wasn’t sure she liked the sound of that – if Sinclair tried to keep her on bed rest or anything of the sort, it wasn’t going to go over well. She was so lost in her thoughts, she didn’t realize Sinclair was watching her and all but reading her mind. “Won’t we, little mate?” He added pointedly.

This jolted Ella back to the present, and she looked up at Sinclair with wide eyes, thinking – not for the first time – that she needed to do a better job paying attention to the powerful Alpha if she wanted to get through this pregnancy with her wits intact.

“Yes, Dominic.”

That afternoon Sinclair struggled to focus on his work. All he could think about was Ella and the baby, and he was sorely tempted to take the rest of the day off to look after them. He’d already blown off all his morning meetings for that very purpose, and though Ella had encouraged him to go about his business as usual, his mind was on anything but business.

He was just about to collect his things and tell Hugo he was calling it a day, when a knock sounded on his door. “Come in.”

The investigator he’d hired to look into Ella and subsequently track down her lowlife ex-lover poked his head inside. “Alpha, he’s here.”

That got Sinclair’s attention. Maybe he would be able to get something worthwhile done today after all. “Bring him in.” He instructed coolly.

When Mike stumbled in the austere office a few minutes later – practically thrown inside by Sinclair’s guards – he looked around in nervous confusion. Sinclair studied the human closely, trying to convince his wolf that attacking the wretched man wasn’t a very honorable thing to do – considering his advantages in speed, strength and power. Still, it was tempting. He didn’t know what Ella had ever seen in the man, and he suspected that Mike’s mental manipulation and gaslighting had gone a long way towards forcing her to settle for someone so inferior.

For all her spirit and intelligence, Sinclair knew that Ella had suffered a love-starved upbringing. It wasn’t hard to imagine that she could fall head over heels for the first person to show her any attention, even letting them convince her she didn’t deserve any better than their mistreatment and disdain. He thought of Mike telling her she was a bad kisser, wondering how far the creep’s insults had gone – did she also think she was bad in bed, bad at keeping a house or doing everyday things? How worthless had this human made her feel for his own gain?

It infuriated Sinclair to imagine anyone mistreating sweet Ella this way, and he was all the more impressed that she had been able to come out of the ordeal with so much

strength of will. He growled before he could stop himself, and Mike froze in his tracks, staring at Sinclair in surprise and obvious fear. “What is this? Why did you bring me here?”

“This, is your just desserts.” Sinclair answered coldly, rising from his chair. “Do you know who I am, Mike?”

“You’re that billionaire that’s always on TV.” Mike countered, barely containing a jealous sneer.

“That’s right.” Sinclair smirked. “I’m also Ella’s new fiance.” He lied, going with a similar story to the one they were telling the shifters. “We’re expecting a child together, despite your efforts to make her infertile.”

All the blood drained from Mike’s face. He stood frozen for a long moment before shaking his head in disbelief. “You’re lying. We only just broke up and she would never have cheated on me, the stupid bitch was too spineless to -“

Sinclair’s wolf snarled out a warning so fierce that Mike all but wet himself, suddenly realizing on an instinctive level that the being in front of him was no normal human – but a dangerous predator. “If you have any sense at all you’ll shut your fucking mouth before you say another word against her.” Sinclair thundered.

Mike backed away towards the door, trembling like a leaf. “I... wh- what are you?”

“Not anyone you want to cross.” Sinclair informed him, prowling forward, stalking his vile prey as if he were nothing more than a deer in the woods.

“This is crazy!” Mike objected. “I haven’t done anything wrong.”

“Do not lie to me!” Sinclair barked, “I know everything, you leech. You took advantage of that angel, knowing exactly how vulnerable she was. You ruined Ella’s life – wrecked her finances, poisoned her body, betrayed her commitment and made her think she didn’t deserve any better!” Sinclair reached out and closed his powerful hand around the scrawny human’s neck, forcing his back up against the door. “You are not a man, you are spineless, despicable little weasel, and if you want to keep your head on your shoulders you are going to make things right!”

“What?!” Mike choked, clawing at Sinclair’s tight grip, “how?”

“You’re going to go to the police, and sign a full confession. Ella already filed a police report, and you’re going to turn yourself in and pay back every cent you stole from her.” Sinclair commanded, “I don’t care if you have to work for a hundred years, you’re going to make it right.”

“But I don’t have that kind of money!” Mike objected frantically, becoming near hysterical as Sinclair lifted his feet off the ground.

In the back of his mind Sinclair momentarily worried about making a habit of attacking men this way, but he couldn’t deny that Mike and Roger both deserved it.

“Then you can rot in prison!” Sinclair answered ferociously. “It’s that or I gut you right here.”

“No!” Mike shouted frantically, “Please, don’t hurt me! I’ll do whatever you say!”

“Good.” Sinclair rumbled. “Because if you don’t I will make you wish you’d never been born.”

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A little while later a shrill ringtone filled Ella’s suite at Sinclair’s estate. She picked up her phone, seeing the local police station’s number scrolling across the screen. “Hello?”

“Hello, Ms. Reina?” A male voice replied on the other end of the line.

“Speaking.” She confirmed.

“This is Moon Valley Police Department, we’re calling in reference to a report you filed last week?” The man referenced.

“Yes?” Ella questioned sitting up a little straighter. The officers hadn’t given her any hope that her case would ever be resolved, so she didn’t have the faintest idea why they were calling.

“Your ex-boyfriend turned himself in this afternoon.” The officer shared, “he doesn’t have the funds to pay the bills he accumulated in your name, but he signed a confession which should convince your creditors to remove the charges from your accounts, and he will be prosecuted to the furthest extent of the law.”



“I.. what? Really?” Ella couldn’t believe it. “How... Mike would never turn himself in, I don’t understand.”

“Well I can’t speak to his motives, but I can tell you he was dropped off by a pair of bodyguards employed by Dominic Sinclair, and he seemed very shaken. It sounds to me like you’ve got friends in high places, Ms. Reina.”

“Thank you.” She murmured, still trying to process this information. As she hung up she tried to comprehend this new development. Had Dominic really found Mike for her, forced him to do the right thing? She knew he’d promised to help resolve her financial situation, but making Mike stand trial seemed like a gesture far beyond their agreement.

What did it all mean?

## Chapter 28

Ella

I hear Sinclair’s footsteps coming up the stairs just past five, and I realize he must have left work at the earliest available opportunity. I’m not complaining, I’ve been so eager to ask him about Mike ever since the police called me, and as unbelievable as it seems I even find myself missing him the more time we spend apart. I think it must be the pup’s craving to be near its father rather than my own interest, because more often than not I’m nervous or on-edge when we’re together. The one exception is when I go to his rooms at bedtime; I haven’t had a single nightmare since he insisted we begin sleeping together, and I look forward to falling asleep in his strong arms every night.

He comes into my rooms without knocking, offering me a wide smile when he sees me cuddled up in bed. The doctor gave me strict orders to rest today, and after the exhausting ordeal at the hospital, I actually didn’t mind. “Hello trouble.” Sinclair greets me fondly, taking a seat on the edge of my mattress. “How are you feeling?”

“I’m fine.” I promise, “No more spotting.” I blush, but I figure we have to get used to speaking on such familiar terms about my body. Pregnancy does nothing if not steal one’s sense of modesty, as the most personal bodily functions must be discussed to assess the baby’s health.

“I’m glad.” Sinclair sighs with visible relief. “Have you checked your blood pressure?”

“No, I’ve been distracted.” I admit.

“Tsk, tsk,” He teases, retrieving the home monitoring device from my bedside. “Let’s have your arm, gorgeous.”

I wait while he settles the cuff around my bicep and presses the machine’s start button. Once the cuff begins to inflate and pressure increases on my arm, I say, “I got a call from the police today.”

Sinclair keeps a perfectly straight face, as if he doesn’t have the first idea what I’m about to say. “Oh?”

“It seems that Mike turned himself in this afternoon.” I share, watching him closely. “He came all the way back from the coast and signed a full confession. He’s going to stand trial.”

Sinclair is busy watching the numbers on the machine, but he manages a distracted smile, “that’s wonderful, Ella.”

I wait for him to say more, but he remains silent, avidly focused on taking my vital signs. “You’re really going to pretend like you had nothing to do with it?” I finally burst.

The machine beeps, and Sinclair frowns, loosening the cuff. “Still too high.” He murmurs, looking back up at me. Sinclair scans my features, taking my cheek in his oversized hand. “Are you still feeling stressed?”

“I’m trying to talk to you about something.” I reply, rather than answering him.

“Ella it was nothing. I would have done it for anyone.” He states simply.

Of course. I think bitterly, better not go getting ahead of yourself, Ella. Don’t make the mistake of thinking you’re special when you’re anything but. “That might be true.” I murmur, “but it’s a very big deal to me. I don’t know how to thank you.”

“That’s not necessary.” Sinclair responds, as if this settles the matter. “I was happy to do it. That rat deserved a lot worse than a jail cell if you ask me.”

I don’t know why, but his ferocity makes me feel better about his dismissive manner. At the very least it shows that he does care, and I decide then and there that I’m going to find a way to thank him – whether he thinks it’s necessary or not.

The next day I spend the morning sick to my stomach, reminding myself over and over again that morning sickness is a good sign, and I shouldn't complain. After my fourth bout of nausea, I take a few pillows and books into the bathroom, setting up a makeshift camp on the cold tiles so that I'm not constantly running back and forth. By the afternoon I feel well enough to go out and about, and I eagerly dress and depart, excited to follow through with my plans to thank Sinclair for his kindness.

At first I wasn't sure about turning up at his father's house unannounced, but when I arrive the elder Alpha greets me with so much hospitality and generosity I decide I should try and visit more often. "Come in, come in! What a lovely surprise!"

"Thank you." I flush, "I hope you don't mind me dropping by like this."

"Of course not, my darling. You're welcome anytime." He replies genially. "I was just about to have a late lunch, please join me."

"Oh no, I couldn't impose." I demur.

"Nonsense, I know the look of a breeding mother who's spent the morning indisposed." He observes wryly. "You're still green about the gills, dear one. Some food in your tummy will help."

"Thank you." I smile despite myself. "I see you're as perceptive as your son."

"And I see you would prefer it if he did not perceive so much." The old man answers.

"Is it that obvious?" I chuckle, taking a seat across from him in the sitting room as a servant runs to get another place setting for lunch.

"I don't blame you." He confides. "I expect if I were in your shoes I wouldn't enjoy having someone read my every thought and feeling either."

Unlike Sinclair, his father sets me completely at ease. So at ease in fact that I find the words sliding off my tongue before I can stop them. "I'm not used to men like you and your son, Alpha -"

"None of that Alpha nonsense." He interjects. "call me Henry."

I can't help but laugh, "you and Dominic really are a pair, you know that?"

Henry smiles warmly, “a high complement. I’m very proud of my son, you know. And I’m so thrilled he’s finally found his second chance mate.”

A stab of guilt assails me. Of any of the people we’re deceiving, Sinclair’s father makes me feel the most ashamed for our lies.

“Thank you.” I manage to reply, unable to stop myself from confiding, “we’re both so excited for this baby I’m not sure if we’ve even discussed whether we truly are mates. I mean we’re saying it for the campaign of course, but I hardly think I’m what Dominic imagined for a mate.”

Henry shakes his head firmly. “Trust me, Ella. I know my son, and I know a good match when I see it. You two will get there in time.”

“Well, I have to say he has already done so much for me. I’ve been scrambling for some way to thank him, but I’m afraid I don’t know him well enough to know what he’d like best. I was hoping you might help me do a bit of plotting.” I confess.

“You’ve come to the right place.” Henry assures me, “what kind of surprise did you have in mind.”

“Just anything to show him how grateful I am.” I explain, “how excited I am to be having this baby together, for all his support.”

“Well one secret I will gladly tell you about my son is that he has a powerful sweet tooth.” Henry intones. “He doesn’t indulge it often, but the quickest way to his heart is probably through dessert.”

I giggle, “Really?” It seems so strange that the terrifying Alpha wolf might have a secret vice as wholesome as sugar. “Any particular recipes?”

“His favorite cake as a boy was simply chocolate with vanilla icing – simple but classic. If you make him that, it will transport him straight back to his childhood.” Henry explains.

“I like that idea. One of our first days together he called my sister to find out my favorite dish – I like the symmetry of returning the gesture.” I muse aloud.

“And of course, if you end up with too much left over, I always appreciate a good sweet myself.” Henry hints, “As well as charming company.”

“You have a deal.” I agree happily. “In fact, I was thinking I might visit you more often.” I suggest, “If you don’t mind having me around that is.”

“I would love nothing more.” Henry beams, “though you should probably clear it with Dominic first.”

I grimace, not caring for this idea. “Do you think he’d object?”

“I think he’s got a new mate and a baby on the way – nothing makes an Alpha more overprotective.” Henry reasons.

“But surely he wouldn’t think you’re a threat.” I protest.

“Not me personally, but there may very well be other dangers out there.” Henry suggests, “in fact I’m surprised he let you come out without a guard today.”

“Well, he doesn’t know.” I answer hesitantly.

“You didn’t tell him you were leaving?” Henry clarifies.

“No, but I’m an adult.” I argue, confused. “I shouldn’t have to ask permission just to pay a visit to family.”

“Ella, you’re with an Alpha now.” Henry reminds me gently. “Everything is different now. Does anyone know where you are right now?”

“No.” Nervously gnawing on my lip, I wonder if I’ve made a bad miscalculation. “Do you think he’s going to be angry?”

“If I were you, I’d try to get back before he realizes you left.” Henry suggests.

I don’t need to be told twice, I finish my lunch and kiss Henry’s scruffy cheek, before heading out again. On the way home I stop only to purchase the ingredients for Sinclair’s cake, hurrying back to the house in the hopes that no one has noticed I was missing. Of course it’s just my luck that Hugo catches me coming up the walk to the mansion, arms laden with grocery bags.

He doesn’t say a word, but I know the game is up.

I’m in big trouble.

## Chapter 29

Ella

I've been avidly watching the clock ever since returning home. Neither Hugo nor any of the guards said a word about my absence, but they did immediately take the grocery bags from my arms, insisting I shouldn't be doing any heavy lifting. I came straight to the kitchen afterwards, hoping that I might be able to finish my surprise before Sinclair comes home, and thereby counteract some of his displeasure that I snuck out.

In my defense it wasn't really sneaking. Sure, I waited until the guards were distracted just in case they tried to stop me leaving, but no one ever told me I wasn't allowed to do so. In fact Sinclair told me I was free to go where I wish... though in hindsight I imagine the Alpha wouldn't like it if he came home and no one knew where I was – especially after the hospital yesterday.

I try to focus on baking rather than the scolding I've surely got coming from Sinclair. I'm really not sure how to handle the situation. It feels entirely unfair that I could be in trouble for breaking rules I didn't know existed, but I'm afraid of angering Sinclair further by expressing my true feelings.

I'm starting to feel completely bipolar in this arrangement of ours. I'm perpetually afraid of saying or doing the wrong thing and provoking Sinclair's temper, but I'm not used to censoring myself this way. Eventually the truth inevitably slips out and then I worry I've ruined everything. So I try to reverse course and do damage control, and probably come off like I've got split personalities.

I don't know what to do. I know I should try to keep Sinclair happy so that I have the best possible chance to stay with my baby, but I don't know how long I can keep this up. I also don't know what to make of Sinclair in the first place. He's the most confusing man I've ever encountered. I don't even recognize myself around him. One moment he's turning me on, making me feel safer than I've ever felt in my entire life, and doing sweet selfless things like helping Cora – and the next he's stomping around like a tyrant and ordering me about.

I've just finished mixing the wet and dry ingredients together in a big silver bowl when the door clicks open behind me, and Sinclair's familiar scent fills the room. Uh-oh, here we go.

When I turn around, I find him framed in the doorway, his arms crossed over his broad chest, and a thunderous expression on his face.

"Welcome home?" I greet him weakly, that statement sounding more like a question than anything else.

Sinclair's emerald eyes begin to glow as he studies me, raking his gaze over my body from head to foot and making me positively squirm. "What do you have to say for yourself, Ella?"

"I'm making you a surprise," I explain, realizing telling him sort of defeats the point. "Or I was – to thank you for your help with Mike."

"You left the estate." He growls, striding forward. "You didn't tell anyone you were leaving or where you were going."

"I was perfectly safe." I supply feebly. "I went to see your father."

"You just got out of the hospital yesterday." Sinclair rumbles, as if I could forget. "You shouldn't be lugging around groceries or going on extended walks, and especially not without guards."

"Dominic, you never told me that I needed to take guards with me if I went out, or that I had to run my plans by you first." I counter, trying to stay calm.

"Because I thought it was common sense!" He exclaims. "Ella, you know how crazy the media coverage has been lately, and you know I don't go anywhere without guards – and I'm a lot bigger and stronger than you are. What if something had happened- we wouldn't have known where to look for you!"

"I was just trying to do something nice for you!" I exclaim, fighting back tears. "I never agreed to be a prisoner here."

"Don't be so dramatic." Sinclair scoffs. "No one is saying you're a prisoner. But you are a public figure now, and you're in delicate condition. We're talking about taking basic

precautions and keeping me in the loop. I need to know where you are, I need to know that you're safe and not taking careless risks!"

"Carrying a few bags of sugar is hardly a risk to my health!" I argue, smothering a few extra choice words. "I'm not so delicate that I need a constant babysitter. You forget that I was on my own for 30 years before you came along and I did just fine!"

"Oh right, so fine that a bottom dwelling asshole bankrupted and betrayed you for years on end!" Sinclair snaps.

"That isn't fair." I fight back, my voice thick with emotion. "Don't blame me for what Mike did!"

"I'm not." He sighs, seeming to regret his rash statement. "I wouldn't. But if you were vulnerable to scum like him in the human world, you're five times as vulnerable among shifters. You don't know how dangerous it is out there!"

"And how am I suppose to know, if you don't tell me?" I demand. "How am I suppose to know I'm breaking your ridiculous rules if you don't even tell me what they are in the first place?"

"They aren't ridiculous, they're for your own safety!" Sinclair grits out.

"That didn't answer my question." I remark, narrowing my eyes.

"I'm sorry Ella, I didn't expect you to go galavanting around town when you're barely recovered! I thought you would come to me if you needed something." He grits out, his jaw ticking in annoyance.

"I don't want to have to come to you every time I want to set foot outside the house!" I cry, "I don't like having to rely on other people for things I'm perfectly capable of doing for myself."

"You mean you don't trust other people." Sinclair corrects me, cutting to the quick. "You feel safer doing everything for yourself, and you don't know how to ask anyone else for help – let alone believe they'll come through for you."

I don't know how he managed to figure that out. He isn't wrong – I've always preferred to do everything myself, because I learned the hard way that I'm the only person I can



rely on when push comes to shove. But I've never told him this – I've never expressed this to anyone. "I meant what I said." I insist, stubbornly notching my chin up.

"I understand better than you think, Ella." Sinclair relates, softening his tone. "But you're supposed to be avoiding stress."

"What's stressing me out is you standing here yelling at me!" I accuse, tears burning in my eyes. "I was just trying to do something nice, I didn't know it would upset anyone!"

"Come on, now." Sinclair admonishes. "At least do me the courtesy of being honest – you couldn't have gotten out of this house unseen without trying."

"Or maybe your guards aren't as on top of things as you think they are." I bite back.

Sinclair narrows his eyes. "You managed to ditch guards specifically assigned to you, Ella."

"What?" I squeak. "Why do you have guards assigned to me?"

"Because you're pregnant with my pup!" He growls, "because I have enemies who would target you at a moment's notice, which you very well know."

"Or maybe it's because you're just an invasive, overprotective ass!" I explode, "you haven't stopped bossing me around from the moment I got here!"

Sinclair's eyes flash dangerously, and the next thing I know he's prowling towards me across the kitchen. I back away until my body collides with the cabinets, suddenly wondering if I've pushed him too far. "Careful Ella." He warns, looming over me. He braces his hands on the counter on either side of my body, pinning me between his arms. He ducks his head so that his face is only a few inches from mine, and I feel the power and authority rolling off him in waves. "I've given you a lot of leeway so far because you don't know our ways, but if you keep speaking to me that way I won't be accountable for my actions."

My knees turn to jelly in the face of his anger, but somehow this fear isn't the same kind I've known in the past. I don't believe he'll hurt me, especially since I'm carrying his pup – as he keeps pointing out. No, his threats feel different – darkly sensual in a way I don't quite understand. All of a sudden I'm very curious to see what he'll do if I keep pushing him. I'm sorely tempted to test him, to see just how far I can push my luck. "Fine." I hiss. "I won't speak to you that way. I'll show you instead."

I reach for the bag of flour on my left, taking a handful in my fist. Before I can think better of it, I act, lobbing the flour right into his incredibly handsome face.

## Chapter 30

Ella

The flour collides with Sinclair's face in an explosion of white powder, covering his features in dense grains and fluttering through the air around us. A low growl rumbles in his chest, and fear slices through me as I wonder if I've made a grave mistake. Sinclair takes a moment to open his eyes after the flour hits, but when he does, his wolf is glowing bright in his irises, and my instincts take over.

I try to duck under his arms, to evade his hold anyway I can. However the moment I begin attempting escape he leans forward, crushing my body between him and the counter. At once I'm reminded of how much larger Sinclair is. Sometimes it's easy to be fooled when I'm dressed up in heels or there's space between us, but now I can feel how helpless I am beside him. The top of my head barely reaches his sternum, and next to his muscles, my slender limbs feel terribly frail.

Sinclair's breath is coming in heaving gasps, and I have the good sense to remain frozen as he tries to gain control of his wolf.

When I look up at him, I can see only the wild animal fuming beneath his skin, and I realize exactly how dangerous this man is.

I'm not sure if he's going to attack me, or yell at me, and my heart is racing a mile a minute. I instinctively flinch when he moves, but he doesn't raise a hand against me. Instead he reaches past me towards the bowl of chocolate cake batter, and the next thing I know, a river of the thick, sweet mixture is dripping down my face.

I gasp in shock, realizing that Sinclair is pouring the batter over me, and try to jerk away. "Dominic, no!"

A dark laugh rolls through the big wolf like thunder, "Oh baby, you asked for this."

I raise my arms over my head, trying to protect myself, but when that doesn't work I reach for the bowl too, returning fire with handful of batter straight into Sinclair's expensively tailored shirt. Soon we're wrestling over the bowl, trying to retrieve more sweet ammunition to splatter each other with, and I'm laughing harder than I can remember laughing in a very long time.

The sound of Sinclair's own cozy chuckles fill my ears as I trade out cake batter for icing, reaching up with two hands and smearing it over his face as he playfully nips at my fingers, before positively squealing as warm, melted chocolate is drizzled over the low cut top of my dress, seeping down between my breasts and into my bra.

We're both absolutely covered in the various cake components, giddy with laughter and still searching for new ways to combat one another. The bowls on the counter are already empty, and I narrow my eyes at Sinclair as I contemplate moving to the pantry or fridge for more ammo. His white teeth flash, and the next thing I know he's racing towards the fridge faster than I can even comprehend.

I dart to the pantry, pulling open the door to use as a shield and disappearing inside, zeroing in on a bottle of caramel syrup, even as I see Sinclair plucking a can of whipped cream from the fridge. Soon we're stalking around the kitchen island, trying to get close enough to squirt each other with our chosen item, and inevitably laughing and racing away when the other gets too close.

I try to feint around the edge of the counter, making him think I'm going to go in a direction other than the one I intend, but I'm outmatched in this game in every possible way. Sinclair is bigger, stronger and faster, and he can read my intentions far better than I can read his.

He snatches me easily, spraying me with cold whipped cream until I manage to wriggle free, even though I know he's letting me escape. If he wanted to he could have easily pinned me in place, but we're both having too much fun with our game.

It's making an unholy mess, but I can't remember the last time I had this much fun. Sinclair has completely surprised me too – I never expected him to have a playful side, and it's so different from the men I've known before. Mike and I certainly never did anything like this, and I doubt my ex would have had the inclination or the confidence to let a woman defy him this way. Sinclair, on the other hand, has no doubts about his masculinity. He can gladly let me tease and defy him without feeling threatened, because he knows at the end of the day his dominance is complete.

Too late I realize I'm thinking about Sinclair in comparison to my past lovers, when I know he doesn't see me this way at all. Yet I can't help it, the more time that passes the more certain I feel that Sinclair is attracted to me. I know it's only physical and that I could never be anything but a plaything to him, but it feels nice to be desired – even if it is superficial.

When the bottle of caramel is empty, I try to make my way back to the pantry, but Sinclair has other ideas. “Come here you.” He purrs, snatching me up. “Such a bad girl.” His fingers are digging into my sides, tickling me ruthlessly and making me giggle and squeal uncontrollably. I try to wrestle him for dominance, but I know it's a lost cause.

We tumble to the floor together, wrestling and writhing against one another, getting more and more dirty with every minute that passes. Sinclair lets me pin him to the tiled floor, straddling his middle and trapping his hands above his head. ‘Ha!’ I declare triumphantly, secretly needing him to prove my victory false, to take control and make me forget my own name.

“Oh, you think you've won, do you?” He taunts, grinning up at me.

“You're not so scary, you know.” I counter, smiling widely. “What would all those big tough wolves say if they knew their leader was letting a weak little human throw food in his face?”

The next thing I know I'm on my back with Sinclair looming above me. The air leaves my lungs in a great whoosh – I didn't even see him flip me, but suddenly our situations are completely reversed. I'm still straddling Sinclair, my legs spread on either side of his body so that his hardness is pressed to my most sensitive flesh through our clothes.

“They'd say, lucky Alpha.” He answers smugly, looking down at me with undiluted hunger.

The little voice in my head has me metaphorically squirming, needing to apologize for reasons I don't understand. It's almost as if I feel compelled to submit now that Sinclair has physically bested me, but why would that be the case? I try to hold the words back, but I can't stop them no matter what I try. “I am sorry I snuck out.” I confess, peeking up at him from beneath my lashes.

“You're forgiven.” Sinclair rules gently, “As long as you promise not to do it again.”

My metaphorical squirming becomes very literal now, though I freeze almost immediately when I realize the way my nervous movement rubs my sensitive sex against his. Softening, I agree, “I promise.”

I don’t understand what’s happening to me. I have all of these strange emotions bubbling up inside me. Is it all just the pregnancy, the pup making me feel and behave more like a wolf, or is it something more than that. “That’s my girl.” Sinclair praises, looking down at me with obvious pride.

“What are you doing to me?” I murmur, before I can stop myself.

“What do you mean?” He asks, frowning slightly.

“I don’t know.” I huff, “I just feel like a different person since we met.”

“Maybe you’re becoming the person you were always meant to be.” Sinclair suggests, shifting so that my wrists are captured between one of his strong hands, while the other slides down my body. “It’s finally safe to come out of your shell, so you are.”

“I think you’re giving yourself an awful lot of credit.” I respond primly, even as I fight the desire to lean into his touch. “And it’s a shame you were such a jerk.” I add pointedly, “now you won’t get to taste the cake I made.”

Sinclair arches his brow, gazing down at my batter covered body and adopting a devilish expression. Before I know what’s happening, he’s lowered his mouth to the swell of my breast and is licking the cake batter from my skin, groaning with delight.

“Delicious.” He praises, rising up over me again. His eyes drift to the curve of my full lips, then the whipped cream splattered across my clavicle – as if he can’t decide what to taste next. A low purr vibrates against my skin, “I want more.”

## Chapter 31

### 3rd Person

Sinclair was tired of fighting his instincts. Ella was looking up at him with heavy-lidded eyes, the scent of her arousal heavy in the air. Why was he fighting his desire for her? So

she was human – she was also beautiful, spirited and bright, everything he could want in a woman. It was exhausting trying to rein in his wolf, and he was tired of denying himself. The fact was that Sinclair wanted Ella more intensely than he could remember wanting anyone. The logical part of his brain insisted it was just the pup growing in her womb, but the more time that passed the more the Alpha believed it was the woman herself.

Sinclair dipped his head until their mouths were mere inches apart, and Ella sighed and tilted her chin up – offering her lips for the taking. He was about to claim them when a knock sounded at the door, followed by a low squeak and a familiar man’s voice,

“What on earth?”

Sinclair turned to look at Hugo, who was frozen in the doorway, staring at the food-splattered kitchen and the couple on the floor in abject shock. “Not now.” Sinclair growled, his wolf clamoring just beneath the surface of his skin.

Hugo met the Alpha’s piercing gaze, “Dom -“

“I said not now.” Sinclair repeated fiercely.

“Trust me.” Hugo stated resolutely, “you want to hear what I have to say.”

Grumbling with annoyance, Sinclair looked back to Ella, sorely tempted to tell her not to move a muscle until he returned.

However he knew that if Hugo was being this persistent, he probably wasn’t going to be back anytime soon. It filled him with regret that he wouldn’t be able to lick all the chocolate from Ella’s sweet body himself, or even help her wash away the remnants in a steaming shower. His mind was overflowing with all the sensuous possibilities, but the best he could do was promise the little human that, “we’ll finish this later.”

He helped Ella to her feet before taking his leave, grabbing a dish towel on the way out to wipe the flour, chocolate and syrup from his face. “What’s up?” He asked Hugo, once they were alone.

“There’s been a rogue attack in old town.” The Beta shared gravely. “It looks like there’s quite a few fatalities.”

Sinclair cursed, “any hints on who’s responsible?”

“Witnesses say the attackers came out of nowhere. They burst onto the canals and started wreaking havoc.” Hugo explained.

“It’s clear they were sent to harm, no one reported having anything stolen.”

Sinclair’s wolf – already fighting for control – reared up inside him, overwhelmed by urgent concern for his pack members. There hadn’t been a rogue attack in a very long time, and he highly doubted that the timing of this incident was a coincidence. “I’ll shower as fast as I can, and I’ll be right there.”

The scene of the attack was worse than Sinclair could have imagined.

Moon Valley’s old town was normally an enchanting place at this time of year. With its idyllic maze of canals woven through historic buildings and blanketed in thick white snow, it should have looked like a winter wonderland – if it weren’t for all the blood.

Ever since the river froze a few weeks earlier, the waterways became bustling thoroughfares dotted with pop up shops to be navigated by humans and shifters on ice skates. They weren’t as grand as they’d be after the solstice celebrations began the following week, but they certainly shouldn’t have looked like this.

At least a dozen bodies littered the ice, and thick crimson pools steamed then froze solid on the glassy surface. Keening filled the air as shifters mourned and injured beings suffered on the sidelines, tended to by concerned bystanders and emergency responders. Sinclair scanned the carnage – noting that all the victims were wolves, not that this came as a surprise. This part of the city was dominated by estates passed down through generations of wealth which, combined with the steep rents on new properties and high end businesses, all but guaranteed the inhabitants were shifters.

Moon Valley’s human mayor was already on the scene, but she was only there for appearances sake. Human tourists might visit to take in the natural splendor, but old town was strictly under Sinclair’s jurisdiction. Sighing with resignation, Sinclair approached the austere woman. “Madame Mayor.”

“Alpha,” She replied tersely, “I presume this was your kind’s doing?”

“Definitely a wolf attack.” He confirmed, ignoring the clear disdain in her voice. “My investigators are on the case.”

“You know this isn’t the kind of press our city needs – just before the holidays too. It’s high tourist season.”

“It’s the holidays for us as well,” Sinclair reminded her. “And you would do well to recall that I don’t blame you when humans wreak havoc in the territory.”

“That’s because my kind is no threat to yours.” The mayor quipped.

Sinclair scoffed, “Right, that’s why we exist in secret – because humans are so accepting of those who are different.”

The Mayor, like all human mayors of Moon Valley, had been less than amused to discover the existence of shifters when she took office two years earlier. Nor could she ever fully wrap her mind around the power dynamics. It never ceased to confuse her that the monarchy resided in Moon Valley but did not rule the pack directly, rather delegating power to the territory’s Alpha.

Sinclair, on the other hand, thought it was pure stubbornness on her part – since she had no problem understanding state versus federal governance in her own society.

“And I suppose this has nothing to do with your campaign?” She questioned. “The Prince’s statement yesterday was quite damning.”

Sinclair blinked. What statement? Had he really been so distracted by Ella that he missed an important development in the race?

It was a silly question. As soon as he asked it of himself he knew the answer was yes. He’d become so preoccupied with the lovely human over the last couple of weeks that he’s thought of little else – including the campaign. Sure he kept his appointments and appearances, but his mind was rarely focused on the matter at hand. It was permanently locked on Ella. In fact, now that he reflected on it – he’d scarcely thought of anything else since she’d come begging for her sister’s job – even before he knew about the pup.

If he’d missed a major statement by the prince, then she wasn’t only a distraction, but a dangerous one. If he’d been paying attention, would he have seen this attack coming? He could imagine the kind of drivel the statement included – was the Prince behind the attack too? He wouldn’t put it past him, and there was no doubt this was going to hurt him. At the end of the day this was his city, not the Prince’s and the attack would make him look like an Alpha who couldn’t protect his people.



Guilt washed over him in a tidal wave. The criticism would be true either way. Whether a political scheme, or a genuine rogue threat, he had failed to secure old town. He had failed to protect his people, and the death surrounding him was his fault. The lives of all Moon Valley shifters were in his hands, and he'd let these slip through his fingers – worse, he hadn't even noticed it happening.

If not for Ella this might never have happened. He wasn't blaming her, far from it – he knew he was the only one to blame. It was his distraction with the human beauty which allowed this to happen, and if it was a princely plot, then it was his heir and his campaign which were responsible.

The mayor, seeing Sinclair had disappeared into his thoughts, shifted away to make a statement to the media, leaving the Alpha with his guilt. He'd always hated seeing any of his people hurt – but this was the first time he knew without a doubt that they were hurt because of him. Suddenly the reasons that he'd been fighting his instincts when it came to Ella and his desire, came rushing back to him like a wildfire. His wolf might want her, but taking his eye off the ball at this stage in the game was dangerous to all of them.

Even as he thought this morbid fact, his eye caught on a flash of silver in his periphery. Turning, he looked up at the raised street running parallel to the canal. There was a sleek town car parked near the bridge, and a crowd of shifters gathered at the railing, looking down on the bloody tableau so many feet below them.

Sinclair recognized the Prince immediately, with his sleek blonde hair and gaudy clothes. The other man gazed over the crime scene with cold disinterest, until he finally met Sinclair's gaze. He arched one blond brow and shook his head, as if in disappointment, but he couldn't keep the smirk from his face. A moment later the human mayor appeared at his side, murmuring in his ear.

Ice froze the blood in Sinclair's veins, and he looked to Hugo, a grave expression on his handsome face. "Tighten Ella's security as soon as possible." He commanded. "I want eyes on her at all times."

## Chapter 32

Ella

I scrub the food from my body as steaming water pours down around me in a blissful cascade. A hot shower is exactly what I needed, but I feel like a silly school girl starcrossed in puppy love. I can't stop replaying the events in the kitchen in my mind, reliving every word, every touch – every look from Sinclair's penetrating green eyes.

I find myself running my hands over my bare skin in the same places he stroked and caressed me, imagining what he'll do when he comes home. I know he was going to kiss me before Hugo interrupted us, and the memory of his lips so near mine sends shivers of excitement down my spine. Sinclair has kissed me before of course, but never in private, never simply because he wanted to.

My mind races with the possibilities. Will he make love to me when he returns? Is his attraction that strong? I can't stop imagining it. Will he be gentle and tender the way he's been when I most needed comfort? Will he be rough and dominating, unleashing the animal within? Or will he be some combination of the two, passion in all its varying forms?

I finally pull myself out of my daydreams when the water runs cold. I yelp when the heat disappears, dousing me in icy reality.

What am I doing? Who is this silly, sex-crazed girl who's taken over my mind? Sinclair and I don't have a future together, so why am I letting the little voice in my head get so carried away with longing for the impossible? That's not me – I've always been practical and realistic, not some starry eyed dreamer. Shaking myself, I cut off the water and grab a towel, determined to stop being so silly.

No sooner have I stepped out of the shower that a knock sounds at the bedroom door. "Miss, you have a visitor!" A maid calls through the thick wooden panel.

I do? This is a surprise. No one has ever visited me here, and the only person who might is Cora – but it's the middle of the day, surely she's at work. Even though I rationalized this, I'm still surprised when I get downstairs it's not Cora waiting for me. It's just about the last person I would have expected to see – Sinclair's estranged brother, Roger.

"Hello Ella." He greets me, standing from his chair.

I freeze in the doorway of the sitting room, unable to process the sight before me. "What are you doing here?"

"Easy now." He raises his hands in supplication, "I come in peace."

“Excuse me if I find that hard to believe.” I cut.

“I came to apologize for the way I behaved the day we met. I’m ashamed to say that my brother brings out the worst in me. It was wrong to take that out on you.” Roger states remorsefully.

“You know I really don’t understand you two.” I confess. “Where I come from, siblings are all you have – the only friends, the only family or allies. It seems very strange to me that you and Dominic are so at odds.”

“Where do you come from?” He asks thoughtfully.

“The shadow pack.” I’ve told the lie so many times now that I don’t even have to think about it. “But my parents died when I was young.”

“I’m very sorry to hear that.” He says, sounding surprisingly genuine. “But it’s different for Dom and I. Your circumstances pushed you and your siblings together, ours tore us apart. Being the sons of an Alpha sets you in competition with one another from a young age. Our father never encouraged it, but we always knew that one of us would rule one day – and we both wanted to prove ourselves.”

“That must have been difficult.” I empathize, remembering what Sinclair also told me about their mother’s death. “But it doesn’t excuse the things you said to me.”

“Ella, I truly am sorry.” He professes again, raising a finger to qualify his statement. “At least, for the way I spoke to you. But I’m afraid I can’t apologize for the things I said.”

My shoulder’s stiffen. “Shouldn’t it be the reverse?”

“No, because I wasn’t lying.” Roger frowns deeply. “I may have been speaking spitefully but my heart was in the right place.”

I cut my eyes to him, “I don’t think spite can ever be the right place.”

“I was trying to warn you.” Roger insists, “And I’d warn you again if you’ll let me.”

“I’ll listen to what you have to say.” I concede, my morbid curiosity burgeoning. “but I won’t promise to take it to heart.”

Roger sighs, almost seeming relieved. “What has Dom told you about Lydia?” He asks.

I'm taken aback for a moment. I remember Roger's harsh words about how I was nothing but a womb to him, that he'd toss me aside as soon as the pup came along, but I wasn't expecting him to bring up Lydia. "That they were fated, but she left when he couldn't give her children." I summarize simply.

"And did he mention that she hasn't had pup with her chosen mate either?" Roger presses.

"No, why would he?" I inquire, though I can already see where this is going.

"They always assumed the root of fertility struggles lied with him." Roger explains, "But now that it's clear that he can father children after all, I guarantee she'll be back."

"Just because she comes back, it doesn't mean Dominic will accept her." I remark coolly. In my head I'm thinking that he won't be so quick to forgive a mate who turned her back on him, fated or not, but I also have to remember I'm supposed to be Dominic's second chance mate. I need Roger to think I'm confident enough in our bond that Lydia's return wouldn't challenge it.

"Ella," He says my name as if it's an apology itself. "They're fated. Take it from someone who learned the hard way – chosen mates can be wonderful, but the Goddess's bond is stronger than all else."

"It happened to you?" I ask, intrigued by his statement.

Roger laughs, "I see Dom left out that part of the story, did he?"

"What part?" I clarify uncertainly.

"Lydia was my lover first." He reveals. "She'd agreed to a formal mating ceremony and everything. We knew we weren't fated, but we thought our love would be strong enough. Then Dominic came of age, and their bond came to life. Everything that had once been between us... disappeared overnight."

"Dominic stole Lydia from you?" I can barely stop myself from gaping with the surprise of this news. Sinclair certainly hadn't shared that part of the tale when he explained Roger's disdain for him.

“They were fated.” Roger shrugs, much more accepting that I would have been about the situation. “Neither of them had a choice in the matter... and he won’t have a choice when she comes back either.”

“And you’re certain she’ll return?” I prompt.

“I’m sure of it.” Roger relates gently. “I’m sorry to be the one to tell you this... and I hope I’m wrong. But you should prepare yourself. I wish I’d had someone to warn me this way.”

“Well thank you for telling me. I’ll take your advice into consideration.” I reply honestly.

I thought about Roger’s words for a long time after he left. I still don’t trust the man, after all he definitely has a chip on his shoulder when it comes to Sinclair. I’m curious about why Sinclair left out the details about his past relationship with Lydia, but not enough to believe Roger hook, line and sinker.

Besides, true or not it doesn’t really change anything at the end of the day. Roger thought he was warning me, but he doesn’t know I’m human, that I’ve already been warned and indeed, prepared for a new mate to come into Sinclair’s life eventually anyway. Sure, I wasn’t expecting it to be Lydia – but the identity of the woman doesn’t really matter, I’ll cease being Luna regardless.

I’m still glad of the idea that my baby might have half siblings one day, but it is an important reminder to protect my heart. I was already questioning myself before Roger turned up, and his cautionary tale just reinforces the need to shield my heart against the Alpha. If I keep carrying on this way, mooning over a man who is completely out of my reach and letting my feelings get completely carried away, I’ll basically be asking for heartbreak.

Sinclair might be build for casual sex, but I’m not, and that means I have to stop the flirtation before it goes too far.

That night, I go to sleep in my own bed for the first time in a week. I don’t expect to be missed. Sinclair still isn’t home, and after what I heard this afternoon – I’m glad for some time alone. The last thing I need is for Sinclair to come home and truly attempt to finish what we started this afternoon. No matter how badly I might want to indulge those desires – I know they’re a recipe for disaster.

Half-asleep, it seems that a person came to my bedside. Who?

## Chapter 33

Sinclair

I smell Roger the moment I walk through the door. My wolf is immediately alert, and I approach the first guard I see. “Was my brother here?”

“Yes Alpha.” The man replies. “He requested a meeting with Ella, and she granted it.”

I do not like the sounds of that. “How long was he here? Is she alright?”

“They spoke for close to an hour.” The guard replies. “She didn’t seem upset afterwards, but she went to bed early and without supper.”

Worry simmers in my belly. If Roger was here it was undoubtedly to make trouble, and while Ella might have simply been exhausted, I don’t believe these events are unrelated. I haven’t eaten either, but I head straight upstairs to check on the mother of my pup. However when I reach my rooms, Ella isn’t there.

Instead I make my way downstairs to her suite, concern tying my insides into knots. I push open the bedroom door, following the luscious aroma that is Ella, and stalk silently inside. She’s curled up beneath the covers, sleeping as sweetly as can be. I’m smiling despite my inner turmoil, moving to sit by her side as she doses.

Ella is lying on her stomach, her arms folded up beneath her pillow, her rose gold hair spilling over her bare shoulders in a silky cascade. I brush a few locks away from her face, content to simply watch her sleep. She looks so angelic like this, and I feel a fresh wave of worry for what Roger might have said to her. Did she go to bed in her own rooms because I wasn’t home, or because Roger upset her?

I’ll kill him if he’s said or done anything to harm her. The thought circles ominously around me for a long moment, and I’m a bit taken about by the force of my conviction. I feel so protective of this little human – is it really only because she’s carrying my baby?

After a minute Ella’s brow furrows and she whimpers in her sleep. I worry she might be having another nightmare, which brings on yet another flood of possessive energy. What happened in her life that haunted her dreams this way? Was she reliving past horrors, or

simply imagining terrors which haven't actually come to pass? Something about the way she refused to talk about the last one makes me suspect the former.

I push the covers down only far enough to expose the curve of her spine, needing to feel her shape beneath my fingers. When I stroke one large hand down the graceful column she stirs and stretches, turning towards me and unconsciously cuddling closer.

She blinks her brilliant eyes open a moment later, offering me a bleary eyed yawn. "You're back."

"I am." I agree, "And you're in the wrong bed." I tease, petting her slender waist and marveling at how small she is compared to me. The breadth of my hand easily circles her ribs, and I wonder if my fingers would actually touch if I tried to wrap my other hand around her middle.

"Mmm," She moans, the sound like a sultry torment to my oversensitized ears. "You weren't here."

"As if that's any excuse." I mockingly scold.

"Are you going to make me move?" She murmurs, though her eyes have already closed again and she sighs contentedly as I continue to caress her.

"I should." I muse, "I should make you get up and have the dinner you skipped."

Ella peeks one eye open then, pouting in a way that does nothing to garner my sympathy and everything to make me contemplate claiming her plump, pink lips. "Your servants are tattle tales."

"Uh-huh." I chuckle, trying to keep my tone light as I continue, "they also told me about your visit with Roger."

Ella hums with indignation, but doesn't say more.

"Would you like to tell me what he wanted?" I ask after a moment.

"He was warning me." She yawns.

"What about?" I rumble, fearing I already know the answer.

“Nothing I didn’t already know.” Ella shrugs sleepily. “That your mate will come along one day and you’ll no longer need me to be Luna.”

Only the sight of Ella contentedly stretching into my touch like a sleepy kitten keeps me from jumping to my feet and growling.

“He has no business saying such things to you.”

“Why not?” She purrs, “It’s true.”

I don’t know why it bothers me so much to hear her speak that way – but it does. “You know that and I know that – but he thinks you’re my second chance mate like everyone else. He thinks you’re a she-wolf and he has no right to interfere.” The truth is that he completely crossed a line. Ella isn’t familiar enough with our ways to understand how egregious his behavior truly was. If she was truly my mate and another man came along and told her I didn’t actually care for her, I would be well within my rights to challenge him.

Still, Ella isn’t my mate, and though I genuinely hate hearing her talk about a future where we aren’t together, I know she’s being pragmatic. That’s the arrangement we agreed upon. She would be equally justified to dissolve our agreement if she met a man.

Before I’ve even finished the thought, my wolf is roaring in my head, driven over the edge by the idea of Ella being with anyone else. It takes all my willpower to keep him reined in, and I’m glad Ella is only half awake. I’m sure it’s just the pup growing in her belly – I wouldn’t care otherwise, but as long as she’s carrying my child, the idea of another man – even a human – coming near her makes me absolutely furious. I breathe in a deep sigh, trying to get my wolf back under control. Of course this only amplifies her delicious scent, and my wolf becomes distracted once more.

“You washed off my scent again.” I observe, thankful that my voice sounds much calmer than I feel.

Ella flushes despite her foggy state. “I had to – I was covered in chocolate and whipped cream and who knows what else.”

Oh how quickly things can change, I think sadly. This afternoon I wanted nothing more than to lick every inch of her body clean, and now I’m glad the temptation is gone. If I’d gone down that road there would have been no turning back, and this afternoon was a cautionary tale I won’t soon forget. Ella and I have to find a way to move forward in our



agreement without all the pent up sexual tension – maybe she realized the same thing after Roger’s visit. Maybe that’s the real reason she chose to sleep in her own bed.

I see the logic of it, and yet I can’t seem to stop myself from flirting. “Hmm, and who’s fault was that?”

“Yours.” Ella replies easily, still not opening her eyes.

“Oh really? I seem to remember you throwing the first handful.” I remind her amusedly.

Again that sumptuous pout, more tempting than she could possibly realize. “You provoked me.”

“Such a temper.” I tease, running my fingers through her long hair. “if I didn’t know any better I’d think you were a wolf.”

“I think I’d like to be one.” She confesses wistfully, “Just to shift and experience what it would be like to be that free.”

I can hear the emotion in her voice clear as day, even though she’s not truly awake. Her words make me wonder what Ella would be like as a wolf, and I have to admit I find the idea more plausible than I would for most humans. She’s so strong of will and spirit, clever, intuitive, both deeply independent and pack oriented – she’s even skittish like she’s wrangling a wild inner animal.

Suddenly I find myself wishing that she was a wolf too, so we could be together without all these complications. “What am I going to do with you, Ella?”

I can’t afford these distractions, and I need to be caring for my family and the pack, not rutting Ella senseless. I’m not even sure if she could withstand the affections of a wolf. She’s so small, so delicate. I can’t risk her or the pup. I have to simply be grateful she’s safe, and give up hoping for more – for both our sakes.

She rolls onto her back, looking up at me curiously. “Earlier you said ‘we’ll finish this later.’” She reminds me. “What did you mean?”

Damn. I’d meant I was going to kiss her until she forgot her own name and take her to bed, but I’ve seen the error of my ways only too well today. “I meant we’d finish talking about security and setting boundaries.” I lie instead. “But we can talk about that tomorrow.”

## Chapter 34

Ella

I wake up alone in bed, and promptly rush to the restroom to empty the contents of my stomach. When I finally emerge, I find Aileen waiting for me, a breakfast tray in her hands and a kind smile on her face. “How are you doing, my love?”

“I am thankful my baby is growing big and strong.” I recite, clutching my belly and repeating the same mantra I keep employing whenever the morning sickness or mood swings act up.

Aileen chuckles, “but you feel like hell?” She guesses.

I nod pitifully, and Aileen offers me a steaming cup of tea. “Here, have some of this. When I was carrying my pips nothing banished the sickness better.” I take a sip of the herbal brew, sighing happily as warmth fills me up from the inside out. “That’s it.”

Aileen encourages. “I can already see some color coming back into your cheeks.”

“More Luna lessons today?” I guess, thanking her kindness with a wide smile and a squeeze of her soft hands.

“And not a moment too soon.” She reports, “We shouldn’t have put it off this long with the holidays coming up so soon, but Dominic wanted to give you time to rest.”

“The holidays?” I repeat, the wheels slowly turning over in my mind. Her words take a moment to sink in, I’m so ravenous after going to bed without supper that it’s all I can do not to shove my face full of the cream scones and raspberry jam laid out on the breakfast tray. “Of course,” I eventually murmur, “It hadn’t even occurred to me that if you have your own gods you’d have your own holidays and traditions.”

Aileen smiles kindly. “It’s alright, this is all a lot to take in, but we don’t have much time to waste either. The Winter Solstice is next week, and you are going to be very busy, my dear.”

I know enough about ancient pagan traditions to know that the Winter Solstice is the longest night of the year, but beyond that I'm fairly clueless about how werewolves might celebrate the occasion. "What happens at the Winter Solstice?"

"Well, it's all about honoring nature and the goddess, rebirth, transformations and new beginnings – finding light in the dark half of the year. It's really beautiful. The week before the solstice day is seven days straight of different festivals and activities, I've got a calendar around her somewhere." She adds, moving back towards the breakfast tray and searching through the contents. "It's all wonderful: bonfires, drinking and dancing, parading through the streets and decorating the city, lighting candles, giving gifts.

Then there's feasts and rituals, and it all culminates in a grand ball at the Royal Palace."

Her words ring a few bells in my mind. I've always known there are exclusive parties and festivals in the city's wealthiest neighborhoods, but I always assumed they were for the human holiday celebrations, not anything supernatural. I've never attended because I've never had the money or access to such entertainment, but it also sounds like Aileen is talking about events far more extensive than the few of which I'm aware.

"A ball?" I repeat, latching onto her last comment. "Like... an actual ball?"

"I take it you've never been to one?" Aileen surmises, arching a brow.

I simply laugh, "When would I have ever had the opportunity? The only humans who have them are rich and famous!"

"I see," Aileen muses. "Well, I knew I was going to have to teach you our dances, but I suppose we'll have to be a bit more thorough regarding etiquette and the like."

I remember the dances Sinclair showed me at the shifter club, and my heart begins to pound. "What kind of dances?"

"Nothing like what you're thinking." Aileen assures me. "I swear they're all perfectly tasteful."

"And the festivals and rituals?" I gulp, remembering Sinclair's teasing about humans being prudish and repressed.

"Now they can get a bit scandalous, but I promise Sinclair will be with you every step of the way." She promises.

Sure, I think, a bitter taste in my mouth. I've heard that before. Before I can say anything of the sort or ask any additional questions, Aileen abruptly stops rustling through the tray, "Aha! Here it is!" She offers me a sheet of parchment, and I look down at the page with trepidation and awe.

#### Moon Valley Solstice Festival Schedule of Events

Night 1: Bonfire Night – Wulver Hill

Night 2: Solstice Procession – Old Town

Night 3: Yuletide Feast – Midwinter's Fair

Night 4: Wassailing – Central Canal

Night 5: Moon Bathing – Moon Valley Stone Circle

Night 6: The Wild Hunt – the King's Forest

Night 7: Masquerade Ball – the Royal Palace

"Aileen, I don't know what half these things are! More than half!" I exclaim, feeling suddenly and profoundly out of my depth.

"It's okay." She croons, "you'll take it one day at a time, and you'll be an expert in shifter solstice traditions by the time the week is out."

I scan the parchment over and over again, my eyes repeatedly catching on the ball and whatever moon bathing is. However only one event sends true fear slicing through my body. "What is the Wild Hunt?"

"Ah," Aileen purses her lips, looking as if she wants to smile. "That's when things get especially fun for mated couples. Some people find a partner just for the night, but it's more powerful when you're bonded to the one hunting you."

"Hunting you?" I squeak.

"Yes, she wolves take off into the woods, and then their mates must hunt them down and claim them. It goes back to our origin myths, when the Moon Goddess would lead her celestial army into the forest, in pursuit of souls to create new wolves.

Nowadays “making new wolves” takes on a more literal meaning. I can’t tell you how many babies are conceived on the night of the wild hunt.”

“But I can’t shift.” I remind her nervously. Would I even have to participate? Is it required? I’m already pregnant, that must be enough to get permission to sit it out.

“That’s alright. As future Luna you’ll lead the way into the forest wearing a special ceremonial dress and carrying a torch. You won’t be expected to shift until you’re out of sight, and then Dominic will set out after you long before anyone else joins – he’s the only one who will know you didn’t shift.”

That doesn’t make me feel much better. The idea of having the entire pack watching me lead a ceremony I’ve never heard of before sounds more frightening than comforting, especially since it will all be a fraud!

“Did Dominic used to do this with Lydia?” I ask, not entirely sure why that thought entered my brain.

“Why, of course.” Aileen confirms. “Why do you ask?”

I shrug, “Roger told me that she was his mate first. I suppose I’m just curious about their relationship.”

Aileen gives me an appraising look, and I try not to squirm beneath her scrutiny. She sighs. “And so she was, but fated mates...

there are some forces so strong nothing can combat them.”

“You both make it sound much more loving than Dominic did.” I confess, remembering how disenchanted the Alpha had seemed with his former mate. He never described how they met or the early days, he never mentioned any love between them, only her hunger for status and power.

“It’s easy to be bitter and cynical when your heart is broken.” Aileen confides, patting my shoulder.

“Right.” I murmur, and I have to admit this makes sense. Who hasn’t been bitter in the wake of a lost love – especially when things didn’t end amicably. Is that what’s happening with Sinclair? Is his pessimistic description of his marriage simply the wounds of a broken heart making themselves known?

And what about Lydia? I can't even fathom what it would be like to be in love with one man, then feel so uncontrollably compelled to be with another that I'd leave him, but from what everyone says, it doesn't sound like there was any fighting it. On the other hand, I know how devastating it can be to struggle with fertility – I may not understand the mystical forces behind fated mates, but I have to have some sympathy for her on this front at least.

If I'd believed Mike was sterile and that I might have a chance with another man, would I have left him? I think about it for a long moment, but I don't think I would, and we were far from fated. Maybe I'm biased, after all I've seen the damage her disloyalty did to Sinclair, especially considering that a couple of their wealth could have easily gone through IVF or adopted a child. That, more than anything else makes me wonder if Sinclair was right, that she simply wanted the most powerful man in the room. Still, if that is the case, then Roger is probably right regardless. She'll come back when she realizes Sinclair is set to be King – and when that day comes I'll be reduced to nothing. Is Roger right that Sinclair will go back on his word when that happens? Will I lose my baby when Lydia returns?

All of a sudden it all seems like far too much to comprehend. I'm so overwhelmed by new information, confusing feelings and strange possibilities that I feel I might burst. I decide then and there to call Cora – I need to speak to someone who isn't immersed in this crazy world. If anyone can tell me whether or not I'm losing my mind – it's my sister.

## Chapter 35

Ella

“I swear, Cora.” I groan, burying my head in my hands. “I'm in so far over my head it's ridiculous.”

“You're doing fine!” Cora insists, despite the fact that she doesn't have any idea how things are actually going. “I mean a month ago you didn't even know this world existed.”

“How did you keep it quiet for so long?” I inquire.

“I didn’t have a choice.” Cora admits, “I didn’t even believe it at first. It took me a lot longer to come to terms with it than it took you, believe me. I mean I could see it through my microscope, I could see the molecular evidence, but...” She trails off, shaking her head about just how deep her denial had run. “I just couldn’t wrap my head around it. I always thought magic was nonsense

– it actually shook my belief in science for a minute there.”

I appreciate her consolation more than I can express. I’ve felt so alone in all this, it’s wonderful to know I’m not the only one who struggled this way. “I think it helps that I’ve been completely immersed in it.” I reason. “You have no idea how much better I feel just being out with you – away from all that. I mean honestly, it feels as though I’ve been living underwater or something. Like I’m learning how to survive without air because there’s no other option, and I don’t even realize how odd it is until I surface again and remember what breathing is.” I explain. “Not to mention Sinclair. He’s confusing me so much. It’s like I’m a teenager again and he’s my first crush.”

“Maybe it’s just the baby,” Cora suggests, “it wants to be near him.”

“I suppose.” I concede, “but I still don’t understand how any of this is possible. I mean the shifters are one thing – but how can I be pregnant by one?”

“I don’t know.” Cora sighs, “I mean their society has always been hidden for their own protection. A few humans like me are allowed to know, and I expect a few have fallen in love at some point or another, but I’ve never heard of anyone cross breeding.

It shouldn’t be possible.” She shakes her head. “Your baby really is a miracle, Elle.”

“Don’t I know it.” I grin. “I have to focus on that. I have to focus on the baby, rather than him.”

“Is it really that bad?” Cora presses.

“Yeah, I feel like I’m losing it, and I can’t figure out if he reciprocates the feelings, or if it’s all in my head. And then there’s all this stuff with his former mate. It’s all such a mess.”

“Do you trust him?” Cora probes gently, squeezing my hand across the table.

I feel like there's a rock sitting in the bottom of my stomach as I consider this question. "I made the mistake of trusting one man –

after everything that happened to us when we were growing up, I actually fell for Mike's lies. I knew better and I let my guard down. I'll never forgive myself for putting myself in that situation, and it's not a mistake I plan on making again."

Cora looks at me with so much undiluted pity that I pull my hand away. "Please don't look at me that way."

"Mike wasn't your fault, Ella." She declares firmly. "Mike was Mike's fault."

"It takes two to pull off a con." I remind her, "It can't succeed without an easy mark – and that's obviously what I was. I'm at least partly responsible for not seeing through his bullshit. There were red flags and I just buried my head in the sand rather than confront them."

She's shaking her head determinedly, "You know, the older we get, the more I realize just how much you shielded me from when we were kids. You let yourself be hurt so that I and the other little ones wouldn't be, and now you carry the weight of that trauma while we get off scot free. It isn't fair. And I hate to see you blaming yourself this way when none of it has been your fault."

I stare intently at my surrogate sister, feeling a rush of warmth for her. "You know I wouldn't change that for the world, Cora. I would so much rather suffer myself, than let you be harmed, than fail to protect you."

"That's why you're going to make such a wonderful mother." She smiles tenderly.

"I just hope this baby is safe." I relate. "The campaign ends just before I'm due, and once Sinclair is King I'll be able to relax. But I'm terrified of him losing. If the Prince wins I really think he might come after my baby... maybe it and Sinclair both."

"I can't imagine anyone being strong enough to lay a hand on Sinclair." Cora observes doubtfully.

"On their own maybe not." I agree, "but with an army behind him?"

"Then you'll just have to make sure he wins." Cora encourages. "The word around the office is that you've already made an incredible splash."



“Yeah, so much of one that I can barely go anywhere without camera crews following me around everywhere I go.” I complain.

“Well it definitely sounds like you need a night off.” Cora declared mischievously. “We should go out! Just the two of us – before your whole life gets consumed by the holidays.”

“I’d love to,” I sigh, “but if we want to go out without an entire entourage we’ll have to be sneaky about it.”

She arches her brows. “Sinclair is being that overprotective?”

“Yes and it’s driving me crazy. I mean about eleven different people have explained to me about male wolves with a breeding mate. I guess the pup is enough and I understand the prince might want to take him out of the running – but it’s not like anything has even happened to make him worry!” I exclaim.

“I suppose it’s better to be safe than sorry.” Cora counters.

“True – so we’ll just have to be extra safe when we go out.” I decide. “In fact, we won’t go anywhere near the shifter neighborhoods – human world only. I need some more time with my head above water.”

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The next afternoon I’m patiently allowing Sinclair to take my blood pressure, despite the fact that I’m perfectly capable of doing it myself. I’m trying to keep my thoughts neutral as the cuff begins to inflate, but it’s hard to ignore the Alpha’s laser focus on my features.

“I know what you’re thinking.” He smirks after a moment.

“Do you?” I quip.

“I know you can do this yourself.” He grins, “but I like doing it for you and I’ve been so busy that last few days that this is one of the only times I get to spend with you and the pup.”

Sure, I think wryly, other than when he’s scent marking me every morning and night.

“Why have you been so busy?”

“Just the campaign, and the holidays. It’s the craziest time of year.” Sinclair explains, frowning at the reading on the little screen.

“Your pressure is still too high.”

“Have you ever considered that you might be what’s stressing me out?” I suggest, the words slipping out before I can stop them.

Sinclair gives me an appraising look, before reaching up to stroke my cheek. “Hmm, your heart does speed up when I touch you.

Why might that be?”

“As I said, stress.” I supply, instantly regretting the direction of this conversation.

“Uh-huh.” He rumbles, still petting me in the most infuriating way.

“Not to mention all this festival business.” I admit, eager to change the subject.

“What worries you about it?” He inquires, taking the bait.

“It’s seven days straight in the public eye, under intense scrutiny when I don’t know the first thing about the Solstice – beyond what Aileen told me.” I share.

“Ella, look at me.” He encourages, waiting for me to obey before continuing. “I promise you, I’ll help you through it.”

“You said that about the campaign dinner.” I remind him.

“I know, but I won’t let you down again, I’ll stay with you the whole time.”

“Okay, but if you don’t -” I begin to object.

“If I don’t I will grovel at your feet and grant you anything your little heart desires.” Sinclair vows, cutting me off.

“Anything?” I repeat, intrigued.

“Yes, but don’t you even think about sneaking away so that I’ll owe you.” He forbids, offering me a wolfish grin.

“Now there’s an idea!” I remark deviously.

Sinclair throws his head back and laughs. “Good Goddess, I’m not going to have to chain you to my wrist am I?”

I shrug, playfully batting my lashes. “I can pick a lock.”

He laughs again, and I’m filled with warmth. Shaking his head, he presses a swift kiss to my forehead before standing. “No plotting. Focus on relaxing. I’ll be home very late tonight, so don’t wait up.” He informs me, putting away the machine. “I’ll see you in the morning.”

I wait until he drives away before calling Cora. We’d agreed to go out the next time Sinclair stayed out late, and I’m not going to miss out on this chance. She picks up the phone promptly, and I’m smiling widely as I tell her the good news, “Cora – we’re on.”

## Chapter 36

Ella

“Cora, this is exactly what I needed!” I exclaim, raising my voice over the pounding music. “When was the last time we went out just for the fun of it?”

“I can’t even remember!” She shouts back, beaming as multi-colored strobe lights flash over her lovely features. “When was the last time you weren’t working or stuck taking care of that prick, Mike!?”

I don’t need to know the exact date to know it’s been ages – we haven’t had the freedom or money to go out in years, not that it had been much of an option beforehand. Cora always offered to pay my way of course, but I never felt comfortable accepting money from her, not to mention Mike would have accused me of trying to meet another man. Looking at my sister now, dancing without a care to the thumping bass, I’m transported back to the first night we ever snuck into a club.

We were fifteen years old, and it was our second summer living in the streets rather than suffering at the orphanage. We couldn’t survive the elements in the fall and winter, so we always ended up going back – but these summers were quickly becoming our escape

from all the troubles of the broken system, and this night was our first foray into the world of grown up night life.

We befriended the bartender, convincing him we were much older than our true age and bribing him with the little money we could spare from our jobs at a local daycare center. He let us in without complaint, even offering us our first drink for free. It was the first taste of alcohol we'd ever consumed, and the only amount we'd consume that night. We were determined to save our money so we could afford an apartment together one day – even if that meant sleeping in cardboard boxes in the park, or crashing on the floor of the daycare center in the meantime.

“This is amazing!” I cried, dancing without any inhibitions, raising my arms over my head as I swayed to the hypnotic beat.

“I never knew it could be so fun!” Cora replied happily. “Why isn't dancing around in the dark at home this great?”

“Because we're not allowed to have music,” I laugh, “or do anything even remotely resembling fun!”

“We should come back some time!” She suggests, obviously trying to figure out when we might be able to spend money again.

We both know it should be a special occasion, so I throw out, “The last night of summer! Before we go back to the orphanage!”

The memory shifts before I can stop it, sweeping me off to the night we'd agreed on during that first outing, to the last night of summer. The evening had started out precisely the same way, with us changing in the children's restroom at work, trying our best to look grown up, and bribing our way in through the back door. It soon dissolved into a hazy fog of revelry, where Cora and I spiraled into the dizzying lights and deafening music.

It was all wonderful until an aggressive man twice my age took me by the hand and began grinding his body against mine, gripping me so tightly I couldn't escape his hold no matter how hard I struggled. He pulled me away from Cora from the start, but I didn't truly panic until he began dragging me towards the bathroom. The music was so loud that no one could hear me crying out for help. I wriggled and fought with all my might, but it wasn't until Cora flagged down one of the bouncers to come and pry the horrible man off me that I finally escaped.

It had been a close call, but one which was bound to raise other ghosts from the depths of my past – specters I have no intention of resurrecting now. I reach for Cora, determined not to continue down the path into my shattered memories, “I need some air!” I shout.

She’s been dancing with a handsome man who hit on her at the bar, looking as though she’s having the time of her life. Still, she takes one look at my face, and her own crumples with concern. “I’ll come with you!”

“No,” I wave her off, “You stay and have fun, I’ll be back soon!”

I stalk out into the snow, not bothering to retrieve my coat from the coat check. The bracing cold is an utter relief after the writhing heat of the dance floor, and though I chafe my arms against the chill, I welcome the brisk air filling my lungs.

I hate it when this happens, when I’ve been doing so well staying in the present – and then my waking nightmares rise up at the most inopportune moments. I drag a hand through my hair, trying to clear my mind, to get myself back to that happy haze of a little while ago. I haven’t wished for a drink since I was inseminated, but I wish I could have one now – just to help me escape, if only for a moment.

As I stand in the cold, contemplating how long is too long to spend out here and distractedly wondering why I never seem to feel the elements the way others do – the sound of clinking glass shatters the silence. I whip around, startling at the sudden sound.

I’m out behind the club, where there shouldn’t be anyone else present except perhaps a raccoon raiding the dumpster.

Yet as I watch, four shadowy figures emerge from the darkness. I know they’re shifters the moment I lay eyes on them – though I’m not sure how. Each one of the rough, ragged looking men is twice my size, and I immediately turn for the door to the club. I yank on the handle, once twice, then over and over again when it doesn’t open. It must be locked!

Annoyance wells up inside me – despite the morbid turn of my thoughts, this night had been the break I needed from my new, surreal reality. Since we came out I haven’t thought about wolves, shifters, Sinclair or the campaign even once. I finally felt like I was clearing my mind of all the chaos, but now that’s all gone to hell. I can’t very well ignore this.

“What do you want?” I demand, trying to sound braver than I feel. “If it’s money, I’ll give it to you, but you should know Alpha Dominic is my mate.”

The man nearest me laughs, a cruel, humorless sound. “You think we don’t know that?” He scoffs.

“That’s why we’re here.” The second shifter states, as if this should be obvious.”

“Then you also know I’m pregnant.” I add, praying that this might provoke some semblance of mercy from them. They simply laugh again, and I add, “if you lay a hand on me, he’ll kill you.” I threaten, sensing in my heart that this is true, even though he’s never told me any such thing.

“That assumes he can find us.” The first man, clearly their leader, proclaims.

“And trust me, he won’t.” His side-kick contributes.

“Who sent you?” I scramble for any lifeline to help myself, to delay them long enough for me to find a way to escape. I’m scanning the alley behind them, but they’re blocking every possible exit. “What are they paying you? I’ll double the fee whatever it is.”

The man scoffs, “We’re not here for money, you dumb bitch.”

“Then what?” I demand, “a cause?”

The first shifter lashes out so quickly and suddenly I don’t even see him moving. He backhands me across the face, his knuckles exploding against my cheekbone with a violent crack. I tumble to the ground, even as he looms above me. “Shut the fuck up.”

The coppery tang of blood fills my mouth, and I spit the viscous, crimson liquid into the snow. The world is spinning around me.

When I look up at my attackers, they seem to multiply, looking like eight men instead of four. I’m sure they expect me to whimper and plead with him, but if this is going to be the end of me, I refuse to play into his hands. I would gladly plead for the life of my baby, if I thought it might help, but I know better than to think these men will do anything other than use that pain and fear against me. They’re the type that will play on any weakness you expose just to humiliate you.

I glare up at the leader, meeting his expectant smirk with a snark. “You’re not the first man who’s struck me.” I inform him icily,

“and if you want to break me you’re going to have to do better than that.” I continue, taking only the mildest pleasure in their surprise. “You should be ashamed, I’ve known little boys with a stronger swing.” It’s a bold face lie, but I refuse to give him the satisfaction.

“Is that so?” He kneels down, taking my chin in his hand. “I see why the Alpha likes her.” He leers, “Shall we see what other charms she’s hiding?”

## Chapter 37

Ella

For all my bravado, my attacker’s words fill me with dread. The implications are clear, and panic is bubbling up inside me. No, no, no. I think desperately, hating myself for provoking them. If I’d kept my mouth shut would they have just killed me? Did I bring this upon myself? I open my mouth to scream as he reaches toward me, pure malice glittering in his dark eyes, but before I can make a sound, a voice rings out behind the wolves.

“Take your hands off her!” Roger appears out of nowhere, and for a moment I’m sure I’m hallucinating. Where did he come from?

He charges forward, and I watch in horror and fascination as the clothes explode off his body in shreds and his sinewy muscles vibrate and pulse with energy. Before my very eyes he transforms, bursting forth in a whirlwind of fur, fangs and claws. Where Roger stood a moment before, now there is only a huge gray wolf.

Before I know it the other men have shifted too. Three are gray like Roger, but the first man -the largest and fiercest – has red fur like a fox. Of course I’ve never seen such a terrifying fox. My mind is reeling – have I ever been this near a wolf? Have I ever even seen one in the wild? I don’t even know why I’m focusing on such things – it’s not like it matters, these aren’t actual wolves.

They’re shifters, and the beasts are at least twice the size of true wolves.

My arms are wrapped around my middle, desperately trying to protect my unborn child from the beings in front of me. I’m suddenly painfully aware of how flimsy my human

body is next to theirs, and while my baby might be stronger, it's far too little to survive if anything were to happen to me.

I can barely keep track of what's happening, my mind is fractured between primal fear, amazement as I try to process these incredible sights, and anxiety as I attempt to keep up with the unfolding events. The wolves are circling one another, growling and snarling, baring their fangs as their raised hackles and flattened ears reshape their fluffy coats. As ever, my mind finds humor at the most inappropriate of times, and I have to smother a smile as I imagine these shifters' responses to being described as fluffy.

Stop it, Ella! Shaking myself, I push my body up against the wall, trying to flatten myself to the bricks lest one of the enraged creatures comes too close. At first I think they'll continue stalking around each other, posturing forever, but then Roger lunges out of nowhere, and the fight begins.

My human eyes can't keep up with their supernatural speed. All I see is a tornado of limbs, punctuated by the snapping of fangs and yelps of pain. As they attack one another I try to open the door again, then visually carve out a path past them to the mouth of the alley. Unfortunately their battle is so chaotic that I don't think I'll be able to run past them without falling into the middle of the fray. I just have to pray the Roger is strong enough to defeat his assailants.

In the end it's over relatively quickly, amazingly fast actually – given that it was four against one. Roger might not be as strong as Sinclair, but he's clearly much more powerful than this lot. He seizes the leader by the throat, shaking him like a rag doll and sending the others running for safety. Can it really be that simple? I wonder, cut the head off the snake and the body dies? What cowards.

Roger throws the other wolf to the ground – scarlet blood dripping over the snow as he clammers to his feet and scampers off into the night, whimpering like a pup. I'm still standing there frozen when Roger shifts back, coming forward with outstretched hands, as if I'm a wild animal he's trying to calm. "Ella, are you still with me?" He broaches gently.

"I... what just happened?" I gasp. I can feel the tendrils of shock beginning to take hold, wrapping around me with numbing relief.



Yet for some reason my body is fighting the reaction, as if it doesn't think the threat has passed and needs to remain in fight or flight mode. "How did you know I was here? How did you know I was in danger? Who were those men?"

The questions are pouring out of me now, and I'm not sure I can make them stop. I need answers before I can relax, before I can start to process these events.

"I'll explain everything." Roger promises, "first just tell me if you're alright."

"I'm fine." I insist, still protectively clutching my belly.

"You're bleeding." He observes, reaching towards me.

I flinch away from his touch, and trembles rack my body. Between the flashback of my near-assault and this very real attempt, the idea of any man touching me makes me feel sick to my stomach. Even as I think this, I feel my gorge rising, and turn away to vomit. Tears burn in my eyes as my stomach heaves, and I can only be grateful my hair is up. "I need Cora." I tell Roger. "My sister, she's inside."

He looks uncertain. "I don't want to leave you like this Ella."

I shake my head stubbornly. "I need Cora." I need a woman, I'm coming to pieces, and no man will be able to comfort me right now. I wouldn't normally place such a burden on my sister, but I'm afraid this scene is going to be quickly overrun with aggressive shifters, and I don't think I can handle it.

He races out of the alley, no doubt circling the block to make it back to the club entrance. I move away from my quickly freezing sick, and lower myself to the ground in the snow, Wrapping my arms around my knees. A minute later the back door slams open, making me jump five feet in the air. Then Cora is there, dropping to her knees in front of me. "Oh my God, Ella!" She frets, her hands fluttering around me as if she's not sure what to do first, "What happened, are you okay?"

Tears well on my lashes as I look up at her. "I want to go home." I murmur, my lower lip quivering. "Can you call us a cab?"

"Sweetheart of course," she wraps one slender arm around me, then pulls out her phone.

However, before she can dial the number, the device begins to buzz in her hand, and Sinclair's name flashes across the screen.

We both freeze, and I shake my head. “Don’t, don’t pick up.”

Roger nods in agreement, “You’ll only get her in more trouble.”

But Cora is frowning at my bruised face and split lip, “Honey he’s going to find out anyway, and he’ll be less angry if he hears sooner rather than later.” Before I can stop her, she picks up the phone. I can hear Sinclair’s deep tones through the receiver, and then Cora is nodding. “I’m with her. But listen, something has happened.”

I clench my eyes shut as the call continues, listening as she calmly shares our location and he promises to come as fast as he can. When she hangs up she looks back down at me, “It’ll be okay, Ella.” She chafes my bare arms with her hands, “We should really get you up out of the snow.”

I get to my feet in something of a trance, hating that I’m worrying her. I bite back my fraying emotions, swiping at my tears. “I’m okay.” I say again, “it’s just a little bruise.”

“Come on, let’s go inside.” Cora suggests.

“No!” I argue, backing away from the concerned pair. “It’s too many people.”

“Okay.” Cora agrees easily, clearly not sure how to help me.

Trying to keep up a brave front, I turn back to Roger, “Tell me what just happened.”

“They were rogues.” He explains, “wolves without allegiance to any pack – if they’re not robbing and raping,” I flinch violently at the word, and he softens his tone, “in the neutral borderlands between territories, they’re working as mercenaries. My guess is that’s what these four were.”

“They knew who I was.” I gulp. “They knew I was here. No one but Cora knew that.”

Roger shakes his head, “They probably followed you from home.”

“But why?” Cora inquires, looking so upset now that I feel compelled to comfort her. It’s a much more comfortable dynamic for me, and I readily squeeze her hand.

“Why else?” Roger scoffs, “The campaign. Your pup – this isn’t even the first rogue attack in Moon Valley this week.”

“It isn’t?” I clarify.

“Dominic didn’t tell you?” He sounds as though he’s trying and failing to sound neutral.

I shake my head, zeroing in on the detail that has me hovering so close to my sister, refusing to lower my guard. “None of this answers how you knew I was here.”

“I didn’t.” Roger shares sadly. “When I left the house tonight I caught the scent of the rogues, and I followed it here – afraid there was going to be another attack. I had no idea you were their target.” He glances at the mouth of the alley, scenting the air. “Brace yourself now, Dominic is close.”

## Chapter 38

### Sinclair

When I reach the address Cora supplied, it’s all I can do to keep my temper in check. She hadn’t explained what happened, only that she and Ella needed to be picked up from a nightclub. I was able to stay calm while I got the details from her, but I found my anger growing exponentially the closer I drew to my disobedient little human. After everything that happened when she snuck out to see my father, I can’t believe she defied me again. However as soon as I round the corner of the alley behind the venue, my fury evaporates.

I’m not even sure of what I’m seeing at first. Roger is standing near the back door, naked, disheveled and bruised. The scent of strange wolves reeks to high heaven, and blood is splattered over the ground leading away from the club, along with numerous large pawprints. Cora is standing between me and Ella, her taller frame shielding my pup’s mother from view. She looks unharmed but a bit shaken, dressed in a tight red frock.

Roger stiffens at the sight of me, and Cora turns to face me, finally revealing Ella. Her arms are wrapped around her body, and she’s wearing a glittery black mini dress and heels. She’s staring at the ground, her energy agitated and withdrawn at once.

There’s a huge black and blue bruise on her high cheekbone, and a cut on her lip, dried blood congealed around the wound.

I rush forward, surprised when Cora intercepts me, a pleading expression on her face. “Please be gentle – she’s in shock.”

I immediately skirt around her, reaching for Ella. Roger and Cora both raise their hands to stop me, “No!” It’s as if they think my touch might frighten Ella, but as soon as our bodies connect the tension seeps out of Ella like a dam bursting. She comes to me instinctively, letting me gather her to my chest and nestling close to my body. Her small hands cling to my shirt as her nose presses to my chest, breathing in my scent.

Roger and Cora look on with confusion, and I wonder if Ella had been afraid of their touch. The obvious implications of why she would feel that way pour over me, and I hold her tighter. “What happened?” I ask, glaring at Roger. If it weren’t for Ella’s obvious need of comfort, I might have already attacked him. Seeing any man this close to her when she’s injured was a violent trigger.

“Rogues.” Roger answers simply. “I caught their scent near my house and followed them. When I arrived they had Ella cornered.

They were talking about...” He trails off, glancing nervously at the woman in my arms. “They were sent to kill her, but they obviously wanted to have a bit of fun with her first.”

I can’t hold back the growl which tears through my chest, and I’m not sure what enrages me more – the fact that anyone wanted to hurt Ella, the way she trembles at Roger’s description, or the fact that he brought up their intentions in front of her. Ella burrows closer to me, and I wrap my coat around her shivering body, buttoning it around the small of her back so we’re both snug inside. “I fought them off and they ran for it.” Roger continues. “But she was already hurt before I arrived... it didn’t look like they did anything, but I don’t know.”

Leaning my lips to Ella’s ear, I can’t help the ragged huskiness of my voice. My wolf is going berserk in my head, and I want nothing more than to hunt down the men responsible and rip them to shreds. “Did they touch you?” I demand, stroking her hair.

She shakes her head against my chest, and I catch the sound of a hiccup – as if she’s holding back sobs. She still won’t look at me, and I realize she’s probably afraid she’s in trouble even though she needs my comfort.

“I think one of them hit her.” Cora supplies, no doubt referring to her sister’s battered face. “But she wouldn’t really talk about it.

She just kept saying she's fine and she wanted to go home." I can picture it as if I was there, and I feel a rush of warmth knowing Ella sought me for safety when she shied away from the others.

Cora frowns, continuing. "I don't even know how they found her. We were inside dancing and then... I don't know, I think she got overheated or something and came outside. But... it's like they were waiting for her."

I nod, "However it happened, it sounds like we both owe Roger our thanks." I hate saying these words, and I find all of these circumstances incredibly suspicious. Cora has hit the nail on the head, and the red flags are only compounded by the fact that my brother managed to find Ella just in time to leap to her rescue. Still, I don't want to let him on to my suspicions. If it happens the way he says, then I do owe him my thanks, and if it didn't, I need to play my cards close to my chest in order to uncover the truth. "Brother, can you escort Cora home?"

Cora looks very reluctant to leave Ella, but eventually she departs with Roger, giving me another imploring look as they walk away. If I had to guess I'd presume she's asking me not to be too harsh with her sister, but she needn't be worried. I have no intention of scolding or punishing Ella – not tonight at least.

"Come on little one." I encourage, unbuttoning my coat and scooping her up. She slides her arms around my neck and leans her uninjured cheek against my shoulder, still as quiet as a mouse. The car ride home passes much the same way, and when we reach the mansion I take her straight upstairs to my bathroom.

Setting her on the counter, I rummage through the cabinets for a first aid kit. Ella leans back against the mirror, her face devoid of all emotion. "Come here, let me look at you." I instruct when I've retrieved the proper supplies.

Catching Ella's face between my hands, I tilt her head from right to left, studying her injuries and trying to stay calm. The bruise on her cheek is swelling quickly, it's bright red center showing just how close the blow came to breaking her skin. The cut on her lip seems minor, but the amount of dried blood makes me worry it's deeper than it looks.

I wet a washcloth and begin cleaning the cut, causing Ella hiss and wince, "I'm sorry, sweetheart." I croon. "It has to be done."

Ella snuffles and clamps her eyes shut as I continue working, determined to suffer through it without complaint. Of course, when I switch out the water for alcohol, she practically leaps off the counter, whimpering so pitifully my heart aches. “Shh baby, I know.

I’m almost done.” I promise, holding her tightly in place.

“Do you want to tell me what happened?” I ask a little later, pressing a cloth wrapped ice pack to her cheek. She flinches, but replaces my hand with her own, keeping up the cool pressure.

“They already told you.” She murmurs, silently submitting as I strip off her dress to check for other injuries.

I’m relieved not to find any other wounds, and when I press my hand to her belly the pup seems perfectly well. It’s heartbeat is steady and strong, and though I sense earlier flashes of unease – no doubt caused by Jane’s fear – it now seems relieved to be safely home with us both. “I want to hear it from you.” I press gently. “Roger and Cora don’t know what happened when you were alone with them.”

Ella blinks up at me, and I’m surprised by the lack of emotion on her lovely face. “It was nothing. I went outside for some air.

Then I heard movement in the alley and they appeared. I tried to go back in but the door was locked -“

“It was locked?” I question, more sharply than I intended.

“Yes, but it was probably just an automatic door.” She reasons. “Anyway I offered them money, I told them I was your mate and you’d kill them if you harmed me, then one hit me... and I made the mistake of provoking him...” She trails off. “Roger turned up soon after that.”

“Provoked him how?” I ask, pleased that she’s talking but not liking the hollow look in her eyes, or emptiness in her words.

Ella stares at her lap, “it’s not important, he probably planned on... raping me even before that.”

Sighing, I pull her into my arms, “I’m sure he did.” I confirm, knowing how strange a comfort this must seem. Still, Ella clearly knows exactly what they intended, and I’d

rather her understand that she didn't cause them to think that way, than deny that the danger was always present.

"You really don't have to fuss over me this way." Ella says after a moment of cuddling. "I'm fine."

"You don't have to be fine, Ella." I inform her sternly.

She squirms in my hold, and I reluctantly release her. I'm not sure what I expected her to say, but her next question takes me by surprise. "Why didn't you tell me about the other rogue attacks?"

## Chapter 39

Ella

I can't explain it, but for some reason Sinclair's tender care upsets me more than if he was angry. It's taken me a while to come back to myself—as the fog of my shock wore off and the utter safety and security of being with Sinclair thawed my frozen senses, I found my emotions slowly returning. Just not the ones I expected.

Do I want him to be angry? I wonder. Why? Because it somehow hurts me that he doesn't seem to care that I defied him?

Because I feel badly for breaking his rules and want to see that they weren't all for show? Because I'm so angry with myself for what happened tonight, and I feel like I deserve to be punished?

I don't have the answers to these questions, though on some level I suspect all my theories have a kernel of truth. Either way, I find myself picking an argument, rather than letting him comfort me.

Sinclair sighs, though he still doesn't release me entirely. "I didn't want to worry you." He explains, his handsome features a hard mask. "There's only been one so far, and you know I've been worried about your stress levels."

"Is that why you were called away the other day?" I inquire, his sudden disappearance from the kitchen making more sense now.

“Yes.” He confirms, “It was horrible honestly. Almost a dozen dead in broad daylight and twice as many injured. They didn’t smell like the same wolves who were in the alley with you tonight, but I’m sure they were hired by the same person.”

“The prince?” I guess , shifting my hold on the ice pack as my fingers gradually go numb.

“That’s right.” Sinclair nods. “I’ve been searching for them ever since, but I think he’s probably protecting them.”

“Will you search for the ones who came after me tonight?” I murmur, not understanding the sudden bloodlust I feel. It must be my maternal instincts responding to the threat against my pup – I’ve never wished anyone dead before, no matter what they’ve done to me, but I want nothing more than for Sinclair to destroy those cruel wolves.

Sinclair nods. “I will hunt them down and tear them to absolute pieces.” He snarls, letting out more of his wolf than I think he intended.

I’m amazed to realize I’m smiling about such a macabre idea. Frankly I’m amazed I can smile about anything so soon after the attack, even if it is a somber grin. Either way the stretch of my lips pulls on my cut, and soon my smile is a grimace of pain. “Ow, ow, ow.”

Sinclair tsks, “poor, vicious, darling.” He croons, resting his forehead against mine and petting my sides.

“Is it terrible that I wish them harm?” I whisper, gazing into his green eyes, mere inches from mine.

“Of course not.” Sinclair promises, smiling himself now, “you really are becoming more like a wolf every day.”

A painful pang blooms in my chest. He seems so pleased every time I do something he considers wolfish. It might just be that he’s happy the pup is growing, but it really feels like he doesn’t approve of my humanity – as if he wants me to be a wolf and will take any scraps of behavior he can get. I’m getting lost in my thoughts now, but Sinclair soon pulls my focus back to him.

Framing my face in his hands but careful to avoid touching my bruise, he prompts, “Would you like to tell me why you snuck out tonight – after everything we went through the other day?”



I peek up at him from beneath my lashes, “Am I in a lot of trouble?”

“Just answer the question, Ella.” He admonishes. Part of me wishes he’d tell me I am in trouble – if I am it means he hasn’t given up on me. But it worries me when he goes stoic and unreadable. His anger I can handle, his grim contemplation makes me fear he might decide I’m not worth the hassle and void our deal – taking the baby from me.

“I just needed a night away from all this.” I share, gesturing to our surroundings. “I needed to feel human again, just for a little while. And I thought it would be fine since we were sticking to human territories and businesses. I didn’t know about the other attack.”

“Ella, the other attack isn’t what matters.” Sinclair rumbles sternly, pulling my distracted thoughts back to the present. “I told you it was dangerous for you to be out without guards, you promised me you wouldn’t do this again and you broke your word at the very first opportunity.” I can see his temper flaring now, flashing in his eyes as we finally address the events which led up to the attack. “What were you thinking? After everything I’ve told you about the Prince, after everything you’ve learned is at stake in this campaign.”

“But it’s your campaign, not mine.” I argue. “And I’ve turned my entire life upside down, given up my entire identity to support it.

At the very least I think I deserve a night to myself.”

“I will gladly give you a night to yourself.” Sinclair agreed, “but if you’re going to be out in the city, you need protection!”

“I don’t want to have to ask permission just to set one foot out the front door!” I burst out. “I shouldn’t have to have babysitters just to go to the park or the grocery store. I don’t know how anyone can live with those kinds of restraints, Dominic.”

“I understand better than you think, Ella.” Dominic confesses, “I don’t like having to drag around half a dozen people with me either, but it’s a necessary evil. Just think about the baby, if not for yourself, please take these precautions for the pup.”

I push down off the counter, shaking my head as I stride past him. “I don’t think you realize just how much you’re asking of me –

or how difficult this is. A month ago I led a completely different existence and now everything has changed and everything I thought I knew – was wrong. The only thing I have left is my independence, and now you're demanding that too!"

"I don't want to take your independence, or your freedom, Ella." Sinclair insists, "And I know this isn't how you wanted to have your baby – but it isn't exactly what I wanted either. I always imagined I would share the experience with my mate and that we'd be a family forever. I never imagined contracts and custody and fake relationships." Ouch. It's completely true, and yet the statement cuts me to the core. "So we can make the best of our situation, or we can let it divide us. Now, I for one, think we should be a team. I want our baby to have two loving, united parents, don't you?"

"Of course I do." I murmur, tears springing to my eyes. I need to get out of here before I start to cry. "And I think we'll get there."

But right now I just need some time to myself. I'm going to sleep in my rooms tonight."

I turn to leave, but Sinclair's deep voice stops me. "I don't think that's a good idea."

I pause, turning back in bafflement, "Why not?"

"You've had a traumatic experience, you might have nightmares." He reasons.

I roll my eyes, turning back to the door. "I've had traumatic experiences before and I've always gotten myself through them just fine – nightmares or not."

"I understand that, but you don't have to get through it alone anymore." Sinclair counters, his footsteps sounding behind me.

"And I understand that you might not want to let the pup out of your sight after the attack, but if you want me to avoid stress, then I need some space to process this." I reply, trying to empathize with his perspective.

I can practically hear him grappling for another excuse, before he finally gives up the pretense and commands. "Ella, I'm sorry, but I can't allow that."

"Excuse me?" I scoff, turning to face him.

He's standing a few feet away, clenching and unclenching his fists as the muscle in his jaw twitches with agitation. Something about his behavior makes me think this has

nothing to do with my potential nightmares, or his own possessive instincts. I have the distinct intuition that he's keeping something from me – like the first rogue attack.

Narrowing my eyes, I sidle forehead, feeling an inexplicable wave of intuition that not all is as it seems. “What aren't you telling me?”

“What do you mean?” Sinclair questions impassively.

“I mean that you were already in a security frenzy before there was ever a rogue attack, and unless you're a complete tyrant and just determined to control me, all these precautions must mean you have another reason to be afraid. I don't think you're a tyrant

– despite your spot on impression at times – so what aren't you telling me?” Now that I see it, it seems so obvious. I don't know how I missed it before.

“Fine,” He sighs, looking as though he's about to deliver my death sentence. “I'm sorry, Ella, but there really was someone in your rooms the other night.”

## Chapter 40

Ella

“What?” I squeak, my voice catching in my throat. The moment the words left Sinclair's mouth I felt my blood run cold, and now I feel as though I might topple over with the shock of it. I must have misheard him, surely he doesn' mean what I think he does.

“That night you heard someone growling in your bathroom?” Sinclair explains, stepping forward as though he wants to reach for me, but stopping himself short when I flinch away. “I told you I didn't smell anything... but I lied. There was someone in your rooms, I just didn't want to scare you.”

“And you let me go back there, knowing there'd been an intruder?” I demand, indignation swirling to life amidst my fear, surprise and sorrow.

“Sweetheart, I had the guards do a thorough search of the grounds then and there. They were long gone, and I've had you sleeping in my rooms ever since. I also increased the guards during the day when I knew you'd be back there.” He shares. “Trust me, I've done everything possible to ensure your safety.”

“Except tell me that I was in danger!” I cry. “It’s no wonder you flipped out the way you did when I went to see your father! And you blamed me like I was supposed to know about the threat!”

“Ella –” He begins in a placating tone.

“No!” I cut him off, stomping my foot out of pure wrath. “How am I supposed to know it’s dangerous if you don’t tell me, Dominic?”

I exclaim. “You didn’t even tell me about the rogue attack and that had nothing to do with me! All this time I thought you were being overbearing and overprotective, but I just didn’t have a clue what was happening in my own life!” Too late I realize my earlier desire to leave before I start crying is now a lost cause. Tears are sliding down my cheeks as I continue. “How could you do that! You know what I went through with Mike. I spent years thinking I knew my situation when it was all lies – and you turned around and did the exact same thing!”

Dominic’s usually golden skin goes very pale, “Goddess Ella, I never even thought about it that way.” He admits. “I was just trying to protect you and the pup. I didn’t want you to be afraid.”

“Well all you actually did was make a fool of me.” I inform him stiffly. “And for the record, you also made me more vulnerable to danger. Do you think I would have ever considered sneaking away without guards if I knew someone might actually be after me?! Do you believe I would ever risk my baby that way?”

“Ella, I’m sorry.” Sinclair professes, and I’m amazed to see how earnest he looks. Gone is the bossy Alpha who orders everyone about and lays down the law when they defy him, replaced by a man who has been truly humbled. “I’m truly, truly sorry. I was inconsiderate and patronizing – I assumed I knew what was best and never consulted you... I’ve been a hypocrite, I’ve been going on about being a team but I’ve been acting like a tyrant.” He continues. “You were right, and that’s not the kind of parent I want to be.”

Despite my simmering anger, I’m completely agog. I never expected a man as powerful as Sinclair to admit a mistake – or any fault for that matter. I thoroughly believed that people of his ilk never took responsibility for their actions, because they have the privilege of passing it off onto someone else. Even men without means, like Mike, often

can't admit when they're wrong. In fact, as a woman, the number of times I've heard any man tell me that I'm right in a disagreement is... well, I think this is the first time.

"Can you ever forgive me?" Sinclair is still going, coming forward to brush the hair back from my face, and looking deep into my eyes.

I cross my arms over my chest, tilting my chin up and giving him a haughty sniff to hide my amazement. "As long as you promise never to do it again."

"I promise that I'll try to do better." Sinclair vows, taking hold of my arms. "I'm still an Alpha, and hopefully a King. It's in my nature to protect at all costs, and those instincts are strongest when it comes to she-wolves and pups. When I think about you in danger my wolf fairly loses his mind, and I really am concerned about this pregnancy. You're high risk as a human, and the longer your blood pressure stays elevated, the more likely you are to become high risk in shifter terms too."

His words send a frisson of fear through my nerves. I've been trying to tell myself all this worry is his overprotectiveness gone mad, but when he puts it in these terms I realize my baby and I might have a harder road ahead of us than I realized. I hadn't considered myself high risk simply because I'm a human carrying a shifter pup, but it makes sense. Again I recall the doctor's warnings about the size of the fetus, the spotting incident and now my persistent stress. I really don't mind if I suffer, but the idea of my baby being at risk is enough to bowl me over.

"So I can't say for certain that I'll never slip up again," Sinclair forges ahead, massaging my arms with the pads of his thumbs,

"but I promise to always consider your perspective, and consult you whenever I can."

"Thank you." I murmur, leaning into his warmth.

He nods and kisses the top of my head, wrapping his strong arms around me. "Do you still want to sleep in your rooms?"

"Would you let me?" I inquire, already testing his resolve.

Sinclair offers me a wolfish grin. "As long as you let me post enough guards at the door."

I chuckle, and shake my head. "I want to stay with you."

His muscles untense slightly, and he purrs in contentment. “Good. It’s been a very long night.”

“You can say that again.” I agree, wriggling out of his hold so I can retrieve a night dress from my designated drawer in his dresser.

A little while later we’re curled beneath the plush covers of his king sized bed. Sinclair always sleeps shirtless— not that I’m complaining – so he’s stretched out on his back as I rest my uninjured cheek on his bare pec, immediately soothed by his intoxicating scent. I once asked him why I find smelling him so soothing, and he explained that it’s just the pup. Still I can’t help thinking that I would have loved his scent even if I weren’t ‘breeding’ as he calls it.

“Are you sure you’re alright?” Sinclair asks, tracing his fingers in soothing patterns down my back. “After the attack, I mean.”

I nod, brushing my cheek over the fine hairs of his chest and landing myself with a tickle in my nose. “It was nothing.”

A loud rumble vibrates against my cheek. “Not to me.” Sinclair growls.

My hand has been resting on the hard contours of his abs, and I find myself caressing his soft skin, hoping to soothe him the way he so often soothes me. “Honestly the most shocking part of the whole ordeal was seeing them shift... I’ve never seen anything like it. I still can’t believe it.” In fact that might go a long way to explaining why the entire ordeal still doesn’t quite feel real to me.

“Were you very afraid?” Sinclair presses, taking advantage of my sudden willingness to talk.

“I was more afraid for the baby than anything else.” I confess. “That’s what hurt more than anything, when I thought that my brashness might have cost it, instead of just me.”

A low purr rolls to life in Sinclair’s chest. “Nothing they did or would have done was caused by you, Ella.”

I huff out a laugh. “It seems like there are an awful lot of people telling me things aren’t my fault lately.” I muse aloud. “But at a certain point one has to think the common denominator is common for a reason.”

“Who else?” Sinclair probes. “About what?”

That’s not a conversation I plan on having with Sinclair anytime soon. We might be on better terms, and he might make me feel safe, but I vowed not to make the mistake of trusting another man, and I meant it. Sinclair has already proven himself unreliable on that front. “What does your wolf look like?” I ask, instead of answering his question.

He chuckles, clearly not missing my less-than-smooth transition. “It’s black.” He says simply, “Pitch as the night, with my same colored eyes.”

“Can I see it sometime?” I ask, not quite understanding why I’m so interested in meeting the beast.

“If you like.” He agrees. “But not tonight. Tonight we sleep – and tomorrow we start with a clean slate. Deal?”

For a moment I wonder if such a thing is really possible – part of me thinks it’s too late to stop what’s already begun. Still I have to try, for the sake of my pup if not myself.

“Deal.”

## Chapter 41

Ella

“Parenting classes? Already?” I ask in surprise. “I’m only a few weeks along.”

“Yes, but we only have five months to prepare, and you don’t know anything about shifter children.” Sinclair replies easily.

I’m sitting up in bed with a breakfast tray in my lap, while Sinclair sits in a bedside armchair watching me like a hawk. It’s the morning after the attack and I haven’t been allowed to move a muscle, not even to vomit on my own. I attempted to free my body from Sinclair’s strong arms when we woke so that I could make a mad dash to the bathroom, but he ended up carrying me instead – holding my hair up and rubbing my back until I was finished. In fact he’s been so attentive that he took the day off of work to stay with me, and now he’s talking about going to our first birthing and parenting courses.

“Are shifter children all that different from human ones?” I ask, feeling a wave of anxiety.

“Well they gestate so much faster that I’d expect unique developmental milestones both during pregnancy and infancy, and then there are certainly differences in ability and personality. All their senses are heightened from day one, and they’ll need to learn about our ways and society – which means you do too.” Sinclair reasons.

I frown. Suddenly I feel as though I’m way out of my depth. My child is going to be a little superhuman miracle running circles around me, will I even be able to keep up? Before I realize what he intends, Sinclair has reached out and smoothed my wrinkled brow with the pad of his thumb, a kind smile on his face. “Don’t worry, sweet Ella. This is why I want us to go to class, and we’re a team remember? I’ll always be there to teach our pup the shifter side of things, all you have to worry about is loving him.”

I can’t help but smile at Sinclair’s tender assurances, and it takes me a moment for his last word to click in my brain. “You said

“him”, you did the same thing the night I was spotting – I forgot until just now.” I share, eyeing him curiously. “Is that just hopeful thinking because you need an heir... or do you know something I don’t?”

Sinclair smirks, grazing his knuckles over my cheeks. “I expect there are a few things I know that you don’t.” He teases. “But yes, it’s a boy. I knew the moment I felt the mental link.”

“Really?” I gape, my hands naturally gravitating to my flat tummy. Sometimes it still feels terribly surreal that there’s actually a life growing within me, and now – to think I have a son, it’s almost too much to take in. I feel tears in my eyes, and Sinclair grins, brushing them away with the pad of his thumb.

“Really.” He confirms. “We’re going to have a little boy.”

Before I can stop myself, I push the breakfast tray aside and launch myself at Sinclair, wrapping my arms around his shoulders and hugging him tightly. He catches me with a chuckle, squeezing me tightly and burying his face in my neck. He inhales deeply, his warm lips flush to my skin. “Are you smelling me?” I ask, amusement clear in my voice.

“So?” He laughs, “you smell me all the time.”



“Yeah but that’s the baby.” I remind him, repeating the same explanation he’s given me a hundred times.

“Well I like the way you smell.” Sinclair shrugs, nuzzling my hair. I wait for him to tell me this is also because of the pup, but he doesn’t. Instead he emits a soft purr. “The baby likes it when we’re close this way.” He tells me, and I realize our bodies are so tightly pressed together that he’s undoubtedly able to connect to the child’s consciousness. “He can feel us both, and our happiness.”

“I wish I had a link to him like you do.” I admit, pulling away at long last.

“Don’t worry.” Sinclair murmurs, “I’ll always be here to tell you what he’s thinking and feeling.” His hands slide from my body, and suddenly I feel a rush of cold air. I almost want to wrap myself back around him, just to get that luscious warmth back, but Sinclair is already standing. “Now hop to it, cuddlebug. Class is in an hour.”

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“Hey you’re good at that!” I exclaim, looking over at Sinclair’s station. Our first assignment in parenting class is properly diapering an infant (using a doll to stand in of course). There are eight other couples joining us, all at varying stages of their own pregnancies. Having diapered many children through my nanny days, I was confident that I could ace this part of the course, but I wasn’t prepared for Sinclair to complete the task faster and equally as competently as I had.

He shrugs, the very picture of humility. “In my line of work you have to kiss a lot of babies.”

I roll my eyes – I highly doubt many politicians go as far as diapering the babies they kiss. In fact I expect most of them probably pawn off the less pleasant duties of parenthood onto their wives – if they ever lift a finger at all. “Maybe, but it’s more than that –

isn’t it? I remember how great you were with Millie and Jake.”

For whatever reason, Sinclair doesn’t seem to want to take credit for this. Instead a mischievous glint appears in his eye. “Hey, how about we race?”

“That hardly seems fair, you have supernatural speed.” I whisper, careful not to be overheard. Everyone here thinks I’m a wolf, and I’m doing my best not to give away my secret.

“Scared?” He challenges, waggling his eyebrows.

Perhaps another woman might laugh off this silly taunt, but I’ve never been one to back down from a dare. “Fine.” I answer, narrowing my eyes. “You’re on.”

Sinclair flashes me a wolfish grin. “Ready, set, go!”

At once I get to work, simulating a diaper change complete with wiping and powdering, before sliding the baby doll over a clear diaper and doing up the tabs. Naturally Sinclair finishes about ten seconds ahead of me, “ha! I win!”

Before I can reply, the instructor comes over to us with her arms crossed over her chest, “Parenting is not a game, you two.

Honestly Alpha, I should think you’d take this more seriously.”

We both straighten up, feeling chastised. I’m about to apologize when Sinclair points at me and says, “She started it!”

I gape at him, and before I realize what’s happening a tiny growl vibrates in my chest. I have no idea where the impulse came from – it’s just like that night at the campaign dinner. Before meeting Sinclair I’d never growled a day in my life. It occurs to me that this is probably foolish – wolves don’t growl at their Alpha’s unless they want a beating. Still, Sinclair can only smile. He drags me close and ducks his head to my ear. “You’re lucky that was cutest little growl I’ve ever heard in my life.” He teases.

“Why, what would you have done if it wasn’t?” I challenge.

“Keep it up and you’ll find out.” He promises ominously.

I shrug, “You deserved it, you threw me under the bus and you know it.” I try to keep my tone stern, but inside my insides are veritable mush. I love seeing Sinclair’s playful side, and it seems the more time we spend together the more it comes out. It’s nice to know he’s not strong, tough and terrifying 100% of the time – a strong protector is a wonderful thing, but I want my baby to have a father who will play and have fun with it too.

The instructor, having given up on us, moves on to the next couple. Still our amusement only lasts a while. After diapers and CPR we move on to the birthing portion of the course, which is the last thing I want to think about. Like most expectant mothers, I'm excited for the miracle and eager to meet my baby, but I am absolutely dreading the pain of labor. I know it will be worth it in the end, but I'd rather not think about it overly much.

The instructor seems to have no such sympathy, clearly believing that the best preparation is to know every gorey detail ahead of time. Sinclair and I are seated on a yoga mat and my body is settled between his legs, my back resting on his chest. At first I was supporting my own weight, but with a little bit of encouragement I gradually leaned back against Sinclair, letting him support me completely.

The instructor is in front of the room, standing in front of a chart displaying a baby curled in the womb. "The average werewolf baby is 9-12 pounds and 21-22 inches in length--"

I stop listening at this point, trying to wrap my brain around this information. "Did she say 9-12 pounds?" I squeak.

Sinclair strokes my belly, "Shifters are bigger than humans, remember?"

I'm shaking my head, "No – no, I can't do this!" I whisper frantically. "I can't have a 12 pound baby! Delivering a small baby is terrifying enough now you're telling me it's going to be the size of a butterball turkey! Nope, uh-uh, not happening!" I'm well on my way to genuine panic, and my voice is getting louder by the minute. Other couples are turning to look at us, and if I don't get it together quickly, I might not only have a very public breakdown, but expose myself as a human too.

## Chapter 42

### Sinclair

I can hear Ella's heart racing at a mile a minute, and the baby is starting to become stressed in accordance to his mother. I'm worried too, Ella is small even for a human, and I'm big even for a werewolf, but I don't believe the Goddess would have chosen her to carry my heir if she couldn't handle the toll. I need to calm her down quickly.

I begin to purr, petting her sides in long, soothing strokes. “Easy, little one. It will be alright.”

I can feel her nerves begin to settle, but it seems Ella’s mind is still in full revolt. “Stop that!” She whimpers, “I don’t want you to just soothe this away, I’m right to be afraid!”

“Of course you are.” I croon, not letting up on the purrs. “Childbirth is always scary, and it always seems impossible – that’s why it’s a miracle. You’re going to have the best doctors in the country, Ella. I promise you’ll get through it in flying colors.”

“That’s easy for you to say.” She grumbles. “You don’t have to push a watermelon out of your privates in five months! Oh god, what have you put inside me?”

“Well technically, I didn’t put it there.” I remind her, trying to lighten the mood.

“Sinclair, I’m serious!” She snaps, “I don’t think I can do this!”

“Ella look at me,” I instruct gently. She shakes her head, refusing point blank, so I stop caressing her long enough to catch her chin and turn her beautiful face up to mine. “I’m going to take care of you.” I promise. “If that means we have to induce the baby to come a couple of weeks early or do a cesarean, we will. We’re not going to put your body through anything it can’t handle.”

Ella is gradually submitting to my purrs, though I can tell she still wants to fight. I can see that keeping my little human calm and relaxed through this pregnancy is going to be even more difficult than I anticipated, but I’m not the least bit disappointed if that means we have to spend more time snuggling and talking this way. I like taking care of Ella – It’s in my nature as an Alpha to care for others, and I need to give this comfort every bit as much as Ella needs to receive it – whether she realizes it or not.

Ella sniffs sullenly, nestling into my warmth. “It really isn’t fair that you can influence my emotions this way.”

“I know.” I commiserate, glad she can’t see my smile. The stubborn little thing clearly isn’t used to having help solving her problems, and I’m sure she doesn’t feel comfortable giving anyone else that power. I don’t tell her how much influence she has over my own feelings, however. The more time that passes, the more I realize how much my own mood depends on whether Ella is content – something I haven’t experienced with anyone but my mate.

With Lydia it was very different, my wolf was never settled unless hers was – and she fully expected me to manage her emotions for her, making every complaint in her life loudly and dramatically known. Ella is a very different creature, hiding her upsets most of the time and never expecting or even want me to fix them for her, but my wolf seems even more unhappy when she’s unsettled, than he was with Lydia.

My mind swirls with the implications of this, and I reason that it must be the baby once more. I’m so attuned and concerned about Ella because she’s carrying my heir, it makes perfect sense that my wolf is in this heightened state given our situation. I’m sure this connection is also why Ella seems only to be soothed by my purrs, and no one else’s. The instructor has gone silent –

clearly an old hat at talking couples through the trials of childbirth and expecting panic attacks like Ella’s.

My sweet human is not the only first time mother in the room insisting the task ahead of them is impossible, and I’m not the only mate purring. Still, when I stop for a moment to test whether the other men’s purrs soothe Ella, her heart rate begins to increase again, and I know she only responds to mine.

It’s the pup.” I tell my wolf, who’s strutting around with masculine pride in my head. “It has to be the pup.”

That night I wake alone in bed.

At first I’m not sure what woke me, it’s not until I realize my arms are empty and I reach for Ella that I understand she’s missing. I sit up, instantly alert. She’s not in the room, and the bathroom is dark and empty. I surge out of bed, scenting the air. I don’t smell an

intruder or sense anything off – not that I would. If anyone got close enough to snatch her from my arms they certainly wouldn't have left me alive.

I follow Ella's intoxicating fragrance out the door and down the stairs, my wolf gradually calming as we near the kitchen and I piece together the puzzle in my mind. She must have woken with a craving and decided to sneak a late night snack.

I pause to listen at the door just in case, the familiar aroma of bacon filling my senses. A moment later I push inside, finding Ella stationed over the stovetop in the dim light. I flip the light on and she leaps half a foot in the air, yelping in surprise.

"It's alright sweetheart, it's only me." I promise, coming forward to wrap my arm around her.

She backs away from me instinctively, clearly not realizing I only want to feel her body against mine, but I catch her hand before she can escape my reach and gather her close. "Did you get hungry?"

Ella nods, flushing, "I didn't want to wake you."

I offer her a stern expression. "I want you to wake me when you get up in the middle of this night." I tell her, "whether it's to satisfy a craving, or to feed the baby when it comes."

Ella blinks, and I wonder if she expected us to sleep apart after she delivers. "But you can't help me nurse. Why would you get up too?"

I roll my eyes, "because we're in this together. If you have to wake up ten times a night, then I should have to, too."

"You say that now," Ella snorts, "We'll see if you're still singing that tune in a few months."

"I'm serious Ella, I don't want to miss a moment of this experience. I've waited for it for a very long time. Besides I might not be able to give the baby milk, but I can support you while you do." I reason, not giving her an inch literally or metaphorically.

Ella narrows her eyes. “Are all shifter men like you? Or all Alpha’s? I guarantee you human men aren’t.”

I furrow my brow, thinking for a moment. “I don’t know – honestly. And I really don’t care what anyone else does. This is how we’re going to do it.”

“And what if I don’t want you to get up with me?” Ella poses, a devious glint in her eye. “What if I want to let you sleep, or to steal alone time with the baby.”

I chuckle, pleased to see she’s comfortable enough with me to indulge her mischief. “Just try it and see what happens.” I tease back. “Now,” I continue, looking over her head to the frying bacon. “What’s on the menu tonight?”

“Bacon.” She answers, not meeting my gaze.

“And?” I press, knowing her cravings are never so one note.

“Covered in chocolate.” She murmurs, flushing. I wait, sensing there’s more to the story. Ella does not disappoint. “Dipped in guacamole and hot sauce.”

I can’t withhold my chuckle, and Ella looks up at me with wide eyes. “You think I’m gross don’t you.”

Oh if only she knew how far the opposite my feelings were. “Of course not – I think you’re pregnant.” I answer, nudging her towards one of the high bar stools. “Now you sit here and relax, beautiful. I’ll take care of the food.” I’m pleased to see Ella no longer flinches when I mention her beauty. She obviously still doesn’t like it when others do, but now instead of seeming uncomfortable or annoyed, she blushes when I compliment her.

I finish preparing her snack with ease. The bacon was almost finished cooking already, and the chocolate is already melted. I pat the bacon dry and let it cool a bit, before cutting the strips in half and dipping them in the rich ganache. I lay them out on a plate and pull out a carton of guacamole from the fridge, placing a heaping spoonful at the center of the plate and drizzling it in hot sauce. I place the plate in front of Ella, who gazes at it in amazement.” I was just going to eat it out of the tub like a heathen.”

I throw my head back and laugh, “I would probably have done the same.” I watch her take the first bite, moaning with pleasure as her lashes fall shut in epicurean delight. However odd it may seem to me, it’s what the baby wants, and Ella loves it.

I get a head start on the dishes while Ella indulges, only pausing to try a bite myself. It’s not as gross as I thought it might be –

but it definitely doesn’t delight me the way it does my little human. When I place the last dish in the drying rack I turn back to Ella, only to find her sniffing pitifully.

“Ella, what’s wrong?” I exclaim, shocked by her heightened emotion.

She shakes her head, “It’s nothing, I’m being silly.”

“Tell me right now, Ella.” I order.

## Chapter 43

Sinclair

Her lower lip quivers dangerously, tears sliding down her cheeks. Eventually the truth spills from her lips. “I ate all my bacon!” My heart eases immediately. My wolf hates the sounds of Ella’s tears, but I’m relieved to know this is just a mood swing.

Chuckling, I pull her into my arms. “It’s okay baby, we can get more bacon.”

The next morning I wake up bright and early, though not intentionally. Instead I was jarred from sleep when Ella wriggled out of my arms to race for the bathroom. This is quickly becoming our morning ritual, and I’m far less concerned with my little human’s unhealthy snacking than I was a week ago, as I’m simply pleased she’s able to keep some food down.

When Ella is finally done being sick, I coax her back to bed and wrap her up in my arms. My wolf is urging me to scent mark her again, but I want to give her a few minutes to regain her strength before I begin rubbing my body all over hers. Of our daily rituals, marking Ella has quickly become my favorite. It’s a unique sort of ecstasy and torment:



satisfying my wolf and claiming the mother of my pup, then denying both of our lusts when they inevitably spark.

I know exactly how powerfully the intimate contact affects the little human, and the scent of her arousal is becoming increasingly difficult to ignore. It's not as if I'm not equally turned on, but I also don't have wild pregnancy hormones rushes through my body

– I wonder how much longer Ella will be able to hold out before she asks for more. More importantly, I wonder if I will have the strength to deny her when that time comes.

“You know the only good thing about this crazy six month pregnancy?” Ella asks.

“You get to be done with morning sickness faster?” I guess.

“Mhmm.” She hums, pressing her nose to my chest and breathing deeply.

I reach down to the hem of her night dress and deftly slip my hand inside, resting it on the soft, warm skin of her belly. I feel a steady heartbeat and waves of contentment through the mental link, “Well I know you're miserable, but if it helps the baby is happy as can be.”

“Of course he is.” She murmurs sleepily. “He's always happy when you're around.”

“And what about you?” I ask, “Are you happy when I'm around?” I'm not sure why I press her this way. I know that at least some of the baby's emotions are feeding directly off of Ella's, which means she's probably content at a minimum around me. Still, I want to know.

“That depends.” The cheeky creature replies, “on whether or not you're being all high handed and bossing me around.”

I shake my head, shifting my hands to tickle her sides. Ella giggle and squeals, trying to wriggle away from me, but I hold her tight. Soon we're writhing around on the bed, Ella begging me for mercy as I continue tickling her, and me showing no mercy whatsoever. Before long the came turns to the intimate dance of scent marking, and as our bodies rub sensuously together I realize an unavoidable truth.

If Ella loses control and asks me to go further, there's no way in hell I'll be able to deny her now.

A little while later I head downstairs to go to work, but I stop dead in my tracks when I see my brother waiting in the foyer. “What are you doing here?” I question coldly.

Roger arches a brow. “It’s amazing how alike you and your little mate already sound. That’s precisely the way she greeted me the other day.”

A rush of pride flows through me. “That’s because she’s a very clever she-wolf.”

“Or because you’ve turned her against me.” Roger suggests.

“I don’t need to manipulate Ella for her to see through you, Roger.” I remark, descending the last few steps in front of me. “And you didn’t answer my question.”

“I wanted to check on Ella.” He answers easily. “I was worried after the other night.”

“She’s fine.” I reply simply, not feeling he deserves any more information than this. I know he saved Ella, but I still find the circumstances which allowed him to do so incredibly suspicious. I’ve already had a team of investigators out looking for the rogues since the night of the attack, and I was planning on assigning another team to look into my brother’s potential involvement today. And now that he’s turned up like this it’s going to be my top priority.

“Can I see her?” Roger requests, having the decency to look uncertain of the question.

My wolf growls in my chest, and I have to forcibly restrain the impulse to lash out at my brother. “Ella was sick this morning, and besides, I need to speak with you myself. Walk me to work?” I suggest.

Roger frowns but agrees. “Is she alright?”

Something about his interest in my little human’s wellbeing makes my hackles raise. It all sounds completely innocent and, indeed, compassionate, but I wouldn’t put anything past Roger. He’s the king of manipulation and gaslighting, and though I don’t think he wants to harm Ella, I don’t think his preoccupation with her is innocent either.

“Naturally I’m investigating the rogue attack.” I tell him as we head out into the snow, my bodyguards framing us on either side.

“But I wanted to see if you picked up on any particular details which might help us track down or identify the culprits.”

He adopts a thoughtful expression, “You mean like distinguishing features or tattoos?”

“Sure, or anything they might have said – really any hints about their identities or who hired them.” I clarify.

“The only piece I overheard was them discussing having “fun” with her before they finished the job.” He reports.

I emit a violent snarl, and Roger flinches before he can stop himself. I’d be lying if I said I wasn’t pleased to have startled him this way. “Sorry,” I lie. “You know how it is.”

“Actually I don’t – you stole my mate, remember.” Roger snaps back.

I resist the urge to roll my eyes. “That isn’t what I meant and you know it.” I answer. “Only that wolves take the front seat when it comes to the ones we care about most.”

“Whatever.” He grumbles. “I can tell you that three of them were gray and the leader was red once they transformed. Definitely not locals. Their accents sounded like they came from somewhere in the east, but that doesn’t mean the person who hired them is also foreign.”

I nod in agreement. “And remind me, how did you find her that night?”

“I told you, I didn’t know Ella was their target. I simply smelled rogues and took up the hunt.” Roger supplies.

“That was incredibly lucky.” I tell him. “If it wasn’t for you who knows what might have happened.”

“I was happy to help.” Roger answers easily, either not picking up on – or not acknowledging – the inherent suspicion in my remark. “Ella is family now, and your pup will be the future of this pack. I’m actually glad you suggested we walk together. I wanted to see Ella, but I also wanted to talk to you. I think it’s high time we put the past behind us.”

“Because of Ella and the pup?” I state, not believing my ears.

“In part.” He confirms. “It was one thing to be at odds when Lydia and the pack was still between us, but it’s been five years since Dad got hurt, and almost two since Lydia left.” He reminds me – as if I could forget. “At a certain point it just seems petty to hold onto

old grudges, especially when the future is so bright for our family. I want to be in my niece or nephew's life, and soon you'll be King. We should be united if you're going to rule. The attack made me realize that loud and clear."

"You know Roger, the bad blood between us has never been on my end. I've never held a grudge against you, so I don't know why you're bringing this to me as if our conflict is mutual. If you want to stop working against our family then stop."

Roger's skin flushes. "How typical of you not to take any responsibility for what happened." He gripes. "I come to you with an olive branch and you foist all the blame on me."

I stop in my tracks, turning toward him. "Do you have any idea how many years I spent in therapy to stop blaming myself for Mom's death?" I demand. "I was a child – I didn't do anything wrong and she did what any good mother would – which is protect her pup. I know you've never seen it that way but I'm done letting you make me feel guilty for taking her from you. I lost her too, you know!"

"If you hadn't –" He begins, worked up into a true lather now. So much for putting the past behind us – he can't be that resolved to mend bridges if that little push back sets him off.

"No, Roger!" I snap. "I'm done with this. If you want to move on, then move on and the family will welcome you back – even and especially Ella because she doesn't have a cruel bone in her body. But if you can't stop blaming a pup for things out of his control then you better believe I'll never let you set a foot near mine."

Without another word Roger turns on his heel and storms away. On one hand I'm proud of myself for finally standing up for the child I once was, and on the other I have to wonder if I just made a terrible mistake. Roger has always had a volatile personality, and he's dangerous even at the best of times. I hope I didn't just put Ella in even more danger than she was already in.

## Chapter 44

Ella

“Are you ready?” Sinclair asks, standing behind me in the mirror. I have to stop myself from staring at him. He’s dressed down from his standard suit, but somehow he looks even more gorgeous and intimidating than usual. In sleek black slacks and a simple white dress shirt, rolled up to his elbows and unbuttoned to his sternum, he looks powerful and laid back at once.

“That depends, what do you think?” I reply, extending my arms to show him my dress and get his opinion. I’m wearing a sleek velvet dress in ink bottle green. When the dressmaker suggested velvet I was skeptical, but now that I see the finished product I can fully appreciate her vision. It’s simple but sophisticated, not to mention incredibly cozy.

“Hmm,” Sinclair replies, striding nearer. “I think you’re missing something.”

“Like what?” I ask, turning back to the mirror to study my reflection. My makeup and hair are done, I found matching heels despite the infinite challenges of matching uncommon dress colors, and I’ll wrap myself in my new coat (courtesy of Sinclair) before we leave.

“Like this.” He beams, pulling out a thin black jewelry box.

I look down at it in surprise. “For me?”

“And just who else do you think I would be buying jewelry for?” He teases.

“I don’t know.” I shrug. “For all I know you have a girlfriend on the side.”

“Ella.” Sinclair’s impossibly deep voice sounds even richer than usual. “There isn’t anyone else.”

For some reason, this statement makes me feel more uncertain. It’s not like we’re in a relationship or have discussed not dating during the pregnancy to avoid scrutiny. It makes sense that he wouldn’t risk the campaign by seeing someone else when he’s supposed to be happily mated, but he’s expressly told me that everything will be different when he finds his second chance mate.

It seems strange that he should make such a firm assurance in this intimate way, it feels as though he’s blurring the line of our arrangement. The little voice in my head might not mind this, but my heart knows better, it isn’t safe.

Too late I realize Sinclair is watching me work through all these feelings, and he narrows his eyes at me. “What’s going on in that head of yours?”

“Nothing.” I reply simply, nodding towards the box. “Can I see it?”

“I shouldn’t.” Sinclair states circumspectly. “I should make you tell me what you’re thinking first – but we don’t have time.” He sighs, flipping open the smooth black lid. Inside the box is a stunning silver necklace, dotted with diamonds and boasting a matching pair of earrings.

My jaw drops, and I try to cover my gaping with my hand. “Sinclair, this is gorgeous. But it’s much too extravagant, I can’t possibly accept it.”

“Of course you can.” He insists, turning my body back towards the mirror. I don’t know why, but I’m holding my breath as he drapes the necklace over my collar and secures it at my nape. My fingers immediately flutter over the opulent jewels. I can guarantee that I’ve never worn anything so fine in my entire life. “You see,” Sinclair says, beaming at my reflection. “It was made for you.”

“It’s incredible.” I answer honestly. “But I feel like an imposter.”

He frowns, furrowing his brow. “Why do you say that?”

“Maybe because I am one.” I reply, trying to tone down the sarcasm at the last minute. He’s been so sweet and generous, I don’t mean to take out my pregnancy angst on him.

“Ella, look at me.” He instructs, his tone gentle but brooking no argument. I don’t really want to obey, I find Sinclair’s penetrating gaze far too observant at the best of times, and sometimes I want to be able to sulk without my thoughts becoming public. “Now, trouble.” He chuckles, seeing my reluctance.

I do as he says, lifting my gaze to meet Sinclair’s emerald irises in the mirror. I feel like I might become hypnotized in their depths, but his expression is warm and open. “You might not be a she-wolf, but you are carrying my heir, and you are my date for the festival.” He slides his strong arms around my waist from behind, still staring at me through the looking glass, “This is not a sham. This is right.”

I have to admit that side by side, we make a striking couple. Sinclair is so tall and dark, rugged yet classically handsome – as if all his features have been carved from stone. In my heels my head actually reaches his shoulder, and though I look very small and

delicate beside him, the fine clothes and jewelry make me look like a woman deserving of all his strength and power, not just some pretty face in the crowd.

Again I feel as though Sinclair is reading my mind, “Will you be upset if I tell you how stunning you look?”

I peek up at him from beneath my lashes, “I don’t know, why don’t you try and find out.”

Sinclair grins, moving his lips to my ear and sending a shiver down my spine before he’s even said a word. He purrs a laugh at the feeling of my body trembling against him, obviously amused and pleased at once by my response. “You look stunning Ella, so stunning it’s very hard not to eat you right up.”

I shiver again, feeling heat pool between my legs and praying that his senses aren’t strong enough to pick up on such an intimate thing. I’m beginning to think he likes getting me all hot and bothered, though it seems terribly unfair of him to tease me this way. Of course, I know Sinclair isn’t completely immune to me either, and suddenly a devious idea sparks in my mind. I lean back into his embrace, squirming slightly as if I’m trying to get comfortable, and intentionally rubbing my round bottom against him.

Sinclair growls in response, but it’s not the dangerous kind he makes when he’s angry. This is low and sultry, and butterflies burst to life in my belly even before I feel him growing hard against my backside. “I suppose I deserved that.” Sinclair murmurs, grazing his lips over the place where my neck meets my shoulder. “Such a mischievous little human.”

“We’re going to be late.” I answer huskily, trying to stay upright as my knees turn to jelly.

“I’m the Alpha, I’m never late.” He jokes, though he releases me at last.

“What, everyone else is just early?” I prompt him, quoting one of my favorite romantic comedies.

He grins, retrieving a glossy white coat and wrapping it around my shoulders. “Exactly.”

The Solstice festival is more beautiful than I ever could have imagined. I know it’s only the first night, but it seems so magical already. I can’t believe that it’s going to get even more magnificent. We’re standing at the top of a snow covered hill, our bodies bathed in the glow of firelight. A huge bonfire is in front of us, but as I turn to gaze out at the sprawling city, I can see hundreds of smaller fires blazing through the pristine winter

landscape. The shifter society has gone completely dark, cutting out all electric lights and replacing everything as far as the eye can see with lanterns and flame.

Music unlike any I've ever heard fills the air around us, a blend of familiar instruments and exotic ones, set to tunes that feel older than time itself. Suddenly it's painfully obvious that these people aren't human, that they're connected to their deity and nature in ways that defy all logic and science. It truly feels as though I've stepped into another world – one far too mystical for me to ever make sense of. I can actually feel the magic in the air, which is definitely not something I've ever encountered before.

Women and men wearing sheer panels of cloth and painted with blue ink whorls begin some sort of ceremonial dance around the fire. They're holding torches of their own, and dancing with the flames as if they were lovers. I'm completely transfixed, but soon the people gathered around the edges drinking mulled wine join in, as an air of unbridled revelry takes hold of the night. I assumed Sinclair and I would stay on the sidelines and watch the evening unfold, but the next thing I know he's pulling me into the crowd of dancers.

"Just let me lead." He teases, pulling me close.

For once I do as he says, letting him guide my body through the unfamiliar steps until I'm so warm between him and the fire that I have to strip off my coat. He does the same, and soon I can feel his hard body flush against every inch of my soft curves. For once I don't find it difficult to let go of my worries and anxiety, Sinclair banished the reporters who tried to follow us into the event, and though we're surrounded by people, I don't think anyone is paying attention to anything but their own partners. I barely even remember that Sinclair and I aren't alone. It certainly seems like we're the only two people on the planet right now.

I'm gazing up at Sinclair as I think all this, and I know I must be telegraphing my every emotion to him, because he ducks his head in the next moment, until our lips are mere inches apart.

He's going to kiss me!



Ella

I don't have the chance to gasp, because the moment my lips part, Sinclair's mouth has claimed them. His hand is firm on my nape, holding me in place so he can plunder my mouth at will. His tongue teases my lips before delving inside, coaxing my own out of hiding until they're dancing, tangling and massaging each other with ravenous hunger.

My shock passes quickly, and soon I'm rising up on my toes to meet him, my insides turning to mush as I wrap my arms around his neck, moaning when he pulls his lips from mine and begins carving a ruthless path over my jaw and down the sensitive skin of my throat.

I'm out of breath already, completely invigorated and lost to the world around us. As Sinclair's talented tongue snakes out to dip into my clavicle, I take the opportunity to nibble his ear lobe. He purrs and a delicious river of heat pours through me. My body is flush against Sinclair's, and I've completely forgotten about the other dancers. I press myself as close to him as possible, trying not to squirm. I'm desperate to get relief for my suddenly aching breasts and the deep pulsing between my legs, but too shy to truly seek it.

Luckily Sinclair doesn't need to be told, he seems to sense my need effortlessly, and he's not at all shy about seeking his own desires. He grips my hips in his powerful hands, holding them firmly against his and letting me feel his hardness. He gently undulates our bodies through the dance, rubbing me in all the right places under the pretense of following the sensuous steps.

This isn't like our other kisses. There are no cameras around, no eager shifters looking on. I'm sure a few of the other wolves present are peeking our way, but everyone is so preoccupied with their own partners that I doubt we have a large audience. If I had the ability to think clearly right now I might wonder why Sinclair is being romantic when we don't have anyone for whom to put on a show, but that's all beside the point – because I couldn't think clearly if my life depended on it.

I'm sure time stops, that the world stops spinning and everything in it ceases to matter except this singular moment between two people – despite the fact that we could not be more different if we tried. Sinclair's lips are soft as silk, but his affection is rough and merciless, as if he's trying to sear the feel of his kiss into my bones so that I'll never forget the way it feels to be in his arms –

to be his. I know he's setting me up for heartbreak in the future – because I won't forget, I'm sure I'll never be able to kiss anyone again without remembering this and feeling infinitely disappointed that nothing can ever compare.

It's also getting carried away very fast, but I can't seem to find the will to end it. Luckily Sinclair does, pulling back a moment later and looking down at me with a fiery gaze that leaves me tingling from my head all the way down to my toes. It's a good thing he has more restraint than I do, because I was about ready to rip off both of our clothes despite the cold. I swear I've never lost control that way in my entire life, and though part of me is worried about the power Sinclair obviously holds over me, it's also impossible for me to be too worried when I'm with him. He makes me feel so safe it's astonishing – and when I finally have the space to clear my head, frightening.

“Why did you do that?” I manage to gasp, still dazed with the aftershocks of his touch.

“Why?” He offers me a wolfish grin that makes my heart do somersaults. “Didn't you like it?”

My cheeks flush with color, “Yes, but –”

“Then what's the problem?” Sinclair inquires, completely missing the point. Before I can think of answering he's kissing me again, stealing the thoughts from my mind and making my insides flutter. This time I do find the will to back away from him, and I'm not even a little intimidated when he rumbles with displeasure... at least, that's how I try to act. In reality his growl has my knees turning to jelly. Why, oh why do I suddenly want to throw myself at his feet and expose my soft underbelly to his mercy?

“Dominic, I don't think this is a good idea.” I finally manage to say, even though the little voice in the back of my head is protesting at the top of her lungs. .

“You don't want me to kiss you?” Sinclair arches a skeptical brow, massaging my nape and studying my face so intently I wish I could run and hide.

“I didn't say that.” I answer huskily. Lying when he's looking at me this way is not even an option, the best I can do is skirt around the truth and pray he'll let me get away with it.

“So you do want me to kiss you?” He smirks, tucking my body closer against his.

With an exasperated huff, I glare up at the impossible Alpha. “Look, I'm simply not the casual type.”

The amusement drains from Sinclair's features at once, as if he realizes I'm truly not playing his game. "And you think I am?"

I want to scoff, or laugh in his absurdly handsome face. I think he's rich and good looking enough to have any woman he wants, and ever since he divorced the tabloids have never once reported him taking the same woman out twice. They haven't named him a playboy exactly, and I know it isn't fair to label him this way because he's obviously a family man – but committing to one's children is very different from committing to a woman. Plenty of men continue their roguish ways even after becoming fathers.

I don't say any of this, instead I answer, "I think I'm human and your surrogate. You've told me a dozen times that your mate will come along eventually and I'll step down as Luna. If we have no future, which makes 'casual' the only option available to us." I remind him stiffly.

"Would you want something more – a relationship – if it was possible?" He asks, the gears visibly turning in his head. I find myself reeling back. Why would he ask me such a thing – doesn't he realize how cruel that is? Is he taunting me? Dangling the impossible over my head for sport? He doesn't look like he's being humorous or attempting a joke, he's also not wearing the playful expression he's donned when he flirts, but I can't fathom why else he would go down this path.

"It isn't possible, so why ask?" I inquire, feeling more and more annoyed by this line of questioning.

"Because I am." Sinclair replies, with just enough edge to make me rethink a sassy retort.

"No, I wouldn't." I snap, and despite my overexcited body – I mean it. I'm woman enough to admit that I couldn't handle a man like Sinclair. He would chew me up and spit me out... and I'd never survive it, no matter how attracted I might be to him. Rather, I wouldn't survive it because of how attracted I am to him. The problem is that the heat between us is so much more than physical, I'm getting more emotionally invested every day, and I can't take anymore. A relationship with Sinclair would be beyond self-destructive, especially given how raw I am after what happened with Mike.

"But you do want me to kiss you?" He presses, his cocky grin covering a countenance which suddenly seems dark and unreadable.

"I never said that." I remind him.

“Not verbally, maybe.” Sinclair agrees. “Your body on the other hand...” He trails off, caressing one of his huge hands down my ribs, perilously close to the curve of my breast. I’m still plastered against him, on fire from his touch, and it takes all my willpower not to turn and press my aching nipple into his hand.

“You’re impossible.” I grumble, trying to stop myself from lashing out at him. The more he drags this flirtation out, the more I feel like some helpless rabbit his wolf is just toying with for sport. It isn’t fair, or right.

Sinclair sighs then, relaxing his hold on me and dragging one hand through his hair, “Ella, there’s probably something I should warn you about—”

I shake my head, drawing away from him. I don’t want a warning or lesson right now. I just want to catch my breath and I’ll never be able to do that if I stay with Sinclair. “I’m going to find a restroom.” I announce, cutting him off.

“Ella —”

“The baby is pressing on my bladder.” I declare stubbornly, knowing he’ll do anything to accommodate the pup. Unsurprisingly, he lets me go, and I storm off into the crowd, hoping I’ll be able to find some decent facilities.

## Chapter 46

### Sinclair

I’m watching Ella retreat, wishing I could read her complex mind as easily as I can read her body language. My wolf is angry with me for upsetting her, but I’m not sure what I did wrong. She liked kissing me, there’s no doubt about that. I also don’t know why she would ever think I’m the casual type – because I’m anything but. Still, she seemed to be telling the truth when she said she didn’t want more. What am I supposed to do with that information?

Ella is clearly feeling off-kilter, and it’s my responsibility to center her – but if she won’t tell me why she’s feeling agitated, how am I supposed to help her? I know exactly what I would do if she was a she-wolf, but I don’t know if a human would react the same way. My wolf wants me to try – he’s completely convinced that Ella is like any other

out-of-sorts mate, who just needs a firm hand to remind her who's in charge so she'll share her worries with us. After all, she made me promise to communicate more – shouldn't that go both ways?

I'm so caught up in my head I almost don't realize that the Prince is approaching me, a knowing smirk dominating his features. "I remember those days," He remarks. "When you first meet your mate and you can't keep your hands off each other – when you miss them even though they've only left the room for a moment. It's a wonder you haven't marked her yet."

My blood begins to boil so quickly that I've barely processed his words before my wolf is clawing at the surface of my skin. The only person who knows that Ella hasn't been marked is Roger... if the Prince knows too, it's because my brother told him.

I'm not surprised by Roger's betrayal. He's had it out for me since day one, and his heroics with the rogues was always highly suspect. It was much too convenient that he happened to turn up just in the nick of time when Ella needed him that fateful night, and his overtures of friendship in the time since have been completely out of character. For a moment I wondered if he truly did have a soft spot for the human – if anyone is capable of thawing his frozen heart, it's my Ella, but now the truth is clear.

More importantly, the crown and the Kingdom are on the line. If people think something is off with Ella and I they'll lose confidence in my ability to lead. We have to appear strong and united to pull this off, and Goddess forbid if anyone begins to suspect we aren't truly mated, it could ruin everything. There's no doubt in my mind that the Prince will use this information as ammunition against me in the campaign unless I can convince him it would be a mistake to make it public. If he believes it will backfire on him, he won't share it, and the only way I know how to make him think this is by marking Ella and showing him the evidence, or selling the same lie I told my brother.

The former option is more tempting than I'd like to admit. My wolf is already urging me to mark Ella despite the fact that she's human and it's impossible for her to be my mate. He wants her, and he doesn't seem to care about any of the difficulties or details. Already, I hear his voice growling mine, every time I lay eyes on her. But it can't happen, I'd never be able to mark her without damaging her delicate flesh. For all I know the force of the bite could permanently injure her.

“You know I pride myself on self-control.” I finally answer the Prince, shaking myself from my thoughts. “We’re waiting until our mating ceremony.”

The Prince scoffs, “Self control, or lack of passion? Not a good sign for an Alpha. If your mate isn’t taking the edge off, how stable will you be to govern?”

“One thing you don’t ever have to worry about with Ella and I, is passion.” I tell him, my voice imbued with abject honesty. I don’t need to have bedded Ella to know we aren’t lacking in that area. She overflows with both sweet submission and fiery passion, and I can’t imagine a more perfect fit for my own desires. Sometimes I feel guilty for comparing her to Lydia— but they’re so different I can’t help myself. Lydia was skilled but always distant in bed. She let me dominate her physically, but never gave herself over emotionally – creating a cavern of distance between us long before she left.

Ella on the other hand... I already know that were she to give herself to me, she would give herself completely – she wouldn’t be able to help herself. She throws herself, body and soul, into everything she does – leading with her heart. The challenge with her is convincing her to take the leap. I can see how skittish she is after Mike’s mistreatment, and who knows what other traumas she’s survived. It’s clear she doesn’t take the decision to jump into relationships lightly... I wonder if that’s why she’s behaving the way she is tonight? Does she truly not want anything from me romantically? Is it purely physical for her and she’s just not interested in being with someone without an emotional connection? Or does she feel as strongly as I do, but holds herself back out of fear or uncertainty?

“I presume you’ve already set a date for the mating ceremony, then?” The Prince prompts me, seeming more than a little peeved that he isn’t holding my full attention.

“Of course.” Now this time I am lying. We’ve made no such arrangements, making up the story solely for Roger’s sake.

“But not before the wild hunt, I take it?” He guesses, even cockier now, “You really think you can get through the night without marking her?”

“As I said, self control.” I repeat, though in truth I’m very worried about this. I’d started to warn Ella before she rushed away, but the Prince’s mocking makes me more determined than ever to hold out. “We’ll be mated exactly one month after our pup is due

—

at the summer solstice.”

“An auspicious day.” The Prince nods, looking pissed. He knows as well as I do that royal mating ceremonies are not to be taken lightly, and are often planned around major holidays when the Goddess’s magic – and our own – is strongest. The fact that I named this date implies that I’m already assuming I’ll win the campaign and that Ella and I will have no problems delivering the Kingdom its heir. Besides, the pack will eat up the idea of a Royal Wedding far more eagerly than they would a private ceremony for a contender. Some people might vote for me just for the occasion alone – of course that’s not how I want to win, but this is life or death – I can’t afford to be noble.

“You must be sure of your victory.” The Prince continues, his tone much too smug for my liking. It’s obvious he’s just trying to push back at my own power play, but there’s something about his smirk that makes me worry his confidence isn’t all a bluff.

“It will be an important day for my family whether I win the campaign or not.” I shrug. “Only the Goddess knows what the future will hold in that regard, but I know my mating day with Ella will be one for the ages, King or not.”

The Prince laughs humorlessly. “That’s one way of looking at it.”

“Do you have another?” I bite, before I can stop myself.

“In my opinion a true Alpha makes his own destiny.” The Prince answers ominously.

My spine stiffens as I think about my father. Is the Prince alluding to his attack? To his own father claiming the throne by eliminating the competition through any means possible? Is he confirming that he has plans to pull a similar act of aggression to keep me from winning? Taking credit for the attack on Ella? Of course he’s always been my number one suspect, but it’s one thing to believe this without proof, and another entirely to have a confession rubbed in your face. Surely he’s not so stupid to do such a thing.

“Well as an Alpha with actual experience leading a pack,” I cut, leaving the rest of my sentence obvious but unsaid: rather than lazing around while my Daddy does all the hard work for me. “I can tell you that it’s not that simple. You might be surprised at the unexpected twists life throws at you.”

“Spoken like a man who’s prepared to lose.” He snaps in an undertone.

I arch my brow. “Haven’t you been paying attention? I can’t lose– I lead the strongest pack on the continent, I have an incredible mate and my first pup on the way.” I offer him

a wide smile bound to infuriate him. “In my book that’s a win – no matter what else happens.”

It’s both the truth, and a misdirect. I do feel as though I have everything I need personally – but I’m not in this campaign for myself. I don’t want the power for personal gain, I have to take it in order to protect shifter-kind and the human world from the Prince’s tyranny. If he succeeds we’ll likely be headed for a civil war and abuses unlike anything we’ve seen before. And I can’t let that happen at any cost.

It’s time I buy a ring. Ella and I can’t keep pretending she’s already marked – by morning everyone in the Kingdom will know she isn’t, which means we’re going to have to go through with the mating ceremony even if the rest of our relationship is a sham. I might not be able to really mark her – but I can sure as hell marry her.

## Chapter 47

### Sinclair

I’m resolved to buy Ella a ring tomorrow, but we still have to get through tonight first.

She was distant on the ride home, sitting across from me in the back of the limo rather than tucked up against my side the way I prefer. Moreover she didn’t say a word until we got back to the house, and then her only message was that she wanted to sleep in her own rooms this evening.

“Are you angry with me?” I ask, furrowing my brow in confusion.

“No, I just think a little space would be good for us.” She answers, hugging herself in a clear defensive move.

Maybe she’s right, I think, though it’s not easy to hear my thoughts with my wolf snarling in protest. I still haven’t gotten to the bottom of her reluctance to indulge our shared desires, and I don’t want to press her if she really isn’t interested. Even if she is, I think it would be a mistake to push her too hard or fast and risk spooking her. “Okay.” I agree eventually. “I’ll notify the guards.”



My wolf is whining like a pup as I stride away from her, and I can't believe how attached I've become to the sweet human in so short a time. I don't like letting her out of my sight when I know she's under threat, but this is so much more than that. I've gotten so used to sleeping with her warm little body snuggled in my arms or sprawled out on top of me, that I'm not sure I'll be able to rest without her.

As I prepare for bed, I try to make my wolf settle, but it's nearly impossible. In the end, I realize I didn't scent mark Ella tonight, and if anything will calm my wolf, I imagine that will. I pull on a t-shirt over my pajama bottoms and set off towards her rooms, knowing precisely how ridiculous I'm being and not giving a damn.

However when I arrive outside Ella's rooms I immediately pick up on a strange tension among the guards. I look around at them curiously, but their stiff postures are only compounded by their refusal to look me in the eye. A moment later a soft whimper emanates through Ella's door, and I understand. It's not a sound of worry, sadness or fear, but one absolutely dripping with sex.

My ears sharpen towards her door and I hear more sounds: the slight rustle of the bed sheets; the gentle glide of deft fingers sliding over wet flesh; uneven and excited breathing; and pounding pulse. It's obvious what Ella is up to in my absence, and I have to stop myself from groaning aloud.

I silently order the guards away – knowing Ella would be mortified if she realized my men can overhear her touching herself. My own mind is divided over what to do – I doubt she wants me to hear this either, though she probably wouldn't mind if she realized just how open shifters are about sex. Even my men weren't embarrassed, simply nervous over my reaction to them being near Ella at an intimate moment. She might not be my mate, but she is carrying my pup, and that's a claim every bit as powerful and sacred to our kind. They know how possessive I am of her, how protective. They probably thought I'd rip their ears off just for standing in hearing distance. Still it was their duty to guard her, and now it has to be mine until this private moment has passed.

I'm confident that I'm the least objectionable audience to Ella, considering the intimacies we've already shared. Still, I have to keep telling myself this reminder as time passes. Every time I begin to wonder if I'm using her protection as an excuse to eavesdrop, I put myself in Ella's shoes and recall how humiliated she would feel about so many strangers hearing her in this state. Leaving her unguarded isn't an option, so this is the lesser of two evils.

Nonetheless, it's absolute torture to listen to Ella finding her pleasure this way, because every small pant and moan fills my head with a thousand explicit images. I can imagine exactly what she's doing, and the tiny sounds she emits every now and then egg my wolf on. He's in a near frenzy, demanding we go in and put a stop to this immediately. I should be the one pleasuring her, she shouldn't have to take matters into her own hands. This is a mate's job. If she were mine I would march in right now, give her lush bottom a few swats for not making her needs known to me, then bury my face between her legs and feast until she's begging me to stop.

But she isn't mine. I remind myself furiously, trying not to get so carried away by the fantasy that I give in. Still, she's clearly worked up because of the kiss, my wolf reasons, she's probably thinking of us this very moment.

We don't know that. I caution. She didn't want to get involved, remember? Her current need might be related or it might be the pregnancy, her hormones, or simply the fact that she's a living breathing woman with a healthy libido. Either way, we have no right.

Ella's quiet ministrations speed up, and I pray we're near the end of this – I've given up all thought of scent marking her. If I go in there now, I won't be able to restrain myself or my wolf. I'm hard as a rock on my slacks, and as soon as Ella's need for privacy is over, I'll let the guards return and trust her safety to them once more. Afterwards I'm going to have a nice cold shower and relieve me cock the only way I can in my current predicament.

Ella's delicious murmurs finally crescendo, and I wish I'd pressed her harder about her reluctance to start something romantic between us. This is only going to get harder as her pregnancy progresses, and my wolf is quickly running out of patience. I can't understand his behavior. I've had sex with plenty of she-wolves over the years, and he's only ever pushed me to claim Lydia, no matter how much I cared about the women who came before her.

It's like he doesn't believe Ella is human – like he refuses to accept that I couldn't mark Ella even if I wanted to. And I don't want to... right? It's just my wolf going overboard because of the pup.

If only we could mark her somewhere else, He suggests wistfully, completely ignoring my logic. And don't even pretend like that idea doesn't tempt you.

Unfortunately he's right, but it doesn't matter how tempting the idea is. Mating marks are so intimate because they require allowing another wolf to wrap their jaws around your most vulnerable spot. It would defeat the point to mark Ella somewhere safer.

But just think about how amazing it would feel. My wolf urges.

Again I have to stop myself from groaning out loud. The bastard is right. The last thing I want is to hurt Ella, but I'm very experienced when it comes to bringing a she-wolf to the peak of pleasure before sinking my teeth into her. I'm sure I could do the same for her— if only it wasn't her neck I had to bite.

Goddess, stop it! I internally shout at myself. You're losing it! This is crazy talk. It's your cock talking, not your brain or even your heart. You don't really want this, and neither does she.

Right on cue, Ella climaxes, a soft keening escaping her lips. My hands close into fists and I grit my teeth against the intoxicating noise, and it's only as I drag in a few gasping breaths, suddenly worried I might actually burst through her door — that I hear my name on her lips. It's a mere whisper as she comes down from her high, and I have no choice but to get out of there before it's too late. I storm past the guards, waving them back to their posts, and race for my shower.

A little while later I find myself lying awake in bed, my cock hard again despite the release I found in the shower. Ella is the only thing on my mind, and I'm beginning to wonder if I'll ever be able to think of anything else. That might have been the most erotic thing I've ever heard, and I didn't even see it happening. Does she have any idea what she's doing to me? How irrational and crazed I've become about her? I barely recognize myself anymore.

I'm sure she has no clue. Unlike Lydia or some of the other she-wolves I've known, Ella doesn't have a manipulative bone in her body. When others would take pleasure in tormenting a powerful Alpha like myself, Ella would never believe she could. Not because she doesn't realize how lovely she is or lack confidence, she just wouldn't want to and doesn't understand that her allure is strong enough to do so unintentionally.

Even as I think this, a small knock sounds on my door, and as soon as I scent the air I know it's the object of my near... okay, not near, we're way past near at this point — the object of my total obsession.

Has she come to say she's changed her mind about us? Is she going to ask me to pleasure her the way she should have from the beginning? Does she know I overheard her? Will this be the beginning of something new? More importantly – if I let her in, will I be able to control my wolf? There's only one way to find out.

## Chapter 48

Ella

“Come in.” Sinclair's voice sounds even deeper than usual, and I'm wondering if I'm imagining it. I waited as long as I could bear before coming to his rooms after finding some relief for all the pent up sexual tension he's created in me. Still, I don't feel nearly satisfied. My sex is still swollen and pulsing with need, and I'm terrified that he'll somehow be able to tell how erotically charged I am.

The larger problem, however, is that I'm exhausted. I'm desperate for some rest, especially after missing my usual afternoon nap amidst the preparations for the festival. As the pregnancy progresses I can't help but think how ironic it is that the closer I come to bringing a baby into the world, the more childlike I seem to become: overly sensitive, constantly exhausted, picky about food, sick half the time and struggling with bladder control. Last week I cried because I ate all of my snack and didn't have any left!

And now this... I can't sleep by myself. I'm grumpy because I didn't get tucked in by Sinclair, and couldn't fall asleep without him next to me. So I've abandoned my pride and now I'm actually going to him so I can beg to crawl into his huge, comfy bed with him.

I poke my head inside, and fight back a whimper. His bedside lamp is on, and he's propped up on his elbows, looking expectantly in my direction with the same dark intensity he always reserves for me. He's shirtless, his chiseled abs glowing in the lamplight, and his dark hair is tousled effortlessly. There's a swath of scruff over his powerful jaw, and his green eyes are almost glowing in the dim light. It's not fair for anyone to look that good, especially not when I'm already squeezing my legs together just to relieve the ache he planted with his kiss.

“Are you still up?” I ask inanely, apparently forgetting that he’s clearly awake and staring right at me.

“I am.” The corner of Sinclair’s mouth curves up, and I’m reminded of how soft and firm his lips had been on mine. “Is everything okay?”

I slip the rest of the way inside, leaning back against the door until it clicks shut and staring at the ground. “I can’t sleep.” I confess, wrapping my arms protectively around my body.

Sinclair sits up a little straighter, frowning with apparent concern. “I can give you a supplement.” He offers. “The doctor left some herbal remedies in case you needed them.”

My heart sinks. “No, I don’t want to take something that’s going to leave me groggy all day tomorrow.” I reason, actually impressed with my ability to improvise an excuse so quickly.

“He assured me they wouldn’t have that effect.” Sinclair states simply, rising from the mattress and coming forward, moving with the lethal grace of his wolf.

“Still, I haven’t ever tried anything like that. I might have a bad reaction.” I suggest lamely.

“Hmm, well we wouldn’t want that.” Sinclair murmurs, closing the final distance between us. “Why can’t you sleep? Are you stressed? You look a bit flushed.” He’s stroking my cheek now, and for the first time I have the sense that he might be wise to my arousal. Naturally this only makes me blush a deeper shade of red. “And your pulse is awfully fast.”

“No, I just couldn’t fall asleep.” I shrug, feeling more frustrated by the second. Why doesn’t he just scoop me up and take me to bed the way he usually does?

Maybe because you told him you wanted to sleep alone and that you weren’t interested in his affection. The little voice in my head snipes, sounding even more bitter than I feel. You wanted him to respect your wishes, didn’t you?

Oh put a sock in it. I think back – I swear my conscience has gotten more and more vocal since I became pregnant, and she’s really not all that helpful at times like this.

“How about a midnight snack, or some ambient sounds.” Sinclair muses, still petting me.

I lean my cheek into his hand before I can realize what I'm doing. I shake my head pitifully, realizing a few things at once. First, Sinclair knows exactly what I want. Second, he's taking no small amount of pleasure in suggesting all the wrong solutions. Third, if I want to sleep with him, I'm going to have to come out and ask for it.

As if he's reading my mind, Sinclair says, "Just tell me what I can do to help, Ella. And I will."

I sigh, fighting the sudden urge to stomp on his big giant foot and only holding back because I remember how much it hurt the first time. My next thought is to turn my lips toward his palm and take a chomp out of him. It's incredibly tempting, but I have no idea where the impulse comes from. I've never contemplated – let alone wanted – to bite another person in my life.

Sinclair narrows his eyes, then smirks, tightening his hold on my cheek. "Don't even think about it." He warns, his rich voice full of foreboding – but also amusement, as if he thinks my bloodthirsty thoughts were cute rather than bizarre and inappropriate.

My eyes widen. I'm both surprised that he sensed my intentions and annoyed that he forbade them. It honestly makes me want to bite him even more than ever, but I'm afraid that if I do he won't let me sleep with him – and I need rest more than I need revenge. "Can I sleep with you?" I finally mutter, keeping my voice very low.

"Of course." He agrees easily, finally gathering me in his arms bridal style. I snuggle in and lean my cheek against the hard plane of his chest.

I don't know why, but I feel compelled to make an excuse for myself as he transfers me to the king-sized bed. "Thank you, I think the pup has a hard time settling without you."

Sinclair hums softly, moving his big palm to my belly before I can even think about moving out of reach – not that running away would do me any good. His brow arches a moment later, and I suddenly feel very vulnerable with him standing over me this way.

"The pup is sleeping, Ella."

"Oh." I can't seem to figure out anything else to say, and slide beneath the plush covers, turning my back to the intimidating Alpha. I wait for him to pull me close when he takes his place beside me, but for once he lets me keep space between us. My frustration is quickly disintegrating into crankiness. I know he's doing this on purpose!

Rolling onto my other side, I find Sinclair watching me with one of those knowing looks of him. He's expectant, waiting for my next move. I glare at him, and he smiles back, extending an arm to me. The message is clear. I can have what I want, but I'm going to have to take it myself.

Grumbling under my breath, I sidle over the space until our bodies are flush together, and finally Sinclair wraps his strong arms around me fully. I sigh with relief, and a shiver-inducing growl sounds in my ear. "Would you like me to purr for you?"

"If you want to." I answer, noncommittal. At first I think he's going to make me ask for this too, but it seems I've paid my penance, a steady vibration takes up in his chest and I bury my face against his shoulder, breathing in his addictive scent. The next thing I know, darkness closes in, and I'm fast asleep.

The next night is day two of the Solstice Festival. Sinclair and I haven't talked about any of yesterday's events, and I'd be lying if I said I wasn't painfully aware of the man every time he's near. I feel like I have some sort of sixth sense for knowing when he's close by, and all the thoughts disappear from my head every time he gives me one of those hungry stares.

We're both dressed up again and preparing to leave the house, and though I know part of tonight's event involves delivering gifts around the city, I never dreamed that Sinclair would appear with another present for me when I've given him nothing in return.

Still, before we set out, he pulls me to a stop and offers me another jewelry box.

"Don't tell me I'm not finished again." I joke, gesturing to my necklace. "I'm already wearing your last gift."

"I know." He grins, "this is just a little something extra. I thought it was time we made it official.""

At his urging I lift the lid on the box, expecting to find another pair of earrings, however it isn't earrings at all. It's a ring – one that steals the breath from my lungs. There's a stunning silver band, with a gleaming moonstone at its center, surrounded by tiny emeralds. It was unmistakable – an engagement ring.

Ella

“Is this...?” I trail off, unable to find the right words.

“I thought if we’re going to pretend to be together, we ought to do it right.” Sinclair smiles, his obvious pleasure at my reaction taking the sting out of his words. This isn’t because he feels anything for me, but he’s happy that I like the gift – and that’s worth something, right?

“It’s beautiful,” I sigh, “But I feel... I haven’t gotten anything for you, Dominic.”

His dark brow furrows, and the next thing I know, he’s turning me towards the mirror at my back. His reflection towers over mine, so dark and sexy in his black dress shirt and trousers. His size and strength are so daunting, and his skin vibrant bronze next to my porcelain complexion and slender limbs. I’m wearing deep purple tonight, and his hand finds my tummy with practiced ease.

“How can you say that?” He demands, gentle but fierce, his lips moving against the shell of my ear as his eyes pierce me through the glass. “Ella, you’re giving me everything.”

My own hand slides to the place where our baby rests, stopping just above his. However a moment later his palm is over mine, pulling our hands just over my belly button. “I wish you could feel what I do.” He tells me solemnly. “You’ll understand when he quickens, when you can feel his movement and moods.” For the first time, the mirror Sinclair pulls his gaze from mine, but only so the real man can turn his head to look at me in reality. My heart stops beating as I turn my face to his, eager to hear what he has to share about our baby. “You’re his whole world – he’s never happier than when he hears your voice.”

“Really?” I squeak, tears flooding my eyes.

“Really.” Sinclair confirms, and I’m surprised and impressed to see there isn’t even the smallest hint of jealousy in his expression.

“Everything I care about, is right here.” He continues, tugging me back against him a little, in a way that makes my delusional mind think that he might be talking about me as well as the baby. “You are making all my dreams come true.”



I'm shaking my head, tears flowing freely now. "Don't you get it?" I ask hoarsely. "You gave me a miracle too." I remind him. "It doesn't seem fair that you should get me so many other gifts too."

"Then it's a good thing you aren't in charge." Sinclair chuckles, kissing my neck just where it connects with my shoulder and finally turning me back around. He wipes away my tears and slides the ring onto my finger. "Now everyone will know that we're taking vows before the Goddess."

Sniffing and trying to get myself back under control, I ask. "But I thought the mating ceremony was just an excuse for, Roger?"

Sinclair shakes his head. "As I said, it's time to make it official. Now come on, we're going to be late."

I'm in such a whirlwind of emotion as he guides me out the door that I can barely think straight. Sometimes I feel like Sinclair are going around in emotional circles, getting carried away with excitement and joy about the baby and then pulling back when reality sets in. Still, I'll be damned if I know how to escape the maelstrom – let alone how I got in it in the first place. My brain is scrambling to figure out what this all means, what's changed and why this is coming up now. Part of me wonders if it was my rejection the other day, however I don't really have a chance to think it over, because the next thing I know we're heading into the oldest part of the city.

It's a glittering maze of frozen canals, and I can see hundreds of vendors set up on the ice. I'd love to go down and explore them, but ice skating has always been for rich people – not the likes of me.

"In another hour the canals will be full of people for the procession." Sinclair tells me as we look down on the wintry scene. "The processions will start here and weave through the old town until dawn, putting up greenery and decorations to transform the city for the holiday and giving gifts to the residents."

"That's so lovely." I express genuinely. I've never known a holiday as magical as the solstice, and it's only just beginning. "But if it doesn't start for an hour, then why did we come so early? You said we were going to be late!"

“I padded the time a bit – I thought we could take advantage of the peace and quiet and skate a little.” Sinclair suggests, keeping one arm protectively looped around my shoulders.

“But I don’t know how to skate.” I whisper nervously, “And what about the baby – is it safe?”

Sinclair shakes his head, as if I should know better than to ask such a silly question. “I won’t let you fall, sweetheart.”

Strangely enough, I believe him. I believe he’s fast and strong enough to keep this promise, and I know he means it with every fiber of his being. He’s as good as his word too. Before long I’m zooming around the rink, unable to stop smiling. Sinclair has stayed glued to my side all night long, never letting me out of arm’s reach and holding my hand more often than not. Of course, the more confident I become, the less I want to be leashed to him, and I find myself taking every opportunity to get far enough away to test my wings.

Shifters are constantly approaching him, saying hello, congratulating us on the baby or commenting on the campaign. The media also starts to arrive after someone tips them off about our early arrival, and it’s as Sinclair shakes hands with a constituent that I begin to skate away.

Naturally I don’t make it five feet before he catches me. “Not so fast, you.” He scolds warmly.

“I swear it’s like you have eyes in the back of your head.” I complain.

“My wolf has special Ella radar.” He jokes. “So you just keep on trying to get away, trouble. I’ll catch you every time.”

I stick my tongue out at him, and flames burst to life in his vibrant eyes. “Are you sassing me, little mate?”

My heart pulses when he calls me his mate, even though I know it’s only for our audience. “So what if I am?” I challenge.

“Is that really how you let your woman speak to you?” A new voice drawls behind us.

Sinclair's expression goes very hard, but he doesn't look the least bit surprised to see the Prince hovering over my shoulder. I instinctively lean closer to Sinclair, remembering what he told me about the other man's desperation to take the crown.

"A true Alpha isn't threatened by strong she-wolves." Sinclair growls, emphasizing the first part of his sentence in a way which makes me think they've debated what makes a "true" alpha before.

"There's strength and then there's insolence." The Prince replies snidely. "And everyone knows that a wolf who doesn't discipline his mate properly isn't fit to lead."

"You and I have very different ideas of discipline." Sinclair rumbles. For the first time I realize that we're drawing a crowd.

"If your mate thinks it's appropriate to challenge you in public." The Prince scoffs, "Then I don't think you know the meaning of the word at all."

"My mate feels safe enough to test her limits with me no matter where we are." Sinclair bites back. "That's a far better sign of a caring Alpha than one who's Luna cowers away from him in fear."

The Prince's face scrunched up with obvious fury, but he glances at the reporters around us and clearly bites his tongue. "Then again, you aren't true mates yet. You haven't even claimed her yet."

There's a sudden rash of murmuring through the crowd. I look up at Sinclair in shock. How did the Prince know? And why doesn't Sinclair look surprised? In fact, Sinclair looks positively triumphant, as if he'd been hoping this would happen when the argument began. "Well thank you for giving me the opportunity to announce the date of our mating ceremony, your Highness."

The Prince blanches, and I feel my own confusion grow. What on earth is happening? I'm trying to keep my emotions off my face, even managing to smile up at Sinclair when he beams down at me. "Ella and I will be mated one month after we welcome our son. On the night of the Summer Solstice. We're having an incredibly hard time waiting, but we figured the occasion should be fitting our incredible bond."

The next thing I know, Sinclair is kissing me soundly for the cameras. A flurry of excitement explodes around us and reporters immediately begin shouting follow up questions as the prince fades into the background. Suddenly I realize that Sinclair has

done it again, he's left me out of key decisions in our arrangement and left me in the dark about too many things I don't understand. Not only that, he clearly knew the Prince was aware I haven't been marked and never warned me.

But worse than any of this... is that those blissful moments we shared before we came out tonight, were all just a part of some political ploy. He didn't want to give me this ring, or make it official – he was simply trying to help the campaign – and he lied right to my face.

## Chapter 50

Ella

The rest of the evening passes without further drama, but as far as I'm concerned, the night has been a wash. The procession through the city's old quarter would have been magical at any other time– with the traditions, music and palpable gaiety of all those around us. If I'd been able to focus on anything other than my thoughts, I'm fairly certain I would have fallen in love with the occasion, but I wasn't able to give the events the attention they deserved.

I'm exhausted by the time we're finally free to leave, thinking that I'll certainly need an extra-long nap tomorrow even as I climb into the back of the limo. I'm distracted and grumpy, and when Sinclair slides into the car next to me, I vacate my seat, choosing the one facing him instead.

Sinclair arches a brow, but doesn't move to stop me. "You're angry with me." He assesses simply, eyeing my crossed arms and stiff shoulders.

"What was that all about, Dominic?" I inquire, trying not to get too carried away in my temper.

"What, with the Prince?" He clarifies, as if the answer isn't completely obvious.

"How did he know I haven't been marked?" I demand, "And how long have you been aware he knew?"

“You know it would be a lot easier to talk if you were over here.” Sinclair coaxes, patting the seat beside him.

“I’m fine right here.” I insist. I know how Sinclair works – he gets me within arms reach and the next thing I know I’m being soothed into complacency by his soothing caresses, cozy warmth and gentle purrs. But I’ll be damned if I’m going to let him lull me into calming down. I have every right to be upset.

He sighs. “The prince came to speak with me last night at the bonfire. I don’t know how he found out you haven’t been marked, but he made it clear he planned on using that information against us. So I told him the same story we told Roger.”

“And you didn’t tell me?” I clarify. “Why, because you didn’t find the right time? Or because you didn’t plan on filling me in at all?”

“Ella –” Sinclair begins, giving me a beseeching look. I know then he wasn’t ever going to tell me, though I shouldn’t be surprised. He had every opportunity to share this information with me – like when he gave me the ring.

“Don’t,” I interject, “just don’t bother. I thought we agreed we would be a team from now on? I thought we were supposed to be in this together?”

“Sweetheart we are,” He insists, looking as though it’s taking great restraint not to reach for me. “I just didn’t think this was something you needed to worry about.”

“You didn’t think I should know that I might have to publicly defend our relationship?” I question sharply, “that I might be asked questions about this? What if a reporter had asked me about the mark already knowing your answer, our entire plan could have fallen to pieces because you didn’t inform me, Dominic.”

“It has all happened very quickly, Ella.” Sinclair excuses, “I would have told you sooner or later, but I miscalculated. I really wasn’t expecting the Prince to make an appearance tonight, let alone bring it up. I thought he was smarter than that.”

“Do you know what I’m hearing here?” I bite. “You thought, you expected, you believed and you calculated. You are making all the calls, all the decisions and I am sitting on the sidelines looking like an idiot – Again!”

“I’m sorry.” Sinclair admits. “I told you this wouldn’t come easily for me. I’m trying, but I’m not used to consulting anyone else on this sort of thing. Change doesn’t happen

overnight.” He frowns. “That’s not a copout, it’s just that my instincts are still to shield you rather than share the burden. I know that probably seems very patronizing –”

“It doesn’t seem patronizing, it is patronizing.” I correct him.

“No.” He counters sternly. “Patronizing implies superiority. I don’t think I’m better than you Ella.”

“Of course you do!” I burst out. “You’re supernatural – the bias is in the name! I’m just a human and next to shifters we’re primitive, tiny, weak and slow. And on top of all that you’re the wealthiest, most powerful man in the pack. How could you not feel superior?”

Sinclair’s green eyes slice through me, and I have to work very hard to stay still. I feel as though I’m about to receive a lecture,

“Because none of those things have any inherent value beyond staying alive and controlling the world around you. There’s no integrity in being fast or rich, and our society didn’t earn any of it. It was handed to us by the Goddess. Yes, we’re more advanced, but not due to our own virtue.” Sinclair continues, still pinning me with his intense stare. “But you, you had to earn everything all on your own. You started from nothing and used your brains and ingenuity to succeed, you had the mental strength to overcome all the trials you faced, and you came out of all that with the purest heart I’ve ever seen.”

I don’t think anyone has ever complimented me this way. Cora might, but she’s as good as my sister – she has to love me. But I’m certain no other man has ever praised me for such things – or mentioned my positive attributes beyond my beauty. This isn’t even the first time Sinclair has made this kind of speech, making me feel valued for the person I am rather than the good looks I lucked into. I feel as though he truly sees me – and I’ll be damned if that isn’t terrifying.

“I… I don’t know how to respond to that.” I admit shyly, my voice barely above a whisper.

He chuckles, the sound filling me with warmth. “You’re a far better person than I am, Ella – and you’re going to have to get used to compliments because I have no intention of letting you continue to undervalue yourself.”

“If you think these things, why do you keep trying to shield me then?” I inquire, much more docile now.

Sinclair's dark brow furrows. "It's because I think those things." He explains intently. "I don't want you to have to struggle and worry. You don't deserve more hardship. And it's in my nature besides. I'm dominant – as a man and an Alpha. What you perceive as condescending are the power dynamics that govern all shifters. Dominance is everything to wolves and it makes it my responsibility to protect those less powerful. That's a distinction you'll have to come to terms with if you're going to live among us."

His words remind me of the Prince's other accusations – calling me insolent and saying I need discipline. A shiver works its way down my spine at the memory, and as curious as I am about that particular part of the conversation, we have more to discuss before I can bring it up. Despite Sinclair's kind words, I'm still incredibly hurt. And I know it's not the fact that Sinclair kept the information from me which stings worst, it's that he didn't give me his ring because he wanted to – he pretended like we were having some intimate moment when really it was just an act.

"Tell me about the mating ceremony." I request. "As far as I understood, we made up that excuse assuming it would be delayed indefinitely – but you just set a date. What do we do when that date arrives?"

Sinclair's mouth forms a hard line, the vein in his jaw twitching dangerously. "We'll go through with it. Though it will only be for show."

"What about when your true mate arrives?" I counter. "This all seems very short sighted. How will you explain it when you leave me? Are third chance mates as common as seconds?"

"The endgame is about making it through the campaign. Once I'm king and I have an heir, the identity of my Luna is...

redundant. It's important that I have one, not who she is or how many I've had before."

Well that's a slap in the face. I think sadly. I've basically just been told that I'm a faceless symbol, and while this is undoubtedly the deal I agreed to when we struck this agreement, it doesn't take away the ache of hearing I'm basically nothing to him.

"So everything you said to me when you gave me this ring was just bullshit?" I summarize, gesturing to my left hand. "You didn't make the gesture because you felt it or wanted to, but because of political pressure?"

Sinclair's eyes flash, and too late I realize I might have shown my hand. I don't know why I'm so bothered that he didn't truly want to make things official with me. I might be attracted to Sinclair, I don't want anything more – so why is it so upsetting? Why is my stomach tied in so many knots? Why is it so difficult to simply breathe?

Sinclair seems to be reading my mind, because in the next moment he inquires, “Why should that matter, you already told me you don't have any interest in something real with me, so shouldn't you be happy that it was fake?” His expression has gone truly deadly now, like a hunter closing in on the kill. “Why do you care so much, Ella?”