

Accidental Surrogate For Alpha Chapter 61 - 100

Chapter 51

Ella

My mind goes blank at first. Sinclair is too close to the truth, to figuring out that I'm not as immune to him as either of us would like to believe. The voice in my head is panicking, but I try to keep it together. Praying for calm, I take a deep breath, and as I exhale I recall the ability to speak.

"Because we're supposed to be in this together, and you played me." I murmur, speaking the truth – but not the whole truth. I can't admit to him that I feel utterly rejected by his ploy, that I feel unwanted on a visceral level and it's tearing me up inside for reasons I don't yet understand. "You played me like I'm one of those reporters, or the Prince."

Sinclair's face twists into a grimace, and the next thing I know he's reaching for me, "Please, come here Ella."

"No." I insist stubbornly, preparing to move away if he tries to approach me.

"I'm sorry." He expresses, looking truly remorseful. "I didn't mean to do that. I care about you, I don't want to hurt you that way."

"Well you did." I reply petulantly. I don't know where this comes from. With anyone else I would have accepted the apology and moved on, whether I actually felt better or not. I've always chosen peace over my own feelings – but I find it very hard to pretend with Sinclair. I think he would know that I don't actually feel better, so why should I fake it?

"I know." He nods grimly. "I promise I'll find a way to make it up to you."

"I don't need some sort of reparation." I insist, "Just... do better, Dominic."

"I will." Sinclair vows soberly, "You have my word."

I breathe a sigh of relief, but Sinclair is surveying me closely. I can tell he wants to metaphorically kiss and make up, but as I suspected, he senses my upset is not wholly resolved. "What else?" He prompts.

“Nothing important.” I shrug, not feeling brave enough to ask the questions I’m most curious about.

“Ella,” He says my name as an admonition, scolding me for not being honest with nothing but those two familiar syllables. “Come on, tell me what’s on your mind.”

I gnaw on my lower lip, hating that he can read me so easily, but also relieved that I might get my answers. “Alright, what was all that about discipline? Those things the Prince said about my insolence? It didn’t just sound like Alpha stuff... I mean it’s one thing to be insubordinate to a leader, but the way you two were talking... it made it seem like all men expect to be in charge of their mates.”

Sinclair’s lips quirk at the edges, and the energy in the limo abruptly shifts. The air around us goes taut, feeling suddenly tense and electric despite the fact that nothing has actually changed. Neither one of us have moved a muscle. Still I know Sinclair feels it too – it’s all too obvious in his reply. “Such a clever little human.”

“You mean it’s true?” I gape. “Why, because of the dominance thing? But that’s so backwards! You just said that strength and all that doesn’t have true value.”

Sinclair emits a low rumble. “I said it comes down to power dynamics, and that dominance isn’t a virtue – but it is a reality in relationships.”

“So what, because men are physically stronger they get to boss around their mates?” I demand hotly.

Sinclair chuckles, flashing his fangs and clearly enjoying my indignation. “You have to remember that shifters are very primal beings. Whatever instincts humans once possessed have been socialized out of you. You’ve been completely detached from your inner animal. But for us? Our inner animal controls everything, our instincts drive everything.”

“And everyone else has to submit?” I guess, feeling a shiver run down my spine. “Even to their lovers?”

“Especially to their lovers.” Sinclair smirks. “For she-wolves, the best mate possible is the one who can best protect and provide for them. Their instincts drive them to test potential partners in order to figure out who is the strongest. They need to feel their mate’s dominance to know they’re safe, to satisfy their own inner animal. Only then will they submit.” Sinclair shares. “That’s part of why I think you’d make such a good wolf. I think you have some of those same instincts. You may not realize it, but you often test

your limits with me, the same way she-wolves test their mates to ensure they have the strongest partner.”

“So all that talk about discipline... that was serious? Literal?” I squeak nervously.

Sinclair is up now, crossing the limo to sit beside me, invading my space with his big body. “Yes.” He rumbles deeply. “It was.

Does that scare you?” I don’t know why, but for some reason, his ominous manner makes me think he wants me to say yes, he wants me to be scared. Oh Goddess, what do I do now?

Sinclair

Ella’s eyes are adorably wide, and she’s squirming in her seat. However she doesn’t look afraid, she looks intrigued – curious. I can see her thighs clenching reflexively, and I can smell the beginnings of her arousal. My wolf howls in triumph. The gendered nature of shifter power dynamics might outrage Ella’s human values, but she clearly craves a strong mate just like any she-wolf –

whether she realizes it or not. Her body has always responded to my dominance even when her saucy little mouth argues against it.

“So,” her pink lips form a perfect “o” as she tries to wrap her mind around this idea, “if a she-wolf does something her mate doesn’t agree with, she just gets abused?”

“Of course not.” I explain, pulling Ella into my lap. “Only weak men assert their authority through violence or mistreatment. That isn’t our way.”

“But you said –”

“Consequences, not abuse.” I correct gently.

“What kind of consequences?” Ella asks, a tiny furrow appearing in her brow. I wish I could read her thoughts right now, but it’s enough to see the blend of eagerness and apprehension on her beautiful face – she’s excited by this conversation, and more than a little interested.

“Well, what does that word make you think of?” I inquire, thoroughly enjoying watching Ella come to terms with these ideas. It hasn’t been easy for me to pull back my wolf from

treating her like one of our own, especially when she shows so many wolfish qualities. I'd be lying if I said I wasn't hoping this conversation might open a new door in our relationship.

"With the children I nannied consequences were things like time outs and no screen time – groundings for the older kids." Ella explains.

"It's much the same with our pups." I say, to Ella's obvious relief. "But mates aren't pups. You aren't a pup."

"I don't understand." She frowns, fidgeting nervously. Her silky thighs are still clenching and it's all the more obvious now that she's settled in my lap. The sweet little human probably thinks I don't have a clue what she's up to, but I know perfectly well that she's trying to relieve the ache between her legs.

"Sure you do." I encourage. "Just say the first thing that comes to your mind."

"I mean, dominance and submission..." She trails off, her voice no louder than a whisper. "That makes it sound like... kinky sex stuff."

"It does, doesn't it?" I tease, stroking her hip.

"You mean it is?!" Ella exclaims, looking scandalized.

"You never experimented with that sort of thing?" I ask.

She flushes. "I've only ever been with Mike – he wasn't the adventurous type."

"Well in my book, these things aren't adventurous. They're standard – normal and natural." I relate, my voice low and husky.

"And more fun than you can imagine."

"But it's discipline." Ella argues. "Isn't that only fun for you?"

"Not if you're doing it right." I remark coolly. "And it's fulfilling for us both. She wolves need to submit as much as male wolves need to dominate – it's in our dna."

"That sounds completely sexist. Would a she-wolf tell me the same thing?" Ella asks archly.

“Ask Aileen if you want.” I shrug.

“Well it’s not as if these things really matter for us.” She reasons, straightening up a little. “After all, I’m not a she-wolf, and we’re not actually mates.” Am I imagining a twinge of disappointment in her voice? But over which part? The fact that she’s human?

That we aren’t mates? Or is she sad she won’t experience these things herself? I already know she never had anyone to take care of her – she’s never had discipline or consequences in her life, she only knew neglect as a child. Does she want someone who will give her the care she was denied now?

“True,” I agree. “But now that you know the consequences, I wouldn’t be too surprised if you get them the next time you act out.”

“But we aren’t lovers!” Ella objects, her pupils dilating and her breath coming in little pants.

“No, but you’re the mother of my pup, that makes you my responsibility. I’m not saying it would be sexual – I know you don’t want that – but if your behavior needs correcting, you better believe I’ll correct it.” I declare, knowing I’m playing with fire here. This sort of attitude might be catnip for she-wolves, but Ella might take it as a threat.

Her eyes are wide as saucers again, but she doesn’t look frightened, if anything she looks invigorated. “All those times you warned me not to test you, that you were showing leniency because I don’t know your ways...” She realizes aloud.

“That’s right.” I confirm. I watch her closely as my words land, and sure enough, she deflates a little. “You know now, so sneak out again or stomp your little foot on me, and I won’t hesitate to put you over my knee like the naughty girl you are.”

Ella gasps at my blunt words, staring at my lips as though she might kiss me. At first I think I’m imagining it, but then she leans in. She’s going to kiss me.

Chapter 52
Sinclair

At the very last second Ella seems to realize what she’s doing and starts to pull back. Unfortunately for her, the scent of her arousal is filling the small space where we’re

confined, and the desire in her eyes is so strong I can't stop myself. I catch her nape before she can move away from me, claiming her lips in one swift move.

Ella offers me a plaintive little moan then sinks willingly into my arms, sliding her arms around my neck and pressing her soft body flush to mine. I growl in reply, my wolf chuckling in my head when she noticeably shivers. She's so beautifully responsive, my every touch sending ripples of heat through her small body. It's only too tempting to continue touching and petting her in new ways, just to see how she'll react.

Despite her reluctance or disinterest in getting involved with me, Ella shows no hesitance now. I suspect our heated conversation pushed her past her inhibitions or worries. She's too turned on to think clearly and though I know I shouldn't take advantage, I'm not a saint. I don't know any man or wolf who could deny such a sweet offering – and Goddess is she sweet.

Ella returns my kisses with open fervor, parting her lips for my questing tongue and shifting until she's straddling my lap. Before long her swollen center is pressed to my hardness, separated only by my slacks and her dress. I want to rip the clothes from her body, to expose every inch of her soft skin and finally fulfill my erotic fantasies about her. I've become so pent up with sexual tension lately that I've found myself making lists in my head, noting all the things I'd like to do with the lovely human if she ever decides to let me into her bed.

It's practically torture not to escalate our tryst when I know how close I am to making those dreams a reality, yet at the same time I'm overjoyed to simply have Ella in my arms this way. Her lips are completely addictive, and I could happily spend hours tasting her this way. Ella, on the other hand, seems more impatient. She gradually drags her lips from mine and trails them across my jaw and down my neck, her nimble fingers busying themselves with undoing the buttons on my shirt.

When I realize what she intends I catch her slender wrists. "Take it easy, gorgeous." I advise, worried she'll regret this if I let it continue. "We're not even home yet."

Ella grumbles wordlessly, continuing to lick and nibble her way over my body even as I hold her hands captive. The next thing I know, her little teeth are sinking into my pec – not a nibble or a nip, but a true bite. It seems my sweet human didn't care for being refused, and she's reacting like any she-wolf who's mate isn't giving her what she needs. I fist one of my large hands in the silky strands of her hair, pulling her off of me before I lose control completely. It takes all my willpower not to throw her onto the seat and claim her once and for all, but somehow I manage. "Fuck, you can't do that, Ella." I grit out.

"Why not?" I look down at her, catching sight of an indignant pout so adorable I have to kiss her again.

"Because only mates bite one another." I sigh when we part. "It's incredibly intimate, it carries meanings you don't understand."

"So explain." She counters, her brow crinkling in confusion.

Huffing out a laugh, I loosen my hold on her long hair, stroking my fingers through the tresses. "I can't. It's a wolf thing. It's part of our bond, there's magic that passes between two partners." I continue. "And you biting me is like an open invitation for my wolf to claim you. It isn't easy to hold him back."

I don't tell her that this shouldn't be the case. A simple bite from any random woman certainly wouldn't tempt my wolf, even a bite from a lover wouldn't tempt him unless he wanted to claim her anyway. But Ella doesn't know that and I don't want to overwhelm her. Still, my words have the intended affect, the idea of my wolf claiming her sobers Ella more quickly than anything else, and the tension between us lowers to a simmer.

I carefully extract the sweet bundle from my lap, placing her on the seat beside me. The fog of lust is still covering her eyes, but I can see her slowly coming down from the endorphin high. Her pulse isn't racing so fast anymore, and I settle my palm on her belly, feeling our pup. He's awake and giving off pulses of happy contentment, no doubt pleased to have us both near. I tenderly stroke Ella's stomach, still reveling in our baby's elusive consciousness. "The pup's influence is strong – you're acting more like a wolf every day." I observe.

“I’m sorry.” Ella finally confesses, looking truly lost now. “Not just for the bite... for all of it. I don’t know what came over me.”

“You don’t have to apologize.” I answer. “I like kissing you.”

“But it’s not...” She shakes her head. “I don’t want that.” Ella insists, gazing up at me. “Thank you for stopping me, I don’t... I’ve never lost control that way. I made such a fuss about us not blurring the lines of our relationship and then I threw myself at you like that... I really don’t know how it happened.”

I do. I think with amusement. I should have expected as much given Ella’s mischievous streak and the way she’s been playfully testing me from the beginning, as well as the times she’s very seriously pushed back at my authority. She needs a firm hand, she craves the kind of care only a strong mate can provide – and it doesn’t matter one bit that she’s human.

“It’s okay.” I repeat, “And I will always do what I can to make sure we don’t get carried away.” One huge exception looms in my mind’s eye, and after tonight, I know I can’t put it off any longer. “But Ella, I really do need to warn you about the wild hunt.”

“How so?” She asks.

“The wild hunt event happens on the second to last night of the festival. It’s a tradition where male wolves hunt,” I’m careful to put this word in air quotes, just in case she misunderstands, “their mates in the forest.”

“I know.” She breathes. “Aileen told me all about it. She said I would have to start the hunt, but it was okay that I couldn’t shift because I’d enter the forest in human form anyway.”

“Yes.” I confirm, wondering if my beta’s wife told her the rest. “And I assume you know what happens when the she-wolves are caught.”

Ella flushes scarlet. “Aileen said you celebrate by ‘making new wolves’.” As embarrassed as she seems to be saying these words, the darling human doesn’t seem to be

taking it seriously. I understand why she might not think there's anything to worry about in our case, but unfortunately that isn't the reality.

"Right." I agree again. "But you have to understand that I will be shifted by the time I reach you. My wolf will be in control, and he's not as gentle or patient as I am."

"But you'll shift back, won't you?" She inquires, sounding suddenly anxious.

"Yes, but he'll still be at the forefront, and we'll have been on the hunt." I wonder if she comprehends all the implications of this, then realize she can't possibly. Only a shifter could understand. I know I have to be more direct. "That night brings the dawning of the Solstice, when our magic is strongest. Our wolves will be closer to the surface that day than they are almost any other day of the year. I won't be myself, I won't be able to hold myself back without help from you. My wolf will see the mother of our pup and want to carry out the ritual – to make love to you. If you encourage me, I won't be able to stop myself."

"So I won't encourage you." Ella answers, as if the solution is truly that simple.

"It might be harder than you think." I warn. "The pup is changing your behavior already, and the event is very heated from the beginning. We can't let what happened tonight happen at the hunt."

Ella grimaces, "Okay." She nods gravely, clearly taking the matter very seriously.

"There's one more thing." I add, my mouth forming a hard line.

"Yes?" She prompts me.

"Once I've caught up to you, you have to stop running." I state, hoping the baby's influence isn't strong enough to make her do this. A true she wolf wouldn't give up until her mate actually pinned her to the ground, but if it gets that far I don't think I'll be able to hold myself back. "If you keep going it will send my prey drive into override and I will chase you down... It would be a different kind of encouragement, but every bit as dangerous. So whatever you do – don't run."

Ella gulps, "I promise."

I'm relieved to have this conversation out of the way, to know we're on the same page. And yet, I saw how curious Ella became tonight about our ways, and I can see the same curiosity in her now. I just have to hope that curiosity isn't so strong that she decides to test me on the night of the hunt. If she does – we'll both be in big trouble.

Chapter 53

Ella

“You look radiant.” Sinclair's father is beaming up at me from his wheelchair, “how's my grandbaby treating you?”

“Oh he's certainly making his presence known.” I laugh, sliding my arms into the sleeves of my coat. Sinclair is holding the garment up for me, then straightens it around my shoulders as if worried I won't be warm enough. He's been particularly on edge tonight, and though I understand his agitation, I'm beginning to tire of being treated like a china doll. “Stop fussing, Dominic, I'm fine.”

“I'm still not sure this is a good idea.” He grumbles. “Your blood pressure was much too high this afternoon and you didn't get nearly enough rest.”

“You're the one who keeps telling me how important these events are.” I remind him. “And I feel perfectly well.”

He's still muttering to himself, and Henry chuckles, “You're fighting a losing battle, my dear. There won't be any reasoning with him – I was the same way when his mother was breeding and we weren't campaigning.”

“It's too much stress.” Sinclair agrees. “All the media and the royal family, on top of the crowds.”

“Not to mention your brother.” Henry adds darkly. It's true that this is the first time I'm going to be encountering all of these people together, but it's also far from the last. The Yuletide Feast is only the third night of the festival, and we still have four more high profile events to get through before we can relax. Even then it will only be a temporary reprieve – we still have the rest of the campaign to get through.

“I’ll be fine.” I insist. “You don’t have to coddle me.”

Both men raise their eyebrows, as if to say that this isn’t my decision and I absolutely do need to be coddled. Sure enough, Sinclair shakes his head and overrules me. “We’ll come home at the first sign you feel overwhelmed – and that isn’t up for debate.”

I turn away, rolling my eyes when I’m confident they can’t see my face. However as I begin to step towards the door, Sinclair pulls me back against his chest. The big Alpha lowers his lips to my ear, his deep voice like rough velvet. “I saw that, trouble.”

My stomach swoops with excitement and apprehension, and I try to make my voice sound stronger than I feel. “And?” I challenge him. “I’m not scared of you.”

A low chuckle vibrates in his chest, and I feel very overheated all of a sudden. “Liar.” Sinclair croons, petting me affectionately.

I’m only too aware that his father is only a few feet behind us and can hear every word. I feel my cheeks flush with color, but the elder alpha doesn’t seem embarrassed at all.

“Alright you two, we’re going to be late.”

We pile out the door and into the back of the limo, Sinclair effortlessly lifting his father into the seat and stowing his wheelchair in the trunk before joining us. I’m deeply curious to know more about Henry’s relationship with Roger, especially given the way he warned us about his presence. “Do you see Roger often?” I inquire shyly.

Dark clouds seem to pass over the older man’s features. “No, I’m afraid my son has never forgiven me for naming Dominic my heir.”

“I’m sorry, I shouldn’t have asked.” I apologize, realizing how personal the question was.

“Nonsense, you’re family now.” Henry assures me, looking pensive. “I love my son as any father should,” he shares thoughtfully,

“and when you welcome your pup you’ll learn firsthand that children don’t always appreciate what’s best for them. Roger would not have made a good Alpha, and I had to do what was best for the pack as well as him. Neither would have thrived under his leadership, and I haven’t ever regretted passing the role to Dominic one bit. I just wish it had been possible to do the right thing without sewing so much discord in my family.”

“Roger hated me long before you named me as your heir.” Sinclair interjects, and I can see his protective side coming out in response to his father’s sadness. “He’s been after me ever since Mom died, and becoming Alpha wouldn’t have helped our relationship at all. If anything it would have created more problems. He would have mismanaged things and I would have been compelled to challenge him. You did the right thing.”

“Oh I know,” Henry reaches over to pat Sinclair’s shoulder, “I just can’t help thinking that there might have been a better way, I could have handled it differently, including losing your mother.”

“Everything is easy in hindsight.” I offer gently. “And grief blinds us all, there is no right way to handle it. Besides, it sounds like these cards were already on the table from the start. I’m sure you did the best you could – and that’s all any of us can hope for.”

“Thank you Ella.” Henry proclaims, managing a dim smile. “I appreciate that.”

We continue to the fair in peaceful silence, and I find myself staring out the window at all the lavish decorations which were put up around the city yesterday. I was too preoccupied fighting with Sinclair to notice when we departed the festival, but the old town has truly been transformed for the holiday. Lights, greenery, ice sculptures and ornaments abound, glittering almost too brightly against the stark white mounds of fresh snow.

The feast is happening against the backdrop of the Midwinter Fair, and though I wish we had time to explore the carnival, when we arrive reporters and photographers are clamoring around us the moment we exit the car. Sinclair growls at them in warning when they edge too close to me, and though they back off, they remain persistent in their demands for questions and photos. So we head straight to the feast, eager to cross the velvet ropes that will block the clamoring media from the main party.

We have to greet the royal family first, bowing and curtsying to the King, Queen and Prince and making polite conversation – at least, as polite as one can be with political opponents. Afterwards we move to our assigned places at the head table, relieved to have the tense interaction resolved.

Sinclair pulls out my chair, but I can’t bring myself to sit down. “Oh no,” I gulp, holding my breath when I see a large platter of grilled fish on the table. “Is that fish?”

Sinclair follows my gaze, quickly growling at a waiter. “Can you remove the fish, please?”

“Remove it?” The man blinks, looking back and forth between us. I’ve got my hand over my mouth, and my face is probably very pale from holding my breath. I’m about to break, needing air but knowing the scent will be terrible.

“Yes, the smell makes Ella sick.” Sinclair explains, getting impatient with the man’s slowness on the uptake. “Get it out of here, can’t you see what it’s doing to her?”

It’s too late, at that moment I lower my hand, heaving in a gasp of much needed oxygen, and feeling my stomach turn in the very same second. I shake my head, knowing I’ve probably turned green and whimpering when I feel my gag reflex engage. I take off for the restrooms, knowing if I stay I’ll be sick all over the beautiful table.

I can hear Sinclair coming after me, but I race into the bathroom just as another woman is exiting. I can barely hear their confrontation over the sounds of my own retching, but when Sinclair doesn’t enter I know the stranger must have insisted he not set foot in the lady’s room. Propriety must have won out, but I don’t mind – I hate being sick in front of people, especially handsome men who give me butterflies.

The door opens just as a second wave of nausea overtakes me, and I hear high heels clicking across the floor. “Oh you poor dear.” A feminine voice sounds behind me, and gentle hands pull the hair back from my face. “There, that’s better.”

“Thank you.” I croak, miserable beyond words.

“Nonsense,” My savior replies. “We she-wolves have to stick together.”

“Well I appreciate it.” I repeat, looking up for the first time. The other woman is beautiful, with short dark hair and bright blue eyes. She’s elegant and sophisticated in a way I’ll never be, and I feel a twinge of shame. I bet this stranger has never done anything as unseemly as vomiting in public – pregnant or not.

“This is your first pup.” She observes kindly, “They’re always the hardest.”

“Do you have any?” I ask, moving towards the sink to rinse out my mouth.

“No,” She frowns, a dark look crossing her features. “I haven’t been so blessed.”

“Oh I’m sorry, it was insensitive of me.” I realize, flushing with embarrassment.

“Don’t worry about it.” She gives me a long, lingering look full of unspoken emotion. “You’re very lucky, you know.” She murmurs meaningfully, then turns and leaves without another word. I can’t help feeling as though I’ve missed something important. It’s only after she’s gone that I realize I never even asked her name.

When I return to the feast, Sinclair stands to greet me, reaching for my waist. “Are you alright?”

“Yes,” I try to summon a smile, “as long as the fish is gone.”

“Do you want to leave?” He asks, stroking my cheek.

I shrug, leaning into his warmth and pressing my face to the curve of his neck. He smells so good, it’s almost enough to make me forget about being ill. His arms come around me reflexively, and I can hear him breathing in my own scent. However rather than purring or humming with contentment like he usually does, his body goes completely stiff. He pulls away from me slightly, his brow furrowing in confusion as he searches my features.

“What’s wrong?” I ask, feeling uneasy. He’s looking at me as if I’ve grown a second head, and I don’t like it one bit.

“You smell like my ex-wife.” Sinclair grits out, his wolf suddenly glowing in his eyes. “You smell like Lydia.”

Chapter 54

Ella

It takes me a minute to understand what must be happening. The only woman I’ve been near tonight, is the stranger in the restroom. So if I smell like Lydia... that must have been her. It’s no wonder she seemed so mysterious and sad. I feel for her immensely. I know what it’s like to try for years on end to get pregnant with a partner, only for them to succeed with someone else.

Of course, Sinclair didn’t do to her what Mike did to me, they’d been in their struggle together— but it must still hurt. In fact, my pregnancy probably proves the problems they had conceiving were with her, which is devastating for any hopeful mother.

“There was a woman in the restroom.” I tell Sinclair hesitantly. “She helped me, held back my hair.”

“What did she look like?” He demands urgently.

“Dark hair, blue eyes, tall and willowy.” In fact she was my opposite in just about every way, right down to her perfectly manicured nails and custom designer shoes.

Before I can say any more, Sinclair turns and disappears into the crowd, scanning the feast for signs of his ex. My heart falls, faster and harder than I could have believed possible. I can’t believe how painful it is to see him running after her this way, obviously desperate to find her. One mention of Lydia and I might as well not exist. I feel like crumpling in on myself, though I don’t have any right to feel jilted. I’ve known the score from the beginning – Sinclair never pretended otherwise. So why does it hurt so much?

“You should get off your feet.” Henry says kindly, urging me to take my seat. “You still look very pale.” I follow his gesture obediently, not sure how much longer my legs will support me. Sinclair is out of sight now, no doubt chasing down his true mate to convince her to come back to him. I can’t seem to conjure up any words or coherent thoughts, I’m slowly being crushed beneath the weight of my disappointment.

I’m cursing myself for being so silly, for getting my hopes up when I knew better. It’s obvious now I’ve been lying to myself about my feelings for Sinclair, or this wouldn’t be so agonizing. At the same time, It’s irrefutable proof that I was right not to get involved with him. I was right to try and protect myself – even though I failed. I can’t imagine how much worse this would be if I’d actually started a relationship with him.

Stop this, the little voice in my head scolds. You’re overreacting, he just went after her, you have no idea what he’s thinking.

You’re assuming the worst because you expect to be let down.

I expect it with good reason. I reply bitterly. I learned the hard way, remember?

Sinclair is different. She insists. He’s special and he cares about you.

He cares about the pup. I correct her. He’s protective of me for its sake and he might be grateful to me for carrying it, but I’ll never be a she-wolf. I’ll never be in his league and we both know it.

That's your insecurity talking, not your brain. Think of the way he compliments you! You're more than just a surrogate to him. She presses.

And the moment I deliver this baby, I guarantee I'll cease to warrant his attention. I predict grimly. Just you wait and see.

Before my conscience can reply there's movement in my periphery, and a new voice joins the conversation.

"I tried to warn you." Roger appears as if from nowhere, but he obviously saw what happened. "I told you she would always come first to Dominic."

"Roger, that isn't fair." Henry rumbles beside me, giving his eldest son a disapproving glare.

"Oh hello, Father." Roger quips, turning his attention to the former Alpha. "It's been too long – I'm surprised you still remember my name."

"That's your own doing." Henry answers fiercely. "I still call you every week though you never pick up the phone. I'd be thrilled to see you any time you like."

I feel a rush of sympathy for Sinclair's father. I might not be a parent yet, but I know that I already love my baby more than I thought possible. I hate to think of how badly being rejected by him would sting – no matter how old he gets. Most parents would probably give up after a while, to save themselves the pain if nothing else. It speaks volumes that Henry has never stopped trying to be in his son's life, and I'm glad that Sinclair learned how to be a father from him. I might not ever have my feelings for Sinclair returned, but I know my baby will always have his father's love and protection. That's certainly more than I could have said for Mike, and more than many women get from their partners.

However Roger clearly doesn't feel any sense of gratitude for his father's dedication. Instead he turns his nose up in disgust,

"You clearly let that injury steal your dignity as well as your mobility. No true Alpha would shamelessly chase after someone who clearly didn't want to be around them."

"No true father would let a bitter child push him away without a fight either." Henry growls back, showing a glimmer of his former strength. "Like it or not, I will always be there for you – even and especially when you don't want me to be."

“That’s called smothering.” Roger complains, curling his lip.

“It’s called parenting.” Henry counters coolly. “And if I didn’t teach you that well enough then I’m relieved you don’t have pups of your own.”

“Please don’t fight.” I cut in. I hate disagreements, especially between men. That’s another lesson I learned the hard way – men are dangerous when they lose their tempers. In fact, it’s amazing that I’m not more frightened of Sinclair’s temper– given how intimidating he is. Maybe it’s because he’s always so in control, but somehow I know in my heart that he wouldn’t ever raise a hand against me. The more I think about it, the more I realize that I can’t recall ever trusting anyone the way I trust Sinclair. That must be the pup’s influence too, he’s bonded with Sinclair and knows he isn’t a threat, so I don’t fear him either.

“I’m sorry, Ella.” Henry proclaims swiftly. “You’re right, it’s the holidays, we shouldn’t be arguing like this, especially not in front of you.”

“I’m sorry too.” Roger concedes, though he doesn’t sound it. “I simply thought you might need a friendly ear, what with Dom taking off on you.”

“He didn’t take off, he simply went to investigate.” Henry sighs, sounding as though he’d like to scold his son some more and is holding back for my sake.

“Investigate what?” Roger scoffs. “He knows it was Lydia in the restroom with Ella, and he knows she wouldn’t be here if she wasn’t still interested in him. If he went after her, it’s because he wants to see her. He chose her over Ella, just like he always will.”

Henry, who doesn’t have the first clue that Dominic and I aren’t really mates, looks outraged in my honor. “Why in the Goddess’s name would you say such a thing?”

“Because it’s true.” Roger states simply. “I’m not going to lie to Ella like the rest of you. Dominic and Lydia are fated, their bond is more powerful than anything they’ll ever share with another.”

Henry shakes his head. “Then why did she leave? Why did Dominic let her go?”

“Because she thought he couldn’t give her children and he believed it too, he wanted better for her so he didn’t go after her. But now it’s clear he can father pups, they can try again.” Roger surmises, gesturing to my middle.

“They weren’t right for each other.” Henry argues. “And though you don’t want to hear it, she wasn’t right for you either.”

“We were in love – every bit as in love as Ella and Dominic, but as soon as their bond kicked in, none of that mattered.” Roger reminds the other man. “The Goddess doesn’t make mistakes.”

I want to protest, to correct him and attest that Sinclair and I aren’t in love, or tell Henry that he doesn’t have to defend me this way. I want to scream that it’s all just a sham for the campaign – just to make them stop talking about it. It’s no longer the disagreement I mind, I just can’t stand to be reminded of how little I mean to Sinclair over and over like this.

I can see that Roger is biased, but I also feel for him. He lost his mother, he grew up in his younger brother’s shadow and lost his birthright and his chosen mate to him. He was clearly scarred by those experiences, and part of me agrees that Dominic shouldn’t have gotten involved with his brother’s ex – fated or not. Maybe Roger is trying to manipulate me, or maybe he really is trying to help – either way, he isn’t lying. Lydia and Sinclair are bonded in a way I will never be with any man – least of all the father of my child.

Before anyone can say another word, I turn on my heel and walk out.

Chapter 55

Sinclair

It doesn’t take me long to catch up with Lydia. Once I caught her scent on Ella, it was easy to track her through the fair. I leave the feast pavilion and set off into the twinkling lights, finally spotting her in front of one of the food stalls near the snow maze.

She’s standing in line for mulled wine, and she looks exactly like she did the last time I saw her.

I wait for the familiar tug on my heartstrings, for our bond to trigger my wolf – to hear him chanting mine in my head the way he does with Ella. But it never comes. I don’t feel compelled to claim her, or even to approach her. If it weren’t for the fact that she’d been

sniffing around Ella and my pup, I wouldn't even consider going near her. I'm amazed to realize that – after all this time –

I'm finally free of her influence. I'm finally over her, and she no longer holds any power over me.

When did that happen? I wonder. The last time I saw her was over a year ago, and though I hadn't felt anything like affection for her, my wolf had still recognized our mate just like always. There was chemistry between us even though I'd wanted nothing to do with her. Then again, maybe the fact that I felt so much animosity for her then was evidence of lingering feelings. I can honestly say I feel nothing for her now, and that seems much more final than when I still held our past against her.

Taking a steadying breath, I approach. Lydia turns to face me when I'm still a few paces away, and she gasps in surprise.

“Dominic!”

I feel my hackles raise instinctively. I don't believe her show of surprise for one moment. She obviously knew I was here because she helped Ella in the bathroom, and my scent was all over the little human. In fact, knowing Lydia, she'd probably approached Ella in order to engineer this exact situation. I'm annoyed with myself for playing into her hands – but I also couldn't do otherwise.

A jealous female is a threat to a breeding she-wolf, especially when the title of Luna is on the line.

“What are you doing here, Lydia?” I demand coolly, not bothering to greet her.

“Oh come now, Dominic, is that any way to greet your mate?” Lydia smiles, batting her lashes.

“Don't do that,” I growl. “We haven't been mates for a long time now, and I know you approached Ella – what are you up to?”

“We might not be married anymore but we'll always be mates, whether you like it or not.” She reminds me, her smile dimming but not disappearing. “And I was curious. I heard you found a new Luna and I wanted to see my replacement for myself.”

“Ella isn't your replacement.” I bite back, “She's nothing to do with you at all.”

“She is a pretty little thing, I’ll give you that.” Lydia sneers in return, flashing her fangs. “But she seems awfully meek for your taste. I thought you liked strong she-wolves, not frail damsels who are afraid of their own shadows.”

“I’m not going to talk to you about my mate, or dignify your comments with a response.” I declare icily. “Where’s your new husband anyway, surely you didn’t come all this way alone?”

“Oh, Sloan is back in the Bloodbane pack. He doesn’t like to travel.” She answers boredly.

“Does he know you’re here?” I inquire, wondering if things are sour enough between them that he doesn’t care, or if she’s sneaking around behind his back. I don’t know an Alpha alive who would allow his Luna to go visit her ex alone, even if they were in an unhappy relationship – it would look too bad for his reputation.

“He knows what he needs to know and no more.” She answers archly, confirming my suspicions.

“You can’t honestly tell me you were willing to go to all this trouble just to get a look at Ella.” I counter. “What are you up to?”

She laughs humorlessly. “I guess the damsel act works, you were never this protective of me.”

“Of course I was.” I hiss. “I loved you with all my heart – even after I realized you only married me for my title.”

Lydia pretends to look offended. “How can you say that, we were fated.”

“Fate didn’t matter to you until after my father named me his heir.” I recall, “remind me, how many years did you stay with Roger after figuring out I was your true mate? And how long did it take you to leave him after realizing he’d never be Alpha?” I don’t need her to answer me. I know the dates like the back of my hand. Roger never realized it, but our bond presented itself when I was just sixteen – two years before my father named me his successor. Lydia broke my brother’s heart the very next day. I knew it then, but I was young and foolish. My wolf had been pining after my mate for so long then that I would have done anything to be with her. I couldn’t see her for the scheming social climber she is – but I do now.

“You’re right.” She simpers. “I wasted too many years on him hoping to become Luna. I should have listened to my wolf from the beginning. Maybe if I’d gone to you when the bond first appeared we would have had children and we could have avoided all this drama.”

“Or maybe we’d be in exactly the same place we are now.” I counter. I wish I could tell her how easy it had been for Ella to conceive with me. That even after the damage Mike did to her ovaries, one simple insemination had done the trick when years of trying hadn’t gotten Lydia and I anywhere. I might point it out if I didn’t think it was so cruel. For all her faults, Lydia had always wanted pups, and I know better than anyone how much it hurt her not to conceive.

“No.” She frowns. “I obviously gave up on you too quickly. I blamed you for our fertility struggles but I was wrong. I think we deserve another chance.”

Oh. Of course, now it all makes sense. She’s back because she knows I’m not sterile, but she still can’t conceive with her husband. “Go home, Lydia.” I grit out. “Go back to your husband. You’re still young. It wasn’t in the cards for us, but it obviously can be with other people. Ella proves that.”

“You know she’s not strong enough to be your Luna.” Lydia whispers in an undertone, looking up at me from beneath her lashes.

“Keep her as a plaything if you like, but don’t put her in charge. If you care about her you wouldn’t subject her to that pressure.

Let me come back, we can keep trying and if it doesn’t work I’ll even adopt her pup as my own.”

It takes all my willpower not to reel back in shock. I always knew Lydia was calculating and power-hungry, but I didn’t think she’d go to this length. I don’t even believe this is all about Ella – except that Ella finally gave the Alpha counsel and the allied packs enough confidence in my ability as King to get me elected. Is Lydia here because she thinks I can give her a child after all, or because I might be king after all? Maybe it’s both – but either way, she isn’t here for me.

Ella isn’t here for me either, but her dedication to our baby is undeniable. I know she’d do anything for our child, and I’ve never seen that kind of emotion in Lydia. Ella has

more love in her little finger than Lydia does in her entire body, and that's the mother I want for my son.

"You're out of your mind." I tell her bleakly. "You can't honestly believe I would ever take you back after you walked out on me.

You're the reason I might lose this campaign, and that puts the entire realm at risk. You should have stayed for that duty alone."

"I wanted more than duty, Dominic." She argues, puffing out her lips into a pout. "Is that so wrong?"

"You wanted power." I correct. "You've always wanted power, but never the responsibility that comes along with it."

"You're wrong." She insists. "And I'm going to prove it to you, I'm going to win you back, Dom!"

"You're not, because I'm happier with Ella than I've ever been." I'm amazed to realize I'm telling the truth. We're not even together, but I feel like I've finally found the partner I've been looking for in life. Even if nothing ever happens between us, I know we'll be good parents together, and lifelong friends to boot. I might wish we could be more, but I'm satisfied just having Ella in my life. As I think this, I turn away from Lydia, wondering why I ever let her drag me away from my heart's true desire.

"I'm not going to leave, Dominic." Lydia says to my back, and I can hear other shifters murmuring around us. Our conversation is clearly private no longer, and I regret coming after her. "I'm not going to give up on you."

"I've made my decision, Lydia." I counter, turning away again. "Deal with it."

My good mood only lasts until I get back to the feast table, where I find my father and no sign whatsoever of my little troublemaker. "Where's Ella?"

My father sighs, looking tired and forlorn. "She left."

Sinclair

I stare at my father, not comprehending his words. “What do you mean she left?”

“Well you took off and your brother came along and started whispering in her ear about Lydia and picking arguments with me.”

Dad explains pointedly. “I wasn’t surprised when Ella walked away – the poor thing clearly doesn’t like conflict. I thought maybe she’d just gone back to the restroom, but she hasn’t come back and I haven’t seen hide nor hair of her since.”

“Damnit.” I swear, dragging a hand through my hair and looking around. I don’t see the guards I specially assigned to her, and I can only hope that they’re with her – not searching for her too.

“What were you thinking, running off that way?” My father scolds.

“I had to make sure Lydia wasn’t a threat to her or the pup.” I grit out, wondering just how much damage my impulsivity has done. Between leaving Ella alone, publicly arguing with Lydia and now preparing to walk out before the feast has truly kicked off, it’s entirely possible that I’ve hurt my campaign – not to mention the mother of my pup.

“I understand that but you must know how that looked to Ella.” My father sighs. “And Roger didn’t help.”

“What did he say to her?” I demand, more harshly than I intended.

“About what you’d expect.” Dad grimaces. “That Lydia came back to try to mend bridges and you would dump Ella in a heartbeat to get back together with your fated mate.”

A low growl tears through my chest, and I’ve half a mind to go track down my treacherous brother and make him eat his words.

However my wolf won’t allow that. He’s demanding we see to Ella first – her welfare is more important than punishing Roger.

I make my excuses to the King and Queen, using Ella’s illness as an excuse. No one could fault me for caring for my breeding mate rather than furthering my campaign, and Dad and I return to the limo without much objection. The driver confirms he took Ella home a little while ago, but I won’t relax until I can talk with her.

When I get home, my rooms are empty, and I know it's a bad sign if Ella is sleeping in her own bed. She only ever does this if she's unhappy with me or – Goddess forbid, in need of privacy to relieve our sexual tension. Still, after the night we've had I doubt there's much danger of the latter, so I make my way to her rooms without hesitation.

I enter without knocking, finding Ella curled beneath her covers but wide awake. She sits up when I enter, her golden eyes wide.

“You're home already?”

“You didn't think I'd stay after you left, did you?” I inquire, coming to sit on the edge of her mattress.

“I don't know.” She shrugs. “I wasn't sure you'd notice I was gone.” She winces almost as soon as the words are out of her mouth. “I'm sorry, I didn't mean that – I sound like a spoiled child.”

“Don't apologize.” I admonish, “not for sharing your feelings.”

“But they're so petty.” She whispers, flushing bright red.

“You're allowed to be petty every now and then.” I tease, brushing the hair back from her face. “it's the least I can offer when you're giving me a baby. What you're not allowed – is to run off without telling anyone where you're going.” I continue sternly.

Ella peeks up at me from beneath her lashes. It's amazing how different she and Lydia can seem even when wearing the same expression. Lydia had adopted this look to try and manipulate me, but Ella's shyness is entirely genuine. “You asked me if I wanted to leave, but then you disappeared before I could answer.”

“Uh-huh,” I hum, sliding my hand around to her nape. I close my hand around the back of her neck, massaging her tense muscles with my thumb. “You don't really think I'm going to let you get away with that, do you?”

“I took the guards with me!” Ella protests, clearly knowing she was in the wrong, but attempting to push her luck. “I didn't break any rules!”

“But you didn't tell anyone where you went.” I reply. “My father was really worried about you, and so was I.”

“Oh.” She frowns, looking truly guilt-stricken. “I’m sorry, that’s not what I wanted.”

“What did you want?” I press, encouraging her to lean her weight against me.

“I just wanted to get out of there.” Ella murmurs, leaning her head against my shoulder.

“Is that really all? You weren’t angry at me? Trying to punish me for leaving you alone?” I suggest, trailing my hand up and down the curve of her spine.

“Not consciously.” Ella reasons, “I just felt overwhelmed, you were gone and Roger and your Dad were arguing, I didn’t know what else to do.”

“And I suppose it didn’t have anything to do with the things Roger said to you about Lydia?” I inquire.

“He didn’t tell me anything that wasn’t true.” Ella remarks, repeating a sentiment very close to the one she’d shared the first time Roger sought her out. I hadn’t cared for her acceptance of his warnings then, and I certainly don’t now, given everything that’s happened between us.

“Oh yeah, like what?” I probe, overflowing with suspicion.

“That you two are fated and I’ll never have that bond with you. He’s not wrong.” She answers blithely. Despite her casual tone, I can see the tension behind her eyes. Perhaps it truly doesn’t bother her but she understands he was out of line, or maybe she cares more than she’s letting on. Is it terrible of me to hope for the latter? To hope she’s sad about this painful truth?

“We’ve talked about this once before, he shouldn’t be saying those things to you – he was trying to be hurtful.” I clarify, wishing I hadn’t been so thoughtless as to leave her alone and vulnerable to his interference.

“Or maybe he was just hurt.” Ella suggests, using a tone I haven’t heard before.

“What do you mean?” I ask.

Ella pulls away from me, though not by much. “Look, I don’t want to get in between you two, and I know you’re right. He lashes out at everything and everyone... but he does it the way a wounded animal does... I can’t help but feel sorry for him.”

My mind reels and I try to keep my wolf calm. Ella sympathizing with Roger bothers me more than I'd like to admit. I love that she has such a big heart, but she doesn't know even a fraction of his misdeeds, let alone what I suspect about his recent scheming. I guarantee she wouldn't be feeling sorry for him if she knew he might be behind her attack, or helping the Prince to keep me from winning the throne.

Ella leans closer to me when she feels my muscles tense, and damned if it isn't effective. It's very difficult for me to stay in a bad mood when her soft curves are pressed up against me. "He hasn't gotten what he wanted out of life and he might be wrong to blame others for his misfortunes... but I know what it's like to be denied that way." She continues, clearly feeling the need to explain herself.

At once I understand what Ella means. She sees something of herself in Roger, though she fails to grasp the core differences between them. Roger has let his misfortunes twist and corrupt him into a wolf without integrity or morals, whereas Ella has stayed pure of heart no matter what challenges she faced – and I guarantee they were considerably greater than my brother's.

"You did once, not anymore." I correct fiercely, taking her chin and forcing her to hold my gaze. "From here on out you're going to get what you want, Ella. I won't see the mother of my pup denied happiness."

Adorably, Ella places her hands over her ears, as if she might block out the sound of my voice. "Don't! Please don't." She pleads.

"I don't want to get my hopes up, it will just hurt all the more when they fall through."

At once I'm furious with a world that has conditioned her to think this way. I wish I could go back in time and find her when she was a young girl, to take her under my wing and protect her from the cruelties she's faced. I know she wouldn't be the same woman today without them, but I still wish I could spare her the pain.

"Listen to me very carefully, Ella." I instruct, staring into the brilliant pools of her golden eyes, "I'm going to do whatever I can to ensure your hopes aren't ever dashed again. I can't promise you'll never be disappointed, but you have my word that if it's in my power to give you what you want, you'll have it."

“I don’t trust this.” Ella confesses, not meeting my gaze. “It sounds too good to be true.” She slowly raises her eyes to mine, taking a deep breath as she summons her courage. “You sound too good to be true.”

“Then I guess I’ll just have to prove myself to you, won’t I?” I grin, grazing my knuckles over her cheek.

She shakes her head. “I don’t need you to be anything more than you already are, just please don’t tell me to wish for the moon when I can’t even reach the sky.”

“That’s because you’ve been reaching on your own all this time.” I inform her gently. “It doesn’t have to be that way.”

“No?” Ella questions, her eyes shuttering. “Then maybe you’d like to tell me what Lydia had to say when you found her?”

Too late I realize I pushed too hard, I promised too much, and Ella is calling me on it. I need to make a decision and fast. Do I tell her the truth and make her fear for our future with our baby, or do I shield her from Lydia’s intentions and protect her peace of mind?

Chapter 57

Ella

I’m holding my breath for the second time this evening, though this time it isn’t to save myself from any bad smells or illness.

Now I’m waiting to see if Sinclair will be honest with me about his ex-wife, or if he’ll let me down again with another lie. In truth I’m expecting him to disappoint me, though I don’t believe he has bad intentions. On the contrary, I think he’s much too determined to protect me – but he’s very mistaken if he thinks keeping me in the dark is going to make me safer. If anything it will put me more at risk. I don’t want to be blindsided again, and after what happened with Mike I feel especially sensitive about dishonesty – however well intentioned.

He sighs, and drops his hands from my face. His green eyes bore into me, and a muscle flutters in his cheek, betraying his agitation over the evening's events. "Roger wasn't entirely wrong. Lydia is back because she wants us to try again."

For a moment I'm so surprised he actually admitted this that I can't speak. At the same time, my heart sinks and swells. It hurts me to know this information, but I'm touched and impressed that Sinclair confided in me. He really does seem to be trying to do better and communicate more, and I appreciate it immensely. As I work through my conflicting feelings I gradually wrap my mind around his words. "Try again." I repeat. "For a baby, or as mates?"

"Both." Sinclair answers simply, shaking his head. "But it's not going to happen."

I blink, "Why not?"

"There's a reason I didn't go after Lydia when she left." Sinclair growls, a dark look overtaking his features. "She might have walked out, but our marriage was over for a long time by then."

"But I thought..." I trail off, remembering Sinclair and Roger's conflicting statements about mates. Roger made it sound like fated couples shared a love deeper than any ocean and no chosen bond could ever compete, but Sinclair described things differently.

He said that he and Lydia hadn't been good for one another, that some chosen couples were happier than fated ones. "You're fated," I finally continue, wondering if I'm asking this because I believe it, or because I'm afraid of the possibility. "Don't you love her?"

The corner of his mouth twitches up into a sad smile, and for a moment I can imagine the boy he once was. I can imagine a young Sinclair diving headfirst into love without any fear at all – driven by his strength and innate confidence. Now he looks as though he learned his lesson the hard way, and though some bitterness remains, there's also acceptance.

"Sometimes I think the Goddess fates some couples because they have to go through the experience in order to become the person they're destined to be, not because she intends them to stay together forever, or even that they're well suited to each other." Sinclair explains thoughtfully. "Sometimes they might be sent to test a chosen couple's bond, or even to break your heart."

There's always a larger plan, though it's hard to accept that the painful parts of life serve any purpose other than tormenting you."

"I actually think that's a comforting idea." I reply, thinking of my own relationships. "I've never believed in fate or destiny before..."

but I'd much rather think that I spent all those years with Mike for a reason I don't yet understand, than believe it was all just a waste – that it was all for nothing."

Sinclair does smile now, pressing his hand to my belly. "That's right. If it wasn't for him, you never would have conceived this baby." His eyes sparkle with mischief, and his grin turns positively canine. "Though I'd still like to let my wolf have a go at him."

"You didn't answer me, you know." I point out, covering his hand with my own and wishing I could feel our child's emotions the way Sinclair does. "You didn't say whether you still love Lydia."

Sinclair makes a low rumbling sound, "I don't want to talk about Lydia anymore. I just want to be here with you and this little one."

I pull my hand away, sensing I've crossed a line. It worries me that he won't answer me, but I prefer his silence over untruths or empty platitudes. Besides, he told me he wasn't going to get back together with Lydia, and I don't feel confident enough with him to press my luck on the matter. I know the look of a man who's said all he's going to say on a subject, and if I keep pushing he'll just double down. There will be time to talk about her more in the future.

Sinclair, meanwhile, is gazing at all the bedding piled around my body. "It's only eight o'clock." He reminds me, his brow wrinkling with concern when he realizes I'm still wearing my feast dress. "Were you too exhausted to change?"

I flush. "No, I was just really cold after the festival. I couldn't feel my fingers or toes."

He tsks, grazing his knuckles over my cheek. "Poor baby, do you feel better now?"

"I did," I answer, tilting my chin up and shooting him an accusing stare. "Until you came and untucked me."

His wolfish smile is back, the one that makes me feel like I need to lock myself behind a closed door before he huffs and puffs and blows my house down to devour me. Suddenly

the goosebumps covering my arms have nothing to do with the cold air, and everything to do with the predator in front of me.

“Then let’s warm you up.” Sinclair purrs, just before he pounces.

I squeak and cry out as he joins me beneath the covers, and though I’m not sure why, I immediately try to wriggle away. I know he just plans on snuggling with me, but the little voice in my head pushes me to give chase, and my human instincts don’t need any encouragement to run from the big bad wolf. Of course Sinclair catches me easily, tickling and playfully wrestling until I’m giggling uncontrollably.

I barely notice when he strips off my dress, and I don’t complain when he removes his own clothes either. Soon we’re both in our underwear, and my entire body is surrounded by Sinclair on all sides. The blankets are over our heads, and all I can see is the dim glow of his green eyes. “I thought the idea was to warm up.” I say, laughter still filling my voice.

“Body heat needs skin to skin contact to work.” He smirks – I can’t see it, but I hear it in his voice as clear as a bell. “Don’t they teach you humans anything in school?”

“I dunno,” I muse suspiciously. “I think you just like having me naked. I think maybe I should go climb into a nice hot bath instead of letting you take advantage this way.”

Sinclair makes a low grumbly sound that sends delicious shivers down my spine. “First of all, you aren’t naked, not yet anyway.”

He counters, his words a sultry promise. “Second, baths are dangerous business, I think you might need supervision.”

“Dangerous?” I scoff, still giggling.

“Mmm,” He confirms gravely. “Slips and falls, drowning, bath snakes – you definitely need a lifeguard.”

My cheeks hurt from smiling, but I can’t seem to stop. “Did you say bath snakes?”

“Oh yes, we get whole infestations in these parts, they’re terribly venomous.” Sinclair replies, still sounding very somber and serious.

I love this playful side of him, even though this is all starting to get a bit too close to the romantic territory I'm desperately trying to avoid entering. The only reason I can handle this is because it's dark and he's behaving himself. If I have to see him undressed –

feel the heat of his gaze on my own body or goddess forbid if he decides to help me wash and starts touching me – I'll be a goner. The idea is incredibly enticing, but I have to stay strong, I can't fall for this man.

A spark of inspiration strikes me then, "But if you're playing lifeguard, who's going to feed me dinner. You know I left the feast without eating?"

Sinclair stills, and I can tell my words did the trick. He might be enjoying flirting, but I know his instincts won't allow him to let me go unfed. I've learned that he considers it his duty as an alpha and the father of my child to make sure the baby and I have enough to eat, and the only way I ever get away with skipping a meal is if I'm sick. "And I lost my afternoon snack at the feast." I remind him.

Sinclair growls, "You're a clever little minx, you know that?"

"You've mentioned it once or twice." I murmur, wondering if he can see my blush.

"Alright, you go have your bath." He sighs, his wonderful heat leaving me as he untangles our bodies and rises from the bed.

"When you're warm and clean I'll have dinner waiting, just be careful." He drops a kiss to my temple and strides out of the room.

"Watch out for snakes."

Once he's gone I flop down on the bed and exhale deeply. "I am in so much trouble."

Chapter 58

Ella

On the fourth day of the festival we wake to headlines about Lydia's reappearance in Moon Valley. I'm just coming out of the bathroom following my morning bout of

vomiting, when I find Sinclair standing in the doorway, glaring at the newspaper. I startle slightly, not expecting to see him in my rooms. I left his bed only half an hour ago, and wasn't planning on seeing him again until breakfast. I'm not sure what's on the front page of the paper, but it must be bad if it couldn't wait.

He glances up at me, frowning deeply. "I thought I asked you to tell me when you feel ill."

"Dominic, it's happening so often now that it would be impossible to tell you every time, and it's not as if I have a lot of warning when it comes on." I argue, though this isn't the full truth. As much as his presence and gentle hands soothe me, I still find it horribly embarrassing to be sick in front of him, and I avoid informing him whenever possible.

Sinclair narrows his eyes, but before he can call me out for bending the truth I cross the distance between us. "What's going on?"

He shows me the paper, which is dominated by a large black and white photo of Sinclair and Lydia by the snow maze. The headlines are in bold black lettering above the image. Trouble in Paradise? Former Luna Returns to Reclaim her Mate.

My eyes widen in shock, and I quickly scan the article. While the media had been kept away from the main feast, they clearly hadn't been barred from the rest of the fair. Worse, it seems like they overheard most or all of Sinclair's confrontation with Lydia.

Though Moon Valley Alpha Dominic Sinclair seems to have won the lottery with his second chance mate, Ella Correntin, his attention wasn't on his bride-to-be at the annual Yuletide Feast in Oldtown. Instead the prospective King was seen chasing his ex-wife Lydia Davis – now of the Bloodbane pack – through the fair, causing his pregnant mate to walk out of the event in protest. Onlookers report that the two engaged in a heated conversation wherein Lydia professed her desire to mend bridges with the Alpha, claiming she still loves him and that his second chance mate isn't strong enough to lead the Moon Valley Pack, let alone the Kingdom. Though Sinclair rejected her advances, Lydia fiercely declared she wasn't going to give up on him, leaving many to wonder if the fated pair might be able to repair their relationship.

"They're all like this." He shares, tension lacing his words. "Every paper and tabloid is some version of this. Fucking Lydia probably planted the story herself, given the way they left out the pieces that might make her look bad."

Guilt washes over me as I realize how leaving the festival must have looked to onlookers, especially given this information. “I’m so sorry I left.” I murmur. “I didn’t think, I should have stuck it out and waited for you to come back.”

Sinclair frowns down at me. “What are you talking about?”

“It makes it look like I was angry with you and we’re on the rocks.” I explain, my pulse fluttering.

“Ella, none of this is your fault.” Sinclair promises. “If anyone is to blame it’s me for arguing with her in public, and Lydia for turning up to cause trouble in the first place.”

“But –” I try to object.

“I said it isn’t your fault, and I meant it.” Sinclair interrupts, placing his pointer finger against my lips.

“Is this going to hurt the campaign?” I ask, though it comes out rather muddled since his finger is still pressed to my mouth.

“It’s a hiccup.” Sinclair states simply, “We’ll do some damage control at the festival tonight. I’ll invite a few trusted reporters and make a statement refuting all this, but the more important part is that we put on a good show. We’ll look so happy and in love that everyone will forget this ever happened.”

“Okay.” I nod, trying to steady my nerves. “And it’s wassailing tonight, right? So all we have to do is drink and sing carols and enjoy the fair.”

“Right,” he confirms.

“I wish I could really drink.” I lament. “I could use a bit of liquid courage tonight.”

“You have nothing to worry about.” Sinclair croons. “I know it makes you nervous but you always do beautifully at these events.”

“When I stay at them long enough to participate, you mean?” I correct him, still regretting my decision to run out yesterday.

“You’re growing the pack a prince,” Sinclair smiles, “you get a free pass when it comes to all these public responsibilities. In case you’ve forgotten I was voting for you to stay home entirely until you convinced me otherwise.”

“I should have let you coddle me after all.” I sigh, “we could have avoided all this.”

Sinclair gathers me to his chest, hugging me tightly. “I’m glad to see you’re learning that I’m always right.” He teases.

Groaning, I try to squirm out of his hold – much good that it does. “You know I regretted it the moment I said it.”

“I’m not going to let you forget it, either.” Sinclair chuckles.

I laugh, ceasing my struggles and submitting to his petting. “Bossy wolf.”

When we arrive at the festival, the media descends almost immediately. Cameras are flashing before we even exit the car.

Sinclair wraps a protective arm around my shoulders, growling softly when the reporters get too close, and eventually they back off, realizing they’ll be endangering more than their careers if they invade my space.

“Alpha, do you have any comment about the reports regarding your ex-wife?” One of the reporter’s asks, shoving a microphone forward.

“I’ll tell you what I told Lydia last night,” Sinclair begins coolly. “That I’m happier with Ella than I ever was with her, and there’s not a snowball’s chance in hell that I would ever take back someone who walked out on their pack when they needed them most.

There’s no love lost between us, but I have no respect for a Luna who abandons her responsibilities as a leader.”

The reporter murmur and exchange glances, and suddenly the microphone is pointing to me. “Ella, how do you feel about Lydia’s accusations that you’re not strong enough to be the Alpha’s mate?”

I lean into Sinclair, trying to draw on his own raw power to give myself the confidence I need. “I think that Lydia is obviously the kind of woman who believes there’s only one

way to lead, and one way to be strong. If she believes that compassion and kindness are signs of weakness, well – I think that says more about her than it says about me.”

Sinclair leans down, dropping his lips to my ear. “You’re too humble.” He rumbles affectionately, making me blush. “You ought to tell them how fearlessly you braved those bath snakes yesterday.”

I can barely contain my laughter, grinning up at him and whispering, “I can’t say that.”

Sinclair’s cheeks split into a wide smile, and he kisses the tip of my nose before turning back to the clambering paparazzi, “trust me, gentlemen, this one stands up to me on a daily basis. She might come in a sweet package but she’s got nerves of steel.”

I’m blushing again, but the reporters are eating it up. They’re wearing the ravening expression of hungry jackals, and I suspect they’re thrilled to be getting this on tape. I can already predict the waves this will make – when Sinclair looks at me the way he is now I feel like I’m the center of his universe, and I know it’s all an act. To outsiders it will be beyond convincing. “Is there anything you would tell Lydia, if you could, Ella?”

“I would tell her that if she cares about her life she’ll stay away from my mate.” I growl, surprising myself with my own ferocity.

Where on earth did that come from? “And that the next time she wants to get a look at me she can introduce herself directly, rather than sneaking up on a breeding woman while she’s suffering morning sickness.”

This last statement causes a near frenzy, and Sinclair growls again. I watch as the crowd cowers instinctively, tucking their proverbial tails between their legs. “When did this happen?”

“Last night.” Sinclair answers darkly. “Why else do you think I went after her, or that Ella left? We’ve all seen what jealous she-wolves can do at the best of times, and I don’t take threats to my family lightly.” While the crowd immediately begins clamboring for more information, Sinclair raises a hand to forstall them. “Now, I’m going to take my beautiful mate and get lost in the snow maze.” He announces, squeezing my waist. “And don’t be surprised if she’s seeing stars when we come out again.”

Hearty chuckles rise from our audience and though I assumed Sinclair was joking, I quickly learn quite the opposite. He spends the rest of the evening kissing and caressing me for all to see, and by the time we get back to the house I think I’m so turned on that I

think I'll go crazy if I don't find a release. Unfortunately there's no chances for that tonight because Sinclair takes me to bed almost as soon as we walk through the door. For the first time I seriously consider throwing in the towel and simply asking him to have sex with me, even though I know it's just my libido talking. The little voice in my head is whining with need, and I find myself hungrily watching Sinclair as he climbs into bed beside me.

Can I really do this?

Chapter 59

Ella

In the end my exhaustion saves me. I hadn't realized how tiring the evening was, but the added pressure of putting on our show for the reporters must have taken more of a toll than I expected. I fall asleep almost as soon as my head hits the pillow, but as fate would have it, I can't even escape Sinclair in my dreams tonight.

I know I'm dreaming from the very start. I'm still in Sinclair's bed, but it's no longer in his opulent mansion. It's in the middle of a starlit forest, with nothing but trees and wilderness surrounding it as far as the eye can see. I'm wearing a simple white negligee

– more evidence that this isn't real, I don't own anything like it. A cool breeze flutters over my skin, carrying the scent of evergreens and moss, rich amber and... Sinclair. I would know that scent anywhere, even though I can't see him yet.

He appears slowly, moving towards me through the darkness, his green eyes glowing through the trees. He's wearing nothing but a pair of simply black slacks, and for the first time I don't feel shy about appreciating his gorgeous physique. I've always averted my eyes when he undresses in front of me, not that this prevents me from feeling his muscles or the huge member between his legs when our bodies are pressed up against each other in bed. But now I look my fill, raking my eyes over the rugged planes of his face and the contours of his chest. His tall frame is padded with muscles most human men can only dream about – some of which I didn't even know existed.

“Hello beautiful,” Sinclair greets me huskily, prowling closer with every ragged breath I take, his naked torso gleaming in the moonlight. “Didn’t you get enough of me when you were awake?”

“How could I?” I pout, feeling completely face to express my sullen mood. “You teased me all night long and I haven’t had any relief. It’s torture!”

“It’s not easy for me either.” He murmurs sympathetically, crawling up onto the big bed. He moves with such lethal grace, crawling over the plush covers until he’s close enough to reach out and touch me, which he immediately does. He lies on his side, encouraging me to come rest in the protective circle of his arms. I don’t resist. I slide into his embrace as easily as I breathe, feeling completely at home with this dangerous man wrapped around me. It seems strange to think he terrified me a month ago, now he’s my safe space.

“It’s not the same.” I insist, looking over at him from beneath my lashes.

“Why not?” Sinclair asks, brushing the hair back from my face.

“You don’t know the effect you have on me ” I confess, pressing a bit closer. I might be asleep but my breasts are still aching, and my sex is swollen and dripping with need. It’s rather freeing to be able to rub myself against Sinclair without fear of embarrassment or worries over opening a can of worms.

“Tell me,” He growls, his voice deep and rough. One of his massive hands tangles in my hair, forming a fist in the long silky strands while the other slides down over my bottom, hitching my hips closer, until the pulsing bundle of nerves at the apex of my things is right up against his hardness.

“Even the smallest touch sets me on fire.” I complain. “You holding my hand feels more intimate and arousing than another man kissing me.”

“And when I do kiss you?” Sinclair prompts, encouraging me to move against him, guiding my hips to rock against his.

“I might as well be molten lava. My entire body turns to liquid – figuratively and literally.” I confess, and I know he understands.

My wetness has already seeped through my panties and onto the sleek black fabric of his trousers. “You have a power over me I don’t understand, I’ve never experienced anything like it.”

“You don’t really think it’s different for me, do you?” Sinclair murmurs, lowering his mouth to my throat and brushing his lips over my pulsepoint.

“Of course it is.” I whine, so frustrated that I feel like I might cry.

“Can’t you feel how hard I am for you, Ella?” Sinclair inquires gruffly, nuzzling my skin, grazing his fangs over the spot where my neck meets my shoulder. “How hard I always am for you?” I’m shivering with need now, especially as his words combine with the feeling of his steely length against my clit.

“Well that doesn’t mean anything. You’re in bed with a half naked woman, it would happen with anyone.” I reason miserably.

Sinclair chuckles, “I think you’ve been around human men for too long, they’ve given you a very low opinion of my sex.” He raises his head at last, taking a break from laving the soft spot behind my ear. “Trust me, it doesn’t happen for just anyone, no matter what they’re doing or how lovely they are.”

“But I’m nothing.” I insist. “I’m just a human, I don’t have the kind of power you do.”

“You’re not nothing.” Sinclair growls, a dangerous edge in his deep voice. “And you might be human but you have a power all your own. Don’t you know how difficult it is for me to be near you without touching you? How impossible it is to hold myself back when you’re in my arms, when all my instincts are driving me to make you mine? Ever since we met I’ve felt like an addict, and you’re my only fix.”

“That’s probably just the baby.” I murmur, sighing when the fabric of my teddy slides off my breast, finally allowing one taut nipple to meet Sinclair’s bare chest, teased and tickled by the coarse black hair scattered over his pecs. “It has to be. It doesn’t make sense otherwise.”

“You don’t give yourself enough credit.” Sinclair answers, his lips mere inches from mine. “And you give me too much and too little all at once.”

“What do you mean?” I wonder aloud, not really wanting him to answer. I just want him to kiss me, to strip off my negligee and finally relieve the terrible ache which seems to

have taken over my very soul. I think Sinclair can sense my growing desperation, but for some reason he isn't giving me what I need. He's holding himself back, taking away his kisses and questing hands.

"I don't do casual either, Ella." He catches my hips when I get so distracted rubbing myself against him that I stop listening, too intent on chasing my pleasure. I whimper when the delicious friction I'd been building ceases, and Sinclair clucks sympathetically. Still, he doesn't show me any mercy. Instead he tilts my chin up so I'll have to look him in the eye, "I don't waste my time on people I'm not serious about, or relationships that aren't going anywhere."

"I don't know why we're even talking about this." I relate, "It's not like this is even real, it's just my imagination run out of control."

Sinclair's eyes shutter, and he leans his forehead against mine. "Goddess, sometimes I forget how much you don't know about shifters, how much you can't know."

"Please, Dominic." I beg, needing to move, to perform the carnal dance our bodies were made to create together. "Won't you kiss me, won't you touch me?"

"I'd like to touch you and taste you and all the rest." He grumbles reluctantly, and suddenly his strong hands are gone from my body, and his warm limbs are pulling away from my own. "But I need to leave before I do something I'll regret, something you'll regret."

"I don't understand." I admit, my nose crinkling up in confusion.

Sinclair pauses only long enough to lean over me and run his fingertip down my nose, straightening out the wrinkles. "You will when you wake up."

Before I can say anything more, Sinclair begins stalking away through the dream forest, leaving me alone, and entirely unsatisfied.

When I wake up, I find Sinclair watching me, stroking my hair and gazing down at me with a tender expression. "Welcome back."

I blink and stretch, feeling as though I only just fell asleep. "It's not morning already, is it?" I yawn.

"No." He smiles gently, "You're just coming out of the dream."

“How did you...?” I stop short of finishing my sentence. Logic tells me he must be guessing, or that maybe I was talking in my sleep or some other explanation. However when I look into Sinclair’s eyes, I see the truth. He isn’t speculating, somehow he knows I was dreaming, and as the seconds tick by it becomes more and more obvious that he knows I was dreaming about him.

Worse, I fear he’s managed to decipher some of the details from the fantasy.

“It’s okay, Ella.” He soothes, petting me as if I’m a skittish horse.

No, oh no. He knows – he knows everything.

Chapter 60

Ella

Sinclair is watching me struggle through the idea that he somehow shared my dream, that he knows everything I said – secrets I would never admit if I’d known he wasn’t just some fantasy my sleeping brain cooked up. I just admitted how deeply I’m attracted to him, how much he turns me on. I can’t believe how shamelessly I rubbed myself all over him – I might as well have been a dog in heat, practically begging him to make love to me.

I did beg, I realize belatedly, And he left. He walked away even though I was his for the taking. He must have thought my behavior was pathetic. He’s wanted to kiss me in the past, he even said he wanted me in the dream, but that was before I debased myself that way. I suppose that sort of thing isn’t befitting of a Luna at all.

Suddenly Mike’s voice sounds in my head, and I remember the way he belittled me for liking sex. You’re a stunner, Ella, but you’re too eager. Men don’t want a girl whose legs fall open at the first opportunity – show a little class. He never realized it was the physical intimacy I liked, never connected the dots that sex with him was more about conception and closeness than pleasure. It would be different with Sinclair, I can tell that much already. I find more pleasure with him in the foreplay than I ever found with Mike in ten years of being together. He’s awakened parts of my body I didn’t even know existed – and now he knows it.

Sinclair is still stroking and petting me, and I can't take it. I've got to put some distance between us or I'll lose it. I wrench myself out of his arms, and he lets me go – again, the little voice in my head moans. I climb out of the bed and though my cheeks are already flooded with heat, I can feel myself flushing deeper still. “I... you... that was real?” I stutter, trying to comprehend the impossible.

“No, it was a dream.” Sinclair explains. “But we shared it. Bonded mates often visit each other in their dreams.”

“But we aren't mates, I'm not even a shifter.” I protest. “How did this happen?”

“As you said, it must be another gift from the baby.” Sinclair replies easily.

“So you knew, all along, that it was real?” I gape, my embarrassment and shame quickly giving way to outrage. “And that I had no idea?”

“Yes.” He confirms gravely. “I knew.”

“Why didn't you tell me!?” I burst out, feeling like I might cry. “You had to know I wouldn't have said or done those things if I'd known! I was vulnerable and you took advantage!”

Sinclair rises from the bed, unfolding his big body and prowling after me. I can see now that he isn't as unaffected by this situation as I initially thought. His eyes are blazing and his muscles racked with tension. His hands are closed into white-knuckled fists and his voice is low and husky. “Ella, I might be a shifter, but there are limits to even my abilities.” He rumbles. “I would have to be dead not to respond to such a tempting invitation, and you called me to your dream, not the other way around. I got caught up in the moment just like you did. I couldn't resist... not until you reminded me that you don't understand our ways.”

“How can I have called you to my dream, when I didn't even know I was doing it?” I question, confusion swirling around me in a dense fog. “And why did you come?”

“Because I wanted to.” Sinclair replies, his jaw clenched so tightly the muscle twitches. “I was telling the truth about the power you have over me, Ella. I might keep some things from you, but I don't tell falsehoods. I don't say things I don't mean, even in dreams.”

I wrap my arms around myself, unsure what to make of this new information. I want to believe him, as terrifying as that is, but doubts continue to plague me. “Then why did you leave?”

Sinclair exhales, and I can tell his patience is hanging by a thread. “Because you thought it was just a fantasy and I’m trying to respect your wishes.”

“Oh.” I utter softly, furrowing my brow. That isn’t what I expected, and though it should make me feel better to know he took me seriously when I told him I wasn’t interested in being with him, part of me is deeply disappointed. I know I’m being contrary and hormonal, but I can’t help it. I need more time to process this, and until I have it I’m not going to be making sense – even to myself.

Sinclair’s gaze sharpens on me, pinning me in place. “Why did you think I left?”

I shrug, “I thought maybe I was being too eager. I know men don’t like that.”

The imposing Alpha crosses the floor until he’s towering over me. My first instinct is to back away, but I find my feet frozen to the floor, unable to move. I peek up at him hesitantly, and find a fierce expression on his handsome face. “Any man who wants a lover without passion is an idiot. Yours is electrifying, and knowing I can set you alight makes me feel more powerful than anything else. Your ‘eagerness’ as you call it, is a gift, and I’d like to hunt down every man who’s ever made you feel otherwise and beat them to a pulp.”

I drop my gaze to the floor, staring at my feet. His words warm me through and through, from the top of my head to the tips of my toes. Still, I can’t help thinking that this is very dangerous territory. It’s getting harder and harder to resist my attraction to him, and it’s especially difficult when he speaks to me this way.

So why are you resisting? The little voice in my head demands. You like him, he likes you, why are you fighting it?

She has a point. I’ve just been given proof that Sinclair not only returns my attraction, but also that he takes it seriously. Still, I can’t help but remember the second half of his statement – he doesn’t waste his time on relationships that aren’t going anywhere, but that’s exactly what we would be. We have no future together, and we both know it, we’re just in denial because we want to give into our desires.

Because there's one thing more important than either of us. I remind her, Our baby. We're about to bring a child into the world, and it deserves two loving co-parents who can give it their full attention, not a pair of exes too caught up in their own drama to prioritize their child's best interest.

But why are you so sure you'd end up as exes? She inquires. You're predicting the end before you've even had a chance to begin.

I'm being realistic. The best Sinclair and I can hope for is a temporary fling. I bite back. Maybe we could have some fun together, but at the end of the day he's going to end up with a she-wolf who can rule by his side. I'm playing a dangerous game here pretending to be something I'm not, and it's safer for everyone involved if I fade into the background after the campaign while he finds love elsewhere.

Sinclair is watching me again, and he taps his finger lightly against my temple. "You wanna tell me what's going on in there, trouble?"

"We can't keep doing this Dominic." I state, drawing in a shakey breath. "If we stay on this path, we're headed for trouble."

He nods, cupping my cheek and smiling when I reflexively lean my head into his hand. "Listen Ella," He broaches carefully. "I don't need to know why you don't want to get involved, but I don't have unlimited self control. If you invite me into your dreams in the future, if you offer yourself up to me that way again, I don't think I'm going to be able to say no."

"But I didn't know I was doing any of that." I say, "not for real. I don't even know how I called you to me."

"I know that." He remarks, "I'm just trying to be up front with you about where I am with all this."

"Well we only have to worry about this until after the pup is born right?" I ask, more upset by this thought than I could have predicted. "I'll lose the connection to you when I'm no longer carrying him."

"We'll always be connected through our pup." Sinclair corrects me, "but yes, I suspect many of these bonds will fade in time."

My face falls, and I wish I had the same talent Sinclair does for masking my feelings. I'm about to pull away from him when he stops me. "There's something else, Ella. This may sound terrible to you, but there's something else you have to understand about shifter relationships."

"Yes?"

"It's in a she-wolf's nature to make her mate prove himself to her. She won't accept him until she's been convinced he's the one.

It's a sort of mating dance – like the wild hunt, she plays hard to get and he gives chase."

"Okay." I gulp, my tongue darting out to lick my lips. "So what does that mean?"

"It means that if you give me reason to think that you do want to be with me but you're holding yourself back for some reason, my wolf is going to react the same way he would to a she wolf drawing him into the hunt." Sinclair announces ominously.

"You're saying that you might stop respecting my wishes if you think I don't mean them?" I repeat, indignance rising up inside me.

"That's what being an alpha is all about. Doing what's best for your mate even when she doesn't agree." Sinclair confirms.

"But I'm not your mate." I say, amazed that I'm having to remind him of this for a second time tonight.

"We'll see, Ella." Sinclair purrs, his eyes glowing with barely restrained fire. "We'll see."

Chapter 61

Ella

"Wait what?!" I exclaim, certain that I must be hearing things. Sinclair can't have possibly just said what I think he did.

He smiles, tracing circles on the soft skin of my belly. "You heard me." He teases.

"Completely naked?" I gape, blushing at the idea alone. "Everyone? Even the children?"

“I’ve told you, shifters don’t associate nudity with sex the way that humans do. It’s our natural state.” Sinclair explains gently. “No one feels self conscious, because there’s nothing to be embarrassed about.”

I should have known something was up when he came in this afternoon and woke me from my nap, climbing into bed behind me and sliding his hand underneath the hem of my top so he could feel the baby. I’d whined at being disturbed, but cuddled closer to him anyway, stretching into his tender caresses like a sleepy kitten. Only once I was purring with contentment did he broach the subject he’d come to discuss.

The fourth night of the Solstice festival is apparently devoted to something called moonbathing. I’d hesitated over this idea when Aileen first showed me the schedule, but had been so distracted by the idea of the wild hunt and the masquerade ball that I hadn’t been able to focus on it. Now, however, I can’t focus on anything else. Sinclair has just explained that the moonbathing ritual involves stripping off one’s clothes and anointing our bodies with oil, then laying out in the full moon’s light. I’d been okay with this up until the point when Sinclair clarified that it would happen at a sacred stone circle – surrounded by other shifters.

“But... it’s also natural to be curious about other people’s bodies, doesn’t everyone stare? Doesn’t that bother you?” I squeak, thinking of all the times I’ve been uncomfortable beneath the male gaze when fully clothed, and not wanting to even imagine how much worse it would be naked.

“It doesn’t bother me to be studied or admired,” Sinclair shrugs, looking down at me intently. “But I can understand how that might be different if I was a human woman, and used to being looked at like an object. You have to realize that male wolves don’t disrespect she-wolves that way.”

“So when you were with Lydia, it didn’t bother you for your mate to be naked in front of other men?” I don’t think I would be so generous if the tables were turned, in fact I’m already thinking about all the she-wolves that will undoubtedly be checking out Sinclair and I do not like it.

“No shifter would be stupid enough to lay their eyes on the Alpha’s mate in the manner you’re thinking – not if they want to keep their heads connected to their bodies.” Sinclair assures me. “And if they’re envious, it’s no threat to me. In fact I enjoy having a partner others covet, it just goes to show I won the lottery, and reminds me to be the best mate I can, so that I’ll be worthy of her.”

I consider this for a moment. On one hand I'm very wary of any man who wants a partner they can show off like a trophy – that was exactly what Mike did and I know it's a far cry from being truly valued or respected. At the same time, Sinclair isn't talking about women the same way Mike used to. He doesn't want to show off his mate to make others feel jealous, or feel threatened if someone else glances her way. What's more, he associates envy with her intrinsic value, not a boost to his own ego or masculinity.

“Now,” Sinclair continues, a sharp edge in his voice now. “If they were to disrespect her, to sniff around her despite my claim, or set a single paw on her...” He growls wordlessly, sending shivers down my spine. “Now that would be another matter entirely.”

I snort when I see the menacing expression on his face. “Sometimes I get caught up thinking shifters are so far ahead of humans, and then you say things like that and I remember you're just big furry beasts wearing the guise of civility.”

Sinclair chuckles. “We all have our contradictions.”

“I don't.” I argue, notching my chin up defiantly.

“I beg to differ.” Sinclair replies warmly, his fingers dancing over my bare skin in increasingly sensuous patterns. “You're the fiercest little ball of mischief I've ever encountered, but you're also the sweetest thing I've ever seen,” He purrs, “or held...” His lips drop to my neck, just barely grazing them across my skin. “or tasted.”

“Hey, none of that.” I object, pushing his head away. “I don't need you getting me all worked up right before I go strip naked in front of a hundred strangers.” I admonish, my voice trailing off as the reality of the event ahead of us sets in.

“It's gonna be okay.” Sinclair promises. “Besides, all anyone's going to be doing is trying to figure out if you're showing yet. This is a royal baby, remember.” He says, tapping a finger on my belly button.

“Well they're going to be disappointed.” I sigh, though in truth it's been a few days since I stood in front of the mirror and glared at my middle, willing it to show signs of the life growing within.

“Are you sure about that?” Sinclair arches a brow. “This feels like a baby bump to me.”

I promptly push up onto my elbows so that I can look down at my stomach, even though sitting up puts my neck dangerously close to Sinclair's mouth again. I can almost feel

him thinking about stealing more kisses while I'm distracted. Ever since we admitted that we're attracted to each other, he's been more forward about showing me affection, which only makes it more difficult to resist my feelings. If only I didn't enjoy his touch so much, maybe then I could be more forceful about rebuffing his advances.

His oversized hand is sprawled over my tummy, keeping my shirt bunched up beneath my breasts. It's hard to see anything with his palm in the way, so he traces the outline of my womb with a featherlight touch. Sure enough I'm surprised to see the smallest of swellings just north of my pelvis. I suppose part of shifters' short gestation is seeing these changes much sooner than expected, but that scares me too. What if my body doesn't have enough time to adjust, to go through all the changes human mothers spend nine months manifesting.

I think Sinclair can sense my unease, because the next thing I know he's kissing my belly – once, twice, three times.

“I said no kisses.” I scold him, earning myself a low rumble in Sinclair's chest, and his green eyes flashing at my challenge.

“I'm kissing the baby.” He insists, a devious, wolfish grin on his face. “He likes it.”

“Oh sure.” I reply tartly, “blame it on the baby.”

“He does.” Sinclair repeats, kissing me again before slyly adding, “But then he likes it because it makes you happy.”

“You're incorrigible.” I roll my eyes, but I'm blushing too. And more than that, I'm amazed to think the tiny life growing inside me knows what I'm feeling this way. It didn't seem strange when the doctors told me he could sense my stress, but I suppose I attributed that to him being impacted by the physical symptoms of stress, not truly feeling my emotions. My heart both swells and tightens in my chest as I contemplate this idea, that we have a bond every bit as strong as Sinclair's, I just can't feel it.

Suddenly I'm crying, and Sinclair stops his teasing and crawls back up my body, clucking sympathetically. “What is it sweetheart?”

“Nothing, I'm just being silly.” I hiccup, shaking my head. “It's hormones, that's all.”

“Why don't you tell me, and then we can decide together if it's silly.” He replies, brushing the pads of his thumbs over my cheeks, caressing the tears away.

“I just wish I had a connection to him like you do.” I confess. “I wish I could sense what he’s feeling. I want you to be close with him, of course. I’m just... jealous, I suppose. You’ll always be the better parent, you’ll always know what he needs without asking, and I’ll be bumbling around blind in comparison.”

“That’s not silly at all.” Sinclair assures me. “It’s only natural that you should feel that way. But you’re wrong about something, Ella. You’ll have a bond with the baby every bit as strong as mine by the time you bring him into the world. Mothers have connections to their babies most fathers – even shifter fathers – can never have, because we don’t carry and deliver them. We can’t nourish them with our own bodies, we’re not the ones who sheltered and protected them in the first and most vulnerable months of their existence.”

“You promise it will be as strong as yours?” I ask, sniffing.

“I think you’re focusing on the idea of a bond too much.” Sinclair muses. “You have to remember that a connection isn’t the same as a relationship, Ella. All parents are bonded with their children, but some still have terrible relationships, just like everyone is bonded to their lover, but some couples are much happier than others.”

“I think it’s difficult because it’s just such an abstract idea.” I share, already feeling less blue. “I mean, you tell me something is magic and I’m automatically going to assume it’s more powerful than natural things.”

“But magic is part of nature.” Sinclair corrects me. “The Goddess created all of it at the same time. The difference is simply that you didn’t know about it.”

“Right.” I nod slowly, telling myself to keep this reminder at the forefront of my thoughts.

“Better?” Sinclair prompts, stroking my hair.

“Yes, thank you for making me talk about it.” I profess, feeling a strong urge to hug the big Alpha.

“Always.” He agrees, “Now get ready, we have some moon bathing to do.”

My eyes go wide. “Wait, I spoke too soon, I’m not better at all, I think I need to stay home and process this.”

Sinclair chuckles, “nice try, trouble. We leave in half an hour.” He leans down and kisses the tip of my nose before sliding from the bed, leaving me with a low purr. “And I, for one, can’t wait.”

Chapter 62

Sinclair

“This is the weirdest thing I’ve ever done!” Ella exclaims, shifting restlessly beside me. We’re just arrived at the festival, and though she’s only wearing a silk robe, she looks stunning. She’s also nearly beside herself with anxiety, and getting increasingly feisty the closer we get to the big event.

“Poor darling, you’re shaking.” I croon, pulling Ella into my arms and rubbing her back. She’s all sharp edges, stiff and grumbling unhappily into my chest, but snuggling into my warmth despite her grumpy mood.

“Of course I’m shaking, it’s freezing. I’m wearing next to nothing and it’s winter!!” She exclaims, gesturing to the snow falling around us. “How are we even supposed to do this ridiculous ritual without getting hypothermia!”

“First because wolves run much hotter than humans.” I answer, catching her hands and tucking them between our bodies so they’ll get warm too. “Second, because the stone circle is surrounded by thermal pools and the base is heated from below by hot springs. I promise you’ll be plenty warm. And if you’re not then there’s always body heat.”

I’m waggling my eyebrows suggestively, but Ella doesn’t laugh. She pouts, peeking up at me, “I thought you were going to respect my wishes.”

“I’m doing my best.” I share, “but it isn’t easy. Especially when you’re so beautifully responsive.”

This much is true, I might have an easier time respecting Ella’s boundaries if she didn’t react so openly and passionately to my advances. But the reality is that she’s obviously affected by me, and it’s hard not to feel encouraged when she melts into my arms like hot honey.

“That’s just my hormones.” Ella insists. “You have to listen to what I say, not what I do.”

“Ah, so ‘actions speak louder than words’ doesn’t count in your book.” I tease.

“That’s right.” Ella answers stiffly, “My body isn’t my own right now, it’s the baby’s. That means you have to take my word over my reactions.”

“Alright.” I agree. “But I hope you’ll give me a little slack when I slip up.”

“I thought being an Alpha was about always being in control.” Ella argues.

“Maybe,” I concede, chafing her chilled limbs with my warm hands. “But my wolf is in charge when it comes to mating, and he’s not nearly as patient as I am.”

“But there’s no mating here!” Ella objects, “In case you’ve forgotten, I’m human!” Her whispered words are barely audible even to my own ears, but I still glance around to ensure we can’t be overheard.

“I haven’t forgotten.” I answer. I wish I could. It seems if I’m not thinking about romancing Ella, I’m thinking about how vulnerable she is living among shifters. Even now, I’m painfully aware of how fragile she is in comparison, surrounded on all sides by vicious predators. The poor thing is still shivering and I’m worried she might have been right, without a wolf’s resilience to the elements, it might be too cold for her to participate. Though in truth, I think it’s only partly due to the weather. I suspect she’s trembling with apprehension as much as she is with cold.

Guilt washes over me, and for a moment I wonder if I’m doing a terrible thing putting Ella through all this. Not only these events that throw her so far out of her comfort zone and into a world she doesn’t yet understand, or even asking her to suffer through the cold and discomfort, but asking her to tell so many lies. Asking her to perform an elaborate fraud, to go against her own honest nature to deceive and trick people. I don’t believe it’s possible to corrupt Ella, or her life would have already done it, but it feels very hard to forgive myself for forcing her into this situation. In hindsight I can clearly see that’s what I did – it might have been her idea, but she’d felt like she had no other choice, fore I told her I would take her child away.

I know all the justifications for our scheme – avoiding a civil war, preventing a despot from taking the throne, saving countless lives. And there’s no way of justifying ending all this just to save one human some distress – yet I want to. I want to go back in time and tell Ella I will keep her and the baby a secret so that they’ll never be in danger from my

enemies, and never have to adopt this facade. I want to call off our arrangement so that she want shiver anymore. Now not only do I think my wolf is broken, I think I'm losing my mind as well.

“What?” Ella presses me sullenly, “Why are you looking at me that way?”

“I was thinking that when this is done we can go home and curl up in front of a warm fire, and then I'll rub your feet and feed you hot chocolate.” I answer.

“Why can't we just go home now? We've made an appearance and kissed for the cameras! We should just say I'm ill and make our apologies.” Her tone goes from exasperated and sharp, to sounding so small I might believe it belonged to a child. “I don't want to do this.”

“I know, baby.” I murmur, tucking her head to my chest and stroking her long, silky hair. “I promise we'll leave as soon as we're able.”

“But Dominic—” Ella is raising her voice now, and trying to pull away from me. I know she's only lashing out because she's feeling so much emotional turmoil. I'm sure the pregnancy hormones aren't helping, but it's clear she needs me to help ground her, to calm her down because she can't calm herself.

I tighten my hands on her, beginning to purr even as I rumble. “This is an important ritual.” I explain, in a tone that makes her visibly squirm. “I know you're cold and afraid Ella. Honestly, I would spare you this if I could – but missing this isn't like missing the feast. It would be seen as disrespect to the Goddess.”

Ella is struggling internally, her body responding to my purrs and my dominance, but her mind no doubt consumed with battling thoughts of duty and unhappiness. Her eyes begin to shine, and I fear she might start crying.

No, I hate it when she cries. My wolf complains, not that he needs to remind me. He whines like a pup any time Ella sheds so much as a single tear, even for silly reasons like eating all of her snack. I increase my purrs, and Ella glares at me. “That isn't fair, I don't want to be comforted right now.”

“Maybe you don't want it, but you need it.” I answer sternly, and Ella takes up a mutinous muttering.

“Ella, I’m going to take care of you. It will be over before you know it. I won’t make us stay a minute longer than we have to.”

She’s still glaring, but her plump lower lip is also trembling. “Fine.” She snaps, her voice thick with emotion. “But for the record, I don’t like you very much right now.”

“I know.” I smile, kissing her upturned mouth. I’m not the least bit surprised when she nips me, quickly sinking her little teeth into my lip and releasing them again just when I begin to feel the sting. My wolf growls deep in my chest, loving her fire but not about to let her get away with this. Ella trembles again, but in a very different way this time. Her demeanor is exactly that of a chastised she-wolf, reassured and excited by her mate’s strength.

“Behave.” I instruct, not bothering to soften my tone. The light in her eyes is impish now, rather than sad or frightened, and I’m pleased to see her cheeks flushed with color. “It’s about to begin.”

I lead Ella through the moonlit forest, following paths so familiar to me, yet completely new to Ella. Before long we’re crossing the bridges straddling steaming thermal pools, and crossing into the sacred space of the stone circle.

I pull my robe off, then reach for the belt at her waist. “Just look at me.” I advise, “Keep those gorgeous eyes on mine, and just pretend we’re all alone.”

Ella nods nervously, and I carefully uncinch her robe, pulling the garment from her body and baring her for all to see. I don’t take my eyes off her either, even as I’m handed the necessary oils by an attendant. I drip the slick liquid onto my fingers, then paint it onto Ella’s body. I deposit the sweet smelling substance on her neck, her temples, then use a different bottle for her wrists and palms – then finally I take the third oil, and trace the letters of my name over her heart.

I wish I could look down and watch the oil dribble down between her luscious breasts, to appreciate the beauty of her form, but she needs the eye contact more than I need to satisfy my lustful urges. “You’re doing so well, sweetheart.” I praise, handing her the bottles so that she can anoint my skin. Following my example, she applies the oils without taking her eyes away from mine, going up on her tiptoes to reach my temples.

When it’s done, we stretch out on the heated stone slab beneath our feet, and I pull Ella close, using my big body to block her from view from as many people as I can. Still she

doesn't take her eyes from mine, and I continue praising her, genuinely proud of how brave she's being.

We lie together under the moon until her eyes grow heavy, and I know it's time to leave.

When I wake the next morning, I'm unsurprised to be greeted with more headlines about us, though these are a far cry from the last breaking news in which we featured. Every last article is a veritable celebration of our mating, eagerly reporting that we're so in love that we couldn't take our eyes off one another.

I'm thrilled, but I know we're facing a far greater challenge tonight – the wild hunt has finally arrived.

Chapter 63

Ella

“How are you feeling?” Sinclair asks, standing in the doorway of my bedroom. The wild hunt is tonight, and I know he's not merely asking about my morning sickness or fatigue.

“Nervous.” I confess. “Do you think...” I trail off, blushing and unsure if I can actually speak the question I need to ask.

“What is it Ella?” He inquires, coming forward with an encouraging smile.

“Do you think I could see your wolf before we go tonight, just so that I'll recognize it when I see you?” I whisper, barely loud enough to hear myself, but knowing Sinclair's wolf ears will be more than capable of picking up on the sound. And so I won't be scared. I add silently in my head.

“Of course.” He chuckles, “That's a great idea. I should have thought of it myself.”

His powerful hands move to the buttons on his shirt, and I find myself taking a step back.

“What are you doing?”

“You wanted to see my wolf, I don't want to ruin this shirt.” He shrugs. “It's one of my favorites.”

“Right.” I breathe, “Right, of course.”

He continues stripping off his clothes, and I work hard to avert my gaze. So far I've been very successful in avoiding temptation by not looking at his body in these vulnerable moments, and I'm not about to change that now – on the day when it's more important than ever that we practice self control.

“Does it hurt, shifting?” I ask, staring at my fidgeting fingers.

“It does the first time.” Sinclair shares, “The first time is almost unbearable, it takes hours and hours, but once you've gotten it over with it happens fast as lightning, too quickly for you to feel the pain of your bones breaking and rearranging.”

“That sounds ghastly.” I feel suddenly lightheaded, “How old are you when you shift the first time?”

“It's a little different for everyone – most make the change when they go through puberty.” Sinclair informs me, pulling off his trousers.

Already I'm thinking of my baby – my son – eventually suffering through this sort of grisly shift, and I don't like it one bit. “What was yours like, was anyone with you?” I squeak.

“Mine was as painful as anyone else's. But my father was with me, he got me through it, just like I'll do for our son.” He states, a promise in his voice.

“Good.” I sigh, feeling relieved to know Sinclair will help guide our child through the process. I can imagine Henry was a very gentle and supportive presence for Sinclair, and I know he'll be the same. “I suppose... I probably wouldn't be allowed to help?”

Sinclair offers me a tender smile. “No sweet Ella. I'm afraid it would be much too dangerous.” He comes forward, taking my face in his oversized hands. This is probably the first time he's ever been unclothed when I'm not, and I'm amazed at how much stronger I feel with my own body covered. I never realized until now how vulnerable it is to be undressed and exposed when others are not, but Sinclair doesn't seem to mind one bit. He's still wielding the power in this room, and part of me resents his constant strength. “Now, do you want to talk, or do you want to meet my wolf?”

“Yes, sorry.” I flush.

“Don't apologize.” He murmurs, “and don't get close to me until after I've shifted, you don't want to be within reach of my claws when I make the transformation.”

I nod wordlessly, my pulse pounding in anticipation. Sinclair backs away from me, holding my gaze the same way he did last night at the stone circle. I keep my eyes on him, watching with horrified fascination as he ensures he's not near anything breakable, then disappears. There's a loud crack and the air seems to go blurry, I even feel a bit nauseous trying to keep track of the rapid movement. However when my eyes adjust and I'm able to take in the familiar room again, I see that where Sinclair was standing a moment before, now there is only a huge, black wolf with glowing green eyes.

I'm sure my eyes are as wide as saucers, and I feel my jaw going slack. "That's not a wolf that's a bear!" I blurt out, saying the first thought which came to my mind.

The wolf, who is much, much too large – far larger than any natural wolf and probably almost as tall as I am – gives me an affronted look, as if I've insulted him gravely.

"I'm sorry, not a bear!" I quickly amend, still trying to reconcile the fact that the beast in front of me is actually the man who spends every night wrapped around me like a very muscular heated blanket. "But how are you bigger as a wolf than you are as a man!"

He huffs and rolls his eyes, sitting on the rug and waiting patiently for me to recover from my shock.

"I mean honestly, I could ride you." I point out, my head filled with images of me mounted on his back like a particularly deadly variety of horse.

Suddenly Sinclair's expression goes so mischievous and heated that I don't need to hear him speak. I know exactly what he's thinking and his mind is clearly in the gutter. "Not like that! You know what I mean." I'm amazed that anyone could manage to be so suggestive without speaking a word, or even possessing human features. "I... what do I do, how do you communicate with other wolves when you're like this. Do you have mental links like you do with the baby?"

He nods, wagging his tail and astonishing me. I never imagined that the imposing Alpha would ever do something so very doglike, but then again his silly side always surprises me. Suddenly it seems positively hilarious that Dominic Sinclair is sitting in front of me with the squirmy energy of a puppy, and I realize that he's holding himself back from approaching me until I'm comfortable with this.

"Can – Can I touch you?" I inquire meekly.

The furry behemoth nods again, and though I don't know how I understand his reasoning, I know he's waiting for me to come to him. It takes a minute for me to find the courage to move my leadened feet, but I manage. I slowly cross the room, feeling terribly anxious to be approaching a creature out of the horror stories I grew up fearing, even though I know it's just Sinclair.

Up close he's even larger than I realized, still taller than me even seated. He looks as though he could snap me up in one bite, and my mind spins with mathematical equations, trying desperately to figure out how his mass increased so much. It defies logic.

You're overthinking it. It's magic – a man became a wolf but you're hung up on how big the wolf is?

"This is weird, this is so weird." I moan, ringing my hands as I close the distance between us. I hesitantly reach out towards him, sinking my fingers into his thick, downy fur. "Oh, you're really soft... I think this is the strangest thing that's ever happened to me."

The next thing I know, Sinclair has pounced, apparently no longer able to contain himself. He gently eases me to the ground despite the suddenness of his attack. He's standing over me then, licking my face and making me giggle and squeal as I try to push him away. Eventually he settles, laying his big head on my belly and pinning me to the floor. Soft purrs rumble in his chest, and I find myself sliding my hands back into his fur, massaging his head and ears and making him groan contentedly.

"You do know that if you crush this baby while it's still inside of me, you'll never get your heir!" I complain, amazed at how heavy his furry snout is.

Instead of removing it, Sinclair nudges his cold nose up under the hem of my top, resting his soft muzzle against my bare belly and peering up at me with those wolfish eyes. The cloth of my shirt rests gently over his snout, and his heated breath dances over my tender breasts, traveling through the tented material and fluttering over my skin. "Dominic, that tickles!"

The wolf makes a sound that resembles a laugh, and the next thing I know, Sinclair is a man again, though his head is still under my top and he's kissing my belly. "All right you," he says after a moment, pulling me up to a sitting position. "Now how are you feeling, still nervous?"

"Yes." I admit, "though not about your wolf."

“You’re ready for this, Ella.” Sinclair encourages. “You’re going to do beautifully. Just remember what I told you...”

“I know.” I sigh. “Don’t run when you catch me.”

“Good girl.” Sinclair praises, though he has no way of knowing the second half of this thought – the words still ringing in my head.

Unless I want you to run me down and make me yours. Unless I want you to claim me.

And now the only question is, will I be able to actually stop running when the time

Chapter 64

Ella

When we arrive at the edge of the forest where the ceremony is set to begin, I’m wearing a shimmering pearl-colored dress, which looks as if it’s been spun from pure moonlight. Its straps are so thin it doesn’t seem like they should be strong enough to hold up the flowing fabric, which plunges between my breasts, hugs my waist and then cascades out into a wide skirt with a graceful train. It’s completely inappropriate for the cold weather, but a cape of plush black furs billows down my back and Sinclair’s cozy heat is warming my left side. My shoulders are heavy with the weight of his arm, and I feel thankful the rough forest terrain made wearing high heels impossible.

We move through the crowds of reporters and admirers, pausing for photos and handshakes but not answering any questions.

The press coverage from the moon bathing ritual was truly phenomenal, almost fawning in its analysis, and the crowds are getting bigger every day. Everyone seems to want to glimpse us for themselves, and I’m beginning to feel more like a museum attraction than a person.

It’s hard to keep myself grounded when everyone around me is staring, jumping up and down yelling my name. This is business as usual for Sinclair, but I don’t think I’ll ever get used to it. I also don’t know if I want my child subjected to all this attention. “It won’t

always be like this, right?” I ask, cradling my tiny baby bump as we move past the crowds. “Surely it’s just the festival and how new our relationship is.”

“Things will calm down.” Sinclair agrees, his keen eyes not missing the way I try to shield our pup with my hands. “They’ll be excited about the baby too, but they’ll keep their distance. They know how protective new parents are, and as invasive as we can be about adult relationships, children are considered off limits.”

“Good.” I breathe, still frowning. “I don’t like it, but I’ll endure it as long as they leave the baby alone.”

“After the campaign is over we can pull you out of the spotlight.” Sinclair offers, “you’ll be a new mother, it would be perfectly reasonable for your public presence to be diminished.” Just then the wind shifts, and Sinclair scents the air, his muscles suddenly going very tense.

Right on cue, a snide voice sounds on our left, and a figure in white emerges from behind a tree. “What kind of Luna looks for excuses to get out of doing her job?” I don’t need to look to recognize the speaker – her tone is completely altered from when she helped me in the bathroom, but there’s no mistaking the nasal timbre of Lydia’s voice.

Before I can even begin to process her words or get a good look at her, Sinclair pushes my body behind his, taking up a defensive stance between me and his ex-wife. “Are you really so desperate to force yourself in where you’re not wanted, that you’ve been reduced to skulking around like a fox, Lydia?” A murmur moves through the gathered shifters, and I suspect calling a wolf a fox is something of an insult. Though I, as someone who has always liked foxes, can’t help but feel a bit offended on their behalf.

“It certainly took you long enough to sense me.” She complains, sounding more than a little bitter. “Are you really so preoccupied with your little pet that your wolf can’t keep track of his surroundings?”

I’m trying to move back around in front of Sinclair, but he holds me fast, his arm reaching behind his body to lock me against him in an iron grip. I feel a little growl bubble up in my chest, only to be reduced to a trembling mess when he growls back, leaving no room for argument. “I guess that goes to show how little you mean to my wolf these days.” Sinclair counters smoothly. “He doesn’t even notice you when you’re right in front of him.”

I'm trying to peek around Sinclair's burly arm, but I can only catch a flash of Lydia's outraged expression before her venomous tongue is back at it, "Well you might not want me here, Sinclair, but as the only she-wolf who bears your mark, it's my right to begin the hunt with you."

My slow brain scrambles to catch up, and I gradually understand that she's trying to take my place in the ceremony. She thinks that I don't have the right to participate because Sinclair and I haven't fully been mated, and suddenly I feel outraged myself.

How dare she try to take our place? How dare she try to take Sinclair from us? The little voice in my head is in a full on rage, and any logic I might have used to calm it – like the fact that Sinclair isn't ours in the first place, so it's impossible for him to be taken

– goes completely by the wayside.

I can't recall ever feeling jealous or possessive about Mike. Heartbroken yes, but when I learned he was cheating I didn't feel envy for Kate, only sorrow for myself and all those wasted years. But I feel jealous now. I feel a possessive fury unlike anything I've ever experienced. Something raw and primal is building up inside me, and I don't know how to identify it or reign it in. Is this the pup too? Staking its claim on its father? Or have I lost my mind?

"You're out of your head, Lyd–"

I surge forward, slipping out of Sinclair's grasp by ducking underneath his arms and rounding his big body in a fit of righteous indignation. I can feel Sinclair reaching for me again, but I pull myself up to my full height and shoot him a warning glare over my shoulder before giving Lydia the full force of my ire. "The only mark you bear is of the wolf you tricked into marrying you after you ran out on this pack. If you want to participate in the hunt, go home to him – or has he seen you for the snake you are and kicked you out?"

Lydia's eyes flash, and I wonder if I've hit too close to home. I also wonder if her new husband might have realized the same thing she did – that Sinclair was never sterile, so their inability to conceive was probably a problem with her. Would an Alpha reject a mate that couldn't give him pups? Is Lydia back here because she has nowhere else to go?

Stop empathizing! The voice in my head admonishes angrily, You can feel bad for her later, right now there's a battle to win!

Who are you?! I cry in return. What battle? I'm not going to publicly humiliate a woman who's struggling with fertility.

Struggling with fertility doesn't mean she isn't a conniving bitch. The voice replies. And she's trying to take Sinclair. He's mine.

Ours.

Before I can reply, Lydia snarls and I have to thrust a hand into Sinclair's chest to keep him from throwing my body behind his once more. "Better the mark of another than no mark at all. You don't even know what it truly means to be a mate." She snaps.

I press my palm to my belly again, drawing her attention to my unborn pup. "What stronger claim could there be than this miracle? I don't need Dominic's mark to know I belong to him – and I'm willing to wait for it until we can do it right, in a manner befitting a King and Queen." I declare, notching my chin up.

Lydia's expression flickered when I mentioned the pup, and again I felt a rush of sympathy for the other woman, but her eyes hardened and blazed when I called myself a queen. The shifters around us are whispering and muttering among themselves, many glaring at Lydia and grinning at me. I know I've done well when Sinclair presses his body flush to mine, his hands circling my waist from behind to help me cradle our pup. A satisfied purr rumbles in his chest as his lips move against my ear, "the baby likes it when Mommy's fierce." He shares, and my heart flip flops over hearing myself called Mommy for the first time. "And so do I." He praises.

Feeling a rush of confidence and an inexplicable knowing that I'm close to the kill, I continue, "And we both know that there are many more ways to claim a mate than with a bite." I say with a sultry grin, sliding one hand up and around the back of Sinclair's neck, encouraging his affection. I've never done anything so brazen in my life, except perhaps the other night at the bonfire... or in that damned dream. At the same time, it feels completely right that we should be fighting this battle together, and showing off our attraction for all to see.

Lydia takes one furious step towards me, and Sinclair emits a snarl so vicious that everyone around us cowers, Lydia included.

I'm the only one able to withstand the force of his Alpha authority, which works well for our purposes. Since no one knows I'm human, they'll all assume I'm truly Sinclair's equal – in spirit if not brute strength.

Lydia shudders and whimpers before turning tail and fleeing in the opposite direction. For some reason, I feel the strangest urge to chase after her, but Sinclair is holding me too tightly. "Not so fast feisty pants, we have more important things to do than chase after bitter exes." I have to crane my neck to look up at him, but his face is full of pride and anticipation as he announces. "It's time."

Chapter 65

Ella

It's all come down to this.

My mind reels as I stare into the dark forest. For weeks I feel like Sinclair and I have been trapped in the same pattern: flirting, holding ourselves back, slipping up and falling in too deep, then retreating. It's felt like two steps forward and one step back, but the reality is that those one steps have gradually brought us closer to this point. The wild hunt feels like a turning point for our relationship – a critical test to decide whether we become lovers or stay friends – if that's what you can call us.

I know it's up to me to decide. For all his affection, compliments and terms of endearment, Sinclair has promised to follow my lead when it comes to taking things to the next level. I appreciate his restraint, but there's also a part of me that wants him to take the decision out of my hands. It's just one more impulse this pup has given me that I can't even begin to understand. I've never wanted anyone to decide anything for me in my entire life, yet here I am agonizing over my desire for a man I barely know, wishing I didn't have to be responsible for once in my life.

I think that's the problem. The temptation is so powerful that I want to throw caution to the wind, but I know better. I know so much better. So why am I still debating this?

Because it's Sinclair. He's different. He belongs to us. The little voice in my head encourages.

I don't know what drugs you've been taking, but you really need to get a hold of yourself. I counter, feeling more certain now that my conscience has demonstrated just how insane this pregnancy is making us.

This is temporary. It will pass when I give birth. I can't run around writing checks that my heart won't be able to cash in a few months. Focus on the pup, focus on the future.

I look around at the other participants in the ceremony: other she-wolves dressed in gowns like my own, their mates glued to them like velcro in anticipation of the hunt. I'm sure Sinclair and I looked much the same a few moments ago, but now I've stepped forward to begin the ritual. Ethereal music fills the air, a nearby orchestra playing instruments I've never before seen, as drums and singing voices raise towards the full moon. Gooseflesh raises on my chilled skin, and for the first time since this journey began, I understand what Aileen meant when she said shifters can feel the Goddess's magic. I'm probably just imagining it, like someone who believes they've taken drugs and therefore acts intoxicated, but I could swear the very air feels different tonight.

I feel different tonight.

I close my eyes and raise my face towards the heavens, letting the strange sensations grow. Is it crazy to think I can actually feel the moon on my skin, or that the electricity pulsing through my veins is not merely my own excitement, but something more?

I can feel Sinclair's eyes on me, and I glance back at him as one of the attendants hands me a blazing lantern. Sinclair looks as though he's barely holding it together. He's wearing a fur cape like my own, but underneath he's completely shirtless, sporting only sleek black trousers and bare feet. His green eyes are glowing through the darkness, and I can see his claws and fangs extended. His wolf must be right at the surface, and I remember what he told me about his power being strongest tonight.

I won't be myself. He'd warned me. I'm not sure if he's fully lost himself yet, but I can feel the power rolling off of him in heady waves, at least I imagine I can. It must be so much more intense for the actual shifters. I find myself shivering and turning away before the voice in my head can tell me to go steal a kiss or immediately flee. Instead I take a deep breath and set off into the darkness, starting slowly as the music builds. Hundreds of floating lanterns are released into the sky as I disappear into the forest, and as soon as I'm out of sight, I increase my speed.

Sinclair made me promise not to run once he's caught me, but he didn't say anything about beforehand. I've never been a runner, but tonight nothing sounds better than racing through the trees and feeling the cold winter wind on my skin. The deep snow makes it difficult, but the golden light of my lantern casts a warm glow on the dense evergreen trees, and I race forward without hesitation.

I've been running for about five minutes, amazed that I don't feel even a little bit winded, when a piercing howl shatters the air.

For one astonishing moment my body stops dead, trembling and quaking as Sinclair's wolf calls to me. The sound paralyzes me, no doubt giving him a head start as he takes up his pursuit, but once it's over I'm able to carry on. At this point a true she-wolf would abandon the lantern and clothing to shift, but Sinclair promised me no one would notice I don't. All the other wolves are much more concerned with their own hunts tonight, and they won't even enter the forest until Sinclair howls his victory once I'm caught.

I can still hear the distant music, and adrenaline and exhilaration flood my form as I continue running. I'm grinning so wide my cheeks hurt, and actually on the verge of giggling. Why haven't I ever run in the forest before? I had no idea what I was missing out on.

Sinclair howls again, and again I'm forced to stop until the shuddering need coursing through my body passes. This time I understand why I'm shivering and shaking this way, because the mere sound set my body alight. He might as well have been touching me, bringing all of my neglected nerve endings to life the way only he can. I'm beginning to really dislike his howls. I can't let him catch me, if he keeps howling he'll catch me. It isn't fair. The voice in my head wines, throwing off the oppressive weight of his power to continue our flight.

Run, just run. I answer, not knowing where this is coming from. A few minutes ago I was determined to let Sinclair catch me, but now that seems impossible. It's not even an option. I don't want to be caught. I just want to keep running like this forever. I've never felt so free.

Who is Sinclair to stop us? My conscience inquires. He's not the boss of us, I'm never going to stop running and I don't care what he says.

Yes. I think in agreement. You're right, you're so right. We're never going to stop.

Another howl breaks the air, and I prepare myself to halt and battle the call, but for some reason my body doesn't respond this time. It's as if the third howl has no impact on me at all. Surely I haven't become immune? Am I so far away now that it can't affect me? That doesn't make any sense, he's ten times faster than I am – he's got to be closing the distance with every minute.

I'm still pondering this when I hear a distant growl, and it occurs to me that the third howl was a higher pitch than the first two. Is that supposed to mean something? Is he closing in on me? Was that the victory howl?

I cock my ears to the forest behind me, and sure enough I hear more than just music and owl songs. I expect the steady loping of a gargantuan wolf, but the air is muddled with too many noises – distant snarls and strange crashes, whimpers and whines. I thought the others wouldn't start the hunt until our part was finished? I think, a bolt of fear slicing through me. And that doesn't sound like sex.

In my periphery I think I glimpse a flash of movement, but then an identical flash happens on my other side. I start to whip my head back and forth, trying to get a hold of what I saw. Unfortunately I can't do this and keep my eyes on the path in front of me. I have to choose: look for dangers in my surroundings, or make sure I have an escape route.

The voice in my head isn't just urging me to run for fun now, but with the understanding that something is very wrong here.

Finally I hear the steady thud of a wolf on my trail, his paws crashing and crunching in the dense snow much more swiftly than my own clumsy feet.

But when another howl sounds in the distance, once that does nothing to summon my desire but seems to scream at me to run for my life, I realize: The wolf behind me isn't Sinclair, and he isn't alone.

Chapter 66

Ella

When I realized I was being chased, I threw off my cape and veered off in another direction, hoping that the wolves weren't close enough to see me yet. If I'm lucky maybe I can throw them off my trail, if only for a moment. I throw down the lantern too. The

moonlight is so bright that I can see the forest well enough, and the snow is so deep that I don't have to worry about trodding on rocks or sticks.

I take up the skirts of my dress in both hands, running as fast as I can – faster than I've ever run before. I see a narrow creek on my right, a steady stream of water flowing along the banks, releasing steam into the air. I realize the stream must be thermal, like the pools around the stone circle. I momentarily debate jumping into the waters, both craving the warmth and knowing the water will disguise my scent.

But what if I have to get back out into the snow? I fret. I could die from hypothermia faster than the wolves could catch me.

I don't think so. The voice in my head answers. The wolves will catch you first unless you find a way to throw them off. It's not even like you can climb a tree – they can shift and climb true.

You better be right about this. I moan internally, jumping down into the streambed. The water comes up to my waist, and warmth quickly seeps through my dress. I dive beneath the surface, knowing I'll be faster swimming than running. I don't pause to try and track my pursuers, I simply go as fast as I can, praying this crazy plan will have worked – praying that Sinclair is out there somewhere, coming to help me.

I hate being dependent on anyone else and I hate feeling helpless, but I know that's exactly what I am in this situation. I'm at the mercy of these wolves and Sinclair's swiftness, and that would hurt badly enough even without knowing my weakness is threatening my baby's life as well.

I swim until the water becomes too shallow, jumping back into the snow and taking off again. I hear a roar behind me, and I know I've failed. I didn't throw them off at all, I probably just kept them at bay a while. I scan the forest ahead of me, searching for anything that might help me. Belatedly I realize I should have kept my lantern and set the bastards on fire, but then hindsight is always 20/20.

Cursing myself, I zero in on some boulders, catching sight of a narrow crevice between the huge stones. I know it's my only chance. For once being tiny might help me, but only if the wolves aren't strong enough to break through rock. A month ago I would have thought this was a given, but now I'm not so sure.

I wedge my way into the crevice just in time, for now sooner have I wriggled into the tight space that a huge weight crashes into the rock. Snarls and growls surround me, and clawed paws begin scrabbling at the opening in the rocks, trying to make purchase on my skin and drag me out.

The only piece of dignity I can boast is that I don't wet myself, but I certainly whimper and whine like a baby. I'm sobbing with terror, wishing I'd never agreed to this stupid ritual.

This isn't the first time I've thought I was going to die, but this time it matters a lot more. This time it won't only be my life that's lost. I might be able to come to terms with my own end, but I can't bear the thought of my baby dying before it's even had the chance to be born.

"Please," I pray, knowing the Goddess probably won't care about me, but hoping she'll care about my son. "Please help us."

Sinclair

She's running. My wolf howls with delight.

Of course she's running. I think amusedly, That's the whole point.

No, I mean she's not going to stop. My wolf clarifies, loping around in my head. Mine, she's finally mine!

It's taken all my willpower to wait the full five minutes to give my mischievous little human her head start, and as I prepare to shift, I wonder if my wolf knows something I don't. Surely he's just getting ahead of himself. We won't know what Ella decides until we catch up to her, but he seems to think this is a done deal.

I'd known there was a chance Ella would disobey my instructions and run from me tonight, and my inner wolf had certainly prayed she'd give me the excuse to finally make her mine, but I still feel anxious about the situation. I'd much rather take Ella to bed when I'm in full control, and I know as soon as I shift that will be out the window. At the same time, I warned Ella – I did my part and left the decision in her hands.

I know my reluctance and worry will disappear as soon as I give my wolf free reign, so I give him one last order before transforming. We have to be gentle.

He snarls in reply, as if affronted I might think he'd forget. After all, his job is just to catch her, all the rest comes after I've shifted back again. Even so, I know from experience that the haze of the solstice leaves him largely in control, and I won't take any risks

– not with Ella.

With a sudden blur and a loud crack, I transform, only pausing to howl before I take off into the night. The howl is mostly for show

– Ella might hear it, but she won't feel it the way a she-wolf does. She won't be temporarily frozen in place, struggling to fight my power over her, my demand that she answer my call. She won't understand that this is her first chance to submit, that raising her own voice into the air would be to accept me as her mate even before I've caught her.

I pick up Ella's scent and her tracks instantly, a thrill of excitement pulsing through my body as I think about everything I'm going to do once I've caught her. Will she protect herself like she should and stop running, or will she provoke me? Does she want to be with me as badly as I want to be with her? Will her base instincts make her surrender to lust, despite her humanity? Either way I'm going to take her home and spoil her rotten for doing so well with Lydia tonight, but the real question is how much fun we get to have first.

With the magic in the air tonight, I wonder why we've been fighting this so hard. I know all the reasons of course, but under the moon and the stars they all seem so silly. I don't care that Ella isn't a wolf, and I don't care that we've started out on a lie. I just want her.

I howl again, but soon after I catch the scent of other wolves; wolves that shouldn't be anywhere near these forests, especially not tonight. I immediately recognize one, remembering his scent from the alley behind the club where Ella was attacked. My wolf snarls at the mere memory and as much as I want to attack, I have to figure out how many there are, as well as where they're located.

I scent the air again, cocking my ears for more sounds and scanning the dense trees. Fury and fear crash into me when I realize there are at least half a dozen wolves in the woods with Ella and I, and that can only mean one thing: The Prince has chosen the hunt to make his next assassination attempt, only this time, I think he's targeting Ella and I both.

There are four rogues tracking me, but the other two are far ahead. I know instinctively that they've gone after Ella. They must have been in the forest waiting for us already, and now my sweet human and my pup might pay the price for my distraction.

Maybe Lydia was right – I've been so caught up in her that I've gotten sloppy.

Or maybe Linda was part of it – she certainly helped distract you. My wolf suggests viciously.

She might be conniving, but I don't believe that of her. After all, if I'm dead she can't be queen. And in all honesty, the failure would still be mine even if she was plotting against me. Like it or not, I've missed threats brewing right under my nose. It's the canal attack all over again, only this time it's a thousand times worse. I'll never forgive myself if anything happens to Ella and the baby – never!

I have to decide quickly. Do I dispatch the wolves nearest to me so I can run down Ella's attackers without added risk, or do I go straight to Ella and face them all at once. Four is certainly easier to defeat than six, but even one wolf against Ella is too much. I have to reach her before they can harm her. If I pause to fight my own attackers, they could easily kill her.

Unfortunately the rogues seem to understand this too. I'm sprinting ahead, racing towards Ella with every bit of strength and endurance I possess, when a huge red wolf barrels into me from the side.

Chapter 67

Sinclair

The rogues aren't as smart as they think they are. Their only chance would have been to attack me all at once. Instead they try to lunge at me two at a time, giving each other time to rest and rebound in between attacks. At first – the first five seconds that is

– it works. The red wolf crashes into my side while a big gray beta slams into my right. Then the other two charge me, but as soon as I've seen what they're about – I adapt.

The next time a wolf lunges for me I meet him head on, snatching his neck between my jaws and violently ripping into him with my fangs. As soon as he falls I turn on the other,

slashing at the other wolves with my front and hind legs while my mouth rips the next attacker limb from limb. I've tasted their blood now, and my worry for Ella and the baby is growing stronger with every moment that passes.

These four would have been outmatched with me on a good day, but the Prince was an idiot to send them on the Solstice, and he was certainly a fool to have them attack my mate at the same time. Normal wolves can do extraordinary things to protect their families – and I'm no ordinary wolf.

Within minutes their bodies are scattered around me, and I don't feel the slightest bit of remorse for killing them. These wolves are probably some of the same ones responsible for the attack at the canal, and while I might forgive an attack on me, I will never forgive an attack on my pack or the woman they believe is my mate.

Even if I was in a forgiving mood, I can't afford to let them get word back to the Prince. The wolves after Ella will know she hasn't shifted and they probably already communicated that with their friends. They'll realize that Ella isn't truly a she-wolf, and that secret is certainly going to die with them.

I sprint through the forest towards Ella and the other rogues. When I find Ella's abandoned coat and realize she's tried to lay a false trail I'm impressed, and when I realize she's gone into the stream I'm both proud and terrified. I can hear snarling in the distance, which means she's still alive. But how long has she been out of the water, and what have they done to her?

Finally I reach the boulders where Ella has taken refuge. The rogues are so busy clawing impotently at the rocks that they don't even notice my arrival. I thought I would be relieved to find Ella alive – and I am – but nothing prepared me for the primal fury I would feel actually seeing these wolves go after my sweet little human. The sounds of her cries egg me on, making me roar out my wrath so that the bastards will get away from her.

My vision turns to a red haze, and I don't even remember killing the rogues. One moment there's nothing but the blood roaring in my ears and the taste of blood on my fangs, and the next I'm opening my eyes to a scene of utter carnage. I can't recall ever inflicting so much damage on an enemy, I've literally torn them to shreds, and only too late do I consider that Ella will have just listened to all of that.

She's still whimpering and crying, and I can hear her teeth chattering as well. Cursing myself, I shift back into my human form and use some snow to wash the blood from my face and limbs. Trying to shake off the violence, I go to kneel in front of the tiny cave into which Ella has forced herself. "Ella?"

A small whine meets my ears, and I try to steady my heaving breath. "It's alright, little one." I promise. "They're gone. They can't hurt you."

I listen for sounds of movement, and I remember the way she went into shock after the first attack. My Goddess, I think bitterly.

Only a month together and there's already been more than one attack. Some protector I am.

"Can you come out to me, Ella?" I ask gently, wishing I could force my way in there with her. I can smell her blood, though it isn't as strong as the rogue's. Of course, that's not saying much, all the blood that was once inside them is now out, but it doesn't smell like Ella is bleeding badly.

Yet she doesn't move, and fresh panic lances through me – she could have broken bones or frostbite and I wouldn't smell a thing. "Are you hurt? How long have you been out of the water?"

Still there's nothing, and I'm becoming increasingly afraid I'm going to have to break through the rocks to reach her. I begin to purr, hoping this will break through her shock enough to lure her out of hiding. "You did so well evading them and finding a hiding place, sweetheart." I praise. "You gave me time to reach you, but now you have to help me and come out so I can take care of you."

Bending down, I peer into the crevice, wondering if she might take my hand and let me pull her out. When I finally see her, however, I know she isn't in any state to help me. Her beautiful eyes are clenched tightly shut, tears streaming down her cheeks as she clamps her hands over her ears, rocking back and forth in the small space. I doubt she can hear me, and I have a feeling she wouldn't see me even if she opened her eyes.

Ella's arms are covered in defensive wounds where she must have been shielding herself from the attacker's arms reaching in after her, and I immediately know reaching in myself will only frighten her more. I purr more loudly, and Ella's body seems to jolt, but just as quickly she doubles down, as if she's trying to block out the sensations – as if she doesn't

trust them. I never knew my heart could break just having someone refuse my comfort, but not being able to reach Ella now, when she needs me most, hurts more than I could have imagined.

“Okay, baby.” I decide, wishing there was any other way, “I wish I could let you stay here until you’re ready to come out, but it’s too cold.” I sigh. “I’m going to have to break through the rocks.”

I know she can’t hear me, but I continue talking to her in the hopes that she might come back to herself and understand.

She doesn’t.

Instead I place both of my hands on either side of the break in the boulders, and I summon all of my strength to force them apart.

It doesn’t happen immediately, but I think of Ella and our baby being trapped in these rocks forever, and I channel all of my power into destroying her makeshift fortress. A thunderous crack fills the air as they split in two, and I snatch Ella out of the cave before any sediment can fall on her.

The moment I lay a hand on Ella her eye’s snap open, but there’s no recognition in her brilliant irises. Instead sharp, acrid fear pours out of her, and she thrashes against my hold, trying to break free. I wrap my arms tightly around her small body, but Ella fights me like a wildcat, kicking, hitting, scratching and biting for all she’s worth. It’s amazing how difficult it is to keep hold of her, and if it weren’t so horrible I would be proud of the fight she’s putting up.

“Shhh, Ella, it’s alright. You’re safe. You’re safe now.” However her sightless eyes and desperate cries make me think this isn’t the first time she’s fought this way, and I find myself holding back tears as I finally dig my fingers into a pressure point at the base of her throat, stealing her consciousness.

Little by little, Ella fades into a forced sleep, her body finally going limp in my arms. When it’s over I slump onto the ground, gathering her precious form in my lap and pressing my hand to her belly. Our babe is whole and unharmed, but severely distressed. I try to send waves of comfort through our bond, beginning to purr again, but I think he can feel my own guilt and misery. He settles slightly, but pulses of anxiety continue to

surge through our bond, as well as flashes of the fear and anguish Ella felt during the attack.

I don't stay there long, too worried about Ella catching hypothermia to give into my own body's demands for rest. However for the moment that I do remain, I wonder how it ever came to this: Naked, slumped on the ground surrounded by dead bodies, cradling the mother of my child in my arms and weeping my apologies into her neck.

I have to get her home. I have to make sure she's alright. But as soon as I know Ella and the baby are okay, I'm going to find and kill the person responsible for this.

Chapter 68

Sinclair

"Dominic?" My beta, Hugo, stands behind me, watching me with a worried expression. "We need you in the war room."

"I want to be here when she wakes up." I insist, keeping my gaze locked on Ella. She's asleep in my bed, her small body curled beneath the covers. Her arms are bandaged from shoulder to fingertip, and bruises dot her fair skin in too many places to count.

Guilt ties my insides into knots just looking at them – some of those bruises were my doing, the results of my efforts to restrain her. Ella had remained unconscious as I carried her out of the forest, but when she woke, she fought me as hard as ever. The doctor was forced to give her a strong dose of a sleeping draft in order to treat her wounds, though he promised the potion would help break her shock.

"I understand, but we're still cleaning up the scene and we need to make sure no one finds out about this." Hugo sighs. It was thanks to Ella's quick thinking and endurance that the attack happened so deep in the forest, far deeper than other couples would be running on the hunt.

I was able to evacuate her on the opposite side of the park, free from the prying eyes of the pack or the media, and my men had immediately rushed in to clean up the bodies before they could be discovered. "Until we can prove the prince was behind it, rogue attacks will just make you look weak."

“I am weak.” I state hoarsely, wallowing in more than a small amount of self-pity and loathing. “It’s my fault. I didn’t see them coming. I knew the Prince was plotting against us and I still didn’t see them coming.”

“That isn’t fair Dom.” Hugo growls, his voice very stern. “You can only prepare for so much and none of us can foresee the future.

I’m sure Ella doesn’t blame you.”

“Well she should.” I bite back, emotion clogging my throat. “You know, she was so traumatized she couldn’t even recognize me?

That our baby was beside itself after weathering all her fear?”

“I know.” Hugo confirms grimly. “But she’s heavily sedated. It will be some time before she wakes, and if you want to make her safe, then the best thing you can do for her is to come to the war room and deal with the fallout. Help us strategize against the Prince. We’ll place extra guards at her door.”

“Not at her door.” I correct, seeing the sense of his words even though I hate hearing logic at the moment. “I want them posted in here with her. And I’ll come to the war room, but there’s something I have to do first.”

“Dominic –”

“If anyone has an inside track on the Prince’s plans, it’s my brother.” I interrupt, scrubbing a hand over my face. “We need intel if we’re going to effectively strategize – and he has it.”

“Alright.” Hugo agrees. “Just try not to lose your temper. Murdering your brother isn’t the kind of PR we need right now.”

I huff a humorless laugh, “Spoil sport.”

The sun is rising over the mountains as I pull into Roger’s driveway, taking measured breaths and conducting silent counting exercises to try and stay calm. In my current mood it wouldn’t take much provocation for me to kill anyone who crosses my path, and Roger is more infuriating than most.

I slide from the car and stride up the garden path, urging my wolf to settle. No violence. Violence is bad. Just think how disappointed Ella would be. I know it's ironic that I'm urging myself not to resort to violence after the slaughter I committed last night, but that was different. I didn't have a choice then – I do now.

The door swings open soon after I knock, and Roger's surprised face appears. He looks so genuinely shocked to see me, I actually contemplate whether he might not have been involved in the attack. Then again, my brother has always been a good actor.

“Dominic, to what do I owe the pleasure?” He drawls, making it clear that my visit is anything but pleasurable.

I push past him, knocking into his shoulder and forcing him back from the doorway as I go. “Were you involved?” I demand, my voice little more than a growl, “Did you know what he was planning?”

Roger blinks, “what are you talking about?”

“Don't play dumb with me, Roger.” I scowl, “I know you've been working with the Prince.”

He offers me a humorless laugh. “You're being paranoid, Dom.”

“Bull,” I snap, “You expect me to believe you just happened to turn up in the same back alley where Ella was being attacked in the middle of the night by coincidence? Or that the Prince mysteriously discovered I haven't claimed Ella when you're the only person who has that information?”

“I think you're forgetting all your staff – your guards, your doctors, Hugo and Aileen.” Roger counters smoothly.

“My people are loyal – you are the only person who knew who also has a vendetta against me.” I combat.

“That you know of.” He intones ominously.

“Ella was almost killed last night.” I thunder, “I understand you hating me, but how could you be so cruel to an innocent she-wolf!”

“Wait,” Roger protests, visibly paling. “Back up, what happened last night?”

“Stop pretending you don’t know!” The words burst from my chest in a vicious snarl, and I just barely hold onto my temper. Use your words Dominic! “I suppose you ran in to protect her the first time to try and earn her trust, but when that didn’t work you decided to just sacrifice her to the rogues.”

“I don’t have any idea what you’re talking about!” Roger shouts back, losing his own temper. “On my life, Dominic, I had no idea there had been a second attack!”

“Why should I believe you?” I grumble, clenching and unclenching my fists.

Roger raises his hands, his mouth a thin line. To my surprise, he seems genuinely shaken, and I wonder if I underestimated his interest in Ella. “Look, I admit I knew about the first attack in advance. The Prince planned on killing her outright, but I thought saving her might get me some leverage with her. I... I thought if she trusted me I could convince her to leave you.”

“What, so you could have her for yourself?” I bite, fighting the urge to reel back. I’ve never known Roger to admit any of his misdeeds. He must truly like Ella.

“No.” Roger rolls his eyes, “Just so you would lose the campaign. And yes, I told the Prince she hadn’t been claimed, but I swear on my life, I was never going to let him hurt her. I didn’t know about last night.”

“Do you really despise me so much?” I grind out, “That you would rather a tyrant take over the realm just to spite me? Do you have no concept of the damage he’ll do if he wins? The atrocities he’ll inflict?”

Roger’s face closes off, and I wonder if he truly was so blinded by his resentment of me that he never considered the consequences of his schemes. “I just wanted to hurt you Dom. I admit I was being selfish.”

“Well I’ve got news for you,” I declare ferociously. “I plan on winning this campaign, and you can be with me or against me. But you need to decide, because if you continue to make yourself my enemy, I’m going to treat you as complicit to the Prince’s crimes.” Pacing I let my wolf flash in my eyes. “Further, if anything happens to Ella I will hold you personally responsible – and I’m not talking exile, brother.”

“Is she okay?” He gulps.

“Physically, she’ll heal.” I respond, trying to keep the emotional from my voice. “I’m not so sure if she’ll be okay mentally.”

He flinches, and I wonder if he really does care for her. “Are you going to tell her what I did?”

“I should.” I answer gruffly, “But she’s been through enough already.” I start to turn away, before changing my mind and whirling back to face him, “You know she actually defended you to me? She feels for you, even though you’ve done nothing but try to hurt and manipulate her.”

Roger’s face draws tight, and I see a glimmer of something akin to shame on his features. “I didn’t know.”

“That’s how good she is. She’d be your ally if you let her.” I explain, “And instead you chose to terrorize her.”

“I’m sorry.” Roger professes, ashen-faced. “I know she’s good. I saw that in her from the beginning. I think that’s part of why I was so angry when you found her. You don’t deserve someone so pure.”

“It’s not my fault I was born stronger, Roger!” I state simply, disgusted at how broken our relationship has become over things that are not my fault. “Or that Mom sacrificed herself for me.”

He clears his throat, looking down at the ground. “It felt better, to blame you...” He confesses slowly, “Than to believe it was all for nothing.”

I’m both grief stricken and amazed to hear him speak this way. We’ve never connected like this before, and I know Ella is the reason we are now. “Well if you want to make it up to us, you can go back to the Prince and find out what he’s planning next.”

Roger raises his chin, looking thoughtful. “You want me to be a double agent?”

“It’s not about what I want. It’s about whether you want to let a madman take over the Kingdom. It’s about whether you want Ella and your nephew to live or die.”

“Alright.” He nods. “I’ll do it.”

Chapter 69

Sinclair

It's mid-morning by the time I leave Roger's house, and I dial Cora's phone number, both because she needs to know about what happened, and because I need help caring for Ella. Despite the doctor's promises, I'm worried that Ella won't recover as quickly as he's predicting and if anyone knows what to expect, her sister surely must.

"Mr Sinclair?" She sounds uncertain as she answers, as if she suspects her caller ID might be lying to her.

"Good morning, Cora." I greet her, taking a deep breath. "I'm sorry to disturb you when you're at work, but I'm calling with some bad news."

I can feel the anxiety in her sharp intake of breath, and worry imbues her soft voice, "Is Ella okay? Is the baby?"

"They're both at home resting." I share, hoping this will assuage the worst of her fears. "But there was another attack last night."

"Another one?" Cora squeaks, indignation bleeding into her voice as she continues. "I thought you were supposed to be this all powerful Alpha? You're supposed to be keeping her safe! My sister has known you for a month and she's already had people trying to kill her twice!"

I understand her outrage, and I agree with it completely. "I know. You have every right to be upset with me. I'm not very happy with myself right now... I failed her." I confess, exhaling heavily. "I'm not turning out to be a very good father so far."

"I..." Cora doesn't seem to know what to make of this. "Tsk," She clears her throat. "Well is she alright? Does she need anything?"

"She's a bit scraped up, but I'm afraid the worst damage was psychological. It wasn't like last time. She... she didn't recognize me afterwards." I wonder if the human can hear how upsetting I find this particular detail, but when she remains silent I forge on.

"She's in a deep state of shock – the doctor used the word dissociative, like she completely disconnected from her body to protect her mind."

Cora swears, but she doesn't sound surprised. "I'll leave work right now." She offers, "I can be there within a half hour."

"Wait." I advise, "She's been sedated and I'm not sure when she'll wake up." For a moment I debate whether or not I should voice my next thought. Ella hasn't spoken to me much about her childhood, but I know that she feels very protective of her sister.

Moreover, I remember the way she acted after the attack in the alley, refusing to show her upset to Cora, insisting she was fine.

"And... I don't want to sound insensitive because I know you love Ella and want to be with her, but I'm afraid if you're there she'll be so focused on not worrying you, that she'll try to pretend like nothing happened and ignore her own wellbeing."

Cora thinks about this for a minute. "You're probably right about that. Ella has always been the caretaker... she really doesn't know how to deal with having the tables turned on her."

"So I've learned." I muse aloud. "So I think it would be best to give it a couple of days."

"Alright." Cora agrees, "But I can still help you. I know all her creature comforts, the things that soothe her best. I can send you a list."

"That would be wonderful." I express honestly, thankful I decided to make this call before Ella wakes. By the time she returns to consciousness I can have all her favorite things already on hand and ready to comfort her.

"But Sinclair—" Cora interrupts my thoughts.

"Please call me Dominic, Cora." I correct gently.

"Dominic," She repeats patiently. "It's not my place to tell you the details... but I think you should know,"

"Yes?" I prompt her, having a dreadful premonition that I don't want to hear whatever it is she's about to say.

"These attacks aren't the first traumas Ella has endured at the hands of men." She explains vaguely, and I both want to demand further explanations and forbid her from saying more. "She went through a lot when we were still children... she endured some of

it to protect me and the other kids.” Cora trails off for a moment, sounding positively miserable. My mind immediately floods with horrible images of Ella, even more sweet and innocent than she is now, suffering at the hands of the adults meant to care for her.

“You need to be prepared that she won’t just be dealing with the trauma of the attacks when she wakes – but all the bad memories they’ll have dredged up.”

“That’s why you weren’t surprised... when I told you she dissociated.” I guess, hating every word of this conversation. “You’ve seen this before.”

“Yes.” Cora confirms, sounding remorseful. “But you’re not wrong either. She wants to protect the people she cares about even when she’s in no state to do so.”

Something we have in common. I think bitterly.

“I suppose it’s two sides of the same coin.” I say instead. “Whether she’s doing it to protect herself from the pain or put on a brave face for someone else, it’s still repressing the bad feelings.”

“Oh.” Cora murmurs, in the tone of someone having an epiphany.

“What?” I inquire, not liking this one bit.

“Well when you put it that way... I wonder if maybe we’re wrong about it being for someone else.” Cora shares. “I mean maybe that’s how it started, but at the end of the day it still means she never learned how to cope with these things.”

A wave of understanding crashes into me. If Ella has only ever repressed the bad things in her life, it won’t matter if her sister is there or not, she’ll try to do the same with this – because it’s all she knows. Only now do I realize that Ella didn’t just pretend she was fine with Cora after the first attack. She might have come to me for safety, but she was a hollow shell as I tended her wounds, and when I encouraged her to share her feelings she distracted me with an argument. She never even cried about the attack, only my deception.

Ffuuuueckk. I think, furious with myself for missing this, for letting the wiley minx outwit me.

“So what do I do?” I ask, hoping Cora will have the answer.

“Well I’ve never been able to refuse Ella anything when she’s hurting.” Cora remarks, sounding disheartened, “Especially not when it’s my fault. Which means I’ve never called out her avoidance, I’ve just... well, I think I’ve enabled her – letting her tell me what she wants and never questioning or pushing back on whether it’s healthy.”

It seems like Cora and I have more in common than I realized. It also seems she’s sharper than I gave her credit for, as I’m receiving her message loud and clear. I might be blaming myself for putting Ella in danger, but I can’t let that guilt me into coddling her. “But you’re an Alpha.” She elaborates. “So maybe you’ll be able to do what I never could – and not let her get away with pretending everything is fine.”

“You can count on it.” I nod, taking this mission to heart. Ella is my responsibility, and it’s in my blood to take care of my pack.

She might be human, but Ella is pack now, and I know her in some ways her sister certainly doesn’t. I also know a thing or two about helping stubborn she-wolves find catharsis – and from what I’ve seen, Ella will be no different.

“Thank you for telling me, Cora.” I profess genuinely. “And thank you for the advice. I’ll call you as soon as Ella is ready for visitors.”

“Good luck.” Cora offers, “and just let me know if you need anything else.”

“I will.” Hanging up, I realize that talking with Ella’s sister has completely changed my expectations for what the next few hours hold. I was prepared for Ella to wake up in another fog or to come home to a basket case, but if the doctor is right and she’s lucid – I’ll probably be dealing with one very obstinate little human in total denial.

When Cora’s email hits my inbox, listing out all of Ella’s favorite foods, music, films, and amenities, I make a detour to the store.

Stocking up on candles, essential oils, bubble bath, fancy scrubs and masks, dark chocolate, flowers and various groceries, I plan out exactly how I’ll set up my rooms once I get home. I’m hoping I can get everything done before Ella wakes, and also praying we’re wrong about Ella’s propensity to bury her traumas.

However I know my prayers haven’t been answered as soon as I walk into my rooms and discover that Ella is not only wide awake, but standing in the middle of the room instructing her dressmaker to sew sleeves onto her ballgown to cover her bandages. In the

midst of all the excitement I actually forgot the masquerade was tonight – but Ella, it seems, did not.

She smiles at me in greeting, but I can only glare in return. “What in the Goddess’s name do you think you’re doing?”

Chapter 70

Ella

I woke up in a thick haze of confusion, feeling as though I’ve been run over by a truck, but not remembering why. Muscles I didn’t even know I possessed are screaming at me, demanding ice packs and pain killers, and I have a thumping headache. For a moment I wonder if I somehow have a hangover, recalling the groggy morning afters I used to experience following nights out on the town.

Slowly the memories trickled in: the wild hunt taking a horrible turn; the rogue wolves chasing me in the forest; my near scrape with hypothermia; and fighting for my life while knowing it will all be over once they catch me. When I reach the point where I’m reliving being trapped in the boulders, feeling their claws ripping into my skin as I try to hold them off, I rush to the bathroom.

Emptying my stomach into the toilet for reasons that have nothing to do with my pregnancy and everything to do with the sheer terror I feel, I collapse on the tiles and try to force the horrible memories from my brain.

Other unwelcome images crowd into my thoughts even as I struggle to bury this most recent horror, ghosts from my past seeing an opportunity to rear their terrible heads. Breathing deeply, I force them back into the iron safe in the back of my mind, shoving the memories of last night inside with them. It isn’t easy, but I’m well practiced at stowing unpleasant things away like this, protecting myself from their torment. When the work is done, I feel dazed and numb, but that’s better than wallowing in agony.

Pulling myself up off the floor, I study my bandaged arms in the mirror, realizing they’ll clash with my ball gown’s off-the-shoulder cut. I call the dressmaker first thing, asking her to hurry to my side. The morning papers tell me that the bloody events of my first wild hunt went undetected from the media and the general public, but today is the Solstice itself – it’s more important than ever that Sinclair and I make a strong showing.

The dressmaker arrives shortly, surprising my guards – who apparently didn't realize I was awake. She suggests tight-fitted sleeves the same color as my flesh, to disguise my bandages without compromising the gown's design, and also offers to sew me a pair of matching gloves to help hide my injuries. I agree and she quickly makes the adjustments. By early afternoon the gown is complete, and I'm standing in front of the mirror studying the effect.

When Sinclair barges in halfway through the fitting, I'm expecting him to compliment my quick thinking. I smile at him, feeling proud of my efforts, but he only glares. "What in the Goddess's name do you think you're doing?"

His growling voice sends a shiver down my spine, but I summon a soft chuckle. "Well I can't very well go to the ball looking like a mummy." I answer, nodding towards my white bandages.

Sinclair stalks forward, dismissing the dressmaker with a curt "Leave us." Once the door closes behind her, he bears down on me, towering above me with a foreboding expression on his handsome face. "Ella you're not going to the ball."

"I'm sorry, are you auditioning to be my evil step mother?" I quip, astonished by his apparent anger.

"This isn't a joke." Sinclair informs me sternly. "A few hours ago you were bloody catatonic."

"I'm better now." I shrug, turning back to the mirror and pretending I don't see his thunderstruck expression. "I felt a bit groggy from all the doctor's drugs at first, but that passed ages ago."

Sinclair shakes his head, muttering in something akin to disbelief. "Goddess, Cora was right."

"Right about wh—" I begin, processing his words too late. As soon as I do I turn on him, understanding slamming into me. "You called Cora? You told her? Why would you do that?!"

"Because she's your sister, she loves you and she had a right to know you were hurt." He declares, turning me back towards the mirror and unzipping my gown. I try to wrench away from him but it doesn't work.

“Dominic stop!” I insist, backing out of his reach and clutching the garment to my chest. “You should have talked to me before calling Cora. It wasn’t necessary to upset her.”

“At least one of you is upset!” He exclaims, baffling me completely.

“What on earth is wrong with you?” I demand, feeling my annoyance devolve into outrage. “Why are you being like this?”

“Well to start with, the mother of my pup was almost killed last night but you’re pretending like nothing happened!” Sinclair bursts.

I feel a familiar rush of disappointment to be reduced to ‘the mother of his pup’, but I’m not surprised.

“I’m not denying it happened,” I correct him simply. “But it wasn’t a big deal. You’re fine, I’m fine. It was scary in the moment but it all turned out okay.”

I can see Sinclair wants to reach for me, to grab me and turn me to face him, but he’s obviously wary of touching my wounds.

Instead he circles in front of me, again imposing on my personal space with his big body. “Ella nothing about this situation is okay!” He asserts firmly, searching my face for signs that his words are sinking in and becoming even more upset when they don’t. “And I don’t believe for one second that you are as unaffected by all this as you’re pretending.”

“I’m not pretending.” I insist. “I know you think I’m this fragile thing, but I’m not, Dominic.”

He sighs, wearing the beleaguered expression of someone at his wits end. “It isn’t fragile or weak to be affected by a near death experience, Ella.”

“I know that.” I inform him stubbornly, “That isn’t what I meant, just that you want me to behave according to your expectations...

but everyone handles trauma differently.”

“Well if I thought you were handling it, I wouldn’t care what method you chose.” Sinclair grumbles. “What bothers me is seeing you ignore it.”

“So what, you want me to be upset?” I inquire, aghast. “Why, so you can rush in and play the hero?”

“Of course I don’t want you to be upset!” He rumbles, catching my waist. “But I also don’t want you hurting yourself by repressing your feelings. These things don’t just go away, Ella, if you don’t let them out they fester and grow toxic inside of you.”

I notch my chin up, my own blood beginning to boil now. “I have the rest of my life to process what happened, but I’ll be damned if I’m going to let the Prince win this campaign. Don’t you think he wants us to stay home and lick our wounds?” I demand, surprising myself with the force of my convictions.

I want to convince Sinclair not to coddle me, but I also want to make the Prince pay for trying to harm my unborn child. “He shouldn’t get away with what he did last night! I don’t care what he does to me, but I won’t stand for him trying to kill our baby.”

“Well you should care what he does to you!” Sinclair explodes, pacing in front of me and looking as though he can’t decide whether to be annoyed or impressed with my defiance. “And your wellbeing is more important than showing him up.”

“That’s your opinion.” I hiss, crossing my arms over my chest. “I disagree.”

Sinclair narrows his eyes, pulling my body flush against his and letting me feel the full weight of his disapproval. “We’re not going to the ball, Ella.” He declares, his fingers digging into my tender flesh. “We’re going to talk about this whether you like it or not.”

“You can’t make me.” I combat, my lip curling with disdain, “And I don’t need you to make me feel better, because I’m fine.”

“No, you aren’t.” Sinclair insists, seeming resigned but determined as he looms over me. “I know, because I’m not and it didn’t even happen to me.”

“Just stop it!” I shout, fighting back tears. Why won’t he let this go? Why won’t he just let me deal with it in my own way? I can feel myself spiraling out of control. I can feel the bad feelings hammering against the locked door in my mind, encouraged by Sinclair’s warmth and understanding. Something inside me wants to cave to his dominance, but I can’t let that happen. I can’t release all that darkness – it will swallow me whole. “I’ve made up my mind!”

“Have you even cried, Ella?” Sinclair continues, stalking me across the room. “Have you let yourself feel what they did to you?”

“I said stop it!” I repeat, pushing at his broad chest, “Just leave me alone!”

“I’m not going to do that, baby.” He states gravely, continuing to pursue me.

“Of course not!” I accuse, “You pretend you’re doing this for me but really you’re helping yourself. You don’t care what I want.”

“I do, but what you want and what you need aren’t always the same.” Sinclair says, repeating the same Alpha nonsense he’s been preaching from day one.

Before I can stop myself, I’m surging forward, fueled by a strange and reckless courage. “I am so sick of your condescending bullshit,” I cry, smacking his hands away, “You’re a wolf so you get to boss me around, you’re a man so you know what I need better than I do – well I don’t accept that!”

My feeble swats, pushing back against his attempts to console me, grow more and more desperate, until I lash out with all my strength and strike Sinclair across the face. A loud clap rings through the air, and only too late do I realize what I’ve done.

Sinclair’s wolf blazes to life in his eyes, and I can only whimper, turn tail – and run.

Chapter 71

Ella

Every instinct I possess is telling me to get away from Sinclair as fast as I can, but he catches me around the waist before I can move two feet. I know I’ve made a terrible mistake, and I don’t have any idea where the impulse to strike him came from. I’ve never raised a hand against anyone in my life, and certainly not a man as dangerous as Sinclair – a predator who could snap me up in one bite.

When I’m yanked to a stop in his arms, I panic. “I’m sorry! I didn’t mean it, I don’t know what happened.” I exclaim, squirming despite my injuries. He lugs me up against his chest, keeping my body flush against him.

Sinclair emits a dark chuckle, and I realize he hasn't lost his temper. Far from it, he's entirely in control, but he's also not going to let me get away with hitting him. "Tsk, sweet Ella, I know exactly what happened." He purrs, "but you're not sorry – not yet anyway." His lips graze my ear, his deep voice turning my insides to jelly, "But you will be."

"Dominic please—" I beg, squirming in his arms, desperately trying to free myself from his grasp.

"I warned you, little one. This was your last strike." He answers coolly, "Now stop wriggling before you hurt yourself."

At once I'm struck by the difference I feel being trapped in his arms. If one of those rogues had caught me, I would have been too afraid to anger them to risk rebelling. After all, I've experienced the dreadful paralysis that occurs when you're too terrified to fight back against an attacker more than once. Yet I feel no such fear with Sinclair. I know he means to punish me, and yet I feel completely safe.

The ball gown is stripped from my body, and Sinclair settles on the bed, laying my body face down over his lap. "What are you doing?" I whimper, trying to rear up.

One of Sinclair's massive palms settles at the base of my spine, holding me in place as his free hand traces the curve of my bare bottom. "What do you think I'm doing?" He inquires, sounding as though he's taking far too much pleasure in this.

"You can't be serious!" I protest, "This is barbaric! I'm not a child!"

"You're right." Sinclair croons, still grazing his fingers over my skin and making the bundle of nerves at the apex of my thighs swell and plump with rushing blood. "you're not a child, which means you should know better than to throw tantrums and strike people."

"But I'm pregnant," I remind him, hoping he'll take mercy. "You could hurt the baby."

"Trust me sweetheart, if spankings harmed unborn pups my kind would have died out a long time ago." Sinclair drawls, massaging the tense muscles of my lower back.

"Breeding she-wolves need to feel their mate's dominance more than anyone else."

The word "spanking" echoes in my mind, almost as if it's some foreign term from another language. I know exactly what it means, but it seems impossible that I could truly

be in this predicament. I've known plenty of punishments in my time, but none like this. None from someone who actually cares about me, and none that excite me despite my better judgment.

“Well that’s fine for you and your twisted were-friends, but I’m not into that sort of thing!” I insist, trying to ignore the flames engulfing my body. I can feel myself growing wet already, and I’m horrified when Sinclair scents the air, a satisfied rumble sounding in his chest. Surely he can’t smell my arousal? Right?

“Is that the story you want to stick with, Ella?” Sinclair questions, amusement heavy in his velvety tones as his fingers dip dangerously close to my swollen sex. No, no, no. I think. It’s too embarrassing! I’m sure I’ve never been this turned on in my life

– but what does that say about me? What’s wrong with me that I like this?

I whine, trying to jerk out of his reach. “This isn’t fair, you’re not the boss of me!” Why am I still provoking him? Why am I not begging for mercy?

“We’ll just see about that.” Sinclair intones, still massaging my backside. Belatedly I realize he’s warming my skin, preparing me for his discipline. When the first swat finally lands, I rear up, crying out in protest. I’m sure Sinclair is only using a fraction of his strength, but it still hurts. Even so, I know my reaction is more outrage than actual pain.

I kick my legs and beat my fists against Sinclair’s thighs, but he easily restrains me. This is so confusing, how can I feel safer being confined by his strong arms than I did when I was lashing out wildly? He lands another swat, on the opposite cheek this time – spreading the heat over my raised buttocks equally. He starts slowly, continuing to warm my skin until I’m accustomed to the sting, and then increasing his efforts.

I fight like a hellcat, furious that he’s doing this and yet more turned on than I can ever remember being. Something is wrong with me. I decide. Only someone deeply disturbed would enjoy this. He’s actually spanking me, like I’m a naughty child instead of the mother of his baby. The worst part is his deliciously dirty words, telling me what a bad girl I’ve been, scolding me for my misbehavior and yet praising my arousal – telling me how natural it is, how delicious I smell.

He doesn’t let up until I stop trying to escape his hold, until I submit to his discipline and let go of my own control. When his relentless swats finally slow, I catch myself

undulating, raising my bottom to meet his hand. With considerable effort, I force myself to still. “Is it over?” I ask miserably, trying to sound as pitiful as possible.

“On any other occasion it would be,” Sinclair shares, sounding resigned now. “But you need to cry, Ella. You need to deal with the attack.”

“But I don’t want to.” I moan, feeling very immature now.

“It’s okay, I’m going to help you.” Sinclair promises, stroking my spine. “And afterwards I promise I’ll make you feel good.”

“No, please... I don’t want to cry.” I confess, my voice very small now.

“Why not?” Sinclair asks. “What’s so terrible about crying?”

Sniffling, I pluck up the courage to tell him my fears. After all – the man just spanked me, if I can be honest with anyone, it’s him.

“I’m afraid if I start I won’t be able to stop. I don’t want to hurt.”

Sinclair clucks sympathetically, clearly understanding that I’m not talking about physical pain. “I’ll be with you the whole time.” He promises. “I’m not going to let you face it alone.”

I try to resist my instincts to submit as long as I can, holding myself tense as the swats rain down on my upturned bottom, growing sharper and more delectable with every volley. I might have been able to resist if it weren’t for Sinclair’s encouragement.

Now instead of telling me how naughty I’ve been he keeps insisting it’s alright, that I’m safe and he’ll take care of me.

It doesn’t take much then, a few good swats and I collapse into Sinclair’s arms, sobbing out my anguish into his legs until he pulls me up into his lap. I wince and hiss when my sore backside meets with his thighs, but he kisses and croons and rocks me as I work through the pain, and soon I forget about the indignity and outrage of my spanking.

“I’m sorry I was such a brat.” I confess, nuzzling my face against his chest and breathing in his scent.

“I love your every mood.” Sinclair assures me, “you never need to apologize for being yourself.”

I shake my head. “When you say things like that I think you’re too good to be true.” I admit. “I don’t trust it.”

“That’s okay.” Sinclair affirms. “I’m not going to be scared off because you’re a bit skittish, Ella. You’re giving me an heir – I’m in this for the long haul.”

My heart sinks at the reminder he’s only doing this because I’m carrying his son, but I feel so cozy in Sinclair’s arms that I can’t bring myself to protest. He continues petting and cuddling me until my tears slow, though my rear end is still on fire. I’ve never known so many conflicting feelings.

I’ve been thoroughly punished, confronted my trauma and grief, and yet I’m also beside myself with lust. In fact, my desire is the only thing Sinclair has yet to satisfy, and I’m all too aware he vowed to take care of that as well.

As if he’s reading my mind, Sinclair slides his hand between my legs, feeling my sodden core and purring with approval. “Now, would you like me to make you feel good?”

Chapter 72

Ella

Yes, yes, yes! The little voice in my head chants, so forcefully the words almost spill out of my mouth. I stop them just in time, even though I can’t stop my hips from jerking up towards Sinclair’s hand. Still, I manage to clasp my fingers around his wrist before he can make contact with my aching clit, even as my blood sings for release.

I desperately want to let Sinclair’s give me the pleasure he’s offering, but I feel so overwhelmed by all this. Too many things have happened in the last 24 hours, and I’m beyond confused by my reaction to Sinclair’s discipline. All my emotions have been thrust together, smashed up and blended into a violent, swirling maelstrom– too muddied to differentiate. It’s as though I’ve been completely unmoored, no long understanding my own heart or mind.

I look up at Sinclair, my eyes wide and still stinging with leftover tears. He’s wearing that ravenous expression that makes me feel like he’s about to gobble me up, but there’s a

softness in his eyes – an understanding that my body’s base instincts are not on the same page with my distraught mind.

“I don’t think I’m ready for that.” I confess, my voice very soft. How surreal is it, that twenty four hours ago I was ready to give myself to him completely? To let him make love to me right there in the middle of the forest, despite all our efforts to keep our relationship platonic?

Maybe the Prince did us a favor with his attack, I think bitterly. He kept us from taking a step we wouldn’t be able to take back –

from making a terrible mistake.

How can you say that? My conscience demands. Look at what Sinclair just did for you.

What? Spank me like a child? Make me cry like a baby? I bite back.

You know you feel better now, The infuriating voice replies, It hurts, but hurting is better than feeling nothing.

I’m not so sure about that. The feelings that flowed out of me after the spanking provided an entirely different kind of release than the one I need now, pouring out pent up emotions with no other outlet than tears. However I’m acutely aware that those feelings were only a drop in the bucket, the surface waters of a bottomless well of anguish I am not prepared to face.

Ignoring my conscience, I peek up at the huge Alpha. “Is that okay?”

“Ella, of course it’s okay.” Sinclair answers, studying me closely. “Do you want me to leave you, so you can take care of it yourself?” He offers, though there’s a low, growly quality to his voice that makes me think his wolf doesn’t like this idea one bit.

“No.” I object immediately, grasping for his shirt before I can think better of it. I don’t want him to leave, to lose his soothing touch– but I also have a sneaking suspicion that staying in his lap is a bad idea. I can feel his hardness digging into my sore backside, and I’m both squirming to relieve the sting of my punished flesh and the ache between my legs.

“Easy sweetheart.” Sinclair chuckles, “I’m not going anywhere.” He kisses my hair. Then, seeming to sense the problem, he sets me beside him on the bed. I wince,

preferring the feel of his warm thighs over the cool silk of the duvet, but before I can feel too sorry for myself Sinclair slides his palm to my bare belly, feeling for the pup.

“How is he?” I ask, feeling both guilty for not asking sooner, but also afraid of hearing the answer. How much of my ordeal was the pup able to feel? Surely if he can sense my feelings he can feel my fear and pain. Is he also aware that his father just put me over his knee? Oh that is so wrong – no child should have to know those things about their parents.

“I wish you could see your face right now.” Sinclair teases, “But I promise he’s much too young to understand any of this. All he knows is that you were sad, and that you feel better now we’re together. He feels better too.”

“Was he very frightened last night?” I inquire, closing my eyes and leaning into his side.

“He was distressed, because he could feel your fear, but everything he knows is in response to you. And his own feelings haven’t become more complicated than sad or happy – they won’t until after he’s born.” He explains.

“But you could tell what he was making me crave.” I remind him, striving to understand.

Sinclair nods, “Hunger, pain, tiredness, those are all reflexive instincts, not emotions.” I sigh, taking this in and pressing my nose to his chest and breathing in his scent. “You see?” I can hear a smile in his voice. “You’re soothed my scent, so he’s happy.”

“But I thought I liked smelling you because it’s what he needs?” I murmur.

“That’s the way with mothers and pups – that’s why I say you have a connection every bit as magical as my own. Your wants and needs become one in the same.” Sinclair shares.

“Okay.” I breathe, knowing that the harder I think about this, the less sense it will make. The more time that passes, the more I’m learning that magic and logic do not always mix.

We pass the next few moments in silence, and though I’m still so needy I think I might scream, I also haven’t forgotten the reason we fought. My ball gown remains in a puddle on the floor, it’s gauzy, gemstone studded skirts glinting up at me in the low lighting.

“Dominic?”

“Yes?” He prompts, running his fingers up and down my arm in the most distracting way. His touch is featherlight, and I know it’s intended to comfort me rather than excite, but

I'm beginning to think that it's impossible to be in physical contact with this man without being turned on. Hell, I was even turned on when he was spanking me – and it hurt like hell. On some level I understand it was his dominance I liked, rather than the pain, but it still seems so wrong.

“I think I need you to stop touching me.” I whisper, hating myself even as I say it.

“Okay.” He agrees, reluctantly shifting my small body away from his. I instantly feel cold and incomplete, and my feelings must show on my face because Sinclair laughs and taps his finger on my nose. “You asked for it, beautiful.”

“I know.” I complain, pulling the duvet up around me so that I won't feel so exposed. Sinclair watches my movement with narrowed eyes, and I can see he's holding back some bossy statement. Probably something about not hiding myself from him, though he seems to understand I won't calm down as long as his gaze is raking over my naked skin. “I want to talk about the ball.”

“Ella–”

“No!” I insist, cutting him off, “Please just hear me out?”

Sinclair exhales heavily, “Go ahead.”

“Look, you were obviously right that I wasn't okay,” I begin, feeling resigned. “But I wasn't wrong either. We can't let the Prince win.”

“We're not.” Sinclair promises. “But you need your rest. You've been through a lot.”

“I've been through worse.” I announce, surprising us both. I didn't intend on sharing that with Sinclair, but I need him to know I'm not going to fall to pieces at the first sign of danger. He doesn't look surprised, he merely grimaces, as if he hates hearing this but also wants to ask for more details. Sensing this, I forge ahead before he can act on his impulse. “You made such a big deal about the Solstice, about how much these events mean. If we skip it, the Prince will have an advantage.”

“The Prince doesn't have a breeding mate.” Sinclair counters, “pregnant she-wolves get a lot more free passes in our society than those who are not.”

“But he'll know.” I state stubbornly. “He'll feel emboldened, like his plan is working. We have to show him it isn't.”

Sinclair studies me for a long moment. “Is this truly what you want, or are you trying to prove something to me – because I promise you don’t have to.”

“Not everything is about you, you know.” I answer saucily, feeling a bit more of myself now.

Warmth floods my body at the sound of his laughter. “Careful little one, or I might think you didn’t learn your lesson the first time.”

“Please Dominic?” I request. “I want to go to the ball.”

“Hmm.” He hums thoughtfully. “If I agree, will you do something for me in return?”

“That depends,” I answer warily. “What do you want?”

“Will you promise to tell me about those worse things you’ve been through some day?” Sinclair inquires, grazing his knuckles over my cheek.

I go very still now. “I’ve never talked about those things with anyone. I’m not sure I know how.”

“I could help you.” Sinclair offers, “Like I helped you today.”

“If you think I’m going to let you spank me again –” I begin indignantly.

“Oh so you let me, did you?” He rumbles, sliding his hand around to my nape and making my toes curl. He grins wolfishly, shaking his head. “I hate to break it to you, baby – but that was far from your last spanking, whether it’s to help you tap into your feelings or not.”

“You’re a tyrant, you know that?” I remark, shooting him a sullen glare.

“Is that a no?” He asks, arching a brow.

“But why bothering digging into all of that?” I question. “It’s in the past. Surely it’s better to leave it there.”

“I think we both know these things never stay in the past, Ella.” Sinclair answers gravely.

“I could see them weighing on you before you ever said a word.”

“You could?” I squeak, hating to think I’m so transparent.

“Yes.” He affirms gently, “And I don’t want you carrying all that alone.”

“But it’s my burden to carry, not yours.” I reason, not looking him in the eye.

Sinclair catches my chin between his thumb and forefinger, pulling my eyes up to his.

“And I suppose you asked to carry it? You sought out the pain and heartache?”

I can see his point, though I don’t want to. I can also see the advantage in keeping this deal some vague promise of the future.

The ball is tonight, so I can agree to share and then put off following through indefinitely.

It’s not a lie – not really. I know I’m not ever going to be ready to talk about those horrible things with Sinclair, so I just have to tell him as much when the time comes.

“Okay.” I finally confirm. “You have a deal.”

Chapter 73

Sinclair

“Are you sure you want to do this?” I ask, studying Ella.

Her golden eyes sparkle up at me. “Yes Dominic, for the thousandth time.” She sasses, “I’m sure.”

I chuckle, dropping a kiss to her hair. “Imp.”

We’re in the back of a limousine as it rolls slowly down the street, lined on all sides by clambering pack members eager to catch a glimpse of the shifter elite on their way to the King’s palace. Ella is tucked safely against my side, wearing an off the shoulder gown of deepest green.

Layer upon layer of sheer fabric winds around her body in graceful tendrils, leaving small flashes of her fair skin bared and outlining her feminine figure in the most tantalizing design, before cascading to the ground in a waterfall of chiffon. Amber gemstones glitter in her skirts, perfectly matching the delicate jewels of her necklace and earrings. Her hair has been piled up on top of her head, save for a few wisps left free, and her small feet are confined in a pair of sky high heels. Her mask is resting in her lap, waiting for the

moment we'll exit the car and don the intricate disguises required for the ball. Every time I look at her my lungs stop pumping, and I have to remind myself to breathe, struggling to remember how it's done.

"I know you don't like being told how beautiful you are, but sometimes it's hard for me to keep it to myself." I sigh, leaning down to nuzzle her neck and bask in her sweet scent.

Ella tilts her head to the side, giving me more room to work as I brush my nose and lips over her skin. "It's not that I mind compliments," Her breath hitches when I pause to nibble the place where her neck meets her shoulder. "I just don't like being made to feel like that's all I am."

"Well you don't have to worry there, because as lovely as you are, your beauty is my least favorite thing about you." I remark, completely serious.

"Sure it is." She giggles, the sound filling my body with pure sunshine.

"I mean it." I reply honestly, "Of course, it's not like that means much because I like all of you. Talking about my least favorite part is like talking about my least favorite dessert – at the end of the day it's still dessert."

She doesn't answer, and when I finally stop exploring the silky curve of her throat, I find a guarded expression on her face, as if she's waiting for the other shoe to drop.

"Would you like to know my favorite thing about you?" I prompt, offering what she's either too afraid or too shy to ask.

"I don't know." She shrugs, not looking me in the eye.

"Hmm," I purr, enjoying the way her tightly wound little body immediately melts against mine. "It's that warrior heart of yours."

Ella snorts, finally raising her luminous gaze to mine. "No one has ever mistaken me for a warrior before." She admonishes. "I think you're just trying to flatter me now."

"It's no mistake." I rumble sternly, not liking her self-deprecating tone. "I know warriors, and I know you. You have a heart that cannot be quelled – you love fiercely, and you don't give up."

Ella blushes, her cheeks growing so pink that I want to whisper all my secret desires in her ear, just to see how deeply I can make her flush. She peeks up at me from beneath her lashes. “Do you want to know my favorite thing about you?”

“Tell me,” I invite, not caring one bit whether her answer is about my looks or personality— as long as she has a favorite thing, she could tell me she likes my big toe and I’d still be grateful.

“You listen.” Ella shares softly. “Not because you think you should or that it’s the right thing to do – but because you want to. You want to understand, and you want your people to be happy.”

I can’t stop myself from kissing her, even if it’s only a brief graze of our lips. “I want you to be happy too, Ella.” I tell her, “I know that might feel impossible right now, with everything you’ve been through, but I’m going to make our family safe. And once I do I’m going to spoil you and the baby rotten.”

Her eyes widen slightly when I say, “our family,” and I realize I’ve never talked about us that way. However the more time that passes, the more obvious it becomes to me that Ella and I will be family. Whether we become romantically involved or not, we’re going to share a pup and that will tie us together for life. However, no sooner have I worked through these thoughts myself, than I see Ella’s expression transforming, taking on a decidedly devious glint.

“Does that mean you won’t boss me around anymore?” The minx replies, alight with mischief and desire in equal measure.

“You’ll let me walk all over you and get away with everything?”

I throw my head back, barking with laughter even as I fight the urge to tell the driver to turn the car around so I can take Ella home and finish what we started earlier. “Not even close, trouble.”

As the car pulls to a stop and we put on our masks, I glance at the media clamoring outside and feel Ella do the same. She recoils in surprise, and a rush of protectiveness slams into me. My wolf immediately rises to the surface, and I have to fight the urge to shift.

Let me out. My wolf demands. I’ll kill them before they lay a hand on her.

Calm down! I insist, shaking with the effort of holding him back.

But they're scaring her! He insists. This was a mistake! It's too soon.

After last night I don't want to let anyone come near Ella, and her fear is forcing my possessive fury into overdrive. It's as though I see threats everywhere I look, and I'd like nothing more than to attack every reporter in sight. Deep down, I also know that I wouldn't be so on edge if we'd found an outlet for our sexual tension earlier. It goes against my every instinct not to reward my mate after she submitted so beautifully, and I feel as though my job is unfinished. Moreover, I wasn't able to take the edge off of my own desire – and the need to claim her is suddenly so powerful I want to take her right here and now.

Mine, mine, mine. My wolf chants. I have to mark her.

No! I refuse ferociously. She's not a wolf, it would hurt her.

Just a nibble? He begs, She smells so delicious.

Somehow I manage to get Ella out of the car and through the crowd, but no sooner have we stepped into the ballroom that Ella turns toward me with an exasperated look on her face. "Dominic, you're acting like a dog guarding a bone."

I arch my brows, letting some of my Alpha authority seep into my voice. "Am I now?"

Ella shivers, but doesn't back down. "You just growled that attendant – the poor man practically wet himself."

"He came too close to you!" I growl defensively

"He was taking my coat." Ella reminds me, sounding almost stern. "You've got to find a way to calm down."

"I don't think I can." I grumble, "The man who hired those rogues to kill you is here somewhere, no doubt plotting another attack."

Ella frowns. "Is there nothing I can do to help? You told me mates are supposed to calm each other."

I sigh and hold her tight so that she can't see my grimace. "Sweetheart, the things you could do to help are not things we could do in public, nor are you ready for them."

"Oh..." Ella's eyes go adorably wide as realization strikes. I watch her work through the implications of my words, and without a single word of help, she comes to the correct conclusion. "Would it still be this way, if I'd... if we'd... you know – after?" She trails off, blushing.

"After your spanking?" I supply.

Ella's blush turns crimson, and she leans forward impatiently. "Shhh!" Looking around to make sure no one overheard me, she agrees, "Yes."

"It would have helped me take the edge off, but—"

Before I can finish the sentence, Ella gives me a fierce glare and a delectable pout. "You should have told me, I can still—"

She's about to offer something I might not be able to turn down, so I stop her, softening the force of my growl at the last moment.

"No, this was always going to be the case, Ella. I don't like you being here with all these wolves after what happened last night. If I had my way I would have kept you at home in bed until this campaign is over."

"Then maybe..." she pulls my hand to her tummy, and the tiny bump hidden by her skirts. "Maybe just feel the baby. Feel how secure we are in your arms, how safe I feel with you. Nothing's going to happen, and I promise to stay close."

Warmth washes over me, and I smile down at the precious bundle in my arms, amazed that she seems to know exactly what to say to help me, despite not understanding so much about our kind. However, no sooner have I started to relax, than the Prince enters. He scans the room until his eyes land on Ella and I, then crosses the floor – heading straight towards us.

Ella

As soon as the Prince catches sight of Sinclair and I, his eyes flash with obvious rage. I can tell he's surprised to see us here, though he must have known I survived the hunt. When none of his rogues returned to confirm my death, he would have immediately realized what happened. Still, I'm sure he expected Sinclair to do exactly what he just suggested, and keep me home at all costs.

Despite his fury, the Prince quickly covers his emotions and stalks toward us. I can feel Sinclair vibrating with dangerous energy, and I lean into him, letting him feel my warmth and breathe in my scent. He's making low grumbly sounds, though not the kind he often makes when he's kissing or scent marking me, which let me know his wolf is pleased. These are very different: sharp and vicious, hinting at barely contained aggression.

"It's okay." I whisper. "He can't do anything here."

"I'll kill him." Sinclair snarls under his breath. "You need to leave, before this gets ugly."

I can tell Sinclair is no longer in control and I know his wolf is urging him to protect the baby even if it costs him the campaign. Of course, killing the Prince would get rid of the competition, but I don't think it would comprise very good optics for a future King. I don't understand enough about shifter society to know for sure, but my instincts are telling me that a death match on one of the most sacred days of the year is a bad idea.

"I'm not going anywhere." I answer firmly, digging in my heels.

"Ella, I wasn't asking." Sinclair snaps, pinning me with his most intimidating gaze.

The fine hairs on the back of my neck stand on end, and I feel the sudden urge to cower before the predator towering over me, but I can't bring a pup into the world without Sinclair, and I'm not going to risk him being thrown in jail or exiled. "You can threaten me and punish me however you like." I remark coolly, pretending that my knees haven't completely turned to jelly. "But I promised not to leave your side, and I meant it."

Sinclair's powerful arm squeezes my waist, pulling me even closer against him even though our bodies were already flush. He drops his lips to my ear. "This is not the time to test me, little human."

Before I can respond, the Prince appears in front of us. Acting on instinct, I start to pull away from Sinclair, forcing him to pull me back and keep his hands occupied holding me

in place, rather than ripping the Prince to shreds. “Happy Solstice, Dominic,” The Prince greets, before turning his wolfish gaze to me. “Ella. You’re looking very well.”

Another growl rends the air between us, but I move directly in front of Sinclair, making a human barrier between the wolves with my body. I lean my back into Sinclair’s chest, encouraging him to wrap his arms around me and rest his palms over the baby.

“Thank you.” I smile, trying to sound genuine. “We’re so pleased to be here – though I’m afraid our masks didn’t do much to disguise us.” I laugh falsely.

Sinclair is muttering a steady litany of threats in my my head, using his connection with the baby to make his voice echo in my mind. He compliments me even as he promises to punish me for my interference, and I reach back to run my fingers through his silky hair, soothing him even though I’m making myself the target of his outrage. You’re in so much trouble, you magnificent, fearless little angel. What are you thinking?

“Ah well, it’s hard to go incognito when you’re as famous as you two.” The Prince grins, creating a conniving, cruel expression. “It seems like I can’t open the newspaper these days without seeing you two staring back at me.”

I shrug gently, an audience is forming around us, drawn in by the magnetic pull of watching two competing alphas. “It’s amazing isn’t it? You’d think people would have gotten bored of us by now.”

You’re too clever for your own good. Dominic is saying, making it very difficult for me to focus on the Prince’s response. I need to make him pay for what he did. I need to kill him.

“Well there’s no accounting for taste – especially among commoners.” The Prince is snidely remarking.

“Forgive me,” I answer boldly, speaking loudly enough for our onlookers to hear. “But weren’t you a commoner until your father became King? It seems awfully callous to write off so many people just because they haven’t been as lucky as you. After all, that’s why you’re in this position – isn’t it? Luck?” A stark murmur works through the crowd around us. When we get home I’m going to put you right back over my knee and this time I’m not going to let you get away without coming at least three times, you brilliant, impossible creature. At this point I press one of my stiletto’s onto Sinclair’s foot, needing

him to shut up before I become so aroused that the entire room can smell my desire. Of course, he only responds with a low chuckle.

That might work if you weighed more than a field mouse, little one. But that's okay – I won't forget that you tried to stomp on me again.

“What interesting ideas your mate has, Dominic.” The Prince comments, looking over my head to speak to Sinclair with barely contained rage. He obviously hates being shown up in public, but he's in the same position as Sinclair, trapped by convention.

“I wonder if you might release her for a dance? I'd be very curious to speak with her further.”

“I don't think so.” Sinclair growls, before I can respond. “Ella is struggling with morning sickness, too much spinning on the dance floor might trigger it.”

Sighing, I tilt my face up to his, urging him to lower his ear to my mouth. I'm wishing I could speak to him through the baby, the way he does with me, but I also know that the more intimate we appear for the media, the better the reports will seem. “It's okay.”

I insist. “He won't hurt me with you watching.”

No. He responds immediately. You're mine, he can't have you – even for a dance.

“Dominic, he underestimates me. He thinks I'm a dumb commoner, I might be able to get information from him he wouldn't admit to you.” I reason. “And it would look good to the council. I doubt they want it to appear like there's a risk of civil war between the Alphas.”

I hate this. Sinclair complains in my head. I need you to be safe. I need him to be dead.

“You need to win. The baby and I need you to win, and you can't do that if we make a scene here.” I counter.

Goddess, damn it! The next thing I know, Sinclair has spun me to face him. His mouth claims mine with urgent need, drawing a whimper from my lips as I open for his questing tongue. I'm sure the Prince is still standing behind us, impotently waiting for us to reach a decision. We pay him no mind. Instead I let Sinclair ravish me for all to see, stealing kiss after kiss from my swollen mouth and nibbling my neck before he releases me. I'll be right here. If you need me, just send me a look, and I'll be there.

“I promise.” I confirm, “I’ll ask for help if I need it.”

You better! Sinclair claims once last kiss before letting me go, glaring at the Prince over my head. “Make it quick.”

I turn and accept the Prince’s outstretched hand, shaking off Sinclair when he doesn’t immediately release me. Gradually he does, though I can see him in my periphery, following our progress as we move onto the dance floor.

“Dominic is very protective of you.” The Prince observes, glancing at the wolf currently stalking us.

“Aren’t you protective of your mate?” I reply. “I thought all Alphas were that way – all true Alphas that is.”

The Prince’s wolf glows in his eyes, and I know I’ve struck a chord. I’m not sure where I found the courage to question his dominance. Maybe it’s the baby, or maybe Sinclair is rubbing off on me – either way it’s difficult to be afraid of the Prince when I spend all my time with a man who is ten times more powerful.

“Hmph.” The Prince murmurs, barely containing his ire. “I suppose.”

We move through the dance for a few moments, and I try not to pay attention to Sinclair. I try to focus on the steps and not make a fool of myself, but I’m painfully conscious of the emerald eyes glued to my back.

“You know – I had my investigators look into you.” The Prince declares abruptly, as if he’s talking about running an errand rather than invading my privacy

“Did you?” I counter, making an effort to sound nonchalant. However the little voice in my head is struggling not to panic. If his investigators searched for me in the Bloodbane pack, they won’t have found anything. And if they searched for me here, they might have discovered my true identity. “And tell me, what did you find?”

“Well, it’s the strangest thing.” The Prince replies, suddenly looking like a hunter going in for the kill. “They didn’t find anything.

Not a single thing.”

Chapter 75

Ella

As the Prince and I move around the dance floor, I'm only too conscious that every eye in the room is on us. Of course, none of those eyes weigh on my shoulders so heavily as Sinclairs. I'm working hard not to accidentally send him any signals that I need to be rescued, but it isn't easy – especially after the Prince just confronted me with one of the many lies I've been telling.

“That's not surprising.” I bluff. “I lived a quiet life before coming here.”

“There's quiet and then there's nonexistent.” The Prince mutters bleakly. “And forgive me but I find it highly suspicious that you made absolutely no impact on your prior pack. After all – one would expect a she-wolf qualified to be Luna to have a high profile.”

“Believe it or not,” I begin, deciding to tell at least one truth tonight, “but I didn't find my strength until I met Dominic. He's helping me recognize that my power was always there, but sometimes it takes seeing yourself through someone else's eyes to appreciate the parts of ourselves we take for granted. So, no I didn't have a high profile in the Bloodbane pack.”

The Prince scoffs. “I wouldn't be so quick to admit that, Ella. Just imagine what the council would think if they knew.” His tone implies advice, but his eyes glint with an obvious threat.

“I'll gladly tell them myself.” I counter coolly, “I'm not ashamed of my past, and I think people need leaders who can be honest about their journeys. No one starts out in this world as a force of nature; they become one after being molded and weathered by the elements. Dominic and I are examples of how even the strongest of our kind become so through resilience and strife, as well as the people with whom you surround yourself – not blind ambition.”

The Prince has been keeping his voice low, no doubt afraid of being overheard, but when I continue to speak at a volume guaranteeing others will hear our conversation, he loses his temper. “Would you keep your voice down?!”

“Why, don't you want people to know our positions?” I counter, feeling an unfamiliar spike of adrenaline. Is this how hunters feel when they know they're closing in? When

they've got their target cornered. "Don't you want them to be fully informed before the election?"

"That isn't how things are done!" The Prince snaps, forgetting to whisper now.

"Well maybe it should be." I answer coldly. "Why adhere to outdated traditions just because that's the way things have always been done? Being done doesn't mean they're right or effective."

The Prince growls, and I see the wolves around us rear back in shock. I know I have scant seconds before Sinclair will appear and snatch me away from the Prince so he can attack, so I offer the tyrant in front of me my widest smile, hoping it will convince Sinclair I can handle this.

"See, this is exactly what I mean," I beam, mildly surprised at how little fear I truly fear. "Growling at breeding she-wolves half your size really seems like a practice that should have been left in the dark ages, don't you think?"

The Prince glowers, abruptly stopping and yanking me close enough so he can hiss in my ear, "You dumb bitch, I don't know how you survived last night, but mark my words, I'm going to get rid of you and that brat you're growing one way or another. You should leave while you still can, if you stay I guarantee your days are numbered!"

His claws are digging into my bandaged arms, and I know I can't give into my instincts to growl back at him. I don't care if he's threatening me, but the idea that he's threatening my pup makes me want to rant and rage – to destroy him no matter the cost.

Any fear I might have once felt for myself has translated into primal protectiveness for my child. The problem is that it might cost us the campaign – I know how important it is for me to continue looking calm and unintimidated by the Prince. If I let the people around us see my fear or anger I'll lose the upper hand.

Luckily Sinclair appears in our path before I can lose control and snap back the way I want to. He suddenly steps into our path, all rugged good looks and raw power. My belly swoops and flutters when I see him, and the next thing I know, he's extracting me from the Prince's arms. "I'm going to take my mate back now." He announces with a lethal grin, not waiting for the Prince to agree. "It's been too long."

I laugh, "It's only been a few minutes."

“I meant what I said.” Sinclair beams, sending a ripple of laughs around the room as he sweeps me into his arms. We spin away on the dance floor, leaving the Prince to stew in his anger.

Only once we’ve left our audience behind and I’m swaying safely in Sinclair’s arms, does he drop his lips to my ear. “What did he say to you?”

I glance up at him hesitantly. “I’m not sure I should tell you, not here at least.”

“If you don’t tell me now I’m going to throw a tantrum right here in the middle of the dance floor.” Sinclair jokes, though there’s a sharp edge in his voice that tells me he’s not merely jesting. He might have chosen the words to make me laugh, but I can tell he needs to know the truth if he’s going to maintain his control.

“He admitted sending the rogues after me.” I relate, peeking up at him. “He threatened me and the baby, told me to leave while I still can.”

Sinclair pulls me closer, until I can no longer see his handsome face. Still, I can picture him glowering at everyone around us, staring daggers at anyone who sets eyes on me—like a dragon guarding its treasure. “Don’t worry, Ella.” Sinclair rumbles, his strong hands caressing my spine. “I won’t let him hurt you or the baby.”

“I know you won’t.” I assure him, leaning close so he can feel my solid weight in his arms. “I trust you, Dominic.”

I’m amazed to realize I’m speaking the truth. I do trust Sinclair, despite everything I’ve been through. I know he wouldn’t intentionally hurt me, and I know he’ll keep me safe.

“Thank you, baby.” He croons, sending delicious shivers down my spine. Even as I revel in his warm tone and terms of endearment, his earlier threats are still ringing in my ears, and I have to wonder whether I have another punishment ahead of me.

“Am I still in trouble?” I squeak, not sure whether I’m hoping he says yes or no. There’s something strangely addictive about his dominance, and I’m still aching for his touch. At the time I thought the longing would pass with time, but it seems like my hormones have gotten the better of me. Rather than passing, my desire has only grown, and the flames were stoked ever higher when he began scolding me earlier.

“No, sweetheart.” He answers, donning an indulgent smile. “You kept me from making a terrible mistake. You helped me stay calm when I was completely out of control. You don’t deserve a punishment, if anything you deserve to be rewarded.”

“Oh? What kind of reward?” I inquire, both hoping he’ll give me a scandalous answer, and praying he won’t. I’m not sure how much longer I can resist him, even though I know I should.

He chuckles, sending heat through every inch of my body. “That’s a dangerous question, little one.”

I smother a whimper, even as heat pools in my core. I hear Sinclair take in a sharp breath, and I’m sure he can smell my arousal again. I lean my forehead against the hard muscles of his chest. “What are we doing, Dominic?” I sigh, knowing I’m being terribly contrary. “I’m sorry, I know I’m not making any of this easier – I’m just so confused.”

“It’s okay to be confused.” He promises. “And I think you were right this afternoon. You’ve been through too much. You’re not in any state of mind to make those kinds of decisions today – no matter what your body wants.”

“But my body wants it so badly.” I confess, figuring that I’ve already admitted as much in our dream date, so I have nothing left to lose.

“Mine does too.” Sinclair smiled wryly, “if you could hear my wolf, Ella – you’d be scandalized... maybe even frightened.”

“I’m not sure I could be frightened of you. Not the way you mean at least.” I breathe, “it’s the strangest thing, If you were anyone else I’d be terrified, but it’s like the baby won’t let me.”

“He’s a smart baby.” Sinclair confirms, putting up with pride. “He gets that from you.”

I’m tempted to argue, but I can see a warning glint in Sinclair’s eyes and think better of it. “So what do we do? How do we resist this?”

“We keep at it.” Sinclair decides, “until we can’t any longer.”

“And then?” I prompt him, curious beyond words. “When we can no longer resist?”

“We give in.” Sinclair answers, lowering his forehead to mine. “And pray we can survive it.”

Chapter 76

Ella

It’s been three weeks since the ball, and though I can scarcely believe it, it seems like all the campaign drama passed with Solstice. There has been nothing but calm since the holidays, and I’m beyond thrilled that I’ve been able to relax a bit, even though part of me is waiting for the rug to be pulled out from under us.

I’ve spent my time pouring over baby books, making plans for our nursery, and brainstorming baby names – and the best part is that I’ve felt less nauseated and achy every day. In fact, yesterday marked the beginning of my second trimester – since shifter pregnancies are so short – and it seems impossible to think my baby will arrive in four short months. My stress has already eased knowing I’m leaving the most vulnerable phase of my pregnancy behind, and I don’t even mind that I’ve been seeing Sinclair less now that he’s gone back to a regular work schedule.

Well, that’s not entirely true. I miss him. I miss him much more than I should, but I’m also grateful for the space. It’s much easier to resist our attraction to each other when we’re not constantly together and taking part in intimate rituals and romantic outings.

I don’t know why you’re being so stubborn. The little voice in my head mutters. If you’re going to give in eventually, why not throw in the towel now and enjoy being together in the last months before the baby comes? You do realize that in another four months you’ll never be alone again.

I’m not having this argument again. I decide. We agreed it’s better for the baby if we can co-parent without our own relationship drama getting in the way.

You mean you decided and he went along with it because he doesn't know it's such a stupid reason. My conscience snipes.

It's not stupid! I insist. I'm going to be a mother, I have to put my baby first – that's what being a parent is all about.

You keep telling yourself that. The voice derides. We both know you're just a big scaredy cat.

Oh put a sock in it! I exclaim, losing my patience. "Stupid conscience." I mutter aloud, sorting through the clothing racks in my giant closet and trying to choose an outfit for our parenting class tonight. "Uppity, annoying, impossible..."

"Talking to yourself, trouble?" Sinclair's deep voice breaks through my angry diatribe, and I jump about ten feet in the air.

Whirling around, I find him leaning in the closet doorway, watching me intently.

"Dominic, you scared me half to death!"

The big wolf tsks, coming forward and pulling me into his arms, petting me gently. "I'm sorry." He croons, kissing my hair.

"Sometimes I forget how weak your hearing is."

"My hearing is fine!" I object, feeling irrationally angry all of a sudden. "It's your ridiculous shifter stealth that's the problem. It's not right that anyone as big as you should be able to move around so quietly."

"Alright." He agrees, and I have a sneaking suspicion he's smothering a smile. "It's my fault, I'm a big hulking beast and I need to do a better job of stomping around."

I pull away from him, narrowing my eyes. "Are you laughing at me?"

Now Sinclair does smile, “Is there any way I can answer that question that won’t annoy you?”

I huff, deciding not to dignify that question with an answer. I turn back to my closet, beginning to rifle through trouser options.

“Nothing fits anymore.” I complain, eliminating every pair of pants I come across. “I can’t button any of these!”

Sinclair’s palm rubs over the gentle curve of my belly. The changes are still very slight, but my clothing has gone from being a bit tight to entirely too small. My breasts might not be so tender anymore, but they spill out of all my bras, and my favorite fitted tops now stretch and strain to cover my growing tummy. “That’s a good thing, Ella.” Sinclair reminds me gently. “It means the baby is growing big and strong.”

“Oh enough of that!” I argue, not sure why I’m so determined to disagree with everything he says. “All that means is that your giant pup is coming closer to pushing my body past its limits. Normal women don’t show this much at this stage you know.” My throat is stinging with the threat of tears, even though I know I’m being unreasonable. I feel like I’m on a roller coaster, I can see exactly what’s happening, but I also can’t get off the ride.

Sinclair clucks sympathetically, “You’re having a rough day, aren’t you, sweetheart?” I can hear the guilt in his voice, and it makes me want to cry all the more. He’s been working from home a lot and I can tell he feels like he’s neglecting us, but there’s also nothing to be done. He bears so much responsibility, and it’s only going to get worse if he wins the crown. Suddenly I feel terrible for being so grumpy with him, when he’s already blaming himself despite doing everything he can to take care of me.

“I’m sorry.” I sniffle. “I shouldn’t be giving you a hard time.”

“You’re allowed.” He promises, pulling a wrap dress from the clothing rack. “Here, no buttons, no zippers. You don’t even have to wear a bra.”

“Thank you.” I murmur, sliding my arms around his middle and squeezing tightly. Sinclair purrs and snuggles me until I’ve had my fill, and half an hour later we’re back on the padded floors of our monthly birthing class, listening to the instructor explain precisely why I’m slowly losing my mind.

“Moms, you’ll be feeling physically better now that you’re out of the first trimester, but this is the time when your hormones really kick into high gear. You may already be experiencing some intense mood swings, as well as physical changes to things like hair growth or skin pigmentation.” She looks around at the couples spread out on the mats, and I see I’m not the only expectant mother looking sheepish or anxious.

“You’ll also experience heightened libidos – something I encourage you all to take advantage of, as you won’t have time for much fun after your pup arrives.”

Oh great. I think bitterly. As if it wasn’t already hard enough to resist Sinclair. I’d known this was part of pregnancy, but I also hadn’t understood how powerless I’d be to my hormones. I’d assumed it would be like PMS mood swings, not these constant extremes. The instructor is still speaking. “Bottom line, mates, it’s your job to keep Mom satisfied and relaxed during these next few months. She’s going to need you to be her rock while she weathers these stormy seas, so I encourage you not to go overboard coddling her – tempting as it may be. Her wolf needs to feel your strength now more than ever.”

Somehow I really don’t think they give the same advice in human birthing classes. I mutter to my conscience.

A warm chuckle rumbles against my back and Sinclair’s voice sounds in my mind. You should see the look on your face.

I look up at Sinclair, wondering how he was able to see my expression in the first place. He grins down at me, then steals a kiss from my pouting lips.

“You also need to create a birthing plan you’re both comfortable with.” The instructor carries on. “By show of hands, who here is considering a home birth rather than a hospital birth.”

I raise my hand hesitantly. I haven’t decided which option I feel most comfortable with yet, but I’m open to either and want to hear what she has to say. However, almost as soon as I put my hand up, a low growl sounds in my ear. “Put that lovely little hand down. You’re going to deliver in the hospital and that is not up for discussion.”

I turn to glare at him. I might not be decided yet, but I don’t appreciate him taking away my options. “You’re supposed to be keeping me relaxed and listening to my instincts.” I state fiercely, mimicking the instructor in a saccharine tone even though the whole class can probably hear us, “trusting my body’s wisdom.”

“Ella, you’re high risk.” Sinclair reminds me sternly, the rugged contours of his face set in a foreboding expression. “We need to be at the hospital in case the doctors need to make an emergency intervention.”

I know he’s thinking of my high blood pressure, not to mention the fact that I’m going to be the first human in recorded history to give birth to a shifter. I also know this makes sense, but his high handed manner is making me gnash my teeth in frustration, “It’s my body.”

His wolf flashes in his eyes, “You’re mine – and so is this baby. I’m not going to let you endanger him or yourself, Ella.”

Without thinking, I offer him a snarl – which on my lips sounds more like the grumble of an angry kitten, but I’m sure my intentions are clear.

Sinclair’s hands tighten around me. His power washes over me, and I wish I had a tail to tuck between my legs. “Did you just growl at me, little mate?”

Despite my trembling spine, I tilt my chin up defiantly. “Why not? You growl at me all the time.”

Before he can respond, the instructor laughs, breaking the tense silence in the rest of the room and reclaiming control over the class. “You see, this is the perfect example of why it’s important to talk about these things together early on. You might assume you’re on the same page but discover you have different ideas.”

It’s also an example of why naughty humans need just as firm a hand as she wolves.

Sinclair intones, speaking through his bond with the baby. His mouth is at my throat, his lips grazing the spot where he’ll one day pretend to mark me. I feel a nip from his fangs, and my anger abruptly slips away. All of a sudden my entire body melts, and I realize that the instructor had been right – I do need to feel Sinclair’s strength right now. Then again, maybe this is more hormonal insanity, because why else am I now wishing he could mark me for real?

Chapter 77

Sinclair

“What do you think about this one?” I ask, pulling Ella’s attention away from the rack of onesies she’s currently perusing.

“Oh, so you care what I want now?” She retorts, shooting me a sulky glare. She’s been pouting ever since we left our parenting class, and despite the instructor’s quick thinking to prevent us having a very public argument, I know Ella hasn’t gotten over my

high-handed order regarding a hospital birth. We decided to spend our free afternoon shopping for baby gear before we ever left the house today, or I'm sure she wouldn't have agreed to stay in my company. The stubborn creature has done her best to ignore me since our disagreement, only allowing me to touch her when required for class and barely speaking to me.

Now, as I'm considering cribs and strollers, Ella has placed herself as far away as she can get without leaving my sight, a line she seemed to understand she shouldn't cross no matter how unhappy she is with me. Sighing, I cross the small shop until I'm looming over her. "Ella, of course I care about what you want. I didn't mean to dismiss your feelings earlier, but there are some risks I'm simply not willing to take."

"I just wanted to consider my options." Ella grumbles back, crossing her arms over her chest and unintentionally pushing her pert breasts together. "I don't even know that I would want a home birth, I just thought it was something to consider."

Dragging my gaze from her lush body, I answer. "I understand that and if our situation were different, I wouldn't have a problem with a home birth, but our situation isn't different." I reach for her, but she backs out of my reach. "If you want a water birth or a doula, we can arrange for those things at the hospital, but we need to be practical."

Ella glowers up at me, her lower lip quivering dangerously. I have a bad feeling she's about to cry, and suddenly I'm wishing she would growl at me again. I can't recall ever hearing such a cute noise except from actual pups. I wasn't about to let her get away with it, but it had also been very difficult not to smile. "I don't want the baby to be high risk." Ella finally shares, her voice husky. "It isn't fair."

"I agree." I tell her seriously, hating the idea of either one of them being threatened. "But it is the reality, and we have to make sure you have the safest birth possible. In fact, if your blood pressure doesn't come down by the end of the week, I think we need to go back to the doctor."

Ella nods, fighting back a hiccup. Her golden eyes are shining, and I'm quickly losing my patience with the distance between us.

"Okay."

"Okay." I repeat, ducking my head to try and catch her eye. "So are we friends again? Can we kiss and make up?"

Ella willingly comes into my arms, her small, warm body all tension and sharp edges. She snuggles into my embrace and breathes in my scent, though she doesn't give up her sulking completely. "You better not be this bossy in the delivery room."

I chuckle, low and deep, stroking her long hair. "Oh, you're going to let me be in the delivery room?" I ask, surprised that she wants this, even though I always planned on forcing my way in.

To my surprise, Ella pulls back with a sharp intake of breath. "You are going to be there aren't you?"

She looks so frightened by the prospect of delivering the baby alone that my wolf begins to instinctively purr. "Of course, sweet Ella. I'm not going to let you do it alone – even if you hate me when the time comes and try to kick me out, I won't leave."

Her racing heart slows, but she eyes me suspiciously. "That sounds bossy."

"I said I would be there, not that I wouldn't be bossy." I tease, pulling her close again.

"Tyrant." She accuses, even as she nuzzles her face into my chest.

"Troublemaker." I reply, relieved that we're no longer at odds even though I find her feisty nature irresistible. I much prefer keeping our disagreements playful, rather than serious. "We haven't talked about baby names either." I realize aloud, "We should probably figure these things out before we go back to class. I don't think our teacher appreciated us stealing her thunder."

"We can talk about names." Ella agrees, seeming content to stay wrapped in my arms, even though other customers are already glancing our way – smiling to themselves. Oblivious, Ella performs a huge yawn, her lovely lips stretching wider than I thought was possible.

"Mhmm, do you want to keep shopping while we do?" I inquire, trying to keep the amusement out of my voice. "Or do you want to go home and take a nap?"

"We can keep shopping." She answers, making no effort to move.

"You do know you'll have to let me go in order to do that, right?" I ask, wanting nothing of the kind.

Ella blinks, as if she didn't realize she was already half asleep and leaning all her weight against me. She steps back, smoothing down her dress as she considers the cribs in front of us. "Well, what are your thoughts about names?"

I flash her my most wolfish grin. "How about Thor or Rex?"

Ella gapes, not realizing I'm only making mischief. "You might as well call him butch or spike!" She exclaims, her voice taking a haughty turn. "He might be a wolf but that doesn't mean you have to give him a dog's name, Dominic."

"Well he'll be Alpha one day, so it should be something strong." I reply, still smiling at my indignant little human.

She snorts, "names don't make someone strong – that's about character and integrity."

"Oh really?" I challenge, "so you think calling our son daffodil will set him up for success, do you?"

I've never seen someone so much shorter than me try to look down their nose at me, but somehow Ella manages. "I think if we call our son daffodil, he'll redefine the word for generations to come."

"Maybe, but he'll also be bullied on the playground his entire childhood." I reason, pretending to read the information sheet for one of the strollers.

"Which is why we can't name him anything as ridiculous as Rex." Ella replies, digging in her heels. "I just don't think you should let something as arbitrary as a name decide someone's character."

"Well see that's where we disagree, you see, I believe there is great power in names." I explain, actually meaning my words now.

She frowns pensively, "how about Henry, for your father?"

Suddenly my interest in getting a rise out of Ella evaporates. "That's a very sweet idea." I concede, pinning her with my gaze.

"But do you like the name Henry?"

"It's not my favorite." She shrugs, "but I don't dislike it."

“And I suppose someone who loves children as much as you do – who’s been trying for so long... there’s no chance you have names already picked out, right?” I guess, already knowing the answer to my question.

Ella flushes a delectable shade of pale pink, but she doesn’t say a word.

“Well, come on – out with it.” I encourage.

“Why don’t you tell me yours first.” She suggests, “your real ones I mean.”

Laughing, I agree. “I’ve always liked the name Damon. Then there’s Gabriel, or Maxim... but my favorite is Orion.”

“Like the hunter, from all the myths?” Ella clarifies.

“Not to mention the stars.” I reply, thinking of the constellation.

“I like that idea.” She muses, smiling softly. “I always imagine that if I had a son, I’d call him Rafe.”

“Rafe,” I repeat, rolling the name over my tongue. “You know that means wolf, don’t you?”

Ella stops in her tracks, and though I initially suspect that she’s merely surprised the name she chose has this particular meaning, when I look over at her I freeze. Her eyes are full of tears, and her hand is pressed to her stomach.

“Sweetheart, what is it?” I ask urgently, closing the distance between us.

“The baby,” She answers, her cheeks splitting into an incandescent smile. “He just moved. I think he might have kicked!”

“What!” I immediately move my hand alongside hers, knowing I’m grinning like a fool.

“It was when you said, Rafe.” As the name leaves her lips, the tiniest bump flutters against my hand, and suddenly we’re both laughing. My own eyes are shining now, and I pull Ella’s mouth down to my own. “I think we just named our baby.” I tell her ecstatically between kisses.

We stay like that for a long time, repeatedly saying the name and celebrating every time our son kicks in reply. Through the bond I can tell he loves the sound of our laughter and

joy, and soon he's kicking just to make us smile. Eventually we give up on shopping entirely. I take Ella home and lavish her with all her favorite things – the self care gifts I'd been unable to give her after the Wild Hunt. We spend the rest of the day curled up in front of a blazing fire, and reveling in our delight over this milestone. I know our future is still so uncertain, but right now everything is perfect, and I'm not going to take a single moment for granted.

Chapter 78

Sinclair

A week after our pup started moving, my brother appears on my doorstep, claiming to bring news of the Prince. I'm amazed to discover that I'm not angry to see him for the first time in years. In fact, as strange as it seems, I'm actually thankful for his presence. I'm still not sure whether he's truly my ally, but my wolf is urging me to trust him, and he's rarely wrong.

Besides, any intelligence – even false intelligence – is still new information, and I can sniff out a lie better than anyone. “How's Ella?” He asks, pulling off his coat.

“She's perfect.” I boast, unable to help myself. I can feel myself beaming, but I can't seem to turn off my smile muscles. “She's napping right now, and we're going back to the doctor tomorrow because her blood pressure is still a bit elevated... but otherwise she's absolutely wonderful. I couldn't have asked for a better mother for my pup.”

“I meant... after the attack.” Roger clarifies, looking slightly baffled by my effusiveness.

“Oh,” I pause, laughing softly. “Sorry, it's easy to get caught up. She's still a bit shaken, but her nightmares are happening less frequently now.”

“You're really in love, huh?” Roger inquires, looking surprised.

I scoff, “Did you really doubt that?” I don't pause to consider this idea. As far as Roger knows we fell in love and chose to start a family together. He shouldn't have any reason to think this is all a lie, and I don't like the idea that he might be onto our scheme.

“I mean, you haven't marked her, I figured you were only with her for political reasons.” He shrugs.

“The politics are just a bonus.” I rumble, and I’m mildly amazed to realize this isn’t a lie. At some point the advantages of faking a relationship with Ella shifted, and after more than two months together, I’m discovering that I enjoy her company far more than I enjoy winning the campaign. Winning the campaign is important and necessary yes, but it’s always been a duty, not a personal ambition that gives me pleasure.

“Anyway, what of the Prince?” I ask, ushering Roger into my office.

“Well if possible, he hates Ella even more than he hates you.” Roger sighs. “I think there’s something about being shown up by a she-wolf infuriates him or emasculates him on some visceral level. He really has it out for her.”

“He’s already tried to kill her twice.” I remark coldly, “I’m not sure how much worse things could get.”

“Dom, he doesn’t just want her dead now.” Roger grimaces. “He wants to make her pay first, to punish her, drag it out and make her death as painful as possible. And he wants to make sure you truly suffer too.”

My wolf rises to the surface, and for a moment I have to step away just to breathe. I count to ten inside my head, resisting the urge to shift and trying to block out the furious howls roaring through my head. “Do you know what he’s planning? Why is he taking so long to act if he hates her so much.”

“Because he’s needed the time to figure out how to get her away from you. That’s part of why things have been quiet this last month – he’s been plotting.” Roger shares, seeming truly disturbed to be delivering this news.

Goddess Damn it! I think desperately. This is all my fault, I put her in this danger!

We have to kill him. My wolf snarls, Forget the politics. She and the pup won’t be safe as long as he lives.

We can’t just kill him. His father is the King. He’s bound to take revenge for his son’s murder and unlike the Prince, he has an entire army at his back. Besides, even if he doesn’t – I won’t be considered a suitable candidate anymore and the Alpha council might call off the election. Then the man who paralyzed Dad will be rewarded with a throne he stole!

But it’s Ella. My wolf insists. And it’s the pup. We have to protect them.

“Plotting what?” I growl, my clenched fists shaking with rage as my claws extend and retract.

“He’s going to try and lure her out on her own so he can take her. Right now your guards are keeping his spies at a distance, but he’s planning a campaign event for the Lunas. He thinks if he can guarantee a women-only event then you won’t be around to protect her.” Roger shares, watching me nervously, as if afraid I might explode at a moment’s notice.

“When is it going to happen?” I demand, trying to recall if I’ve seen any sort of invitation matching this description.

“In a couple of weeks.” Roger explains, “He’s planning another rogue attack for the same day, just to be sure you can’t get to her.”

I hear faint movement on the other side of my office door, and I hold up a finger to pause Roger. He glances in the direction of the soft footsteps tiptoeing towards my door. Ella’s scent comes fluttering through the wooden panel, and then a small shadow appears beneath the door jam. My lip quirks with exasperation and amusement. It would seem my little troublemaker is up from her nap, and she’s taken it into her beautiful head to eavesdrop.

I move my finger to my lips, exchanging a knowing glance with Roger. I raise my voice slightly, just in case Ella’s human hearing needs the volume. “I don’t know, if I sell my baby after the campaign is over there’s not much the council can do about it.”

A soft, feminine gasp meets my ears and Roger smothers a laugh, covering it with a cough. “They can always call for another election, don’t forget that’s how we ended up in this situation in the first place.”

“Maybe, but by then I’ll have the army at my disposal.” I counter, rising to my feet and moving as silently as I can across the floor.

“They won’t stand a chance against me.”

I abruptly swing the door open, startling Ella and throwing her off balance. Clearly she was leaning her weight into the door in order to hear better. I catch her slender wrists before she can tumble to the floor, though I’m currently of the opinion that her bottom could do with a bit of soreness.

“Well well, what have we here?” I rumble ominously. “It looks like one very naughty little spy.”

Ella’s wide eyes flash with emotion as she works through her predicament – processing her shock, fear, confusion and then outrage once she realizes our previous words were solely for her benefit. “You rat!” She exclaims finally, “that wasn’t funny!”

“Oh I beg to differ.” I reply, scooping her up into my arms. “I think you got exactly what you deserved.”

I return to my chair, settling the defiant bundle in my lap. Ella huffs, glaring at me with all the ferocity and indignance she possesses. “Well from the sounds of it I should have been part of this conversation in the first place. You left me out again, Dominic!”

“You were asleep.” I state pointedly. “And you need your rest. I had every intention of filling you in once you woke. If you’d knocked I would have gladly invited you in.”

Ella deflates slightly, looking suddenly unsure of herself. “Really?”

“Yes, really.” I confirm, closing my hand over her nape to let her feel my solid strength. “You need to know these things as much as I do.”

“But... you were so determined not to worry me.” She argues, her voice very small now.

“That was before – before you helped me understand how it made you feel not to know what was happening in your own life.” I remind her, “And before I appreciated how much being informed would encourage you to be cautious.”

“Oh.” Ella murmurs, blushing deeply. “I’m sorry, I thought...”

“I know what you thought.” I answer, “But you don’t need to worry about that right now.” Just when she starts to relax, I lower my mouth to her ear, “We’ll deal with your bad behavior later.”

Ella shivers against me, her sweet scent growing warm and liquid. Roger rolls his eyes, “You two aren’t very subtle, you know that.”

“We’re not trying to be.” I smirk, loving the way she’s squirming anxiously against me. “Now, if you would please help my mischievous mate get up to speed, I’m sure she’d appreciate it.”

“Yes please,” Ella offers shyly, “I’m sorry I eavesdropped on your conversation.”

Roger shakes his head. “You two are really a pair, you know that?”

“We know.” I beam, pausing to kiss the soft spot behind Ella’s ear.

“Alright, well the bottom line is that you need to be very careful.” Roger sighs, “and you’re going to get an invitation for a women’s event in a couple of weeks. Whatever you do, you have to make an excuse not to attend. Accept the invitation, but pull out at the last second so that they don’t know you’re onto them. In the meantime, I can give you details about the rogue attack so you can stop it before it happens. But the Prince can’t find out I’m helping you or we’ll lose the inside track.”

“What is he planning on doing with me?” Ella inquires, cuddling closer to me for comfort.

Roger and I exchange a meaningful glance, and I imperceptibly shake my head. “You don’t need to worry about that.” Roger replies, “All you need to know is that you don’t want to fall into his hands– at any cost. Trust me when I tell you that if it comes to it and you have a choice between dying and being captured... choose death.”

Chapter 79

Ella

“I’m very worried about this, Ella.” The doctor pronounces grimly. He’s just taken my blood pressure, and it’s the same high reading we recorded this morning with the home kit. “I know you’re in the middle of a campaign and you’re going through a lot, but you’ve got to find a way to de-stress. If you don’t, we’ll have to put you on bed rest.”

“Bed rest?” I repeat anxiously. “For how long?”

The doctor’s grave face speaks volume, “the duration of your pregnancy.”

Sinclair stiffens beside me, moving the hand at my nape to massage my tense shoulder muscles. “What can we do, other than avoiding high pressure situations?”

“I’m going to prescribe you some medicine that will be safe for you and the baby. Be sure to take it every day, and otherwise just keep up the things we’ve already talked about – healthy eating, regular exercise, activities you find calming or relaxing.” The doctor continues, listing off suggestions. “You can try meditation or breathing exercises, pregnancy yoga is getting very popular.

Sticking to a daily routine can really help when things are uncertain and you’re going through all these changes. And Alpha, help her however you can.”

“The instructor at our parenting class advised us not to coddle our mates– is that still good advice given Ella’s risk level?” Sinclair inquires.

“Yes.” The doctor agrees, smashing the small surge of hope I’d felt to pieces. “Human or wolf, your mate needs to feel like you’re in control, especially in cases like this where so much is out of your hands. She needs you to ground her if she starts to spiral – to show her she can rely on you no matter what.”

I can’t see the logic underpinning his words, but I still don’t like it. What’s so wrong with a bit of coddling? I’ve never been coddled in my entire life. As if he can read my thoughts, Sinclair’s warm breath flutters over my neck, “Just remember how much you hated it when I kept you out of the loop, trying to protect you.”

Oh. I guess I have been coddled after all. I’m about to acknowledge this, but when I look up at Sinclair, he’s smiling at me so affectionately that my heart stops beating. “Besides,” He continues indulgently. “Just because I don’t coddle you, doesn’t mean I can’t pamper you the way you deserve.”

I find myself giggling like a schoolgirl, and the doctor steps out, clearly feeling as though he’s intruding on something even though we’re only talking. When we get home, Sinclair tucks me in for a nap and returns to work, making me promise to call on the servants if I need anything and vowing to be home as early as he can.

I sleep fitfully. Even exhausted as I am, I find it very difficult to sleep without Sinclair. I swear he’s becoming like my security blanket – my body won’t relax fully unless he’s with me and my nightmares always surge in his absence. I’m getting too attached to him. I think sadly, climbing out of bed after half an hour of tossing and turning.

So? The little voice in my head challenges. He’s the baby’s father – he’s going to be in your life forever. Why not get attached?

Because he won't always be in my life in this way. He's not going to be sleeping with me when he finds his second chance mate

– and I have to be able to survive on my own. I can't become so codependent that I need him to take care of me. I answer ruefully.

Maybe he won't find his mate at all. The voice suggests, sounding much too hopeful for my liking.

I scoff at my own naivete, get it together, Ella! You can't start thinking that way – it's just asking for heartbreak.

I've only just opened the door to go downstairs and find an afternoon snack when one of the guards appears at the top of the stairwell. "Luna, there's a visitor for you."

"Really?" I stop in my tracks. "Who is it? I wasn't expecting anyone."

"She says you used to work for her." He shrugs. "I tried to get her name but she wouldn't tell me. Should I make her leave?"

I pause, knowing Sinclair wouldn't like the idea of an unidentified woman entering his home. I don't like the idea myself –

especially after Roger's warning. "What does she look like?"

"Tall, dark hair, tan skin – maybe 40?" He lowers his voice to a whisper. "She's human."

My stomach sinks, it does sound like a former employer and if she's human then it's probably true. In fact, she sounds like the heartless woman who fired me so callously after I tried to beg Sinclair for Cora's job. "No, let her in. I'll speak to her."

Be nice, I instruct myself sternly. Maybe she came to apologize, don't be rude just because you're feelings were hurt.

When I get downstairs, Jake and Millie's mother is gazing around Sinclair's sitting room, a hungry gaze on her face. She looks me up and down as I enter, something distinctly spiteful in her open perusal. She speaks before I can say a word of welcome.

"Well, you've certainly come up in the world, Ella. Lord only knows what you had to do to wiggle your way into Dominic Sinclair's bed."

“What are you doing here?” I inquire, no longer feeling any need to play nice. She clearly set the tone of this conversation and though I’m sorely tempted to kick her out now, I need to find out what she wants first.

“Well when I saw your picture plastered across the society section of the paper I could scarcely believe it. I had to come and find out if the rumors were true.” She explains simply.

I fight the urge to roll my eyes, the media firestorm my relationship with Sinclair created clearly didn’t stop with the shifter news.

Everyone in the human world thought Sinclair was just a handsome billionaire, and he was still a public figure for all his philanthropic work. I should have realized this might happen – my social circle had been very small before discovering the werewolf world and most of the people from my past wouldn’t have any reason to be suspicious of my relationship with Sinclair.

This woman, however, knows exactly how at odds I was with my pup’s father in the beginning.

“Well now that you’ve seen that they were true, you can be leaving.” I suggest, knowing there must be more to this.

“Oh no, I think you and I have much to discuss, Ella.” Her eyes are locked on the curve of my belly. “It’s no wonder you were begging outside his gate that day. No doubt trying to get a bit of money out of him to take care of your little problem?”

“My baby isn’t a problem.” I insist. “And I didn’t even know I was pregnant then. I was asking for help on behalf of my sister – she was going to lose her job over a misunderstanding, ironically enough.”

My ex-employer studies me for a moment, as if trying to decide whether or not she believes. After a pregnant pause, she snorts.

“So what, you thought because you spread your legs for him he would fall at your feet?” She guesses, drawing the wrong conclusion. Shaking her head, she arches a brow. “Though I have to give you credit for not giving up when you realized he’d knocked you up. Very enterprising – for a common whore.”

My jaw drops, “Excuse me?”

“I always knew there was something off about you. It never made sense why you wanted to chase after my brats all day anyway.

Now I see the brilliance of your plan.” She nods at my small baby bump. “You were probably selling yourself all over that neighborhood, just waiting for exactly this sort of ‘accident.’”

“Are you suggesting...” I can’t even say the words, unable to believe my ears.

“How much did you charge him anyway?” She questions, venom dripping from her tongue. “I suppose being so beautiful meant you were able to attract clients far above your station, still, it seems backwards that he should be the one to pay for a night with you. And now you’ve won the lottery by conceiving his bastard.”

I’m not sure what upsets me more, hearing her call my pup names, or her accusations about me charging Sinclair for sex. “You come here and insult my baby, then accuse me of being a prostitute, and you think I’m just going to sit here and take it?” I demand fiercely. “You’re not just cruel – you’re delusional. Get out of my house this instant.”

“I’m not going anywhere.” She hisses in return. “Not without a check.”

The room is spinning around me, “You expect me to pay you? Why, to keep you from spreading these lies?”

“I think the tabloids would be very interested in what I could tell them about you.” She smirks. “They’re painting you two as some sort of fairytale romance – just imagine the headlines if they realized you’re nothing but a disgraced nanny who couldn’t even hold onto her job because she was too busy whoring around for wealthy men.”

I grit my teeth, trying to slow my racing thoughts enough to process this. I don’t particularly care what the human papers say about me, and I have enough good references from past jobs to refute what she’s saying. But that isn’t the problem. The real problem is that if the shifter media learns I was here in Moon Valley, working as a nanny for a human family in Sinclair’s neighborhood and not off in the bloodbane pack, they’ll figure out I’m human. If the truth comes out about my real identity, all our lies will be exposed, and the Campaign will be over faster than we can blink. The Prince will win, and the entire realm will be in danger – not to mention that my baby’s life will practically be forfeit.

I have to talk to Sinclair, I have to find a way to stop her.

“Give me twenty four hours.”

Chapter 80

Ella

“What!” Sinclair roars through the phone receiver, his deep voice full of such rage and aggression that it makes me flinch. I’ve just told him about every horrible moment of my conversation with my former employer – though now it’s probably more accurate to think of her as my blackmailer.

I’ll have to change her contact information in my phone to reflect her new title – I can even assign her an ominous ringtone. I fight down the urge to laugh at this insane thought, wondering why my brain always twists the darkest moments of my life into humor.

There is nothing funny about this situation.

“I don’t know what to do.” I whimper. “I don’t care what she says about me—” I’m interrupted by a low snarl, Sinclair’s wolf’s wordless insistence that he cares even if I don’t. “but if she sells this story then everyone will realize I’m human.”

“I’ll kill her.” He rumbles, overflowing with menace. “She won’t find it so easy to speak such filth when her head is no longer connected to her body.”

“You can’t!” I object, still feeling as though he’s missing the point. “That will only call more attention to her – there will be an investigation into her life and eventually they’ll want to interview me. My identity is bound to get out if that happens. Also, you know – murder is wrong, Dominic.”

“She threatened you.” He growls, as if I’ve forgotten. “And there won’t be an investigation if I make it look like an accident. You’d be amazed how many car accidents result in decapitations.”

“Blackmail hardly warrants an execution, and you can’t go around ripping the heads off everyone who is mean to me.” I insist, overwhelmed that this surreal conversation is actually occurring. “You’re supposed to be setting a good example for our son.”

“The example I’ll be setting is how to protect one’s mate from vile, conniving, despicable, foul—”

“Dominic!” I interrupt, raising my voice over his increasing volatile grumbling. “She has children who love her – she may not deserve their love, but if you kill her, they’ll suffer. Jake and Millie don’t deserve that.”

“They’d probably be better off without her.” Sinclair suggests sullenly, his voice shifting then, as if a new idea is occurring to him.

“We could even take them in – adopt them. I know you miss them... just think, we could have three children instead of one.”

“Oh really, are you going to kill their father too?” I inquire waspishly, shaking my head.

“That depends.” Sinclair replies hopefully, “would you be okay with that?”

“I don’t think I really appreciated how bloodthirsty shifters are about their families until now.” I tell Cora a little while later. “The ridiculous wolf actually thought he could win me over to his plan by waving those precious babies under my nose. It was like trying to talk a hungry jackal out of his dinner.”

“I mean he wasn’t completely off base.” Cora jokes, “if it was possible to convince you, bribing you with children is probably how I’d go about it too.”

“Well I told him that he wasn’t allowed to rip any heads off under any circumstances.” I counter.

Cora snorts, “I bet he took that really well.”

“Oh he grumbled and complained, but he got over it.” I laugh, leaving out the part where he threatened to come home and ‘spank my sassy bottom’ until I agreed to his violent plan. That is not the sort of detail I want my sister to know.

“So what’s he going to do?” My sister inquires curiously, sitting across from me in the same parlor where my blackmailer threatened me two hours ago. I called her and asked her to come over after getting off the phone with Sinclair, in desperate need of some moral support.

“He told me not to worry and that he’d take care of it.” I sigh. “I doubt he’ll pay her, but if he can get Mike to turn himself in to the police, he can probably convince her not to make good on her promise.”

“Are you okay with that?” Cora wonders aloud, “I wouldn’t think you’d be comfortable trusting someone else with something so important.”

“I trust Dominic.” I admit, blushing shyly. Cora understands better than anyone what a momentous statement this is for me. She knows I’ve always had to rely on myself, and that I’ve never felt safe relying on anyone else because of far too many bad experiences. “Honestly I felt better just talking to him about it. I know he’ll fix this, and my only concern is that he’ll lose his temper and go overboard protecting us.”

The baby kicks softly, as if he agrees. “Quick, come here!” I exclaim, waving Cora over. She does, and I pull her palm to my belly.

The baby is still now, so I murmur encouragement at my tummy. “Come on Rafe, say hello to your Aunt Cora.”

At the sound of his name, the pup complies, and Cora and I both squeal. She hugs me tightly then, “You’re glowing you know that? I’ve never seen you so happy – and correct me if I’m wrong, but I don’t think it’s just becoming a Mom.”

“You’re not wrong.” I confess, grinning despite myself. “I am happy, even with all the danger and the drama. I didn’t know it was possible to feel this way.”

Cora shakes her head, eyes shining. “God you should see your smile, Elle. I swear I could kiss Dominic.”

I’m amazed to feel a stab of jealousy when she mentions kissing Sinclair, even though I know it’s only an expression. “You don’t think it’s completely deranged?” I ask shyly. “I mean rogues keep popping up and trying to kill me, and a horrible heartless woman is blackmailing me. It seems crazy to be happy in spite of all that.”

“Ella,” She says seriously, leaning forward with her elbows on her knees. “Do you really think it’s crazy, or do you just feel like you don’t deserve to be happy?”

Her words cut me to the core, and I find myself staring at my hands. I ponder her question for a few seconds, shrugging. “I mean, do I deserve it? Not fishing for compliments, not feeling sorry for myself – but what have I done in my life to deserve so

much prosperity? In a few months I could be as good as a Queen, even if it is only temporary.”

“Ella, the rich and powerful don’t end up that way because of merit!” Cora argues. “How many of the people running the world actually worked to get where they are? Everyone deserves to be happy... well maybe not the Prince or your old boss, but you do! You might not have done anything remarkable yet, but you’ve also never hurt anyone! You’ve never ruined lives for your own selfish promotion.”

“I haven’t been a complete saint.” I remind her. “I mean I’ve stolen and broken laws, I’m lying to millions of people even as we speak.”

“You stole when we were children. You broke laws to survive and to keep me alive, to protect the other orphans. You’ve taken care of people your whole life and you kept doing it for work because you love it so much. And you’re lying to people so that you can protect them from a monster. You’re still taking care of people now, and you’re risking your life to do it. Trust me Ella, you deserve all the prosperity and all the happiness in the world.”

I peek over at my sister, my throat scratching with unshed tears. Looking at her beloved face, I find the strength to ask a question I’ve been too afraid to ask until now. “What if I can’t do it?”

“Do what, be queen?” She clarifies, her brow furrowed.

“Or any of it? I mean I’m just a human – every day I learn about something else I had no idea existed. And after the baby comes I’m going to lose its scent. What if I can’t keep up the act? Or what if I can, but I make some horrible mistake because of my ignorance? I’m going to be responsible for so many people, what if I screw up and someone gets hurt as a result?” I question, swiping at my lashes to keep the tears from falling.

“You’re not in this alone, Ella.” Cora murmurs. “Dominic is going to be helping you every step of the way, and so are his people –

so will I, in any way I can. You don’t have to bear all the responsibility yourself anymore – those days are over.”

I hiccup, nodding and trying to get my breathing under control. “Thank you.” I sniffle. “I needed to hear that.”

Just then a creak sounds on the other side of the door, and I realize we aren't alone. I quickly cross the floor, pulling the door open before our eavesdropper can get away. I suppose this is payback for my own spying the other day, but I'm horrified when I realize who was listening.

It's Roger, and he's just heard every single word of my conversation.

Chapter 81

Ella

I haven't been sick for a few days now, but when I see Roger standing on the other side of the door I immediately turn to one of the ornamental vases in the hallway and empty my stomach. Cora rushes forward to help me, glancing uncertainly at Roger as she pulls my hair back from my face.

I know that Sinclair and Roger are on better terms since the wild hunt, but I also know that their peace is very tenuous. Sinclair hasn't decided whether or not he truly trusts his brother yet, and though Roger has been helpful bringing intelligence from the Prince's camp, he could easily be playing the double agent for both sides – and now he knows my deepest, darkest secret.

This is so bad. I think frantically. He told the Prince that Sinclair hadn't marked me, what if he tells him this too? Forget the blackmail – Roger is more dangerous to me than some bitter ex-employer could ever be!

I wipe the back of my hand over my mouth, straightening with a pitiful moan. I look over at Roger, finding his expression a combination of confusion and concern. "You'd better come in."

"Ella, I'm sorry." He begins hesitantly. "I didn't mean to startle you, and I wasn't trying to eavesdrop. I came over to check in with Sinclair and... well it wasn't difficult to overhear your conversation."

"I know, I know – your shifter hearing is very acute." I grumble. "Trust me, I'm learning just how out of my depth I am every day."

“I don’t understand.” Roger admits, following me into the sitting room. “How is this even possible?”

I sit down, graciously accepting a glass of water from my sister. “Listen, I’ll tell you the truth, but only if you promise me that this conversation stays between us. I know you’ve been helping us lately, but I’m going to be honest – I’m not convinced you’re actually on our side.”

“That’s fair.” Roger admits, looking drawn and pale. “After what I did... I know I don’t deserve your trust, or your forgiveness.”

“Well I’m sure I don’t need to tell you what would happen if this information got out. The only people who know are servants of this house, and my doctor. Not even Henry knows the truth, because if this becomes public information Sinclair’s campaign will be over. The Prince will become King, thousands would die under his tyranny – including me and your nephew.” I remark pointedly, holding my hand to my baby bump. “I don’t care what kind of sibling rivalry you have, or how strongly you think you should have Alpha – if you endanger my baby’s life, you won’t only have Sinclair to deal with – I’ll kill you myself.”

“Ella!” Cora exclaims, shocked by my aggression. In truth I’ve shocked myself, but those primal Mama Bear instincts that started coming out at the ball are back in full force, and I don’t regret a single word I’ve spoken. I would do anything to protect my child, including killing to keep him safe.

“It’s okay.” Roger assures her. “You’re very spirited for a human. I can see why Sinclair picked you.” He stares me in the eye, holding the contact as he makes his next promise. “And you have my word that I’ll take this secret to my grave – I swear it on my mother’s grave.”

“Good.” I nod, feeling a bit more relaxed now. “But you’re wrong if you think Sinclair picked me. This all started as a rather wild accident.”

“An accident?” Roger repeats, his brow knitting with confusion.

“It was my fault really.” Cora admits, relating the mix up at the sperm bank. Of course, her confession only leads to more questions, about why I went to the sperm bank in the first place, and how we figured out Sinclair’s sample had been used instead of the donor I chose. When he hears about Mike, I’m amazed to see how outraged he looks in my honor

– I suppose messing with one’s fertility is a grave offense among wolves, even more so than with humans.

“So you still don’t know how the samples got switched?” Roger presses, after we move past the Mike of it all.

“No.” Cora and I say in unison. “The surveillance cameras were disabled in the lab – before the samples were switched. And of course we don’t film in the exam rooms.”

“What?” I inquire, “this is the first I’m hearing of the security cameras being tampered with.”

“That’s one of the reasons they eventually let me off the hook.” Cora informs me.

“Sinclair ordered them to hire me back, but the investigation didn’t actually move away from me as a suspect until they found the tapes were blank during your appointment. I don’t have access to the surveillance monitors.”

“Does that mean...” I can hardly wrap my brain around this. “We’ve been assuming this was an accident all along, and I could even understand someone erasing them after the fact to cover their mistake... but if someone turned the cameras off before the switch then it must have been on purpose.”

“But why would anyone try to inseminate a human?” Roger questions, aghast. “I mean no shifter I know would imagine it was possible for you to actually conceive. I still can’t believe it myself.”

“I don’t know how it was possible – and honestly I don’t care. This baby is a miracle for me whether it’s a human, or a wolf.” I shrug, though in truth I feel quite uneasy. “But it does make me nervous to think someone might have done this to us. Even if they knew I could conceive, what was their goal? I highly doubt anyone would do this just to make my dreams of becoming a mother – or Dominic’s of becoming a father – come true.”

“True.” Cora nods sympathetically, “I have a hard time thinking their motives were pure, but I also don’t see an opportunity for malice either. How does you having a shifter baby help anyone?”

“This has to be the weirdest crime in history.” I express, absolutely flabbergasted.

“Cora, who has access to both your labs and the security rooms, and who else knew you had Dominic’s sperm?” Roger asks, obviously as curious as we are.

“My bosses.” Cora shrugs, “but they’re also the ones running the investigation. Sinclair has some some of his men on it as well, but as far as I know, no one has ever been arrested or charged.”

“I can ask him about it once he comes home.” I suggest, “with everything else going on, I sort of forgot about all this, but I bet he hasn’t.”

“You can count on that.” Roger confirms, cocking his head to the side. “So what happens after the baby comes? You mentioned losing its scent. Has Sinclair talked to you about his plans for keeping your identity secret?”

“We’re just trying to get through the campaign.” I explain, blushing to think of everything he must have overheard. “Afterwards I can step back from the public eye and... I don’t know, we’ll take it from there. If he has plans he hasn’t talked to me about them, but I trust we’ll think of something.”

Roger is staring at me with an unreadable expression, and for a moment I assume he’s judging me. “What?” I ask softly, “You think I’m being too optimistic? Or too trusting?”

“No.” He counters, shaking his head with a look of begrudging respect. “I was actually thinking that you’re incredibly brave to be doing this, and incredibly generous to be helping Dom. You must have been so overwhelmed when he asked for your help,” He clenches his eyes shut, and for some reason I think I sense some guilt when he continues, “and Goddess, those rogue attacks...

you must have been so terrified.”

“Actually it was her suggestion to pose as Luna.” Cora boasts, focusing on the less traumatic portion of Roger’s statement. I smile at her, thankful she’s looking out for me this way. She grins back, continuing. “He only wanted her as a surrogate at first, but she proved how valuable she could be to him.”

Roger shakes his head, frowning deeply. “I’m so sorry, Ella.”

“For what?” I ask, confused.

“For being so cruel to you. For helping the Prince. If I’d known... I never would have... I’m just so sorry.” Roger professes, looking completely genuine.

“Well, that’s all ancient history now.” I exhale heavily, wondering how much harder it must have been for Sinclair to forgive his brother after all their history, when I find it difficult after only just meeting him. “As long as you’re on our side from here on out – I don’t care about the past.”

“You are too kind for your own good, you know that?” Roger asks, huffing out a laugh. There’s a spark of true admiration in his eyes, a spark that looks dangerously close to attraction as his gaze sweeps from my face and scans my figure.

“I keep trying to tell her that.” Cora declares. “Much good that it does me. She’s a stubborn thing.”

“Well I might be, but I’m not sure Dominic is going to be so calm when he finds out you know my secret.” I advise honestly. “You might want to leave before he gets home – let me break it to him.”

“That’s probably wise.” Roger agrees, rising to his feet. “I really am sorry, Ella.”

“I know.” I nod. “Now go – he’ll be here any moment.”

Chapter 82

Sinclair

When I arrive at the home of Ella’s former employer, it takes all my strength to push my wolf down deep. The last thing I need is to actually murder a human, no matter how badly I might want to.

She deserves it. My wolf mutters mutinously, think about how easy it would be. Then she’d never be able to hurt Ella again.

Maybe so, but Ella wouldn’t like it. I remind him, recalling how the precious creature had worried for the children, even when her own safety and happiness was on the line.

Hmph, she’s got you wrapped around her little finger. My wolf accuses.

Oh, like she doesn’t have you in the exact same position? I scoff. I’d like to see you resist her when she’s blinking those beautiful big eyes up at you, begging you not to orphan innocent children.

Please, you spoke over the phone! He reminds me, his voice trailing off into growls of longing as he pictures her. You couldn't see her eyes or those plump, pouty lips or the sweet swell of her belly. You couldn't smell her delectable scent or...

And I'm the one who's whipped? I roll my eyes as I knock on the heavy rosewood door.

To my surprise, Jake and Millie answer the door, tilting their blonde heads up to me with excited grins. "Mr. Sinclair!"

My wolf calms as soon as he sees the children, softening like the big teddy bear he is. "Well hello!" I drop down to their level, unable to resist their adorable smiles. "I haven't seen you two in ages, what have you been up to?"

"We have a new nanny." Millie whispers conspiratorially, reaching out to play with my tie.

"She never takes us on walks in the neighborhood." Jake explains, clearly blaming his new carer for our increasingly infrequent meetings. "She's too lazy and she hates being outside."

"That's too bad." I commiserate, pulling Millie into my arms and lifting her up as I ruffle Jake's hair affectionately. "Doesn't she know growing boys and girls need to get out and explore?"

"I don't think so." Millie frowns seriously. "She's not very smart."

"I miss Ella." Jake adds miserably. "Mommy's been saying lots of mean things about her, but we don't believe her. Ella was the best nanny we've ever had."

"Well I know Ella misses you too." I confide. "You know she's living with me now?"

"She is?" Jake gapes. "You mean you get to play with her all day long?"

"Whenever you want?" Millie adds in awe.

"Well, not whenever I want." I confess. If only they knew how badly I'd like to stay home with Ella all day, both playing and not playing. "My job keeps me very busy, but she's there in the morning and when I get home at night. She tells me how badly she wants to see you."

“Maybe you can convince Mommy to let her visit?” Jake suggests, staring up at me so hopefully I feel guilty for thinking that nothing I could possibly say to their horrible mother will make her come around.

“I can try.” I promise, patting the boy on the shoulder, “and you two should know you’re welcome at my home anytime.”

Maybe we should get rid of their mother after all. My wolf insinuates in my head. Think how happy Ella would be if we brought them home with us.

I’m not stealing children just to make Ella smile. I argue, tempting as it may be.

Spoilsport. His objections are interrupted when Jake and Millie’s mother appears at the top of the stairs. She stops dead when she sees me. Her face pales, but she plasters on a phony smile. “Mr. Sinclair, to what do we owe this honor?”

“You and I need to speak.” I answer coldly, surprising the children. I set Millie on the ground, smiling widely so that they know my harsh tone is not directed at them. “Your Mommy and I need a few minutes alone, but I’ll come say goodbye, before I leave. I promise.”

Their mother calls for the nanny, her voice very shrill. The children are swept away by a middle aged woman with a grim face, and I’m struck by how uninterested she seems in her charges. She doesn’t even speak to them as she leads them out of the room.

“Well, Mr. Sinclair, what can I help you with?” Ella’s blackmailer questions, as if she doesn’t already know why I’m here. She guides me into a parlor, gesturing towards a plush couch. “Please, have a seat.”

“No.” I declare firmly. “Call me crazy, but I don’t think false politeness is appropriate when you’re threatening my family.”

Her eyes go wide, and her heart rate increases, racing violently in her chest. “I—I’m sure I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“Do not lie to me.” I growl, letting some of my wolf’s ferocity bleed into my voice. The woman reels back, shivering for reasons she doesn’t understand. She may have the dull intuition of a human, but even humans know when they’re in the presence of a lethal predator intent on destroying them.

“Please, it wasn’t what you think!” She lies, her voice unsteady and choking with defiance.

“Oh I’d like to hear this.” I state ominously, prowling towards her. “I’d like to know what kind of twisted logic made you think it would be wise to try and blackmail the most powerful man on the continent.”

“But I wasn’t blackmailing you!” She immediately objects, too stupid to realize that I wouldn’t be nearly this angry if I had been her target. “I only wanted people to see that grasping little gold digger –”

“If you have any brains in that foolish head of yours, you’ll stop while you’re ahead.” I interrupt, clenching my hands into fists.

“You may have no sense of loyalty yourself, but where I come from, if you threaten one member of the family you threaten all of them. If you insult one, you insult them all.”

“But that isn’t, I would never –”

“Let me tell you the situation you’re in.” I cut her off again, my voice as deep as it can become without devolving into wordless snarls. “You first fired my fiancée when she did nothing wrong. You deprived your own children of the most loving caregiver they could ever hope for. You spread rumors among your friends to ensure Ella wouldn’t be able to find another job.” The wretched woman is cowering against the wall now, having backed away from me until she could move no further.

I don’t show her any mercy, I continue stalking until I’m towering over her. “Now if it had been up to me, I would have destroyed you for that alone, but not Ella. She’s much too good, not that you ever saw that. So I agreed to let you go on living your obscenely prosperous life without interference.”

I can smell her fear – sour and acrid. “But then you learned that despite your efforts to ruin Ella’s life, she found happiness with me. Now I don’t know if you’re just so bitter and heartless that you couldn’t stand to see a hard-working young woman succeed, or if you saw my fortune and decided to try and steal part of it for yourself. But either way, you came into my home and called the mother of my child a cheap whore. You threatened to spread your lies in the tabloids. You tried to extort a man who could take away your wealth and your freedom with a single snap of my fingers, and you hurt the woman I love.”

I'm sure my wolf is glowing in my eyes, and suddenly the aroma of urine fills the air. I can see the hot liquid running down the woman's stockings, and my adrenaline spikes with the knowledge that my prey is well and truly cornered. "You also alienated the only person who was protecting you from my wrath in the first place."

"I'm sorry!" She sobs, shaking like a leaf. "I was a fool, I don't know what I was thinking. I'll do anything, just please don't hurt me."

"Shut up, you stupid cow." I bite. "I'm not going to hurt you. I'm not even going to ruin your life, because Ella still loves your children even though they've got a worthless hag for a mother. But mark my words, if I ever see you near my family again, I will destroy you."

I proclaim, speaking with absolute conviction. "If the lies you tried to blackmail us with ever get out, if a single word of your vitriol makes it to a tabloid editor— whether you are the source or not — I will take away everything you care about in the world."

She nods, sobbing and snivelling like a child. "I-I promise. You have my word."

"Good." I growl, starting to turn away. "And for the record, you absolute idiot — I own stock in every press outlet and newspaper from here to the coast. No one will ever publish a story about me without asking for my permission first. You think about that before you ever consider trying to get your story out as leverage against me."

She sinks to the ground, and I leave her to wallow in her own shame and piss. I keep my promise of course, I go to wish the children farewell, and go home to tell Ella the news.

Chapter 83

Sinclair

It's dark out by the time I get home, and I follow my nose upstairs to Ella's room. She's just stepping out of the shower when I walk in, her dripping body wrapped in a fluffy towel. Her rose gold hair is still dry, piled on top of her head and held secure with a pair of chop sticks.

She startles slightly when she sees me sitting on her bed, then rolls her eyes and huffs. “If you’re going to move around as silently as a ghost, would you at least announce yourself when you enter rooms, Dominic?”

I chuckle softly, raking my eyes over her wet skin. “Is that any way to greet your knight in shining armor?”

Ella steps forward before she can think to hide her nervous curiosity. “What happened?”

“Come give me a kiss hello, and I’ll tell you.” I invite, holding my arms open to her. Her muscles relax when she sees my easy mood, and she rolls her eyes again, smiling now. I growl playfully at her sass, and Ella quivers visibly, her thighs clenching reflexively beneath the hem of her towel.

Ella crosses the floor, flushing prettily as she comes to stand between my legs. Her pink lips pucker, and she leans into my warmth, giving every indication that she’s about to brush her mouth over my own. However at the last moment she redirects, skirting away from my waiting lips and attempting to drop a kiss on my cheek. She doesn’t get very far – clearly the mischievous human forgot to account for shifter speed when she formed this plan. I intercept her mouth with my own, claiming her lips and rumbling my disapproval.

Ella giggles softly, even as I tease the seam of her lips with my tongue, and flip her onto the bed. My clothes grow damp as her towel slips away and the liquid dotting her skin absorbs into the cloth of my shirt and trousers. I slant my lips over hers, delving into her sweet mouth and coaxing her tongue into a dance. Her arms and legs wrap around me in welcome, and I’m sorely tempted to strip so that I can feel her every inch of her naked body against my own.

I pull the pins from Ella’s hair, letting it fall down around her face and sending her lovely scent fluttering into the air around us. I continue stealing kiss after kiss, caressing Ella’s sides and silky thighs, dragging the sweetest sounds from her lips. My wolf purrs in reply, and I graze my scruffy jaw over the soft skin of her cheek, changing her contented murmurs into a fresh burst of giggles.

Chuckling with dark, sexual intent, I bury my face into her neck and give the velvety swath of skin the same treatment. Pausing to explore the abraded territory with my tongue, I drag one large palm over her round bottom. Squeezing her lush rear end, I continue kissing my way down to her chest. Ella’s breath catches as I brush my fangs over the swell of her breast, then yelps in surprise when I nip her sensitive flesh.

“That’s for not letting me kill that horrible woman in your honor.” I inform her, moving my mouth to the other breast to give it the same treatment. “That’s for rolling your eyes at me.” This time the playful bite is met with a moan, and her nipples harden into tight buds – dangerously close to my questing lips. Not trusting myself not to suck one of the sweet buds into my mouth, I finish my rebuke with a single swat to her behind. “And that’s for trying to withhold kisses I earned fair and square.”

“I still haven’t heard how you earned them.” Ella argues cheekily, squirming against me and making the quickly stiffening member between my legs strain against my zipper. I pull away from her slightly, pushing up onto my elbow to gaze down at her, and wondering if this was actually a bigger mistake. At least when she was flush against me I couldn’t see her many charms.

“Well, you don’t have to worry about being blackmailed ever again.” I assure her, looking down into her lovely face and wondering if there’s ever been anyone so irresistible. “At least, not from your former employer.”

“Really?” Ella inquires, eyes bright as she props herself up too.

“Really,” I confirm, brushing a few stray locks of hair back from her face. “I also saw Jake and Millie. I told them how much you miss them, and they told me all about how horrible their new nanny is.”

Her face falls, and suddenly I regret sharing this particular detail. “Did they seem very unhappy?” Ella asks anxiously.

“They seemed as sweet as ever.” I share, “and I don’t think they’re being mistreated. I think she’s just not any fun.”

Ella nods thoughtfully, peeking up at me from beneath her long, dark lashes. “How did you convince her to drop the story?”

“It wasn’t hard.” I explain, watching the progress of my fingers as I trace them down her arm, leaving a trail of gooseflesh in their wake. “I simply made sure she realized how foolish it was to threaten a man as powerful as I am. Her imagination did all the rest, but I still would have liked to kill her.”

“Well I’m glad you didn’t.” Ella replies firmly. “We don’t need to be inviting more trouble to our doorstep.”

“Oh I agree.” I muse, laughter obvious in my voice as I move my hand to her belly. “My hands are plenty full with you and this little one.”

“Our baby is not trouble.” Ella objects, narrowing her eyes at me.

“Oh I don’t know about that.” I tease. “With you for a mother? I’d say he’s bound to have a mischievous streak a mile wide –

though we won’t have to worry about that for some time.”

“And I suppose you were always perfectly well behaved?” Ella counters, arching one smooth brow. “I ought to ask Henry how you were as a boy. I bet he has all sorts of stories to share.”

“I was an absolute angel.” I lie, trying my best to sound self-righteous.

“I don’t believe that for a single second.” Ella laughs.

“You hear that, Rafe?” I ask our son, beaming when a little kick pulses in Ella’s tummy, right on the other side of my hand. “As if your Mommy hasn’t been naughty enough today – now she’s calling me a liar.”

“Dominic?” Ella’s serious tone pulls my eyes up to her face. “Something else happened today, while you were out.”

“What?” I press, sensing that she’s not merely trying to distract me from our flirting.

“Well Cora came over and I was talking to her about everything that’s been going on.” Ella begins slowly, not meeting my gaze.

“And well... the short version is that Roger came over while she was here. He heard part of our conversation and... he knows I’m human.”

“What!?” I explode, surging to my feet.

Ella immediately scrambles out of bed after me. Her tiny hands close around my arms, as if she’s afraid I’m going to run out on her. “It’s okay, he stayed and we talked. I explained the situation and he honestly seemed to listen. He promised not to tell – ever.

He apologized for everything that’s happened, and the only reason he left is because I made him. I thought you should hear it from me.”

“Ella, why didn’t you tell me sooner!” I demand, trying not to lose my temper. “I’m not convinced that Roger is actually on our side and with this information, the Prince could end my campaign like that,” I say, snapping my fingers.

“I know, but you only just got home, and I wanted to hear how things went at Jake and Millie’s.” Her face twists into an accusatory stare, “And I’m not the one who got us all sidetracked with kisses.”

Sighing, I acknowledge that I didn’t give her much chance to tell me this latest development. “What exactly did Roger say?”

“Well, we talked about how it happened and Cora explained that the surveillance footage was tampered with – which I didn’t even know about until today.” Ella shares, an open question in her expression.

I nod, “I knew, but we still aren’t any close to understanding who was behind this– or what they were hoping to achieve.”

“Well, Roger just kind of talked through the possibilities with us and everything. He seemed to really regret helping the Prince, I mean I actually thought he looked as though he felt guilty about working against us.” Ella conveys softly, her hands stroking my arms in long, steady movements – clearly intended to calm me.

“He should.” I mutter bleakly. Ella doesn’t know that Roger helped orchestrate the attack in the alley, and unless Roger becomes a problem, I don’t see a reason to tell her. It would only hurt her feelings, and if Roger is truly on our side then I don’t want more space between them. “And I think you’re probably right. I trust your judgement. But I need to go see him, just to be sure.”

“You won’t hurt him, will you?” Ella presses.

“No sweetheart, I promise I’m in control.” I vow. “Just give me a couple of hours. I’ll go talk to Roger and then I’ve got that bloody,

‘have a drink with the Alpha’ event – but I’ll be home by dinner. We can have a nice night together and forget all this ever happened.”

“Okay.” She agrees, stepping away from me. “I’ll see you soon, then.”

Of course, if I'd known then what I know now... I would never have left the house that night. I would have stayed home with Ella and blown off my brother and the campaign. I could have saved us all a lot of trouble if I had.

Chapter 84

Sinclair

When I reach Roger's house, he's not the least bit surprised to find me darkening his doorway. "I was wondering when you were gonna show up." He quips, opening the door wide to welcome me inside.

"Am I that predictable?" I grouse, stepping over the threshold.

"No- I still wasn't sure whether or not you'd rip my head off after you arrived." Roger shares wryly.

"You've been talking with Ella." I assess coolly, recalling the sweet human's objection to me using this precise tactic against our enemies.

Roger snorts. "Not necessary. I grew up with you, I know your MO, brother."

"Well you have Ella to thank for my even temper either way. She seems to trust you'll keep your word and protect her secret." I explain, eyeing him suspiciously.

"And you came to find out if she's right." Roger guesses.

"Is she?" I inquire. "Or is this another one of your tricks?"

"It's not a trick." Roger states simply, leading me into his study. "But I'm not doing it for you – I'm doing it for her."

I absorb this information slowly. It does seem easier to believe my brother would help a stranger sooner than he'd help me, but there's also something in his tone, some unspoken emotion I don't quite understand. "Why do you care what happens to her?" I inquire.

“Because she’s exactly what you’ve been saying she is all along. She’s brave and clever and good to her very core. Goddess only knows how you managed to get her, but you certainly don’t deserve her.” Roger replies, giving me a begrudging look that tells me he’s only half joking.

My wolf growls possessively in my head, he likes her.

Good, if he likes her he’ll help us. I answer evenly.

But she’s mine. My wolf argues fiercely. He shouldn’t even be allowed to look at her.

Would you get a hold of yourself? I admonish.

I won’t share her! The stubborn predator is digging in his heels, making my hackles raise and claws extend. This is why we need to claim her, so that other wolves won’t come sniffing around our mate.

You’re acting like a child. I’m losing my temper now, sick and tired of being at odds with my inner animal. She isn’t our mate and I’m not going to hurt her with a claiming mark her body can’t handle. Besides, even if Roger is interested in Ella, she isn’t interested in him. Have some self-respect.

“I haven’t got her – not the way you mean.” I correct, shaking myself out of my inner conflict. “She’s been adamant about that –

she’s only interested in me as her baby’s father.” I share, deciding that my brother doesn’t need to know how complicated my relationship with Ella truly is.

Roger snorts, “Who are you kidding? That woman is clearly infatuated with you, and I know you want her for keeps. Your wolf is bloody besotted.”

“She’s carrying my pup, that’s changing both of us, neither of us can trust our feelings right now.” I reason, using the same logic with him that I’ve been employing to justify my own restraint. If I let myself believe that everything happening between Ella and I is real, there will be no holding my wolf back, and I don’t want to frighten or push her into something she doesn’t truly want, or isn’t ready for.

“You know as well as I do that pregnancy can’t magically make people fall in love, even if they’re already interested in each other.” Roger scoffs, sounding truly jealous now.

“Don’t waste a gift, Dom.”

I stop dead in my tracks. “Whoever said anything about love?”

His eyes roll into the back of his head. “Honestly Dominic, sometimes I think you don’t have a brain in your head.”

“We only just met.” I remind him. “And we’ve experienced nothing but drama since then, it’s not just the pregnancy that can toy with emotions.”

“It sounds to me like you’ll take any excuse to deny what’s staring you in the face. And if you don’t wise up and do something about it, other wolves who aren’t so hard-headed are going to start horning in on your territory.” Roger warns, sounding as if he’d like to lead the charge. “Ella might not be able to serve as a true Luna, but that’s only a concern if you have a pack to lead. No one will care if she’s human when she can clearly bear shifter children.”

“Is that a threat?” I counter, my defenses riled by the obvious longing in his voice.

“I’m not delusional enough to think that Ella could ever forgive me for helping the Prince plan the first attack.” Roger sighs.

“But you can still hope.” I suggest, letting a note of menace bleed into my voice.

“Dominic, I’m done battling with my own family. From the sounds of it, we’re going to need each other in the months ahead... if there’s to be a war – we can’t be divided.” He grimaces, though I note he didn’t really answer my question. After all, it’s one thing to say you won’t pursue someone, and another to say you don’t want to in the first place.

“I’m trying to win so that there won’t be a war.” I grumble. “But I agree, we’ve been enemies for too long. No woman should come between brothers, and unlike Lydia, Ella would never want to.”

“Lydia couldn’t help it.” Roger defends, some of his old animosity rising to the surface. “It was the bond.”

I purse my lips, trying to decide whether or not I want to tell Roger the truth about Lydia. He’s never been willing to listen before, and I know this is an opportunity to clear the air between us. I also know it could backfire catastrophically. “Roger, Lydia used us both.” I declare, deciding that more lies won’t help anything. “I know what she told you, but she knew we were fated for two years before she left you.”

“What?” Roger gapes, the gears visibly turning in his mind as he struggles to process this information. “No, your bond manifested when you turned 18.”

I shake my head, determined to make him hear me out. “It manifested when I was 16, but Dad didn’t name me his heir until I reached adulthood. The only reason she decided to give into fate was because he announced it on my birthday. Before that she made it perfectly clear I wasn’t good enough for her.”

Roger slumps into a chair. “But, you never said...”

“Why would I? She didn’t want me and I wanted you to be happy. I didn’t want to give you another reason to hate me.” I confess.

“So why did you betray me?” He hisses, his wolf glowing in his eyes. “If you really wanted me to be happy you could have rejected her when she changed her mind?”

“I was a pup!” I exclaim. “I’d spent two years in misery, longing for my mate. My wolf was half mad with unrequited feelings and I was too young to know better. I was blinded by our bond, and it wasn’t until years later that I realized what a fool I’d been. I never wanted to hurt you... I just wasn’t strong enough to resist fate. Not then, at least.”

Roger sits back, watching me closely. After a few long moments, he scrubs his palm over his face, and I’m shocked to see his eyes are red – on the verge of tears. “I haven’t been a very good brother to you, have I?”

“You’ve been a pain in the ass.” I quip, huffing an exasperated laugh. “Roger, when we were little you were my hero. I would have followed you anywhere!”

“But I never let you.” He finishes my thought, clamping his eyes shut. “Dad tried to tell me a thousand times that it wasn’t your fault Mom died. And I know it wasn’t fair of me to treat you so horribly. In hindsight, I don’t even think you’re the one I hated, I was just so mad at the Goddess for taking her from me, and I needed someone to blame.”

“I know.” I affirm, remembering our argument after the Wild Hunt. It seems like every other conversation we have these days is some long-overdue emotional blowout. We’ve poured out years worth of feelings and resentments in a handful of weeks, and already our relationship feels like it’s turned a corner. For the first time since I was a child, I feel like my brother is more friend than enemy.

Roger is giving me a watery smile, and I realize he's realizing the same thing I am. "And to think, all it took was one tiny human to finally make us talk all this out."

To my amazement, I'm smiling back. "One tiny, very special human." I correct, thinking of the beautiful creature I left at home.

Roger frowns, "At some point we need to talk about how this all started, Dom. Ella said you still don't know how your sample got switched in the sperm lab."

"That's a conversation for another time." My jaw clenches reflexively. "I haven't told Ella yet, but my investigators have come across evidence which suggests whoever is responsible is very powerful... and they knew exactly what they were doing."

Chapter 85

Sinclair

When I enter the Blood Moon Tavern for the 'have a drink with the Alpha' town hall event, I immediately begin cursing Hugo. My beta may have talked me into this campaign event with good intentions, but I would so much rather go home to Ella. After the way we left things this evening, not to mention my conversation with Roger, my wolf is positively rabid to go climb into bed with her and finish what we started.

However, I made a pledge to my pack that I would come out to this bar and talk with the people one on one, giving them an opportunity to share their thoughts, grievances and questions with me in an informal setting. It's the sort of event the Prince would never consider holding, and also the kind common shifters appreciate most. So I plaster a smile on my face and enter the rustic pub, greeting the assembled pack members as if there's nothing I would rather be doing.

At first I'm completely distracted, preoccupied with thoughts of Ella, our growing pup and whether it might be possible that my brother is right. Could our feelings for each other be more than mere attraction and the connection forged by our pup? Could we be falling in love? I'm not even sure I know what love feels like – of course I imagined myself head over heels for Lydia once, but can there be true love when one partner is only in the relationship for selfish, personal gain? Can a person honestly know what it means to be in love, when it's all one sided?

A burst of laughter and noise pulls my attention away from my thoughts, and suddenly I realize I've been neglecting my conversation with the pack members around me. "I know that look." One of the men in front of me guffaws, slapping his leg. "I'd say the Alpha has his mind on things far lovelier than taxes."

"A certain she-wolf with a swollen belly perhaps?" Another wolf suggests, wagging his eyebrows.

I laugh apologetically, though none of the wolves surrounding me seem upset. They all look as though they understand all too well. "I'm sorry, you've caught me. I have a hard time letting my mate out of my sight these days." I confess, knowing that speaking plainly is far more likely to win me points with this demographic.

"It's no worry." An older man assures me, patting my back. "I remember what it was like when my wife was breeding, and it's always worst with the first."

"When I found out my Mary was pregnant, I actually attacked one of her colleagues when he got too close to her!" Another man shares, "luckily he didn't hold it against me."

I chuckle, "My wolf wanted me to go after Ella's doctor and the nurses when we first got the news – men and women." I relate, earning myself a fresh round of laughter. "Luckily she's learned to climb into my arms anytime I start getting aggressive, the clever minx knows I can't attack anyone if I'm holding her."

They raise their brows with approval, not just any she-wolf can take on an Alpha's riled wolf, even when it's their mate. I swell with pride over their impressed looks, but settle in to listen rather than continue spending my own voice. I'm amazed that this burly group of hardened shifters is so content to talk about she-wolves and babies rather than politics or security, but before long all the rough and tumble bar patrons are exchanging stories of becoming fathers and the antics of their children. I'm suddenly wishing I'd brought my own father along, and thinking that I wouldn't mind campaign events so much if they were all like this.

I order a second drink as the tales unfold, but set it down after a few sips. Though I requested the same brand of liquor as my first tumbler-full, there's a strange metallic taste to the liquid that turns my stomach. I wonder if soap was left in the glass after being washed, or perhaps the bartender opened a new bottle, not realizing the liquor inside had turned. Unfortunately I never figure out what's wrong with the draught, because the last thing I remember is thinking that it tastes off, and then everything is dark.

Ella

When Sinclair doesn't come home in time for dinner, I assume the campaign event ran long. I'm disappointed, but I know that these things are often out of his hands. Winning the crown is more important than spending time with me, and only a complete narcissist could be upset by that fact.

Says the woman who wants to curl up in a ball and cry because Sinclair cares more about the campaign than you. The little voice in my head remarks dryly.

That's not fair. I answer, beyond frustrated. Those are more hormones talking, not logic.

Sure, sure. She snips. Blame the baby.

I pat my tummy. "I don't blame you." I tell my growing pup, "I do, however, blame my body."

The baby flutters and kicks against my hand, as if he's telling me he understands completely. I feel a rush of love so powerful my dour mood disappears, and I can only smile as I get through my meal, content to talk to the tiny being inside me.

Unfortunately, my good mood only lasts until I realize it's almost nine o'clock, and Sinclair still hasn't come home. I decide to call him, but the line rings and rings before eventually going to voicemail. I hang up and send him a quick text: Just checking in, is the event going alright?

Nothing.

Sighing, I put my phone aside and decide to take a bath. I'm worrying about nothing, the sooner I stop thinking about Sinclair, the sooner he'll be home.

I don't know. My conscience interjects, something feels off to me. Are you sure he's okay.

It was an event at a bar, he probably just got caught up. Or maybe he decided to have a night out – he never gets to do anything for himself. He deserves to let loose a little.

True, but I don't think he'd do that without telling you. The voice replies.

It probably slipped his mind. I insist, shaking off the sting carried by the idea of being an afterthought to him.

I fill the huge whirl pool tub in Sinclairs bathroom, choosing to use his rooms instead of my own, just in case he comes home while I'm soaking. I have a sudden, silly fantasy of him walking in while I'm submerged in the hot water and bubbles. I imagine him claiming that he's dirty after his night out and insisting that he needs to join me. I picture him climbing into the tub with me, and settling me between his legs.

As I sink into the steaming water, I slide my own hands over my soft skin, pretending that they're Sinclairs – knowing he'll probably demand to wash me himself, and getting lost in the sensations. My hand lingers over my breasts and between my legs, Sinclair's deep voice filling my head with flimsy excuses about how he has to make sure all my important parts are clean.

Before long I'm breathing heavily and flushed for reasons that have nothing to do with the heat of the bath, and I decide this has to stop before Sinclair walks in and catches me in a much more intimate act than bathing. I wash quickly, settling down enough to soak, but soon the water grows cold, and I have no choice but to get out.

I check the time as I pull on a plush robe. 11 o'clock now. I retrieve my phone, only to find that I haven't had any calls or texts from Sinclair. Feeling truly worried now, I call him again. I know it's not very late, but he promised to be home hours ago, and I've never known him to run late without communicating the delay. When I get his voicemail I try calling two more times, and send a couple more texts for good measure.

Are you okay? I was expecting you hours ago.

Should I wait up?

Why do I feel so anxious about asking these simple questions? I got past my wariness of scaring Sinclair off ages ago, and yet this still feels like a test, like I might be coming on too strong or seem needy for worrying about him.

That's Mike's influence. The little voice in my head reminds me. He would accuse you of being a nagging shrew if you wanted to know when to expect him home, that's not Sinclair. Don't put that on him.

Then why hasn't he called me? Why isn't he responding?

Something's wrong. My conscience insists, more forcefully now.

I decide to call Roger, just to make sure Sinclair actually made it to the campaign event after their talk. He answers quickly, but confirms Sinclair left hours ago. He tells me to sit tight while he goes to the bar, and so I hang up and try to be patient.

In the end, I don't have to wait for Roger to call me back. My phone chirps, and I see a message from Sinclair.

Stop bothering me – I found better company for the night.

Then, immediately following the text, a photo appears. Sinclair is naked in a strange bed, his eyelids heavy over a sultry stare, his clothes from this evening slung over a nightstand. And there beside him, naked as the day she was born – is Lydia.

Chapter 86

Sinclair

The world is fuzzy when I wake. I sit up, instantly on edge. My wolf knows something is wrong, not that this is any great feat of instinct. I don't recognize my surroundings, and I have no recollection of falling asleep. The last thing I remember is being at the 'have a drink with the Alpha' event and talking about fatherhood with my constituents.

How much time has passed? I wonder, my thoughts trapped in a strange fog. I feel hungover, but I can't imagine I had enough alcohol to render me in such a state. It's already light out, and why do I smell...

"Lydia!" I exclaim, scanning the space for my ex-wife. The entire room reeks of her, and belatedly I realize we're in a hotel. I can sense her presence in the other room, but as I slide from bed I realize I'm completely naked.

She appears in the doorway of the bathroom, leaning against the frame. She's wearing my dress shirt from last night. It's unbuttoned from collar to hem, making it clear that she's nude underneath. I'm sure she intended it to give me tantalizing flashes of her tan skin, but I feel no attraction for her at all. My wolf is roaring in my head, my hackles raising defensively when Lydia flashes her fangs in a lethal grin. "Good morning, lover."

“What have you done?” I snarl, not bothering to hide my outrage and disgust. Slowly, so slowly I feel furious with my own dull wits, a picture is forming in my mind. The puzzle pieces are slowly clicking into place. I feel so groggy, achy and nauseous, not because I’m hungover, but because I was drugged.

That metallic taste in my drink. I realize angrily, wishing I’d had the sense to walk out of the pub the moment I realized something was off. I glance again to the windows, realizing it must be morning already. I have no memory of last night and no way of knowing what I did in my drugged state. Did she give me something that unhinged me enough that I would actually sleep with her? Did I make a scene when I left the bar?

“Dominic, I haven’t done anything!” Lydia exclaims, looking offended. “Don’t you remember? We ran into each other after your event last night. I guess without your little pet hanging on your arm you were finally able to remember why we’re so good together.”

Ella! I think suddenly. I promised her I’d be home in time for dinner, she must be so worried! “Where’s my phone?” I demand sharply.

Lydia’s mouth drops open, and some of her haughtiness sleeps away. “Seriously?!” She bursts out, “that’s all it takes, one mention of the little bitch and you just forget I exist?”

Without thinking, I lunge for Lydia, my claws and fangs extended, my shoulders shaking with the effort of holding off the urge to shift. I stop myself short of reaching for her, though my wolf is sorely tempted. “Don’t you ever talk about Ella that way. In fact, keep her name and any other foul nicknames you come up with, out of your mouth completely.”

“What are you doing?” Lydia sputters, flinching and backing away from me. “I’m your mate. You can’t... This isn’t...”

“You think I can’t threaten you? You think I can’t hurt you if you endanger my family?” I snap. “You aren’t my mate anymore, Lydia, and you weren’t ever worthy of being Luna even when you had the title.” Despite my words, even I’m shocked at how easy I find it to show aggression to her. Everything I know about fated mates has taught me that I shouldn’t be able to stomach raising a hand against her, but it’s almost as if she and Ella have traded places in my heart. Now my wolf only cares for protecting the mother of our pup, even if it means protecting her from my once-fated mate.

“I haven’t done a thing to your disgusting little family.” Lydia spits, hissing like a cat.

“You drugged me.” I accuse. “What if I let something sensitive slip under the influence? How did you get me out of that bar?”

What if someone saw us leaving together? You might have compromised my campaign!” I thunder, “and that does threaten my family – make no mistake.”

“Who are you!” Lydia explodes, furious and cowering at once. “People don’t just stop being mates, Dominic! You can’t just erase our past because you found a new plaything. You always said I was more important to you than politics... and now it’s like...

Goddess, I don’t even recognize you!

“You didn’t really think that you could just walk out on me and I’d stay the same, did you? Did you expect me to wallow like a heartsick pup when I have a pack to lead and the fate of the entire fucking realm is on my shoulders? Did you really believe I’d stay here pining for you, and you would be able to walk back into my life like nothing happened?” I rumble coldly, wondering how I ever imagined myself in love with this woman. Ella would never ask me to choose her over the campaign, she wouldn’t want me to. “And for the record, Lydia. I said you were more important than politics, not the pack – not my duty to protect my people.”

“Well you didn’t care very much about your family or your pack last night.” Lydia announces spitefully, wearing a cruel smile that looks more like a grimace. “The time apart certainly didn’t cost us in the bedroom. You were every bit as ferocious and virile as ever. I might be pregnant already.”

I try not to let her see how deeply her words cut me. The idea that I had sex with her under the influence of her drugs makes me sick to my stomach. I have no way of knowing if she’s telling the truth. There aren’t any marks on her body from hickeys or lovebites, and I don’t feel any scratches on my back of physical signs of the kind of rambunctious lovemaking we used to have, but then again – if I was most unconscious then there wouldn’t be any of those signs. So while I’m sure her remarks about my ferocity are a lie, I can’t rule out sex entirely. The bed is in complete disarray, and she certainly smells like me. Is it just from sleeping together... or did she manage to steal my seed the way she’s suggesting.

“What would it matter if you’re pregnant?” I say instead. “I already have my heir.”

“You know better than anyone that the first born child isn’t always the strongest.” Lydia answers shrewdly, looking so cunning I wonder how Roger and I were ever fooled by her. “And your current heir hasn’t even been born yet. It wouldn’t be a bad thing to have a spare. Goddess knows anything can happen between now and the birth.” She doesn’t say the words as a threat, but it’s hard not to hear them that way with all the attempts on Ella’s life. However Lydia isn’t paying attention to the dangerous line she’s walking, she presses on, rubbing her belly as if it’s confirmed that she’s breeding. “I guarantee any child of mine will be stronger than that pipsqueak’s. Soon you won’t have any need of Ella at all.”

The petty part of me wants to lash out and tell Lydia that if it were possible for us to make a baby together it would have happened in the years we were married. I want to tell her she’s delusional if she thinks she can get pregnant at all. But damn it if Ella’s silky voice isn’t interrupting my thoughts, encouraging me to show compassion even though this monster doesn’t deserve any.

Just then I see my phone, balanced on the edge of the nightstand. I snatch it up and turn on the screen, immediately going to my messages. I’m not surprised to see multiple missed calls and texts from Ella, but I’m horrified when I see the response I sent her, and the photo. “You sent this to her?” I roar, thrusting the device towards Lydia’s sneering face.

She smirks, “Of course not, that was all you.”

I stalk forward, closing the final distance between us. “You better hope you are pregnant, Lydia.” I declare icily, “because if you aren’t, I swear to the Goddess I will hunt you down and make sure you can’t ever come anywhere near me, or my family again.”

I storm out without another word. I dial Ella as I race across town, unsurprised when she doesn’t answer the phone. My wolf is already in a panic about her reaction to Lydia’s taunting message. I don’t care how drunk or disoriented I was, I know I wouldn’t have ignored Ella that way – not when she’s all my wolf wants. Was she very upset? Did it exacerbate her stress to a dangerous level? I only stop for the barest second at a newsstand to make sure there’s nothing in the papers about Lydia and I, before continuing to my mansion.

But when I arrive, Ella is nowhere to be found.

Chapter 87 – Ella Runs Away

Ella

“Goddess, Cora, what’s wrong with me?” I moan, burying my head in my hands. “I’ve been thinking Sinclair is too good to be true all along. There cannot be a bigger red flag and I just ignored it. I let him love bomb me and I bought every manipulative word out of his mouth.” I’m seated in my sister’s living room, rocking back and forth in my seat while she looks on anxiously. After I received Sinclair’s text last night, I didn’t waste any time getting out of his house. I went out onto my balcony and waited until the patrolling guards passed by, then climbed down the trellis and out the back gate. There was a vicious thunderstorm roiling at the time, but I barely noticed. I ran through the pouring rain, not stopping until I reached Cora’s apartment.

In hindsight I’m sure I scared her half to death – turning up on her doorstep in the middle of the night, looking like a drowned rat. Nonetheless, she immediately ushered me in and got me a change of dry clothes and a cup of hot tea, but I wasn’t calm enough to actually explain what happened until this morning.

“Ella just slow down, I didn’t think anything had even happened between you two?” Cora asks, watching me with obvious concern.

“I mean, nothing huge.” I clarify. “We’ve flirted and kissed and fooled around a bit... and I’ve insisted that things not go any further. At least, I had enough sense to ensure we didn’t start an actual relationship.”

“And he agreed? You said no and he didn’t push you?” Cora presses.

“Yeah, I mean it’s been hard because we’re attracted to each other, but he’s been trying to respect my wishes.”

“Then how can he have love bombed you?” She inquires, looking confused.

*[guess that’s the wrong expression.” I concede. “It’s just, you should hear the way he talks to me, and the way he behaves. He’s so affectionate and warm that I got completely lulled into complacency. He just lavishes attention and compliments, and he actually listens and takes criticism. He takes my thoughts and opinions into account, and he has

this silly side where he can be so fun and playful, but at the same time he doesn't let me get away with murder. He calls me on my shit and holds me accountable. Like I said, he's just too good to be true."

Cora is frowning deeply, keeping her expression guarded while she processes my words. "Ella

"What? Why are you looking at me that way?" I burst, instantly regretting my sharp tone. I'm sorry, I shouldn't have snapped at you..." Suddenly I want to cry. "I didn't mean it. I'm just really out of sorts."

"i know, honey." She murmurs, her brows furrowing in sympathy. "And don't take this the wrong way, but none of that sounds very bad. I mean, it's not like he's pretending to be this perfect person. You two started off on terrible footing. Terrible." She repeats for emphasis. He thought you were a gold digger and was going to separate you from your child. You had to learn to get along, and sure that happened fast once you decided to trust each other, but... I'm sorry Ella, but it honestly just sounds like you like each other." She leans forward, resting her

elbows on her knees and sending me serious therapist vibes. "Is it possible that you are so used to assholes like Mike, that you assume being treated well is evidence of some sort of trick?"

It takes me a moment to absorb that. Is she right? Am I so unused to receiving genuine affection and compliments that I somehow mistook them for Sinclair grooming me for abuse? Even as I think this, I recall the other things that have happened between us. "That's not all." I confess, blushing scarlet. "Yes he's affectionate and that feels strange to me, but he's also bossy and domineering. He always expects to be in charge."

"Of course he is, he's an Alpha." Cora remarks blithely.

"But, I mean, in charge in... well, I mean..."

Cora rolls her eyes. "Ella, stop beating around the bush, just tell me what happened."

"It's just that he doesn't stop at giving orders, he holds me to them." I confess. "Once, even spanked me."

"Okay." Cora responds, looking as though she's waiting for me to say more.

he

“After the attack on the wild hunt.” I explain, offering the information freely now. “I mean... I slapped him first and he said all this crap about catharsis, but I didn’t even question it because he said it was normal with shifter couples.”

“You slapped Dominic Sinclair?” Cora gapes.

“He was annoying me!” I defend hotly. “He kept saying I should stay home and rest but I wasn’t about to let that foul prince win.”

“So let me get this straight...” Cora begins, clearly struggling to wrap her mind about this. You were in shock, being obstinate and refusing to take care of yourself, then you attacked him and he responded the way that any wolf would?”

“Basically.” I grimace, rubbing the back of my neck.

“Did he injure you?” She inquires, “Traumatize you?”

“No.” I’m blushing again. “It hurt, but it brought me out of my shock and it really did help me to cry... plus, well I was really turned on afterward.” I whisper, unable to believe I’m actually sharing this part.

Cora chuckles. “So what’s the problem?”

“You don’t find that strange!?” I exclaim.

“Ella, I’ve been around shifters a lot longer than you have.” Cora explains, sighing as though she’s not sure how to make me understand. “Power dynamics are a big part of their culture and from a scientific perspective it makes perfect sense. Dominance means strength and strength means survival. And if you liked it, who cares whether or not other people think it’s strange. You’d hardly be the only human who’s ever wanted that from a partner.

“I didn’t say I liked it.” I object. “Just that it helped me...and turned me on... and I did like feeling how in control he was when I was beside myself.”

“Do you want him to do it again?” She asks, grinning mischievously now.

I throw a pillow at her, laughing with faux outrage. I'm only just coming to terms with the fact that I do want to be with Sinclair that way again, when I remember why I'm here unloading all

this on my sister in the first place. My mood dampens almost immediately. "What I want doesn't matter."

Cora purses her lips, "Okay, so you haven't been love bombed, and he hasn't been mistreating you, and you don't want a relationship, right?"

'Right.' I confirm, thankful that we worked through all this, but suddenly anticipating Cora's next question.

"Then Ella, why are you so upset about Lydia?" She asks. "You told him point blank that you don't want to be with him and you agreed to step aside if he finds a new mate from the beginning. I know you weren't expecting it to be Lydia, but... so what if it is?"

"Because it means he lied to me." I explain miserably. "It means he's been lying to me about her for months, and that Roger was right about him running back to her at the first opportunity."

"Are you sure they were lies?" Cora counters. "Do you think it's possible he believed what he was telling you at the time, and then changed his mind? We all have blind spots when it comes to our exes. He wouldn't be the first person to convince himself he hated his former partner to try and protect himself from getting hurt again."

I shrug, suddenly doubting myself. "I don't know. He certainly seemed to mean what he was saying at the time, but he's also a politician, he's bound to be a good liar." I

"He's an Alpha, not a politician. And he also has the campaign to think about, he might have been resisting her for his sake and the pack's at once." Cora suggests.

"Maybe," I acknowledge, hating how logical this sounds. The longer we talk I'm slowly losing my justifications for being so upset, but I still feel as if my world has come crashing down around me.

"Ella?" Cora calls my attention to her lovely face. Immediately I know she's coming to the same conclusion I am. "You snuck out of the house and ran through the night, in a thunderstorm, when people have been trying to kill you. You've exhausted all the

possible reasons to justify this except one, and a few lies on his part hardly seem enough to warrant how devastated you are.”

“What’s your point?” I remark sullenly, already knowing where this is going.

“Are you sure you don’t like him?” Cora asks bluntly. “Not just you’re attracted to him or like the affection, but that you have genuine feelings for him and you’re upset because you think he might not return your feelings now that he’s back with Lydia?”

Her words slam into me one after the other, but before I can give them the consideration they deserve, there’s a sudden pounding at the door.

Chapter 88 – Sinclair takes Ella home

Ella

It was easy to be reasonable when it was just me and Cora. When my sister’s low, steady voice was talking me through all my misguided rationalizations, I didn’t struggle to stay calm, I didn’t have to fight a tidal wave of raging emotions too tangled and convoluted to ever sort out. I was able to listen and really interrogate my assumptions, to use logic and reason without getting caught up in my emotions. However as soon as Sinclair appears, all that goes out the window.

Just seeing his handsome face makes me want to burst into tears, and I’m so miserable and furious that I don’t know what to do. A sense of utter betrayal slams into me, and for the first time I understand why I was so afraid of being love bombed. He might not have been

manipulating me, but I think I’ve been falling in love with Sinclair all along – no matter how hard I tried to fight it.

Sinclair’s power washes over me the moment he enters the room. He barely pauses to greet Cora, his attention clearly elsewhere as his sharp eyes scan the room, only stopping once they land on me. He immediately crosses to the couch where I’m seated and kneels down in front of me. “Ella,” my name is a sigh of relief, and he unwinds my arms from my body so he can look me over, as if he’s worried I’ve somehow been injured in his absence. I try to resist his strength, but he makes a deep rumbling sound and I

instinctively surrender. His hungry gaze rakes over every inch of my skin before finally rising to meet my eyes. He takes my face in his hands. "Are you alright?"

Knowing I'm playing with fire and not giving a damn, I shoot him a sulky glare. "What do you care?" I hate myself as soon as the words leave my lips. I sound like such a child.

His brows knit, "That's a no." He assesses gruffly, pursing his lips as if he's internal cursing himself. "I'm so sorry about last night. I can explain-

"I'm fine." I counter sharply, not wanting him to see how badly I'm hurt. "I don't give a damn what you do or who you see when we're not together."

Sinclair arches one dark brow, leveling me with an expression so stern I want to crawl under the couch and hide. "In that case we can go home and discuss the way you snuck out last night, without

your guards, without letting anyone know where you were going." His powerful hand slides around to my nape, and something deep and primal in my bones curls in on itself. "Not to mention crawling down trellises in the rain, especially when you're carrying precious cargo."

"I don't want to go anywhere with you." I snap, hating to be reminded of how reckless I was with

my

unborn child. "I came to Cora's because I wanted to be with my sister and I'm going to stay here."

"Then

you have a choice." Sinclair informs me, his voice like gravel. "Because I'm not leaving you when you're like this. So we can have this out here, in front of Cora, or we can go home and do it in private."

I glance over his shoulder at Cora, who's currently staring at me as if she's never seen me before. I know I'm behaving like a complete brat, but I can't help myself. Sinclair turns me into someone I don't recognize in times like these, and though part of me thinks it must be

the baby's influence, I'd be lying if I said it didn't feel right. Pushing back against Sinclair seems like the natural thing to do, something the voice in my head is demanding despite my better judgment.

"You need to leave." I growl, a pitiful rumble sounding in my chest.

Sinclair's eyes flash dangerously, and he flashes his fangs, showing me his inner wolf. "Have it your way." The next thing I know his shoulder is digging into my pelvis, and I'm being tipped upside. Before I know it I'm slung over his shoulder like a sack of flour. I yelp in surprise, feeling the blood rush to my head. Before I can hope to orient myself, my hair spills down towards the ground, completely blocking my vision of everything beyond Sinclair's muscular back. 1

"Dominic! The baby!" I object, squirming vigorously.

"The baby is perfectly fine." Sinclair promises, locking his arm over the back of my knees to cease my escape attempts. "You, on the other hand..."

"Put me down right now!" I order, kicking my feet into his toned abs and remembering that his body is constructed of pure steel. The pain in my toes only enrages me more, and so I start beating my clenched fists against his firm backside. "This isn't fair, you tyrant!" I snarl, fighting for all I'm worth.

"That's right, you just get it all out of your system, baby." Sinclair chuckles, patting my thighs. "But you better believe I'm taking note."

He carries me out the door and into the elevator, letting me vent my rage with so little reaction I wonder if he even notices my attack. "Can you even feel this, you ogre!" I exclaim. "Like ferocious little mosquito bites, sweetheart." Sinclair taunts, earning himself another outraged snarl. Of course, the big wolf only laughs. He carts me out of the building and onto the street, where anyone can see us.

"Dominic, people will see!" I object, stilling my movements for the first time.

"Then you might want to stop making all those adorable little growling sounds. People are going to start searching if they think there's an angry kitten on the loose." Sinclair informs me sagely.

"This isn't funny!" I cry, hating him for making light of my misery. Sinclair deposits me into the back of his limo, and I immediately slide over the seats and try to climb out the

other side. Unfortunately Sinclair's shifter speed gets the better of me again, and I'm dragged back into the car. Furious, I move into the seat across from him, biting down on my lower lip to stop it. from quivering and betraying how close to tears I am.

"I don't think this is funny, Ella." Sinclair answers, sounding so sober I wonder if this is the same man who was teasing me a moment ago. "This is very serious to me, but I can't help the way your defiance provokes my wolf any more than you can help feeling provoked by me." His glowing, emerald eyes are boring into me, piercing straight through me with so much intensity I can't doubt his honesty. "And I admit, I find you too cute to bear when you get riled up this way... but I don't find anything about the situation we're in amusing

I cross my arms over my chest, and suddenly I taste blood I guess I was biting myself too hard, and now of course Sinclair is beside me, tsking and tugging my crimson stained lip from the prison of my teeth I pull away from him, not wanting to be soothed and coddled when I'm still so furious. Sinclair's jaw clenches, but he lets me go "Ella, If you stopped fighting me for a minute I could tell you what happened."

"You might be able to bully me physically, but you can't make me listen to you." I snipe. Whatever it is you want to say – I don't want to hear it."

More like you're afraid to hear what he needs to tell you. The little voice in my head observes.

So what if I am? I counter. It's not like it will change anything. The writing is already on the wall. I don't need him to tell me how he thought he was over Lydia and didn't realize he wasn't until it was too late. I don't want to listen to his apologies or promises he can't keep, about how this doesn't have to change our plan.

Maybe not, but you could at least try to be less petty about it.

She has a point. I don't know why I get this way with him, I never suffered from immaturity before meeting Sinclair.

You never had the option before. My conscience reminds me. You always had to be the up in every situation you were in.

grown

Then I should be able to act like one now. I think miserably, even though I know it's a losing battle. I'm about to be a mother. I can't regress just because I got my feelings hurt.

Sinclair is still watching me, and I fight the instinct to squirm under his scrutiny. I take a few deep breaths, trying to work myself up to an apology for my behavior, but unsure how I can word it without also opening us up to a discussion. Before I can come up with the right answer, Sinclair's familiar bass breaks through my thoughts. "What upsets you more Ella, the way I handled last night, or the fact that it happened in the first place?"

"What?" I reply, feeling my hackles raise defensively. Surely he's not suggesting what I think he is. 1

A moment later however, my pulse begins to race as Sinclair repeats his question, this time cutting right to the heart of the matter. "I'm asking: are you angry, or are you jealous?"

Chapter 89 – Jealousy

Sinclair

"I'm not jealous!" Ella explodes, almost as soon as the question left my mouth. Her heart is pounding in her chest, so fast and loud that I wouldn't be able to tune it out if I tried. Her cheeks are consumed by a crimson blush, and my wolf is already celebrating in my head. She's jealous! She has feelings! She knows she's mine! Mine, mine, mine!

He has a point. Ella is not a good liar, and though she may be able to disguise her feelings under usual circumstances, her emotions are much too turbulent to allow that now. She sounded about as believable as a fox caught breaking into a henhouse, insisting it only wanted to look at the tasty morsels inside.

I arch my brow skeptically and, seeming to realize how defensive she just sounded, Ella takes a deep breath and tries again. "I'm not jealous." She repeats, and though she does sound more convincing now, her body is still betraying her. Her color is still so high, and her heart is still racing. "I'm angry because you lied to me."

I know I should correct her right here and now, explain exactly what happened last night whether she wants to hear it or not. But my inner hunter knows I'm onto something, and

there's no turning off my prey drive. "Then you don't care whether I sleep with other she-wolves, as long as I'm honest about it?"

Her plump, pink lip – still stained with blood – trembles dangerously, and her voice sounds suddenly tight. "That's right."

Liar, liar, pants on fire! My wolf chants, running triumphant laps through my consciousness. He's zooming around like a puppy, though I can't let Ella see how excited I am. As thrilling as this revelation is, she is lying to me. I might be able to forgive that since I know she's trying to protect her tender heart, but forgiveness doesn't mean acceptance. "Are you being honest with me, little human?" I rumble, pinning her with a stern glower.

Ella's luminous gold eyes widen and her lips part on a startled gasp. I can see her preparing to answer me, to tell me another falsehood, but before she can say yes, she seems to realize how hypocritical the question is. "Why should I have to be honest when you aren't!?" She demands fiercely.

"Ella "I growl, a clear warning.

"No! You've kept things from me over and over again in the name of protecting me, and you went back to your ex after promising that there was nothing between you." She accuses. "Last night probably wasn't even the first time! How long have you been sneaking around with her, Dominic? Has everything that's happened since I got pregnant been some scheme you two orchestrated to get an heir and win the campaign? Did you arrange the switch at the sperm bank to send all this into motion? What are you planning once the baby comes? Are you just going to steal my child and kick me to the curb?"

I reel back, shocked by the depth of her mistrust. My wolf's jubilation over her jealousy disappears immediately. He whimpers pitifully, devastated to see her so miserable – so undone by fear and betrayal. No, this isn't right! Fix it!

She can't honestly believe any of those things are true, can she? Are these tears that have been

building up in her all along? Or is she simply spiraling because of the perceived lie? She's had trust issues from the day we met, and it pains me to think she might have been tormented by such paranoia, but I could also understand how her baggage might turn one

trigger into this maelstrom. I want to tell Ella these ideas are absurd, I want to insist that she'd have to be mad to believe these things, but I know that won't help anything.

"Ella." I say firmly, "Look at me."

"I don't want to." She snaps, stubbornly turning her head away from me.

"I'm not asking." I clarify severely, waiting for the power in my voice to do its work. Slowly she obeys, turning her head back and lifting her blazing, terrified eyes to mine. I press my hand to her belly, letting her feel the solid weight, praying my warmth will bleed through her skin and into her bones. "I didn't lie to you, Ella." I state evenly, "I know you don't want to talk about it, but "

To my amazement, flames blaze to life behind Ella's eyes, and she slams her hands over her ears, glaring at me with so much hurt and animosity that the gesture no longer seems childish. A world of pain and betrayal swirls in her brilliant irises, and I remember that she's not only a woman who's been deeply scarred by her past, but also one who is battling a thousand raging hormones. Exhaling heavily, I remove my palm from her tummy in order to pull her hands away from her ears. As soon as I do, her eyes fill with tears, and I realize how afraid she is of having her fears confirmed.

"I didn't lie to you." I repeat, deciding that this will have to do for now. "When you're ready to listen to me, I'll explain everything, but right now I need you to know that everything that has happened since we met has been completely real. I didn't have anything to do with the switch at the sperm bank, and I was just as shocked by it as you were. Sweetheart, you remember how angry and unreasonable I was at the time." I remind her, biting back a smile. "I couldn't fake that if I tried, nor is it how any sane human would act if they wanted to draw someone into a trap." I forge on. "I am not, under any circumstances, going to keep Rafe from you. He came from each of us, and he belongs with each of us. I know I hid some things from you, but I haven't ever deceived you about my feelings, and I haven't been sneaking around with Lydia or anyone else."

Little by little, my words sink in. I can see the change in Ella's posture as she slowly deflates, unwinding the tension from her muscles with every sentence I complete. Of course, the more she unwinds, the closer she comes to falling apart. Soon her tears are falling freely, and she looks utterly ashamed of herself. "I'm sorry, I know I'm being crazy." She hiccups. "I don't even know why I said those things. I think I'm losing it."

“Jealousy can do that to a person.” I tease gently, reflexively pulling her closer, trying to draw her into my lap.

Ella’s little body goes stiff with outrage, and she pushes my hands away. “I’m not jealous!” She repeats, though her exclamation sounds more like a whimper now.

“Tsk, of course not.” I sympathize, overwhelming her struggles and scooping her up. She doesn’t come easily, but I gradually trap her defiant limbs until she’s completely bound in my arms. I purr softly, and though I know she doesn’t want to submit, soon I feel her tearstained face pressing into the curve of my neck, and her pert nose breathing in my scent. “Though it’s too bad.”

“Why?” Ella demands grumpily, sniffing as she snuggles closer. Petulant as she’s feeling, she

leans into my touch as I pet her disgruntled form and nuzzle her hair. Her delicious aroma fills my senses, and I feel like I can breathe for first time all morning. Goddess I needed this. When I realized she was missing this morning, I’d panicked completely. Not only because I feared for her safety, hating the idea of her being unprotected in a city full of wolves, but also because I was afraid that Lydia had broken something in our relationship for good.

When I found Ella at her sister’s, furious and lashing out at me like a hellcat, I realized there was still hope. She wouldn’t be so upset if she didn’t care, but I also hated seeing her so unhappy. My wolf wouldn’t be calmed until she was safe in my arms again, not attacking me anymore, but seeking my comfort. Yes, this is the way it’s meant to be.

“Because of what it would mean if you were jealous.” I murmur, finally answering her.

“That I’m a fool.” She suggests bitterly, making me shake my head in exasperation.

“That you have feelings for me.” I correct, letting some of my own feelings seep into my tone. My hope and desire, the passion that takes all my effort to contain whenever we’re together.

“Oh I’m sure you’d love that.” She mutters mutinously. “The big bad Alpha needs all the women to fall at his feet whether he wants them or not. How amusing for the hopeless little human to ”

Before she can continue, I shut her up – claiming her mouth with my own and stealing her ability to speak another word.

Chapter 90 – Feelings

Sinclair

Ella is as stiff as a board in my arms, frozen in shock to find my lips suddenly on hers, cutting off her bitter tirade. Of course, that only lasts a moment. As soon as the stubborn creature realizes what I'm about, she begins pushing at my shoulders, becoming increasingly agitated when they won't budge. She squirms and struggles, clearly outraged that I kissed her when she was trying to be angry with me. I can practically hear her objections in my mind you're not playing fair! She would say, shooting daggers with her eyes.

Damn straight I would answer, my thoughts conjuring the conversation our bodies are already having.

I rumble softly, and Ella whines – it's a sweet, plaintive sound as her body tries to resist the pull of desire, but I ruthlessly gobble it up. I show her no mercy, caressing her lithe body and devouring her soft murmurs of protest until she melts against me, slanting her mouth beneath mine in total surrender. She whimpers when she finally gives in, as if she doesn't know why she even bothered trying to fight this.

I can taste Ella's blood from the cut on her lip, and my inner wolf groans with pleasure. Unlike our horror film counterparts the vampire, shifters don't have any interest in consuming blood. But it's inevitable to taste the blood of one's mate when delivering a claiming mark, and the flavor has an undeniably Pavlovian effect. I may not want the crimson liquid for nourishment, but I certainly crave the taste of Ella's. It's rich and sweet, and instantly has me thinking about how other parts of her must taste.

Ella's salty tears drip onto my questing lips, but though she cries, she also clings to me with all her might. Her arms have locked around my neck, and she's pressing her soft curves against me with an urgency I understand all too well. My tongue slips past her lips as I rearrange her in my arms, guiding her to straddle my lap so that I can feel her plump breasts and beaded nipples against my chest. So that I can slide my hands down to the

curve of her bottom and press my hardness into her soft center, to help her move against me and find pleasure – even through the fabric of our clothes.

Ella responds to me so naturally, so passionately. I barely need to apply any pressure to affect her movement. It's as if she's reading my mind, our bodies speaking the same love language, completely in tune with one another. Her fingers slide into my hair, closing around the dark locks as if she's afraid she needs to hold me in place, lest I take my mouth away. I hold her more tightly, letting her feel my strength and purring when a little thump against my abdomen tells me that the baby is awake and thriving.

I could kiss her for a thousand years and never get bored, I realize. Never get tired of her taste, or grow immune to the feel of her beautiful body in my arms. Never want for another.

She's perfect. My wolf agrees. We have to claim her. She's strong enough to handle it.

I won't hurt her. I insist. I'm painfully aware of how delicate she is, how fragile her human form is next to my own. It's enough to make me stop handling her so roughly, suddenly afraid I might break her. Ella growls in protest, that same indignant sound that never ceases to fill my heart with warmth.

You see. My wolf argues. She can take it she needs this too.

I purr in apology, sliding my hand in her long, silky hair and clenching it into a fist, holding her head steady as I continue ravishing her. I steal kiss after kiss from her sweet lips, until they're swollen and red for reasons that have nothing to do with her self-inflicted bite. Our breathing is ragged, and Ella's heart is beating so loudly that I don't have to wonder if it's racing as fast as my own – it is.

The scent of her arousal is impossible to ignore in the small space, and the sensation of her grinding against my arousal is enough to make me fear I might come in my slacks like an inexperienced schoolboy. I groan, dragging my mouth from hers to try and catch my breath. Instead I kiss my way over her jaw and nibble one delectable earlobe, eliciting a sultry moan that makes the hard member between my legs leap with excitement.

Down boy, I think in exasperation. Our first time with Ella is not going to be frantic and rushed in the back of a limo.

Ella pulls away from me then, and I realize she must have been startled by the movement – enough to break out of the haze of lust. Her eyes are red-rimmed and her pupils so

dilated that her gold irises are a slender ring around the great black pools. Her skin is flushed bright pink, and her hair disheveled. It's a nearly irresistible sight, one that makes me want to go back on my earlier decision not to claim her. No other man should ever be allowed to see my Ella in this state.

"Dominic, this isn't right." She announces, still trying to catch her breath.

"It feels right to me." I reply, resisting the urge to look down at her heaving bosom to see if her breasts are as flushed as the rest of her. Instead I pin her with my dark gaze, massaging her nape and willing her to come back into my embrace.

"That's not the point." Ella insists, sounding as though she might be on the verge of tears again. "Stop looking at me that way!"

"What way?" I clarify, furrowing my brow with concern. "What is the point?"

"Like I'm a rabbit your wolf wants to eat for dinner." She exclaims. "And the point is that I'm done letting you jerk me around and toy with my feelings!"

"What feelings?" I question, ignoring the first part of her statement. She's not wrong – my wolf would undoubtedly like to feast on her, just not in the way she means. Again I know I should clear the air between us, but I'm afraid if I do she won't confess her true emotions. This misunderstanding has provided me with leverage too valuable to ignore, and I might be an asshole for using it against her, but it's more important to get to the bottom of this. I've suspected that Ella has been holding herself back from me for reasons other than disinterest for some time now, and I'm done letting her get away with it. "I thought you didn't want to be with me?"

"Dominic, why are you so determined to ask me questions when the answers aren't important?" She hisses angrily. "You've made your choice, that's all that matters."

"Just tell me, Ella." I command, sending some of my Alpha authority into my voice. She might not be a wolf, but her instincts are plenty strong. It might be the baby, or she might just be one of those humans who's more in touch with their primal selves either way she responds to my dominance as naturally as she breathes air.

Ella shivers as my power washes over her, and I'm amazed to see her fight it. "No!" She bursts out, furious even as she tucks a proverbial tail between her legs. "I don't have to! You might

run the world but you can't make me open my heart to you. You can't demand I make myself vulnerable with you that's my decision."

—

My wolf wants to growl at her defiance, but I can hear the hurt and fear in her voice. Damn it. I realize. She's right, I'm being an ass. I want the truth, but I don't want to hurt her to get it. As I ponder my mistake, the car comes to a stop in front of my mansion, sliding into a parking space on the opposite side of the street from the house.

Before I can apologize for letting this misunderstanding persist to serve my own selfish desires, my driver opens the door to allow us out of the car. Ella promptly slides out, and my chauffeur tactfully averts his gaze from her disheveled state. She stomps onto the paved sidewalk, wrapping her arms protectively around herself as she looks from right to left, checking the road is clear before preparing to cross.

I follow suit, exiting the vehicle and going after her. "Ella, I'm sorry." I pronounce earnestly.

She pauses, turning back in the middle of the empty street. "Don't be haven't done anything wrong."

you were right, you

The screech of tires fills the air as a car suddenly emerges from a parking spot a few spaces down from our own. To my horror and disbelief, it accelerates as fast as it can, heading straight towards Ella.

Chapter 91 – Near Miss

Ella

I'm so focused on Sinclair, I don't even see the car until it's almost upon me. I'm too stunned to move, not that there's time to get out of the way. The only thing I can do is try to turn my body away from the vehicle, to shield my unborn child from the inevitable crash.

Time itself seems to slow down, and there's a dull roaring in my ears. My thoughts fly by, and I'm amazed at the logical clarity I'm able to find in a single, split second. I tell myself to go limp, the impact won't be as terrible if my body isn't tense with fear. Isn't that why drunk people often survive car accidents that would be fatal otherwise?

Unfortunately I don't have time to unwind my tight muscles, as soon as I've had the thought a huge weight collides with my back, slamming into me with so much force the breath is knocked from my lungs. I'm spinning, twisting as the wall of iron surrounds me, forcing my feet off the ground. A deafening crash fills the air, though it seems delayed. Haven't I already been hit?

Then I'm being thrust forward, or is it backwards? I'm moving, flying through the air and yet my limbs are completely constrained. My eyes are clenched shut, and the sound of wrenching metal and shattering glass explodes around me. It's all so sudden, I don't have time to be afraid, to say prayers for my baby, if not for myself.

I wait for the pain, but it doesn't come. After a few moments of holding my breath I realize I'm not moving anymore. Am I dead? Was it so sudden that I didn't feel it?

I peek open one eye, and sunlight blinds me. Is there a sun in the afterlife? I know shifters have a version of heaven, but I didn't imagine humans got to go there..

There's a click, like a car door opening, and then the sound of racing footsteps. "Catch them!" Sinclair's deep voice snarls, so loud that I think he must be yelling in my ear.

Hope courses through my veins. If he's here then I must not be dead. And why am I so warm? I wonder belatedly, imagining myself sprawled over the hood of a vehicle, in too much shock to feel the impact on my broken body. Shouldn't a car that's been sitting in the snow be cold?

"Ella – Ella, are you alright?" Sinclair is talking again, and I open my other eye, anxious to see him. Instead I see the empty street in front of me. "Please say something." He begs, his gentle hands moving over my body from behind. "Are you hurt? Talk to me baby."

Behind me. I think dazedly. But that means... I sit up, truly looking around for the first time. We're sitting on the hood of the car – at least what used to be the hood. Sinclair's huge body has completely totaled the vehicle. Slowly – infuriatingly slowly, my brain pieces together what must have happened. Sinclair had been fast enough to reach me, but he hadn't had time to push me out of the way.

Instead he'd turned me away from the car and wrapped his own body around me, shielding me from the impact of the car. He'd taken the full force of the crash, and his back had crumpled the bumper and hood beyond recognition, shattering the windshield into a thousand pieces.

I feel nauseous at once, and my body is shaking with fear and adrenaline. "I... I ." I clamber off the crumpled metal surface, my knees giving out as soon as my feet hit the ground. I vomit into the pristine white snow, feeling Sinclair follow me at a pace much too slow for his supernatural strength. I'm afraid to look at him, but he's hovering beside me, surreptitiously running his hands over my body, searching for signs of injury yet trying not to disturb. "Stop." I choke, "I'm alright... it's you -" I finally turn to face him, horror and guilt washing over me as I take in the damage.

Sinclair is bleeding, and his body must be covered with bruises. The impact would have killed me, and his shifter strength might have kept him alive, but not even an Alpha wolf can walk away from such an accident unharmed. His handsome face is a tight grimace of pain, but I'm not sure he's even registering the sensations. His attention is focused on me, his green eyes scouring my body for signs of harm.

"Oh Dominic," I choke, my voice thick with emotion as I reach towards his battered body. His shirt has been torn to shreds by glass from the windshield, and I can only imagine how mangled his flesh is underneath. Before I can touch him, I'm distracted by sounds of a struggle in the distance.

I follow the sound with my eyes, catching our chauffeur wrestling the homicidal driver to the ground a few meters down the road. He must have tried to make a run for it when the car stalled, unable to simply plow through Sinclair's iron body the way it would have my own. I immediately recognize the driver as one of the rogues who attacked me in the alley, and suddenly my vision turns completely red.

I forget my concern for myself and the baby, I even forget my worry for Dominic. I feel only a flood of vengeful fury, more violent and feral than any I've known before. That rogue hurt Sinclair. He wanted to end my baby's life and would have taken mine in the process, but he actually did hurt Sinclair. He might have taken my baby's father from us both – from the pack that needs him.

"I'll kill him!" I snarl, pushing myself up on shaky legs and lunging towards the rogue. A steely bar catches me around the waist, pulling me back. "Woah Ella, come here, let me

look at you.” “No, I want to kill him!” I insist, not recognizing this bloodthirsty woman I’ve apparently become.

“I do too, trouble, but right now you’re more important.” Sinclair murmurs in my ear. I can already hear sirens in the distance, loud, shrill, and drawing closer with every moment that passes.

“I’m fine!” I cry, tears spilling from my overflowing lashes. “He hurt you! Let me go so I can make him pay.”

Sinclair is purring, but the sound keeps stuttering in his chest, as if the internal engine that fuels his rumbles and growls has been damaged. “I know little one, we’ll make him pay, just take it easy.”

Sniffing, I stop fighting, turning to face him once he returns my feet to the ground. “You’re all bloody.” I observe pitifully, wishing I knew how to heal his wounds. “I want to make him bloody too.”

I sound like a petulant toddler, though admittedly a very violent one. Still, Sinclair isn’t listening, the stubborn man has his palm pressed to my belly, his eyes scouring me for the hundredth time. “The baby’s okay.” He sighs, but I need you to tell me where you’re hurt, Ella.”

Before I can answer, an ambulance skitters to a stop behind the wreckage, and EMT’s leap from the back of the vehicle, sprinting over to us. They slow down as they draw near, warily

approaching us as Sinclair holds me tightly and begins to growl protectively. “Alpha,” One of the EMT’s has his hands up, to show he means no harm. Belatedly I realize the Moon Valley pack’s symbol is blazing on the side of the ambulance, marking it as part of a shifter institution.

Of course the shifters got here faster than the humans. I think with relief. And thank goodness, Sinclair’s animalistic aggression would have terrified a human – it terrifies the other wolves already. “It’s okay.” The EMT continues. “We just want to help, we won’t hurt her.”

Sinclair scents the air, drawing in their aromas and apparently determining them friendly. Gradually he loosens his hold on me, though I can sense how difficult it is for him to do so. Eventually he offers me up for their examination, delivering a menacing warning in

the process, “I’m watching you, beta. One wrong move and I’ll make you wish you’d never been born.”

The EMT approaches me, still keeping his hands up in clear view. Sinclair paces behind us like an enraged bear, and I try to get my breathing under control. “Luna, where are you bleeding?”

“I’m not!” I exclaim, half-sobbing.” It’s all his blood. I’m fine, he’s the one who was hit.” The EMT look up at Sinclair, searching for confirmation and starting to approach him instead.

“No! Look at her first.” He growls, putting all his Alpha authority into the words and making us all shiver in response. “Dominic, please!” I beg, moving back towards him. “I’m not hurt because you protected me.” I press my palms to his chest, gazing up at him with a pleading expression.

“You did your job, we’re safe.” I continue, praying he’ll listen to reason, or at least be triggered into action by my words. “Rafe and I need you to be okay so you can continue keeping us safe. So we need you to go to the hospital now. We need you to let them help you.”

Sinclair gazes down at me with glowing, uncertain eyes, and I ask one final time. “Please, Dominic.”

Chapter 92 – Stubborn Alpha

Ella

Sinclair finally agreed to let the EMTs administer emergency care, though it wasn’t easy. He refused to let me out of his sight, and though he’d tried to maintain physical contact too, the EMTs eventually convinced him to let them strap him onto a gurney for transfer to the hospital. I sat beside him in the ambulance, where he was sprawled on his side, watching me with complete intensity as the EMTs worked on cutting away his clothes.

I stroked his hair as he stoically suffered through their poking and prodding, so he could feel me safe and secure beside him. At first I tried to peek over Sinclair’s broad shoulder to see the damage on his back, but he growled as soon as I broke eye contact, and I decided keeping him calm was more important than discovering the extent of his injuries.

The ambulance can't seem to move fast enough, and I'm counting down the moments until we reach the shifter hospital. I can see how tired Sinclair is, his eyelids keep drooping, only to snap back open when he realizes he's falling asleep. I want to help him rest, but I'm also afraid that if he falls asleep he might not wake back up.

"I'm so sorry, Dominic." I murmur, unable to hold in my feelings any more.

"Why are you sorry?" He responds, furrowing his brow. "You didn't do anything wrong." "You're hurt because of me." I remind him, hiccuping and swiping at my tears with my free hand. "They wanted me not you. Why did you do that!"

"Baby, if they could have gotten to me they gladly would have you're just an easier target." He explains, sounding so steady and sure, even as the EMTs dig into his raw wounds. "And! did it because you and Rafe are a million times more important than me."

"But that's simply not true." I argue miserably. "You can find another mate and have more babies –" "A warning rumble vibrates in his chest, but I ignore it. "But if something happens to you then the entire pack, the entire realm would be in danger. I'm replaceable, you're not."

"I beg to differ." Sinclair growls. "And if you keep talking that way you're going to regret it, little mate."

The EMTs exchange amused glances, and I can feel the corner of my own mouth twitching. "Are you really threatening me when you're tied down?"

"If you think I can't break out of a few flimsy straps you're out of your mind, gorgeous." He answers, sounding strong and ominous right up until he winces in obvious pain.

"Tsk, stubborn Alpha." I cluck, still stroking his hair. "Are you in a lot of pain? Be honest." I add sternly.

"Not nearly as much as I would have been if I'd lost you." He replies, with utter confidence. My heart swells, but there's still a knot of pain and confusion tangled at its center. I'm falling in love with this man, so of course I want to hear his affectionate endearments, of course I want him to be alright. But that doesn't explain away last night. Sweet nothings won't fix what's broken between us. I want to ask him where Lydia fits in all this so badly it hurts, but I can't do that as long as we have an audience.

That mere thought is enough to give me pause. Does he mean any of the things he's saying, or

is he just putting on a show for the EMTs? And if he does mean it, then how could he be so cold and dismissive last night? Why did he sleep with her?

"What are you thinking?" Sinclair asks, furrowing his brow as he takes in my solemn expression.

"I'm just wondering if it's safe for you to fall asleep." I lie, using my thumb to smooth out the wrinkles in his forehead. "You look so tired."

"He should stay conscious if he can." The first EMT frowns apologetically. "Just until we know the damage."

Sinclair smiles at me, though it looks more like a grimace. "I already told you I wasn't taking my eyes off you, that includes for sleep."

"We're almost there." The second EMT assures me. "He just has to hold on a little longer."

Of course, when we arrive at the hospital it's more of the same: Sinclair being impossibly stubborn and overprotective, even though I'm perfectly fine and he's the one who looks like he's been put through a meat grinder. Once I can see his back, I understand that the entire broad surface was shredded by the glass of the windshield, and hundreds of tiny shards are still embedded in his skin. The sight is enough to send me into a fresh fit of tears, and I'm beyond angry with myself for giving into the emotion. I know me being upset will do nothing. but rile Sinclair's wolf further.

Things reach an unfortunate crescendo when they try and take him for x-rays, because of course I can't go with him. They need to assess the internal damage from the blunt force of the crash, and though the logical part of Sinclair realizes that, the combination of so much danger, my upset, and all the strangers around us has his wolf in full control. In the end it. takes getting every guard in the hospital to stand watch over me until he comes back from the X-ray, on threat of death if they let anything happen to me. I told him he was being ridiculous, but of course he didn't listen.

When he finally returns we end up caught in another disagreement, with him insisting the doctors and nurses can tend to his back while he's sitting up so he can keep me in his lap, and those of us who still have our sanity intact trying to convince him to lie down. It's a

losing battle, and in the end I end up in the bed with him, his huge body draped over me while he pretends not to feel the pain of dozens of tiny tweezers digging into his torn flesh to extract all the shards of glass.

I do my best to distract him, kissing his scruffy cheeks and nuzzling his neck, telling him what a powerful protector he is and guiding his hand to my belly so he can feel the pup.

“I know what you’re doing.” Sinclair chuckles, catching my lips in his the next time I try to graze them over his jaw. “Such blatant pandering, you ought to be ashamed.” He teases.

“It’s not pandering.” I argue, “At least, not entirely. You saved my life today, you saved the baby again. And after I was such a brat to you.”

“You had every right,” He acknowledges, “even if it was a misunderstanding.”

“Misunderstanding how?” I clarify, stiffening slightly. The text message I received the night before was very clear. “You can’t tell me that wasn’t real, Dominic.”

Sinclair waits until the doctors are finished bandaging his back before he answers. They leave us alone, promising to bring the x-ray results soon. Once they’re out of hearing distance, he

sighs. “Lydia drugged me, Ella.” He confesses, sounding completely ashamed of himself. “I was at the pub, I noticed my drink tasted odd and I blacked out. She sent you that text message. The next thing I knew, I was waking up in her bed.”

“Are you serious?” I demand, sitting up in horror. Of all the possible ways I expected him to explain his actions, I never dreamed of this possibility.

“I don’t have any idea what happened while I was blacked out and she claims we had sex, but I don’t know for sure.” Sinclair continues. “But the point is that I haven’t been lying to you. I didn’t intentionally have sex with her, and I don’t want anything to do with her now more. than ever.”

“Dominic! Why didn’t you tell me?” I cry, outraged that he didn’t say anything sooner. “Why did you let me keep spiraling that way?”

Sinclair catches me in his crosshairs, giving me such a searing look of incredulity that I begin curling in on myself. “Oh.” I squeak, realizing that he isn’t the only one who’s been stubborn today. “Because I wouldn’t let you?”

“I tried to tell you repeatedly.” He confirms, “You wouldn’t hear it.”

“I’m sorry.” I profess, feeling lousy even though the knot in my chest is already beginning to uncoil. “I just got so worked up.”

“I know.” Sinclair agrees. “With jealousy.”

“I didn’t say that.” I combat, snuggling into his chest. “I can’t believe Lydia did that. What in hell was she thinking? Surely she didn’t expect that kind of dirty trick to convince you to take her back?”

When Sinclair ignores my continued denial, I know the truth must be worse than I realize. ” She was thinking that if she gets pregnant, I won’t need you anymore.”

Chapter 93 – Proper Luna

Ella

Pain. My first reaction is pain – blistering and hot, like having my body suspended over a pit of flames and slowly roasted. Sinclair won’t need me anymore. I’ll lose him. For all my resistance, I’ve become hopelessly attached to Sinclair, and my feelings for him are far stronger than I’d like to admit. The idea of not having him in my life anymore is so excruciating I can’t even consider the possibility head-on. I want to run and hide from it, to pretend it isn’t real rather than suffer the agony it unleashes.

I breathe through the torment, wondering how much time has passed while I grapple with this news. It feels like hours, but it’s probably only been moments. Once the pain passes, there is only denial. Lydia can’t be pregnant. She and Sinclair attempted to conceive a child for one night couldn’t possibly give them success when years of trying resulted in nothing more than broken hearts and a failed marriage. Right?

years

Of course, it wouldn't be the strangest thing in the world if they did succeed after all this time. My conscience suggests and she's right. How many stories have I heard over the years from well-meaning friends trying to make me feel better about my own infertility struggles? "Just wait, the day you stop trying is the day you'll conceive." they'd say, or, "sometimes the stress alone can keep you from succeeding, at some point you just have to let all that go."

They didn't realize how hurtful it was, almost like they were blaming my infertility on me wanting it too badly. They also didn't appreciate that this might be true for some women, but it's completely false for many others. Some women would never conceive, no matter what they did. Still, they might have been wrong to try and placate me that way, but that doesn't mean those cases never happen. Maybe a blacked out one night stand was what it took for Lydia and Sinclair to finally make a baby together.

What if Lydia is pregnant? I think hesitantly. What if she and Sinclair finally achieved the thing which had cost them their marriage? Could a child be enough to repair the damage in their relationship? Suddenly I see a future where Sinclair and his mate have a child while my own pup and I are able to quietly live in the background no more lies, no more fraud. Completely safe.

Wouldn't that be better than this? Even if I'm heartbroken over Sinclair, isn't my baby's safety more important than anything? Won't I always be sick with guilt as long as I'm continuing this fraud? Isn't it right for the pack to have a true Luna?

No! Something feral and ferocious screams up inside me, Sinclair is ours! She can't have him!

That's selfish. I realize, hating the truth even as I recognize its weight. It's selfish to keep him. for myself if it's not right for him, for the pack. This isn't just about me. It's about millions of people who need Sinclair to lead them.

"And if she is pregnant?" I ask, just barely surfacing from the thoughts attempting to drown

"She's not." Sinclair dismisses easily, echoing my initial thoughts. "we don't even know if I slept with her, and even if I did, we tried for years to no avail."

"But what if she is?" I press, needing him to hear me out. "I mean, if she is pregnant, then

you'll have another potential heir, and its mother will be a she-wolf. That's everything you've been looking for. I have to think that a pup with two shifter parents will be stronger than one with a human mother."

"We don't know that." Sinclair digs in his heels, his sharp gaze piercing me. "And you'll make a better Luna than Lydia ever would."

"We both know that's not true." I correct him gently, wanting to slide out of the bed so he can't use his physical proximity to overpower my senses. "Because no matter what I do, I can never be a real one."

"What are you saying?" Sinclair inquires, frowning deeply now.

"I'm saying that if she is pregnant, that might not be a bad thing." I sigh, trying and failing to leave the protective circle of his arms.

"What?" Sinclair growls, with abject disbelief. I'm not surprised by his reaction, because I'm well aware of how strange it is for me to be making this argument. "Ella, you know what kind of woman Lydia is she's narcissistic and power hungry. In some ways she's as bad as the Prince."

—

"I know and I'm not saying she isn't terrible, just that you need a true Luna." I remark with a weak shrug. "And with you there to keep her in check, her worse nature wouldn't ever get out of control."

"Who says I need a true Luna?" Sinclair grumbles, sounding every bit as petty and mutinous. as I must have earlier.

"Says you!" I burst, laughing now. "From day one, Dominic! You've been telling me this arrangement of ours is temporary, and only binding until you find a real mate from the first moment we met."

"Maybe I changed my mind." He suggests, nuzzling my neck and squeezing me just a bit tighter, as if he's afraid someone might take me from him. "Maybe I was wrong."

My heart skips a beat, and butterflies burst to life in my belly. Is that affection all for me? Is he responding to the baby? How is it we've built so much intense intimacy between us, and we've never done more than kiss?

I decide to test him. “I think Rafe is confusing your instincts, Dominic. It’s easy for you to say this now, but once he’s here with us, I’m going to go back to being just some human you

know.”

Testing him, hmm? The little voice in the back of my head interjects. Sounds to me like you’re just making excuses to keep him at arm’s length.

Unsurprisingly, Sinclair growls at me, making me quake and lean into him for comfort even though he’s the one causing my unease. Now that I don’t want to be separated from him, of course, he sees fit to put some distance between our bodies. He shifts me to face him on the hospital bed, keeping his legs straddled over either side of the gurney and staring me down with stern disapproval. “That isn’t true. I know the difference Ella. You and Rafe are one now, but I don’t want you for my Luna because of him I want you because of you.

“But you weren’t wrong.” I insist, trying not to absorb his compliments. It feels wonderful for him to be speaking this way, but the way I feel doesn’t change the situation we’re in. “Because

it’s one thing to deceive the pack and the Alpha council for the greater good because there is no other option. But Lydia being pregnant would give you another option. An honest option, Dominic.” I clarify, needing him to understand.

“Is that what you want?” He asks gruffly.

“I want my baby to be safe. I don’t want to live a lie.” I answer honestly. “And you don’t want to perpetuate a fraud like this if you don’t have to.” I add pointedly.

“So you think I should take her back, after everything she’s done?” Sinclair bites, looking furious now.

“If she’s pregnant, if there’s a she-wolf who can fill this role without lying to the people, you have to choose her.” I insist. “Keeping up this deception isn’t right, no matter how we feel.”

“You still haven’t told me how you feel, you know that?” Sinclair points out, his powerful hands massaging my waist, surreptitiously holding me in place in case I decide to make a run

for it.

“What does that matter?” I ask, not meeting his gaze. “Last night might have changed everything for us. I know it wasn’t your fault,” I offer apologetically. “But things are complicated enough already without adding feelings to the mix.”

“That may be true, but the feelings are there whether we want them to be or not.” Sinclair responds, ducking his head to try and catch my eye.

“I want our son to have two loving parents who can focus all their attention on him, not their own drama.” I counter, still evading an honest answer, but feeling dizzy now that I’m away from him.

“Why would our feelings mean that we can’t focus on our baby?” Sinclair questions, looking strangely blurry around the edges.

“Because it’s already distracting us! We’re talking about feelings rather than the real issue here which is that Lydia might be carrying another heir for you already. How is that supposed to work?” I inquire, I reach out towards one of his muscular arms for support. “Would you stop moving, please?”

There are strange spots in my vision, and I try to blink them away, but they don’t budge. “Ella?” Sinclair’s urgent voice sounds very far away. “Are you feeling okay?”

The last thing I hear before everything goes dark is his frantic call, “I need a nurse over here!”

Chapter 94 – Bed Rest

Sinclair

When Ella collapses in my arms, I can hardly wait for the nurses to come running. I immediately assume we must have missed some injury from the accident, and I’m instantly furious with myself for letting her talk me into being prioritized by the medical staff.

What was I thinking? I know they checked her out and there weren’t any physical marks on her body, but what if it was something internal? What if she somehow hit her head

amid all the chaos? Deep down I know that doesn't make any sense, she was completely wrapped in my arms when we collided with the car, but my fear isn't logical. It's sudden and violent and overwhelming.

"It's okay, Alpha." The doctor assures me as they move Ella onto a gurney of her own. "It's probably just the stress. There's been a lot of excitement today."

"She has high blood pressure." I warn, "we've been monitoring it daily, but her OBGYN is worried she's developing preeclampsia."

My wolf is growling and whining at once- impatient for the doctors to help Ella, worried for her health, and hating that anyone else is near her when she's so vulnerable. She looks so young and innocent in her unconscious state- so small and fragile. Her rose gold hair is a shining cascade over the flimsy pillow, still streaked with my blood. I stay beside her even after the nurses try to order me away. "I'm not going anywhere." I insist, battling my guilt over whether this is all my fault.

Would she have been so overwhelmed if I hadn't needed her to keep me calm? If I hadn't been such an ogre with the EMTs and the doctors, would she have been free to relax and recover without added stress?

At once, I think about her comments regarding Lydia. On one hand I know she's right, continuing our fraud when there's an honest option changes things completely from a moral standpoint. But beyond morality, if there was a way to protect Ella from all this stress and guilt, from the threats posed by the Prince and being my Luna, shouldn't we pursue that? I've been justifying our arrangement on the grounds that becoming King is the only way to make the pack and my family safe, so the threats she's facing to help me win the crown are necessary. But that won't be true anymore if Lydia conceives.

Should I be trying harder to find a she-wolf to become my Luna? Not for the campaign's sake, but for Ella and Rafe's?

It's not that simple. My wolf insists. The pack aren't going to accept you throwing over Ella for Lydia. You've been doing everything in your power to make them fall in love with the human and it's worked.

That's not because of me. I remind him., stroking Ella's hair as the nurses take her vital signs and hook her up to an IV. She made them love her all on her own, just by being herself.

And Lydia made them hate her by being herself. He argues. If you come forward and tell them you've decided to take Lydia back, it could cost you the campaign, whether she's breeding or

not.

You may have a point. I acknowledge.

I don't just have a point, I'm completely right and you know it. He replies haughtily.

Fine. I concede, feeling exhausted by this debate, but that doesn't mean it has to stay that way after the campaign is over. Ella deserves to have whatever life she wants if that's a quiet existence with our pup out of the public eye, then I want to give that to her, even if it means letting Lydia or someone else be Luna after I'm King. That was the original plan, remember? It's not her fault I got lost along the way.

But you're not the only one who's gotten lost along the way. My wolf argues. Think about how jealous she was, how upset she became over the idea that you'd been with another woman. That has to count for something.

"Dominic?" Ella's soft murmur wrenches me from my thoughts. I breathe an instant sigh of relief how long had I been holding my breath? It doesn't seem fair that such a small, harmless creature can tie all my insides into knots the way Ella can. She thinks she's powerless. I muse, standing to lean over her bed, yet there is no one on earth who has ever had so much power over me.

The doctors had declared Ella dehydrated, stressed and hypertensive, but otherwise unharmed, leaving me to brood over my thoughts while I waited for her to wake. Her OBGYN is on his way in, but until he arrives, we're alone.

"You naughty girl." I tease, stroking her soft cheek. "Fainting to get out of telling me your feelings?"

"It wasn't on purpose." She pouts, looking over me with obvious concern. "Why are you out of bed? What about your x-rays?"

"Don't worry about me, sweetheart." I encourage, "how are you feeling?"

"Sort of hungover." She admits, trying to sit up. I gently catch her shoulder, keeping her in place. Eventually she huffs, "Dominic, I have to pee."

“Well why didn’t you say so?” I’m still smiling at her like an absolute idiot, so relieved that she’s awake and talking to me that my tormented thoughts have taken a backseat for now at least. I scoop her up into my arms, unhooking her IV so I can take her to the restroom.

Ella squeaks, holding her hands crossed over her chest as if she’s afraid to touch me. “What are you doing!?! You’re hurt, you shouldn’t be doing this!”

“Don’t worry, trouble. I heal fast.” I assure her, glaring at the nurses we pass, each of whom look as though they’d like to chastise me as well. They all cower beneath my forbidding glower, and a fresh wave of amusement passes over me as I think about how much harder it is to intimidate the human in my arms.

“Not that fast.” Ella insists, gnawing on her lower lip and seeming to forget the cut she gave herself earlier until her sharp little teeth dig into the wound. She gasps with pain, so I tsk and

purr.

“If you keep that up I’m going to have to find some way to keep your lips occupied so you can’t keep biting yourself.” I intone darkly, realizing too late that this might have sounded even more lascivious than I intended.

Ella doesn’t seem to mind. Her heart thumps loudly against her ribs, and her pupils dilate with interest. Luckily if there is one thing that can kill a mood quickly, it’s a bathroom. I deposit Ella on the toilet and calmly weather her glares and admonishments until i finally leave her to

take care of things in private, making her promise to call for me when she’s done. Instead I hear the commode flush and the sink running, so I push the door open to glare at her, “Ella you’re a fall risk.”

“And you’re an overprotective ogre.” She counters, drying her hands and climbing back into my arms so willingly that my wolf completely melts. Indeed, she comes to me so sweetly have to fight to maintain my stern demeanor, reminding myself that I musn’t coddle her, no matter how tempting.

“Do you think that just because I’m injured and you’re in a delicate condition I’ll let you get away with defying me?” I rumble in Ella’s ear, chuckling when she shivers in response.

“How long have I been asleep?” The brazen creature asks, ignoring my question.

“About half an hour.” I inform her, “and my x-rays did come back while you were out. I’m going to be fine.”

“Good.” She breathes, sounding as though a huge weight is leaving her shoulders.

“You were really worried, weren’t you?” I inquire, settling her back in her bed.

“How could I not be?” Ella asks in return, blinking up at me with wide eyes. “I mean, I know you’re strong, but that car... it’s a miracle you’re not more hurt after an accident like that.” “I’m fine.” I promise, dropping a kiss to her hair. “You don’t have to worry about me, Ella.”

She shoots me a challenging stare. “I’d like to see you take your own advice.”

flash my fangs at her, but the OBGYN interrupts us, “Knock, knock.” He says, peaking around the curtain surrounding our ER bay. “I hear you two have been causing some real chaos among the nursing staff here, defying all the hospital’s protocols.”

“I’m innocent.” Ella immediately announces, pointing at me. “It was all him.

I throw my head back and laugh, ignoring the pain which ricochet’s down my back. “Oh you’re really determined to dig yourself into a hole aren’t you, baby?” I remark ominously, stroking, her nape.

“I’m just being honest.” She shrugs, a mischievous glint in her eye..

“Well I think it’s safe to say you’ve had more than enough excitement for the time being.” The doctor shares, giving us a reluctant frown. “I’m afraid we’ve reached the point where you need to go on bed rest, Ella.”

Chapter 95 – Returning the Favor

Ella

“Bed rest?” I repeat, glancing nervously at Sinclair. “You mean until the baby comes?”

“No, I don’t think we have to do anything quite that extreme yet.” The doctor replies with a kind smile, “For now let’s start with a few weeks. Beyond that we can take it as it comes.” “What does that mean exactly?” Sinclair inquires, his large body looming over me. His heat, which sometimes reminds me too much of a blazing furnace when we’re curled in bed together, is a welcome balm now, washing over me in a tide of cozy comfort. “She can’t out of bed at all?”

get “No, it’s not that severe.” The doctor assures us. “Ella can get up to go to the restroom, or move around to switch positions. She can take two short walks every day one in the morning, one in the evening but no more than twenty minutes and if you find yourself getting tired or overwhelmed before then, you need to stop. Absolutely no stairs or physical exertion though, and no standing for more than twenty minutes at a time for any reason.”

My heart sinks, and I try not to let my disappointment show. It’s not the end of the world. after all, it just means I’m going to be a bit bored. “Do I have to be completely on my back, or is sitting up okay?”

“Choose whatever position is most comfortable for you.” He continues, looking back and forth between us. “More importantly, no stress whether you’re in bed, on the couch, or wherever you choose. That means no campaign events, no excitement.”

“And if she does get excited, despite our efforts?” Sinclair inquires, an odd note in his voice.

“I’m going to send you home with some sedatives in case of emergencies, and while I would advise you keep sexual activity to a minimum, if the tension is building up it’s better to indulge it than to resist just remind your wolf to be gentle with her.”

I blink. Who said anything about sex? Is that what Sinclair was getting at, but I just didn’t understand the nuance? How is that not physical exertion?

Don’t be daft, you know orgasms are the best stress relievers. The little voice in my head remarks.

Oh Goddess, when was the last time I had one of those? I think back, recalling the last night I slept away from Sinclair, when I was finally free to get some relief from the fire he keeps constantly lit inside me.

Too long, and you have to admit it would be nice to have one you didn't give yourself. The voice answers.

That would be a first, I snort. Mike is the only man I've ever been with, and he'd never seemed to understand that women can't just magically get off with a few thrusts. I always enjoyed sex for the intimacy, and though it always felt good, orgasms had always been my own responsibility mine to seek once he rolled over and fell asleep.

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You know it wouldn't be that way with Sinclair. My conscience intimates, sparking memories of the few times we've gotten carried away when I've had glimpses of the pleasure he could give me if I would only succumb to his charms. His words the day of the ball after the

incident, as I've decided to call it – ring in my mind: Now, would you like me to make you feel good? Nothing about his own desires, nothing about going further – just a selfless offer to fulfill my needs.

Shut up. I think sharply, unsure whether I'm speaking to the memory or my inner voice. Sinclair is watching me like a hawk, and the hungry expression he's wearing makes me worry that my expression is giving away my lurid thoughts. Before he can say a word, I lean into his side, turning my face towards his shoulder so I can breathe in his scent. I'm doing it for comfort yes, but also to hide my blushing features. Sinclair purrs softly, still stroking my nape, and thanks the doctor.

"I appreciate you coming on such short notice. Can I take her home now?" He asks bluntly, as if I'm the injured party here, rather than him.

"Dominic, you're in much worse condition than I am." I remind him sulkily. "We should be asking your doctors, not mine."

He raises one dark brow at my challenge, but otherwise doesn't acknowledge my words. He looks back to the OB, who smiles warmly, "she's free to go as soon as I write this prescription. I'll come and check on her the day after tomorrow, but call me if anything comes up before then."

"Oh fine, ignore me, talk about me like I'm not here." I grumble. "That will keep me calm." "Don't worry Ella, you're in good hands." The doctor replies, completely unphased by my petulant words. "I'll see you soon."

The moment he turns away, Sinclair moves in front of me, sliding his muscular arms around my middle and burying his face in my neck. I'm so surprised by the gesture, that I barely notice I forgot to thank the doctor. Sinclair isn't growling, or scolding me, he's not even kissing me or trying to sneak an intimate caress, he's simply hugging me – squeezing me with barely restrained force.

Sensing that this isn't his usual mischief or bossiness, I wrap my arms around his broad shoulders, returning the embrace and nuzzling his scruffy jaw. "Hey, what is it?" I murmur, holding him as tightly as I can so that he knows I'm asking out of concern, not some desire to be released. It's only when I feel the bandages beneath his shirt that I remember his wounds, but as soon as I try to take my arms away, Sinclair rumbles in protest.

He lifts his face from my neck, only high enough to speak into my ear. "Today was horrible." He says, his voice like gravel, "every last minute of it. And now this."

"I'm okay, though." I answer softly. "And so is the baby this is just a precaution."

"I don't like it." He insists, sounding as sullen as I was feeling a few minutes ago. "You shouldn't have to worry about this on top of everything else... and I hate that I can't... I can't protect you from this."

And here I thought I was the one on a roller coaster of emotions. In a matter of a few hours, Sinclair had gone from rabid protector, to bossy nurse, and teasing, would-be lover. Now here he is, clinging to me like a child might cling to a teddy bear, beside himself with feelings of helplessness in light of my condition. I suddenly realize that his day started off even worse than my own waking up drugged with a psychotic ex, then finding me missing, tracking me down and weathering a tantrum he did not deserve.

"I'm sorry." I tell him, my voice sounding smaller than I'd like. "I'm sorry for the way I acted

earlier, and I'm sorry I scared you when I ran, and with the accident, and fainting that way. I wish I could turn back time and undo this entire day and yesterday for that matter."

"It's certainly been an eventful week." He jokes, his deep bass dripping with irony. "But none of it has been your fault."

"I'm still sorry." I repeat, kissing his neck. "You've been killing yourself taking care of me, and I've been a brat. You deserve better." I hate that I'm near tears already, but I

don't think my wild emotions are going to even out any time soon. "I think it's time you let me return the favor."

"You already did." He purrs, rocking me ever so slightly as he strokes my hair. "You kept me calm today when no one else could. You probably saved the lives of some of these nurses."

At first I take it as a joke, but after more thought I realize he's probably being completely literal. "It's not enough, I want to do more."

"You just got put on bed rest, little one." Sinclair reminds me, pulling back to take my face in his massive hands. Despite his stern tone, his green eyes soften as he looks down at me. "I appreciate that you want to help me, Ella. But the only thing that could possibly fix this would be for the doctor to walk back over here and tell me his diagnosis was a mistake. I'm afraid I'm going to be feeling this way until our baby is here and you're both safe and healthy."

"You're right" "I acknowledge, clasping his wrists and giving him my best puppy-dog eyes. "I can't fix this, but there must be something I can do to make you feel better even on bedrest" "I plead, a devious thought occurring to me then. "You know I won't be able to truly relax if I'm worried about you."

Sinclair huffs out a laugh, closing his eyes and shaking his head. "I swear, you're going to be the death of me, trouble."

I peek up at him from beneath my lashes. "Is that a yes?"

Chapter 96 – Ella and Sinclair Reach an Understanding

Ella

"Why does it feel like this is more for my benefit than yours?" I inquire archly, watching as Sinclair pours oils and salts into a large, steaming bath. The clever wolf knows how much I love a bubble bath, especially now that I'm pregnant. After years of constantly being dirty and even living on the street, there is nothing else that feels so luxurious to me and I can't think of anything more relaxing.

“Hey, I was going to get in with you you’re the one who put your foot down.” Sinclair replies with a wolfish grin, skimming his fingers through the water to check the temperature.

“Because you have open wounds!” I exclaim, exasperated but also impatient for the preparation to be over so I can sink into the deep tub. “The doctors said you couldn’t submerge your injuries until the scabs are gone.”

Amazingly, the gashes on his back have already scabbed over. It seems that he truly wasn’t lying when he told me that shifters heal faster than humans, but I hadn’t expected him to heal quite so fast. At this rate his wounds will be mere scars in a couple of days.

“Which is why I’ll be supervising, not participating.” Dominic shrugs, I wonder if that hurts. him? I ponder, watching the muscles rippling in his back. He certainly doesn’t show any signs of pain.

He’s so strong. My traitorous conscience moons, and for a moment I actually think I see stars in my eyes.

Rolling my eyes at my inner voice, I cross my arms over my chest. “The idea was to help us both relax.” I sigh, guilt gnawing at my insides.

“Believe it or not, Ella, but taking care of you does help me relax.” Sinclair declares coolly, pressing a button that triggers the whirlpool jets built into the tub. A steady thrumming sound whirs to life as the water begins to churn, foaming and bubbling even higher now.

“Oh sure, I’m sure your version of supervision will ensure neither of us get the least bit excited as you and the doctor so elegantly put it.” I snark.

The big wolf flashes his fangs, flames dancing in his eyes as he finally turns away from the bath. “If I didn’t know any better I’d think you were worried about losing control with me.” He observes darkly, “but I can’t imagine why that would be, unless of course your feelings for me are stronger than you’re letting on.”

“Now you’re just fishing.” I accuse, narrowing my eyes at Sinclair, even as he prowls toward me across the tiled floor.

“Am I?” His dark brows incline towards his hairline. “Because I have no problem admitting mine.”

“Don’t!” I interrupt, feeling a sudden spike of panic. “Seriously Dominic, whatever you’re going to say, I don’t want to know.”

“I thought we were past that, sweetheart.” He scolds, “didn’t you learn your lesson about actually hearing me out when I want to tell you something

“This is different.” I insist, “it honestly stresses me out.”

Sinclair pauses, studying me closely. He’s only a few paces away now, but the longer he observes me, the softer his ravenous expression becomes. “Has it occurred to you that part of the reason you’re so stressed is because you’re trying to fight the inevitable, Ella?”

“Dominic, what stresses me out is bringing a wolf pup into a world I don’t belong to or understand, while living a lie and dodging constant death threats.” I snap, before I can consider how the Alpha might take my words. “Can you really blame me for wanting to keep things simple in the face of all that? If we lose focus for even a moment, this could all fall

apart.

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He stops dead in his tracks, and I can see a great wall of guilt slam into him. I know he’s not focusing on my logic, but on the blame I’ve basically just foisted upon him. “Wait... that came

fault out wrong.” I try to backtrack. “Dominic, I didn’t mean that any of this is your “You might not have meant it that way, but you weren’t wrong.” Sinclair declares gutturally, his face a full shade paler than it was a moment ago. “It is my fault if I were a normal man, I hadn’t forced you into this situation, you probably wouldn’t have any complications at all.” “No.” I object, my voice thick with emotion. “You didn’t force me into this, Dominic. And there’s no way to know whether any of this is connected. Mike destroyed my reproductive system and plenty of healthy women develop this condition -”

“Maybe so,” He interrupts sharply, “but our situation certainly isn’t making things any better.” Sinclair is pacing now, resembling a tiger in a cage.

“Please don’t do this.” I beg, hiccupping on a sob. “Please don’t blame yourself for this. You’re trying to do the right thing for everyone here. Neither one of us planned this,

neither one of us could have prepared for what the world would throw at us these last few months. I don't blame you, I just don't want things to get more complicated than they have to be."

At the sight, or perhaps scent, of my tears, Sinclair deflates, closing the final distance between us and pulling me into his arms. "I'm sorry." He croons in my ear, stroking my spine and kissing my hair. "I'm sorry, sweetheart. Here I am, supposed to be keeping you relaxed and I'm making you cry."

My feet are still on the ground, but I don't want them to be. I begin clambering up the huge man like a monkey climbing a tree, until my arms and legs are wrapped around him and I'm weeping into his neck. "It's not your fault." I repeat pitifully. "I cry over everything now."

"Shh," He coos, sitting down on the edge of the bath. "It's okay, you're not going to break me with a few tears, trouble." He says this, but I can hear the pain in his voice, I can still see the horrible expression on his face.

A steady purr takes up residence in his chest as he deftly strips off my clothes. He tries to deposit me in the bath, but I won't let go, afraid that he'll leave if I release him. Instead he manages to pull off his slacks, shirt and boxers without dislodging me, before sinking into the tub with me still in his arms. I try to protest about his back, but he just hushes me and continues submerging us in the hot water.

It's quite some time before my tears slow enough to talk again, and I realize this isn't even the first breakdown I've had today. "I love this baby," I murmur after a while, "but I'm getting really sick of crying all the time."

Sinclair's lips graze my temple. "I don't think that's his fault either. Maybe some of it -" if

"The bacon." I remind him, thinking of my most ridiculous fit yet.

"The bacon." He agrees, sounding almost amused. "But not the rest. You have every reason to be upset, Ella. I should have listened to you earlier, before you fainted. You tried to tell me this was all too much and I was too preoccupied with romance to really consider how right you were. It's exactly like you said, I'm letting my feelings distract me from what's really important, and that's the campaign. And it's you and Rafe."

“What are you saying?” I sniffle, fearing I know the answer, and unable to decide whether or not I hope I’m right.

“I’m saying I think you were right. If Lydia is pregnant it might be for the best, and if she isn’t I should try to find another she-wolf to be Luna after we get through the campaign.” Sinclair proclaims, his deep voice sounding hollow – almost as if it belongs to someone else.

Luckily I’m still curled around him like a baby sloth, so I hide my face in his shoulder to prevent him from seeing my disappointment. I don’t understand it myself. I know this is the right decision, I know it’s the most logical solution for our problems, and I don’t plan on arguing it but it still hurts. It still feels like I’m being ripped apart from the inside out.

“Thank you.” I breathe, despite my breaking heart. “I’m trying really hard, but I don’t know if I can get through another week like this one with my sanity intact.” I confess, recalling everything that’s happened in such a short time: blackmail, Roger learning the truth, Lydia drugging Sinclair, our fight, the car crash, the hospital, now this. Has it really only been three days?

“Bed rest will help.” Sinclair promises, “just you wait, in a week or so you’re going to be so bored you’ll be wishing for another blackmailer just to shake up the monotony.”

I hiccup a laugh, and finally relax against him as my tears slow at long last.

Of course, after two weeks of bed rest, it’s not a blackmailer awaiting me it’s a text from Lydia. There are no words, only a photo, one displaying the unmistakable image of a positive pregnancy test.

Todave Ro

Chapter 97- Lydia’s Pregnant

“Well, I guess that settles that.” I muse, staring at the image dominating the narrow screen of my smart phone. Granted, it was sent by the woman I saved as “Satan’s Mistress” in my contacts and is centered right below the photo of Lydia and Sinclair in bed together, but there’s no mistaking the sight of a positive pregnancy test.

I've taken enough home tests in my life to understand what the two pink lines filling the small results window mean they're the sight I wished for a thousand times but never saw.

I'm trying to keep the pain and disappointment out of my voice so that Sinclair won't know how upset I am, though I don't know why I bother. It seems he can read me like a book, even at the best of times.

Whether he can sense it or not, I'm devastated to know Lydia is pregnant, that her scheme worked. Even though this solves some of our problems, I hate to think that she's getting rewarded for her duplicity, and I despise the idea of Sinclair starting a family with anyone else

even if it's in my baby's best interest.

"Not yet it doesn't." Sinclair replies, his big body still wrapped around me in our bed. "Not until I know the test is real, and even then it might not be my pup. I wouldn't put anything past Lydia at this point."

"So you have to go see her?" I guess, fighting the strange but increasingly familiar urge to growl.

"Yes." He confirms, not sounding any more excited about it than I am. He shifts my body beneath his, balancing his weight on his elbows. "I'll go by her hotel on my lunch break."

"Are you sure that's a good idea?" I question, sliding my hands over his muscular chest. "What if she tries to drug you again, or pull some other kind of trick?"

"She succeeded last time because she bribed a waitress to put something in my drink." He reminds me, sharing the details we learned after his guards investigated the staff at the bar he'd visited that fateful night. "I didn't know she was anywhere in the vicinity, or I would have been much more careful. I'm not going to let my guard down with her."

"Fine," I huff, "but if she lays a hand on you I'm going to rip her head off." I remark, already fantasizing about doing just that.

"Oh I see," Sinclair answers, a teasing note in his voice. "So you can rip peoples heads off but I can't?"

"Yes." I reply primly, "because in my case it's just a fantasy, in yours it's an actual possibility."

Sinclair chuckles, nuzzling my neck and pausing to nibble the spot where it meets my shoulder. “I bet you could rip off some heads if you really wanted to.” He states, sounding as if the idea pleases him very much. “You should have seen yourself trying to go after the driver who hit me.”

“Well I guess we’ll never know, because you didn’t let me avenge you.” I grumble sullenly.

“Poor, mistreated Ella.” Sinclair croons, shifting to dip his tongue into the hollow of my clavicle. “Not allowed out of bed, not allowed to slaughter your enemies. What did you ever do to deserve such abuse?”

“You tell me, you’re the one holding the keys to my jail cell.” I challenge, arching my chest in a blatant attempt to encourage him downward. Unfortunately or fortunately I suppose, he has enough restraint to resist.

“I promise I’ll take you anywhere you want to go just as soon as the doctor clears you, sweetheart.” Sinclair promises, lifting his head from my body.

“What ever happened to that driver anyway?” I ask, realizing that I was so distracted by my medical condition and Lydia’s scheming that I almost forgot about our would-be murderer.

“We can talk about that later.” Sinclair announces, “I have a few other updates for you, but there isn’t time now.”

I slide my knees up so I can tangle our legs together. I know he’s getting ready to scent mark me, which means he’s also getting ready to leave for the day. However, being stuck on best rest has made me a bit clingy, since I can’t see Sinclair except for the times he’s home.

When he feels my legs wrapping around his own, Sinclair chuckles darkly, sparing one of his hands to stroke the length of my leg. “You trying to stop me from leaving, trouble?” He asks, pausing to massage the muscles in my calf.

“Of course not.” I lie, adopting an innocent expression. “I just like feeling close to you.”

“Mmm, I like being close to you too.” Sinclair professes warmly, kissing my pulse point. “Now be a good girl and let me scent mark you.”

Wanting to stall him, to keep him in bed with me forever, I inquire. “Dominic, if I’m on bed rest then why do you need to scent mark me? I’m not going to be seeing anyone.”

His eyes flash with emerald light, and I know his wolf has risen to my challenge. “We don’t know that for sure, what if some other wolf comes sniffing around the manor?”

“How would they get past all your guards?” I pose, narrowing my eyes with suspicion.

“Mmm, you can never trust wolves.” He declares, his fangs extending in a predatory grin.

“Says the hungry wolf in my bed.” I laugh, trying not to squirm as he drags those fangs over my ear lobe.

“What’s wrong, little human, are you worried I might gobble you up?” Sinclair teases, his voice a low rumble that makes my insides turn to jelly.

“I’m just wondering why I need to smell like you just to lie in bed all day.” I answer, trying to sound nonchalant.

“Because you always need to smell like me.” Sinclair insists, raking his dark gaze over my body with relish. “You’re mine whether you’re in public or private.”

I positively quiver when he claims me for his own, and though my inner feminist wants to be outraged, I can’t deny how delicious it feels to be wanted this way especially by a man such as Sinclair. “Why is it I feel like I’m talking to your wolf right now, rather than you?” I joke, knowing full well that this is exactly the case. From the moment I challenged him about scent marking, his inner animal rose to the surface, pushing the logical man I’ve come to adore into the backseat.

“Baby, my wolf and I are one in the same.” Sinclair reasons, even as he pulls off my night dress and begins to rub his body against mine.

“Maybe, but it’s very obvious when he’s in control. You start acting like a treasure-obsessed dragon who’s mistaken me for some sparkly trinket.”

Sinclair rumbles in protest, pausing to look down at me with a foreboding expression. “How dare you, you’re so much more than some trinket or trophy, Ella.”

“You know what I mean.” I laugh, rolling my eyes.

“I do,” He concedes, eyes glittering. “but the real question is why you’re delaying something you need just as badly as I do.”

The terrible thing is that he’s right. I’m trying to delay the scent marking because I know he’ll leave once it’s over, but I do need him to mark me. I need to feel his claim on me, to feel the proof that I belong to Dominic Sinclair.

The bigger the baby grows, the sharper my senses become. I can smell Sinclair now, the way only a shifter can. It’s not like with humans, whose aromas are combinations of body odors, soaps and colognes that linger on the skin. Wolf scents are so much deeper than that; powerful essences that exude from the pores and bear strange and mysterious magics. Sinclair’s is all balsam and warm, spiced honey, plus a heady, masculine musk all his own.

I can feel when the strength of his scent fades from my body after a long time apart, and it makes me feel oddly incomplete like I’m suddenly missing a piece of myself. There’s also a primal part of me which wants to ensure he doesn’t go to see his mate the she-wolf who’s carrying another one of his babies without claiming me first.

I’m already fighting a great conflagration of jealousy at the idea that she’s carrying his child. I want to destroy her, I want to smother him with my own scent before he goes to her, to stake my claim on him so Lydia knows that he’s mine no matter what she does.

Suddenly I find myself doing just that. As soon as the thought occurs to me, I find myself rubbing my body all over his, aggressively wriggling against him, determined to cover every inch of his skin in my own essence. Of course, this is much harder for me than it is for Sinclair. He’s so large that he can easily wrap himself around me and cover my whole body. I, on the other hand, have to take extra care to ensure I haven’t missed a spot. I don’t understand what’s come over me, it’s like I’ve been possessed by some wild spirit which won’t rest until this man bears my mark then again, much of pregnancy feels this way. I don’t have any control over what my body does these days.

Sinclair is purring and chuckling at once, both pleased and amused by my wolfish behavior. I pause, shooting him a suspicious glare, “Are you laughing at me?”

Sinclair grins. “I like seeing you like this. So possessive so much ferocity in such a tiny package.” His hands are stroking my sides, exploring the curves of my naked body in a sensual dance that is fanning the flames already consuming me. “It’s adorable, and incredibly sexy.”

I can feel myself flushing, I can also feel a very familiar and dangerous heat pooling in my belly. If we keep this up, we're going to start kissing, and if we start kissing... well, I'm not sure how much longer either of us can hold ourselves back from one another. This thought is enough to finally cool my overheated blood we've agreed to be friends, not to overcomplicate things.

I slump back down onto the bed, throwing my arm over my eyes so I can't see Sinclair's handsome face or rock hard body. "You should go." I sigh, trying to be strong. "This is getting

out of hand."

There's a long beat of silence, but when Sinclair speaks again I know he must have reigned in his own desires, recognizing the slippery slope we were headed down. "I'm sorry, Ella." His weight lifts from the bed, and I feel his soft lips graze mine, "I'll call you as soon as I've seen Lydia. And if you can promise to try and be less irresistible, I'll promise not to go telling you how much you turn me on. Deal?"

I can't help but laugh, moving my arm so I can see his sultry smile, "deal."

Chapter 98 – Sinclair Visits His Ex

Sinclair

When I arrive at Lydia's hotel, I'm still thinking about Ella. We've been doing well over the last two weeks, keeping our relationship affectionate but resisting our shared desires as best we can. So far we've been able to avoid getting more intimate than we'd already become before the doctor ordered bed rest, but the sexual tension. is still building – and the suggestion that Ella could be less irresistible is nothing short of ridiculous.

What's more, the baby is making her more wolf-like every day, and I'm worried our restraint can't last much longer. Her efforts to scent mark me today made that only too obvious. Before long she's going to start pushing me like any she-wolf denied her needs, either challenging my dominance or seducing me outright. It will be up to me to resist, even though denying her needs goes against my every instinct.

I know we made the right decision about staying just friends, especially since I've already let my attraction to Ella distract me from the campaign more than once. I was so

preoccupied with the beautiful human that I missed rogues pouring into my borders, and it cost the pack dearly. I got drugged and apparently bred like a prize stud because I was too busy gushing about her to a pack of bar flies than keeping my guard up.

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None of that is to mention the harm I'm doing to Ella and our baby by keeping her in this fraudulent political game. I need to confirm Lydia's pregnancy or find another Luna and whomever I choose would never accept me having a relationship with Ella in private. That means we have to find a way to be together without romance getting in the way, and so far we're failing. I'm failing her again.

I knock on the door of Lydia's room, trying to push down memories of the last time I was here. I can't decide how I feel about this supposed pregnancy. On one hand, the last thing I want is to have Lydia back in my life. On the other, a baby born from her would solve some of my problems the pack would accept me returning to my fated mate more easily than they would understand me leaving Ella for another woman.

Still, I can't help but thinking the best solution to all this would be to find a she-wolf to be Luna after the campaign, and to keep Rafe as my heir. That way we avoid Lydia's awfulness, while still giving Ella the safety and comfort she deserves.

my

Before I can consider the idea further, the door swings open, revealing Lydia in a hotel bathrobe. She's wearing a knowing smirk, and her dark hair is still wet from the shower. "Dominic, I've been expecting you." She preens, dropping her hand to her belly. "Or should I call you Daddy?"

My wolf

gags in my head, and I can't blame him. It amazes me to know how attractive I once found this woman. The idiocy of youth, I suppose, and the cruel tricks of fate.

I promptly scent the air, pushing past the fragrant soaps and shampoos lingering on her skin. I can smell her familiar, distinct aroma: the cloying combination of lemon and pine. At one time it had smelled natural and fresh to me, now it just reminds me of floor cleaner I can't smell a pup in her womb, which doesn't mean she isn't breeding, but it does mean the child doesn't belong to me.

I could smell Rafe from down the hall when Ella was only ten days along, but it's been two weeks since the apparent conception and I can't detect a single hint of my own essence in Lydia.

"Nice try, Lydia, but if you are pregnant, it's not mine." I announce, overflowing with triumphant glee.

"What. How can you say that!?" She exclaims. "I'm not some slut, Dominic, I don't sleep with just anyone."

Belatedly I realize she must not understand how quickly the bond between a father and pup forms. She probably thought she had plenty of time to figure out how to pass off the child as mine, or to conceive one for real.

"Darling, having never been pregnant, you couldn't possibly know this," I state coldly, watching her flinch at my cruel phrasing and imagining Ella scolding me for intentionally targeting her weak spot. "But if you were carrying my child, I would be able to smell it. Even

now."

Lydia's mouth opens and closes as she struggles to find the right words. "Are you sure about that?" She finally challenges, "you wouldn't want to risk being wrong about something so important."

I stalk forward, rudely reaching for her middle and uncinching her robe. I press my palm to her stomach, telling myself that she deserves this and more. After all, this is nothing compared to drugging someone and sleeping with them when they can't consent. Again I feel nothing, no pulse of life, no tiny consciousness or connection. "I'm sure." I proclaim fiercely. "As soon as the egg implants, the bond to the father forms. If you are breeding, it isn't mine."

Her hands close into fists, and she bares her fangs. "Goddess damn it!" She explodes, wrenching her body away from me and yanking her robe closed. "If you had just cooperated from the beginning -"

"Wait," I interrupt. "What do you mean, if I had cooperated?"

She growls, throwing her hands up in exasperation. "Do you have any idea the lengths I went to in order to drug you, Dom? To get you back here? That was supposed to be the

hard part but of course, you never make anything easy! You were out of your head on GHB, and still all you could think about was that little whore of yours! You didn't want anything to do with me, you kept going back and forth between gushing over how wonderful she is and asking for her, trying to leave so you could go find her. I had to practically tie you down just to keep you here, and then nothing I tried got you even a little aroused I should have shown you her photo, I'm sure you would have been hard in an instant!"

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"So we didn't even have sex?" I clarify, relief coursing through my veins.

"Are you kidding? Your cock was like a limp noodle!" She bursts out, glaring at me. "I swear, that bitch must be a witch. I'm still your fated mate, I ought to be able to turn you on if nothing else."

"What can I say?" I shrug, feeling very smug now. "Now that my wolf has gotten a taste of Ella, you can't expect him to settle for anything less – and you are absolutely, unequivocally less, Lydia."

Her eyes blaze, glowing with her inner wolf. There's anger reflected in her dark irises, but also

a world of pain. "Of course I am. How many times did you even fuck her before she got pregnant? Once? Some sluts just open their legs and magically conceive, while the rest of us struggle for years."

"You don't know Ella." I growl. "It wasn't like that, and it hasn't been easy for her." For one moment, I allow myself to feel for her, for this she-wolf who I spent so many years trying to make a family with. Our disappointment and failure was shared for so long, at a time when we both felt like our bodies were betraying us neither able to fulfill their core function of procreation. I've moved past that now, but I know Lydia is still living it. "It's not your fault that we couldn't get pregnant, and I would never never blame you for that." I begin.

Tears well in Lydia's eyes, and she interrupts me before I can continue.. "You say it's not my fault, but the truth is that it was. You knocked Ella up without even trying, didn't you? That means that I was the problem all along."

“I’m sorry, Lydia.” I profess, surprised to find I mean it. “But that’s not why she’s better. The difference is that Ella is good and kind, and she only ever wanted to be a mother because she has so much love to give not because it was a way for her to secure power. I know that doesn’t make failing easier, but Ella is truly worthy of being a Luna because she will selflessly sacrifice herself for her people or her family, and you never would.”

“I don’t need to be pregnant to ruin you.” Lydia threatens, tears spilling down her cheeks. “If the pack finds out you spent the night with me it won’t matter they’ll turn on you all the same.” Something truly bitter enters her voice now, and I suddenly realize the depth of her hatred for Ella. “She won them over so easily. She just batted her lashes and they fell at her feet, just like you. They’ll take her side if the story comes out, even though you’ve been Alpha for years.”

“So what? You’re going to hold a press conference?” I growl.

“I’ll leak the story to the papers.” She corrects me fiercely. “And they’ll believe me, because I have the photographs. I have proof. I’ll end your campaign once and for all.”

Chapter 99 – Sinclair Tells Ella

Sinclair

My wolf is clawing at the surface of my skin, determined to be let out so he can tear Lydia to shreds. Gritting my teeth, I narrow my eyes at the malevolent she wolf. “Lydia, you are the second person who has attempted to blackmail me this month, and I have to tell you – this is getting really old.”

Rolling my eyes, I continue. “And you seem to be forgetting that I’m on the board of the Moon Valley associated press. I hold shares in every major publication in the city. What’s more, none of the outlets want the Prince to win the campaign, because if he does the free press disappears.”

Lydia snarls, throwing her hands up, “fine, then I’ll simply text it to every person I know! It will get around that way!”

“And I’ll refute it.” I inform her coldly. “I’ll say it’s an old photo from when we were married, and the pack will believe me, because you are a traitor who abandoned them.”

As I speak, I scan the room for her phone. If I refute her story, it's true that the pack will probably side with me, but I honestly don't want to risk it..

I finally see her device, lying on the hotel bed's pristine white coverlet. Straightening up to my full height, I stride closer to Lydia, towering over her. "You've gone too far this time, Lydia." I declare, backing her into the wall. "I'm going to let you walk away, but you have to go now. Leave Moon Valley by sunset, and don't come back."

"Or what?" She mutters bitterly, tears still hovering on her lashes. "You'll kill me?"

"You aren't my mate anymore." I remind her, "And you never deserved to be in the first place. I will kill you if you make me, but it doesn't have to be that way. Go back to your husband, adopt a child if that's what you want, but stay the hell away from my family."

Lydia shakes her head, still full of defiance, even as the scent of her fear grows stronger with every moment that passes. "I don't believe you. I don't believe you'd actually harm me."

With an abundance of control, I close my fist around her throat, glowering down at her and letting her feel the full force of my rage. "You took my brother from me, for more than a decade."

I remind her. "You saw fit to ignore fate until you thought you could benefit from it, and you blamed our fertility struggles on me for years." My voice is barely more than a snarl, and though I no longer feel insecure about this particular slight, it doesn't change the hurt it inflicted at the time.

I press on, watching the panic grow in Lydia's eyes as her air supply is abruptly cut off. "You left when the pack needed a strong Luna most. You have endangered everyone in Moon Valley with your selfishness, you cleared the way for a Tyrant to claim the throne. You drugged me, tried to steal my sperm, and on top of everything else, you made my Ella cry."

I hiss, amazed to discover my wolf finds this as offensive as Lydia pushing the pack to the brink of war. Of course it was more than just tears, Ella ran away because of Lydia's tricks, she might have been killed if I hadn't found her so quickly. "The only reason you're not dead already is because you were my mate, but that protection is gone now.

I release her abruptly, moving to the bed and snatching up her phone while she remained huddled against the wall, gasping for air. “You have until sunset, Lydia. After that, all bets are off.”

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I storm out of the room, not pausing to look back. I don’t need to I can hear Lydia’s back sliding down the wall so she can huddle on the floor, sobbing out her pain and fury. Once upon a time the sound of my fated mate so distraught would have brought me to my knees, now it only fills me with satisfaction.

I should have thrown her out of my life years ago. In fact, I never should have started at relationship with her in the first place. Of course, I wasn’t strong enough at the time – but I’m strong enough now I have to be, for my pack, for Ella and Rafe, even for Roger.

I want to go straight home to Ella, but I know I need to work off some of this violent energy first. I take my guards to the forest, shifting the moment I’m out of the car, and leading them. on a run through the dense woodland. I don’t hold back, sprinting at top speed and leaving my men in the dust. I run until the flames of my fury are finally banked, only turning back once. my wolf is calm enough to think of Lydia without growling

I decide to work from home for the rest of the day, and I finally make my way back to Ella. When I arrive home, she’s sound asleep in my bed, curled up in a little ball beneath the covers. At first I think the round lump in the bedding is one of her pillows, but when I notice it breathing I realize that the precious human has burrowed into a cocoon of cotton and goose- down. Unable to resist, I lift the duvet to peek inside, leaning down to kiss her hair when I see her serene expression.

Afterwards I head for the shower, still sweaty from my run. I sigh as the steaming water envelopes me, telling myself that I have to go back to work after I’m clean, no matter how badly I want to crawl into bed with Ella and nap the afternoon away.

Just for a little while? My wolf begs. Five minutes?

You know it’s never just five minutes. I grouse. Five minutes turns into fifteen, and that turns into an hour. Besides, Ella needs her rest. I’ll probably wake her if I try to join.

But we promised to update her about Lydia. He reminds me, determined to win the argument. And we will. I promise, when she wakes up in her own time.

And so I force myself to dress and go to my study, promising myself I'll come check on Ella. again in a few hours. In the end, however, she ends up finding me. Around three I hear small

door. feet padding down the hall, and then a soft knock on my

I cross the room in an instant, swinging it open and looking down at the beautiful human with a furrowed brow. "What are you doing out of bed?"

"I'm allowed two twenty minute walks, remember?" She remarks pointedly. "Besides I wanted a snack and when I asked my guard he told me you were home."

"Mhmm, and how did you get down the stairs?" I inquire, brushing a few locks of hair back from her upturned face.

"Marcus carried me." Ella declares, gesturing to the guard still trailing after her. "What happened with Lydia?"

I glance at the guard in question, telling my wolf we can't be annoyed with the man for following our orders not to let Ella near any staircases, just because we don't like the fact that he touched her. "Let's go to the kitchen and find you a snack, then we can talk." I suggest, scooping Ella up.

"Dominic, I want to walk." She groans. "I've been stuck in bed all day."

"But there are more stairs." I object, secretly thankful for this fact. I know the poor thing must be getting stir crazy, but I haven't gotten to hold her since this morning, and I've missed her even after this short time apart.

"Fine but I'm standing when we get there." Ella declares stubbornly.

"As long as you stand next to me, that's fine by me." I answer, hugging her close as I navigate the corridors. "Did you have a nice nap?"

"It was fine, what happened with Lydia?" Ella presses,

"So impatient." I cluck, striding into the kitchen and setting her feet on the ground. "Food comes first. What were you craving?"

Ella squares her shoulders, crossing her arms over her chest and tilting her chin up defiantly.” Dominic Sinclair, I am not telling you anything or eating a bite until you tell me what happened.”

I arch one brow, towering over her and giving her my most disapproving look. Ella glares up at me for a few moments, but finally caves when I emit a low rumble. “Fine,” she huffs, going to the fridge. She extracts a bag of baby carrots and some of my chef’s homemade hummus, pointedly opening the container and dipping one of the orange batons into the rich puree and popping it into her mouth. She chews and swallows, then says, “there, happy?”

“Not yet.” I murmur, taking a seat at the counter and pulling her to stand between my legs. My wolf relaxes as soon as she’s in the protective circle of my reach, knowing we can catch her if she starts to feel faint. I dip another carrot and hold it to her lips, determined to feed her at minimum of five before finally agreeing to share the latest developments. Ella obediently munches the morsels, and I can tell that she was hungrier than she’d been willing to admit. Her grumpy energy gradually diminishes, until she’s eagerly waiting for the next bite. A bit later, I finally announce the news. “Lydia isn’t pregnant.”

Chapter 100 – Lydia Gets Desperate

3rd Person

Sinclair watched Ella like a hawk as his words landed. A riot of emotions flashed across her beautiful features, first relief, then happiness and finally worry and confusion. “We didn’t even sleep together.” He continued soberly. “She tried, but apparently I wasn’t interested – even drugged.”

“Oh.” The same progression of tangled feelings flitted across Ella’s expression, one which the Alpha understood only too well. He didn’t want a child with Lydia either, and he was beyond relieved he hadn’t actually been intimate with the conniving she-wolf – but there was no denying it would have solved a number of their problems. “So, we’re right back where we started, then.” Ella assessed softly.

“Yes, but I can still try to find another Luna.” Sinclair assured her. “I know it will take longer now, but it’s better this way. Lydia isn’t the mother I want for one of my pups, and she’s definitely not the woman I want for my queen.”

“I know.” Ella replied, leaning into his warmth. “I didn’t want her in our lives either, I’m just ... overwhelmed.”

“I know,” Sinclair sympathized, tucking her against his broad chest. “I’m going to find a way to make it better, Ella. I promise.”

“You better.” She grumbled, snuggling closer and breathing in his scent. As his comforting aroma filled her senses, she closed her eyes and sighed with pleasure, suddenly feeling the strangest compulsion to bite the big wolf. It was almost as if she wanted to mark him again, now that her scent had washed off in the shower now that she knew Lydia hadn’t succeeded. in her efforts to steal him.

Ella nuzzled Sinclair’s pec, nudging his shirt aside and hesitantly parting her lips. She experimentally pressed her teeth into his flesh, but before she could give in to the instinct completely, Sinclair tangled one large fist in her hair and formed a handhold, pulling her head back.

“You bite me, I bite you back, baby.” He purred, looking as though he didn’t have any problem with this idea at all.

Something deep in Ella’s bones melted at this thought, writhing with defiance and lust, eager to make him do just that. However her well-honed instincts for self-preservation forced down those strange feelings, and she blushed. “Sorry, I don’t know what came over me.”

“I do.” Sinclair rumbled, moving his free hand to the curve of her belly. The baby kicked, as if confirming his guilt for influencing his mother’s wolfish behavior. “But we have more to talk about, I promised I’d tell you about the driver from the accident.”

Ella’s dilated pupils sharpened then, as reason returned to her brain. “What did you find out?”

“He was hired by the Prince.” Sinclair explained, “No surprise there. He was only supposed to be doing recon, but he also had orders to kill you if he saw an opening to do so.”

“So when I walked into the street near his car...” Ella reasoned, piecing together this information with her memories.

“Exactly.” Sinclair confirmed. “He thought it was the perfect opportunity.”

“Did he know anything else about the Prince’s plans?” Ella questioned, any hint of her earlier mischief gone now.

“He was supposed to be on the team of rogues the Prince hired for the attack Roger warned us about.” Sinclair shared, offering Ella another carrot.

She took it, but frowned. “Why haven’t we heard anything more about that? My bed rest isn’t public knowledge, is it?”

“No.” Sinclair confirmed, “but Roger said it would be a few weeks. The invitation could come any day now. Of course, now we have a valid excuse to refuse it.”

“But do we want people to know I’m on bed rest?” Ella asked, worry obvious in her voice.

“I think it’s our best option. No one will question your absence from the event, and I’ve already increased security here threefold. This house is basically a fortress at this point.” Sinclair assured her.

“Well I suppose that deals with the Prince for the time being, but what about Lydia? What if she tries something else?” Ella wondered aloud.

“Lydia isn’t going to be a problem anymore.” Sinclair proclaimed. “I exiled her, and if she wants to live, she’ll leave Moon Valley, and never come back.”

Across town, Lydia was fuming.

She’d been striving to become queen since she was a child. Her parents always told her she was meant for great things, so it hadn’t been hard to convince them to bring her to Moon Valley as a teenager. She’d sidled up to Henry Sinclair’s presumed heir, only to suffer the severe bad luck of choosing the wrong brother twice.

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It hadn't been easy to resist her fated mate, but she was never going to settle for a second son. Then, when Henry named Dominic his heir instead of Roger, she thought that the Goddess must have been right after all. Lydia dumped Roger and happily gave herself to Dominic, only to suffer one misfortune after another.

First Henry had been attacked in the middle of his campaign, preventing her from becoming a Princess. Then she hadn't been able to conceive an heir, which meant Sinclair would never get elected as King on his own merit. She'd blamed him for their infertility and decided to try and move on to greener pastures, but her new husband hadn't been amused when she couldn't give him an heir either.

At last Lydia thought her problems were solved when Sinclair found that little whore to be his surrogate, but for some reason she hadn't been able to waltz back into his life as if nothing had changed. He'd seemed genuinely angry about her departure, even though it's what any rational woman would have done in her shoes. She'd experience a quick flash of hope when she realized that his sperm was fertile after all, but then he'd ruined her plan to steal it.

Everything had fallen apart, and Lydia was sick of watching all her dreams slip away. She had to do something desperate times called for desperate measures, and she had to find a way to claim her rightful place in society without letting Sinclair know she hadn't left town.

Her first thought was to kill Ella, but without his heir, Sinclair wouldn't be King. Her second

thought was to wait until the baby was born and then kill the infuriatingly beautiful she-wolf, but after his reaction that afternoon, Lydia had a sneaking suspicion the Alpha wouldn't take too kindly to the bitch's murder.

In the end, she realized there was only one thing to do. Sinclair wasn't going to take her back, but he wasn't the only wolf in the running to rule the Kingdom. The Prince already had an heir, and though he also had a mate, he didn't seem nearly as attached to her as Sinclair was to Ella. Besides, if Lydia played her cards right, he wouldn't ever know that she had anything to do with the Princess's untimely passing.

Yes, Lydia decided. With the Princess out of the way, the road would be clear for her to swoop in and take her place. She could tell the Prince all of Sinclair's weak spots, and help him win the election. Together they could rule the realm and lead the united packs

into a whole new era. The Prince's ideology was much more in line with Lydia's anyway. She and Sinclair had never really seen eye to eye about things like charity or free speech.

The hard part was figuring out how to get to the Princess when she was frequently surrounded by guards. However, Lydia's experiences with Ella ended up helping there too. She remembered how easy it had been to approach the other she-wolf in the women's restroom where male guards couldn't follow.

Lydia scoured the internet for news about the Princess's planned campaign events and outings in the coming week, eventually discovering that she was going to be the guest of honor at a ribbon cutting for a new primary school in two days time. She spent the better part of the first day trying to figure out how she should go about taking the other woman's life, knowing it would be best if she could find a poison or something with a delayed effect. It would be much easier to get away with the crime if she wasn't present when the Princess actually took her last breath.

Finally Lydia settled on an aerosol toxin which she could hide in a perfume bottle, especially since everyone knew the reigning Luna's signature scent. The Princess had been a model before marrying the Prince, and she starred in multiple beauty ads to this day, but none of which were so famous as her Moonkissed fragrance ads. The perfume was the best selling scent in the realm because of her endorsement.

Thankfully Lydia had the foresight to have the poison she ordered online shipped to a random address, arriving to intercept the overnight delivery before it ever reached the actual resident. From there it was smooth sailing. She bought a fresh bottle of Moonkissed, emptied the contents and replaced it with her toxin. She went to the ribbon cutting and laid in wait in the bathroom, then accidentally crashed into the Princess when she entered, ensuring the Luna dropped her bag.

The contents spilled out over the floor, and then it was a simple slide of hand to switch the perfume bottles. Lydia left immediately afterwards, then waited for the news to break. It took all of 24 hours, until the next time the Princess applied her perfume right in the safety of the Royal Palace. Her death was instantaneous and for once, at long last, Lydia's plans actually paid off. There were no hiccups or unintended consequences, no unfortunate turns of fate. The Princess died just like she was supposed to, and Lydia's path to the Prince was clear. Now all that was left to do was make sure Sinclair lost the election then her future would

finally be secure.

