

Alpha's Redemption: My Luna Has A Son by Jessica Hall

Chapter One

Everly

The adrenaline coursing through me from standing up to my father is short-lived as we drive out of my father's pack territory, Valen following close behind me. Just before we jump on the main road, he flashes his lights and his voice flits briefly through my head.

'Pull over,' he growls. He's angry.

I quickly pull over to the shoulder of the road and away from other traffic. Ava glances at me.

"Wait here," I sigh, climbing out of the car at the same time Valen does. I ready myself for his anger as he stalks toward me. Just as I'm about to defend my actions, he grabs my face and kisses me, pushing me against my car.

"Don't ever do that again," he mumbles against my lips. His fingers tangle in my hair as his tongue invades my mouth, kissing me angrily before he slows with a groan. My face heats, knowing my sister is in the car while he devours my lips.

"Valen!" I squeak against his lips, pushing on his chest. He growls, still trying to maul my lips, while I look around, embarrassed at his public display. With another growl, he grabs my hand and places it in the center of his chest. His heart is racing beneath my hand, thumping so hard I worry he may have a heart attack.

"You just scared the living daylights out of me. Give me a minute," he growls, pressing his face into my neck and inhaling deeply. As if desperate for reassurance, Valen pushes even closer, his entire body flush against me, and I sigh, running my fingers through his thick hair. This man seems almost on the verge of having a nervous breakdown, and he's supposed to be the blood Alpha?

"Don't ever make me do that again. Do you have any idea how hard it was to walk away and leave you there?" Valen says, his voice pleading.

"I didn't mean to scare you; I'm fine. Everything is fine," I assure him. He sighs, nodding his head before cupping my face in his hands as he steps back.

"You challenged your father!" he says, and I'm not quite sure if he wants to kill me or laugh. I can't help the stupid smirk that splits my face at his words, though. He clicks his tongue and shakes his head.

"You better win because if he hurts you, I will kill your father, and you can't blame me for it," he tells me.

"No one is killing anyone," I tell him, and he presses his lips in a line. I know Valen's angry about learning my father knew all along about Valarian being his, but what's done is done. We can't go back and change it, so there's no point in dwelling on it.

In the car, my phone rings loudly and Ava sticks her head out the passenger window.

"What about your sister?" Valen murmurs. "I don't trust her to stay with us. I know she's your sister but..."

"I didn't ask, and I wasn't going to. She can stay at the hotel," I tell him. He nods, looking over my shoulder, and so do I. Ava waves my phone to me.

"Hospital! About some girl named Emily."

My eyes widen, and Valen lets me go. Racing over to take the phone from her, my hand shakes as I hold the phone to my ear. "Hello?"

"Luna Everly?" says a deep baritone voice on the other end of the line.

"Yes, you're speaking with her," I reply.

"I am one of the doctors taking care of Emily. I was wondering if you are available to come to the hospital? You are her only listed contact, and we have no one listed as her family."

"Yes, correct. She has a son, but we still haven't located him, and her only other relative, her mother, died a few years ago," I say.

"I see. Is it possible for you to come to the hospital?" the doctor asks again.

"Yes, I was heading over anyway. Is everything okay?"

"I'm afraid not, Luna, but it is best explained when you get here," he tells me. My heart sinks. Valen grips my shoulder, and I nod.

"I'll be there soon," I tell the doctor before hanging up.

"Emily?" Valen asks, and I nod, dialing Zoe and Macey before merging their calls into a conference call. They both answer at the same time.

"What's up?" Macey asks.

"It's Emily."

"On my way," Macey says, hanging up.

"I'll get Marcus to take Casey," Zoe says before hanging up as well. I swallow the lump forming in my throat and look at Valen.

"I need to go. Can you take Ava back to the hotel for me?"

"Do you want me to come with you?"

"No, Zoe and Macey will meet there, but can you pick up Valarian?" I say, shaking my head.

"Of course." Valen looks over my shoulder. "Ava!"

She sticks her head out the window and looks at him.

"You're coming with me," he tells her, and she looks at me. I nod and she climbs out of the car. As I turn back to Valen, he kisses the side of my mouth. "Call me if you need me to come over," he says, and I nod, unable to form words right now. Swallowing down my worry, I suck in a deep breath before turning back to my car and climbing in.

I don't even remember the drive to the hospital. I'm on autopilot, praying for some miracle that she'll be alright as worry eats at me, yet the doctor wouldn't have called if she was. No news is good news. News always means something to worry about. As I pull up at the pack hospital, I see Macey rushing toward the front door, and I call out to her. She stops and turns, concern etched into her face, her eyes blurring with tears.

Zoe pulls into the parking lot, zooming past us and into a vacant parking spot. She jumps out, still in her pajamas, slams the door, and runs over to us, looking somewhat pained. She looks like crap—but still, she came.

"Emily?" she asks, hitting her key fob and locking her car.

"I just got here," I tell her, and she nods before we all walk toward the front doors. Once inside, we hurry to the elevator and hit the button for the correct floor.

"You sort out the council stuff?" Zoe asks, straightening her pajamas like it will somehow make her look more presentable. Macey pulls a hair tie off her wrist and pulls Zoe's hair into a bun on her head.

"Yep, I challenged my father for my title," I tell them as the door opens to our level.

"You what?" Macey asks, yet I don't really hear her—my eyes are on the room I know is Emily's. Doctors seem to be rushing in and out everywhere. We pick up our pace and walk into the room.

The doctors look like they've just been getting ready to take her bed somewhere. The doctor notices me and walks over, his notepad in hand, and tucks his pen behind his ear.

"Luna, I'm Doctor Porter," he says with a grim smile, offering me his hand before his eyes darted to Zoe and Macey. He offers his hand to each of them. "You are?"

"Family," they both say simultaneously. The doctor's brows pinch, making a deep crease between his eyes, but he turns his attention back to me.

He sighs, pulling his glasses from his face and rubbing his eyes before looking over at Emily.

"As you know, Emily has been having trouble fighting off the infection, and we had to remove her leg."

I nod, though I already knew that. I glance at Emily and swallow nervously, watching as nurses fuss over her, unplugging machines and looping up cords. Doc pulls the pen from behind his ear and passes the notepad to me. I glance at it, then look at him.

"We need to take Emily back in for surgery," he says slowly, letting that sink in.

"But she will be alright?" Zoe says, and I look at her. Her lips quiver, and the doctor smiles sadly before turning back to me.

“There is a chance she won't survive the surgery; the infection has spread, and her other leg has turned gangrenous.” He points to the notepad in my hands.

“This is a DNR. We need to know what your wishes are.”

“What's that?” Zoe asks.

“Do not resuscitate,” Macey tells her, and Zoe makes a strangled noise like a whimper. I glance down at the paperwork I'm holding.

“You want my permission to let her die?” I ask, shaking my head.

“Luna, you need to think of the future.”

I shake my head. “I am. Emily has a son to live for. The answer is no. Do the surgery. She'll pull through,” I tell him. He sighs and reluctantly nods his head, taking the clipboard back from me.

“Luna?”

“No, she'll pull through.” I look over at Emily with tubes hanging out of her—she can live without legs. And she will pull through. I have to believe that. I have to hang onto that.

We're ushered out into a waiting room while she's prepped for surgery and taken away. For hours, we waited, desperate for any news about Emily.

All other issues suddenly seem small in comparison. It's hard to believe that just a short time ago, I was fighting publicly with my father, challenging his title. Macey paces frantically, and I'm surprised she hasn't run tracks into the floor. Zoe stares off blankly, biting her fingernails—a terrible nervous habit she has—but I let it go. I just sit still, numb to everything going on around us. After what feels like eons, the doctor comes down the corridor, and we all jump to our feet. He holds out his hands, and we wait to hear what he has to say.

“She is stable. They are moving her to one of the wards soon, but the infection is moving rapidly throughout her body and putting pressure on her heart. We will be running more tests overnight, but she is a fighter,” Doctor Porter tells us, and I let out a breath of relief.

“Can we see her?” I ask, and he nods.

“Yes, just let them get her settled first. She is not responsive, as you know, and I don't see that changing anytime soon, but for now, she is stable. I will have a nurse come get you when you go in,” he tells us, and we all nod.

Macey grips both of us, tugging us to her. “Thank the Goddess,” she whispers, squeezing us tight.

Chapter Two

Everly

We get to see Emily and sit with her for about an hour. Tubes are hanging out of her nose and mouth, her arms covered in even more. The room smells heavily of antiseptic, but I can still smell the infection running through her veins, and the IV of antibiotics hooked up to her. Emily doesn't deserve this; nobody does.

She looks so frail, her skin pale, and I find it hard not to break down. Emily was always so bubbly—a real chatterbox. Seeing her like this is heartbreaking. I pray she wakes up soon, pray she will pull through this. I would even drink her terrible coffee. Goddess, I wish I could be drinking that horrible coffee. I wouldn't even complain if it meant she'd come back to us.

Eventually, Zoe has to leave to help Marcus, and Macey wants to go home and check on Taylor. We aren't sure if she can hear us, but they both say goodbye to her anyway. Sitting next to Emily, I hold her hand, rubbing circles on the back of it.

“You hold on, Em. Benny needs you,” I tell her. Kissing her hand, I tuck her blankets around her and reluctantly leave as well. It's dark as I climb into my car—it's the middle of the night—and I listen to the radio as I head toward the old commune and to Emily's mobile home on my way to the hotel. I feel mentally and physically drained, and all I want to do is go home, see Valarian, and crawl into bed beside my mate.

The commune is all mud and puddles, the rough terrain a little slippery since the storm, yet I manage to navigate through to the back where Emily's trailer is and get out. Using the key Officer Derrick gave me not long after she went missing, I use it to unlock the flimsy door.

I step inside the tiny little place she shares with her son. Toys and stuffed bears rest on the bed they share, a small TV is perched in the corner, and the walls are

littered with Ben's artwork. I see two jars of her special home-made coffee and chuckle.

I also see a blue duffle bag hanging on a hook on the wall and grab it. After going around the little home looking for clothes with her son's scent on them, I carefully bag them, making sure not to taint them with my scent; I hope it will give Emily comfort in her vulnerable state. I also tidy up a little and while doing so, I find a picture of her and Ben taped to her fridge, both smiling as they stand out in the front of the school.

He's only nine years old, and is her entire life, her world; and she's a good mom, quirky, but that's what everyone loves about her. No one loves her more than her son, though. Emily works her ass off, and her only dream is that her son will grow up and one day become part of a pack and have the opportunities the other pack kids have.

We all wish that our kids will be a part of something bigger than us; that they'll achieve more than us. It's what most parents dream of for their kids; to give them more, watch them grow and succeed, knowing we got at least one thing right.

Grabbing the picture, I put it in the bag for her just as my phone starts ringing in my pocket. Valen's name pops up on the screen.

"Where are you?" he says, his voice frantic.

"At Emily's place, grabbing a few things for her room. I'm hoping something with Ben's scent will help her hold on," I tell him.

"Head home now! A forsaken got past the borders! The border patrol has been chasing it for an hour; it keeps going to the commune. Get out now, Everly!" he orders.

"What?" I shriek, looking nervously out the open door of the trailer.

"I'm sending men to your location. Get out now!" he says, and I hurry to grab the bag. Rushing out the door, I lock it before running to my car and tossing the bag onto the passenger seat before quickly starting my car.

"Marcus is on his way!" I hear Valen say as I put the car in reverse and look around into the darkness of the night. The tires spin, yet I'm not moving! The

truck only groans as the engine revs, spraying mud everywhere and up the side of my truck. I try to drive forward, but it only makes the hole deeper. I'm stuck!

"Everly?"

"I'm stuck," I tell Valen. My breathing becomes louder as panic sets in.

"Hold on, I'm on my way," Valen says.

"What about Valarian?" I ask, glancing at the phone on the passenger seat, though the sound is coming through the Bluetooth in the car. I don't want my son anywhere near here if a forsaken is on the loose.

"Tatum will watch him till my father gets here," Valen says before hanging up.

"Fuck!" I curse. Just my luck! What's the saying? It happens in threes? Well, I hope this is the last of my bad luck today.

The commune is eerily still—my headlights light up the forest surrounding the commune. As I stare out the windshield, I crack my window just a little to hear howls and wolves in the forest. My heart races, waiting for Marcus or Valen to get here. I refuse to get out of the car; I've watched one too many horror movies and know that's a bad idea.

'You okay?' Valen says through the mind-link. I can feel him getting closer, but he's still a fair way out.

'Yes, fine, just a little freaked out.' This place is creepy and I don't know how Emily lives out here. Yet, she loves her little spot.

"I'll be there soon, just keep talking to me," Valen says.

I explain about Emily; not that he doesn't already know—he'd been calling me all night, checking in. But rambling is better than panicking. Suddenly, I see a wolf run out of the tree line, two border patrols chasing after it and my eyes widen as I see them tear into the creature. The wolf turns and beelines straight toward my car. Only, it diverts toward the trailer at the last second, clawing at the walls before snarls send it running again. It seems so small for a normal forsaken. It tries to run back toward the tree line to escape, terrified. I watch on in horror.

"Everly?" Valen says as I see the two border patrols tear into it. Its howls are horrifying to hear when it's flung across the dirt and suddenly shifts—or tries to.

My heart lurches in my chest as I see the figure getting to its feet. Semi-shifted, its body is still covered in fur and its limbs are deformed. He looks like most forsaken, only smaller, until he shifts. It takes me a moment to realize the forsaken is a child. Then it looks at me and I instantly recognize that little face—it's the only recognizable trait he has—and my heart nearly stops.

I don't even remember opening the car door as I see one of the patrols go to rip into him. His petrified eyes, so much like his mother's, widen as I run toward them.

"NO!" I scream. The sound that leaves me is more of a strangled wail as I scream out as one of them tackles him, tearing into his neck and shoulder. He jumps back, looking at me running toward them, waving my arms frantically.

"Please, Goddess, no!" I cry, skidding on the ground as I fall to my knees next to the body. The border patrol try to shove me back, but my claws slip from my fingertips, and slash at them, an angry growl escaping me before I grab him. Sobs wrack my entire body as I smooth back his hair, looking at what has become of him.

He's deformed, and it shouldn't be possible. How is it possible? He's just a boy? He has no wolf yet! One of the patrols shifts back and reaches for me.

"GET A FUCKING AMBULANCE NOW!!" I scream, clutching onto him and trying to protect him from the patrols.

"He's a forsaken," the guard says. I shake my head. The boy's eyes flutter open, bloodshot and rabid, but I only hold him tighter as he thrashes, snarling and growling, trying to attack me. But I know this boy—this isn't him. Someone has done something horrific to him, but that isn't who he is. His wounds are horrific, and he eventually passes out in my arms. His slow heartbeat is the only indicator that he's still alive.

"Call for help!" I wail as tears stream down my face.

"Luna?" the young patrolman questions.

"He isn't forsaken! He's a fucking child!" I scream, baring my canines at them as they slip from my gums.

I hear the mind-link open as the border patrol orders for an ambulance.

"It's okay, it's okay, help is on the way," I whisper to him.

"Luna," the patrolman says, grabbing my arm, but I shake him off.

"Don't touch me," I snap.

"He's dangerous," he tries to reason, but I don't care. I've known this boy since he was in diapers; I've watched him grow. I don't care how dangerous he is, he's family—part of my village.

"He is not dangerous. He was trying to come home, trying to come home to his mother," I growl at them.

"Hang on, Ben, hang on for me," I whisper, clutching him closer while my hand presses against his gaping wound, holding it shut, trying to stem the bleeding from his shoulder.

Hearing a car, I see headlights light up the clearing and see Valen jump out of his car frantically. He races toward me. I hear sirens in the distance on their way here and relief washes over me.

"Everly?" Valen screams at me fearfully; probably because I'm so close to the mutated wolf.

"It's Ben, it's Emily's son," I choke out, turning my attention back to the boy in my arm—or half boy.

Valen grabs my arms trying to pull me away, but I shove him off.

"Nobody touches him," I snarl at him. I will not allow them to kill him, I don't care how dangerous he is.

"Everly!" he snarls.

"Tell them to stand down," I growl. Valen growls too, looking at them and nodding for them to back off.

ChapterThree
One Week Later

Ben has been in the hospital since that night. The doctors have no idea how he was able to shift, but it's becoming clearer that someone is experimenting on not only the forsaken, but also those that were kidnapped from within the city.

This mystery facility that Emily spoke of has become the biggest target on the city's radar. Everyone seems to understand the seriousness of getting to the bottom of it. Ben is not doing well, and every day I've been checking on him and waiting around until the hospital or Valen force me to go home. He's alive, but still in a semi-deformed wolf state. Mostly, he's been unresponsive, just like Emily, and none of the doctor's know how to help him or reverse what was done.

One thing was clear though, Ben had been made into a forsaken. He had turned savage. His little body is ravaged with infections, his heart enlarged, and the few times he's woken, he's tried to attack staff, which has now left him strapped to a bed like a mental patient with a muzzle. A once sweet boy has now been made into some science experiment, and it breaks my heart seeing him like this. The only comfort I have is that he shares a room with Emily.

Her state has not improved either, and the bizarre events are beginning to take a toll on everyone in the city. People are scared—and they should be. Only a monster could do this to a child. This only reignited my fire to ensure the rogues in the city are protected.

Hearing the door open, I look up to see Kalen step inside the room. He's been a great help recently. Valen was busy with pack business, and I've been spending most of the time here or at my hotel, leaving Kalen to watch over Valarian. I never expected him to show up here.

Glancing at the time, I see it's an hour before school pick up; I was about to head over to the school to pick up Valarian. I told Kalen I would today, knowing he needs a break, so I'm surprised when he steps into the hospital room.

Kalen glances down at Ben, brushing his hair from his face. Ben doesn't wake. The entire city has heard and were horrified, despite him being rogue, when they learned what had become of him. Luckily, everyone has found a way to have some heart, probably imagining their own child in the same situation.

"Fucking terrible," Kalen says, smiling sadly.

“What are you doing here?” I ask him and Kalen holds a piece of paper out to me. I take it, noticing the city council emblem on it.

“I pulled a few strings and called in some favors; you get your day to be heard. Your petition will be heard,” Kalen says.

“Wait, how? I needed four signatures,” I say, confused.

Kalen smiles and I glance at the paperwork to see Kalen has signed as well as a man's name I don't recognize. I look at him questioningly.

“I found a loophole. It said you need four Alpha signatures; nothing stating they can't be from previous Alphas,” Kalen says with a sly smile on his face. I glance down at the paperwork to see I have a date and time allotted to be heard by founding council members. One week to prepare. Tears burn my vision as I look back at him.

“Does Valen know?” I ask him and Kalen shakes his head. They are still barely talking unless it has something to do with Valaria—Valen is still upset with his father.

“Thank you,” I tell him, and Kalen nods before looking at Emily.

“Any news on how they are doing?” he asks, but I shake my head.

“No. The doctor is due to do his rounds soon, but I need to pick up, Valarian.”

“I will wait until the doctor gets here,” Kalen tells me, taking a seat in one of the uncomfortable blue chairs.

“Are you sure? The doctor will call me,” I tell him.

“Positive. Besides, I have nothing better to do,” Kalen tells me. He looks lonely, and I can see this feud with Valen is really starting to take a toll on him. He used to be so involved in his son's life, so it must be hard now that Valen is shutting him out.

I walk over to him, lean down, and give him a hug, pecking his cheek. However, I'm not expecting him to grab a hold of me. He hugs me tight, and it feels good to be hugged by a father figure. Despite Kalen's wrong-doings, Valen doesn't realize how lucky he is to have a father so supportive of him.

“Make Valarie proud. I know you will. Give 'em hell,” Kalen whispers to me. With a nod and another peck on the cheek, I quickly leave, heading to the hotel to pick up Ava on the way to the school. I’ve hardly seen her, and she wants to talk to me about something so she’s coming over for dinner tonight. I told her I would pick her up when I did the school run.

My thoughts are plagued lately, and I have trouble keeping my head straight. Now, I have to worry about the upcoming council meeting too. But for the first time all week, I have some hope. Pulling up, I message Ava and wait in the parking lot, staring up at my hotel. I feel like I’ve neglected it lately. With so much going on, I hardly spend any time here, and when I have a chance, I’m just exhausted. Although I know Zoe and Macey have everything handled or will call if something goes wrong.

Ava takes a few minutes before she appears, coming out of the restaurant doors with her bag slung over her shoulder. She’s wearing one of our waitress uniforms. She had wanted to help, and when we were short of staff, she asked Macey if she could. She seems to like it and has been pitching in wherever she’s needed.

Opening the car door, she throws her bag over onto the back seat before climbing in and buckling up.

“Any news?” she asks as I start the car and pull out, heading toward the school.

“No, still the same,” I tell her and she nods, chewing her nails. She looks nervous, and I glance at her when she remains silent for a bit.

“What is it?” I asked her.

“Mom called me; she said Kalen got your petition pushed through,” she says nervously, and I sigh.

“Let me guess, she wants me to pull the petition. Not happening,” I tell her.

“She also asked that you rescind the challenge,” Ava tells me.

“Also not happening,” I tell her, and she nods, looking out the window.

“Are you nervous?” she asks me, but I shake my head.

“Nope. After years of pent-up aggression, it will be good to beat something, or someone; though I wish it wasn’t dad,” I chuckle, though that’s a lie. I didn’t want

it to come to this, but I feel more than ready for it. Valen has been helping me train late at night when I'm up to it. Not that I'm really worried—I was taught by the best, and you don't suddenly forget.

While I feel like I can handle myself, I am still a little nervous since my wolf isn't nearly as big. I make a mental note to shift soon. Valen has been pestering me about it—he says I have to train in wolf form—yet I never have the time, and I can't exactly shift at home. Training in our living room isn't exactly a good idea in wolf form. That might scare Valarian. Hand to hand, I'll be fine, yet in wolf form...

I'm not sure how I will fair, honestly.

But I know he'll force me sooner or later. Probably sooner when he finds out I have the council meeting in a week, and two days after that is the next full moon and the challenge against my father. So much going on and so little time.

Pulling up in front of the school, I wait for the bell to ring, checking my emails while Ava stares off out the window. Glancing at her, I can tell she wants to say something, and her silence is starting to bother me.

"What is it? Spill. Has this got something to do with what you wanted to speak to me about?" I ask her.

"Kind of." She doesn't elaborate, and I put my phone down to give her my attention.

"Just say it. I won't get angry," I tell her. I could never be angry with Ava, she's my little sister, despite everything.

"Nothing. It's just that being at the hotel and hearing the stories—what everyone puts up with, what you put up with... I should have come with you," she says, wiping a stray tear. "I'm sorry, Everly, I should have done more."

"You have nothing to be sorry for, Ava. You didn't do this. I wouldn't have let you anyway; you were fifteen, what could you have done?" I ask her.

"Been there. I should have been there," she chokes out. I shake my head.

"I'm glad you weren't. And everything turned out alright. I'm alright, Valarian is alright, and you're here now," I tell her, and she nods.

“Mom tried, you know. Her and Dad fought constantly for weeks, but you know how Dad is.”

I sigh and nod. The bell rings in the distance and I turn my head to the school, looking for Valarian.

“She still could have called, it’s not like I was hiding,” I tell her.

“Dad forbade her to go anywhere without her guards or him. Same with me. Damn Nixon ruined everything,” Ava says, and my brows furrow.

“What do you mean?” I ask.

“The debt. And I’m pretty sure that’s who Dad was planning for you to marry, though I didn’t know about that part until the other day, but it makes sense to me now.”

“What debt?” I ask, shocked. Ava shrugs.

“It’s why he wanted me to marry Valen. If I did, Dad would control half of Valen’s assets. Dad wanted Valen to enter into a treaty with our pack. Nixon has been threatening to go to war if Dad’s debt isn’t cleared soon, so Dad thought if he had Valen on his side, Nixon would back off.”

“How much does Dad owe?” I ask.

“I’m not sure, but they had some original deal, which I’m now assuming was you; it’s the only thing that makes sense.”

“Nixon has a son?” I ask her.

“Yes, he’s around Valen’s age. His name is Carter. Absolute asshole,” says Ava, rolling her eyes.

“How come I’ve never heard of him before?”

“Nixon hasn’t handed the pack down yet. Dad tried to marry me off to him at first, but Carter and I don’t get along. The man is a pig.”

“So, Dad tried to get you to marry Valen?”

“Yes—told me he had to find the money to pay back the debt he owes Nixon.”

“And if he can’t?”

“Nixon gets our pack lands. The pack is bankrupt, Everly. It runs off Nixon’s finances,” Ava explains. Which would explain why Dad backed Nixon over the petition.

Yet, what does Nixon get out of rogues remaining rogue?ChapterFour

Everly

Having Ava over for dinner gave me much to think about. She didn’t say anything in front of Valen though, so I ended up waiting patiently for her to leave. Tatum eventually picks her up and runs her back to the hotel, and I realize I should ask Valen about Nixon’s son now that Valarian is in bed.

Valen comes walking out of the hall in just a pair of shorts and starts moving the furniture in the living room, pushing it against the windows. I place the last few dishes in the dishwasher and wash my hands before wandering over to him. He points to the couch where he set some yoga pants and my sports bra and I groan.

“Can't we have at least one night off?” I ask him. His only answer is moving the last piece of furniture out of the way. I roll my eyes. I’m exhausted and damn hot. The last thing I want to do is training in the living room and get even more hot and sweaty.

I try to sneak off to shower, yet Valen clearly isn’t having that.

“Don't even think about it,” Valen growls, and I take off running for the room. I shove the door open and have nearly escaped when his arms wrap around my waist, tugging me back.

“Nice try,” he says, turning me and marching me back toward the living room.

“We can have one night off, please. Besides, I want to talk to you, not fucking fight you,” I whine.

“We can do both—multitask,” he says, and I groan, turning to dead weight in his arms. Valen laughs and continues to drag me toward the living room; I grip the door jamb on the bathroom. I do not want to train.

“Everly,” he laughs, prying my fingers off the door. “You wanted to challenge your father, therefore, you train or I kill him; which is it?”

“Nope, I’m too tired,” I tell him.

“So am I, but you're training.”

“Can I bribe you with sexual favors?”

“Hmm, I'm listening? What sort of sexual favors?” he asks, amber eyes narrowing.

“The sort where I can sleep and not have to do anything,” I tell him.

“Wait, you want to bribe me with sex, but I gotta do the work?” he chuckles.

“What about an IOU?” I ask.

“Nah, I'll pass. I'll be fucking you anyway. I was thinking you could suck my dick, but since you want to have vanilla sex, I would rather train,” Valen says.

“Not vanilla. I was more thinking old man style,” I tell him while he tries to get me to stand, but I go all floppy.

“Old man style?” he asks.

“Yeah, where we lay on our sides so I can nap,” I laugh.

“Not happening. Now get your ass up and help me drag the mats out,” he says, dropping me on my butt beside the TV.

“Run, and I will drag you back,” he says while walking off to his little gym at the back of the penthouse.

“Everly!” he calls out when I don't immediately come running after him.

“Yeah, hold your horses. I'm damn well coming,” I growl before stalking after him. Valen comes out with a rolled-up blue mat as I pass him in the hall.

“Grab the other one,” he says.

I retrieve the other, dragging it down the narrow hallway to the living room. Valen is unrolling the other one before he comes over and helps me undo the strap that holds it together. He unrolls it, and that's already enough exercise for me.

“Everly, hurry,” Valen says when I go to lay on the couch. I roll my eyes but snatch up my clothes and quickly run into the bathroom to slip them on before returning to the mats.

“Do you know Al—” The moment I step on it, I’m thrown on my back when he sweeps my feet out from under me. Valen laughs while I glare up at him. He offers me his hand, and I growl at him, slapping it away and getting to my feet.

“As I was saying, do you know Alpha Nixon's son? His name is Carter?” I ask him.

“Why are you asking about him?” Valen asks as he takes his stance. I mirror him, waiting for him to attack. We circle each other looking for an opening.

“Something Ava said to me,” I told him.

“What did she say?” he asks, swinging at me, but I duck out of the way, stepping to the side before punching him in the ribs. Valen is bigger, a lot bigger, but I’m quicker

His foot connects with my thigh a few moments later when he recovers. “You didn't answer,” Valen grunts as he blocks me and pins me to the damn floor. I lift my hips, trying to throw him off.

“I don't want to say because it may piss you off,” I tell him, trying to get an advantage over him, but I can't really be bothered, and he knows it.

“Come on, it's easy. I’ve seen you get out of this one,” Valen growls at me, but I give up, dropping back on the floor. It’s too damn hot for this crap.

“Can you turn the damn AC on at least?” I snap at him. He growls, pushing off my wrists before moving toward the panel on the wall and fiddling with the air conditioning.

“Better? Now, why are you asking about Carter?”

I chew my lip while he motions for me to get back to my feet, but I refuse, just lying here on the cool mat that’s sticking to my back with how much I’m sweating.

“Everly, up now.”

I shake my head. Valen growls, reaching down to grab my wrist and haul me to my feet, but as soon as he gets close enough and bends down to grab my hips, I turn on my side and kick his legs out from under him. He lands on his ass and side. I laugh but remain where I am while he rubs the hip he landed on.

"Ava told me Carter was who I was supposed to be married off to," I tell Valen. He sits up abruptly, looking down at me.

"And you're only just telling me this now?" he growls.

I shrug. "So you do know him?"

"Of course I know him. We're the same age, I saw him a few times at meetings. But I wasn't aware he was back in the city."

"What do you mean?"

"He left after high school. Been years since I saw him last. He went looking for his mother," Valen tells me.

"His mother? Wait, Nixon's mate isn't his mother?"

Valen shakes his head. "No, Carter's mother was a forsaken, and the woman you see with Nixon isn't his real mate. He took her as a mate; she was his mistress while he was married to his first wife."

"Wait, if Carter's mother is forsaken, why did he go looking for her?"

"She wasn't always a forsaken, but she was one of the forsaken we kept an eye on. When Nixon met Leah, she was an Omega and he was already married. Leah had Carter and Nixon took him. She stayed in the city for a while until Nixon marked his other mistress after Leah killed his wife."

"Leah killed his wife?"

Valen nods. "Nixon's first wife was an arranged marriage; he never marked her. She found out about Leah and attacked her. Leah stabbed her in self-defense," Valen says, wiping a hand down his face.

"He still chose his mistress over Leah. It sent her over the edge and she left the city. Carter went looking for her not long after graduation; he wanted to find his real mother. Only, when he did, she was a forsaken. She attacked him and bit him."

"And he lived?" I ask.

“Yes, he’s an Alpha, plus she was his mother. It’s unclear to us why that made a difference, but he was only sick for a bit. Dad said he was never the same afterward though. Then he snapped.”

“What do you mean?”

“You think I’m a savage? Carter was placed in a mental hospital after he killed eight of his pack members, so I’m surprised his father brought him back to the city. He may have survived being attacked by his mother, but the poison still had some effect on him. He’s unhinged,” Valen explains.

“Well, Ava said she met him and he was a pig. Why would my father agree to marry me off to him, then, knowing that? Seems extreme to marry your daughter off over a debt—especially to a monster.”

“Your father's pack is in debt?” Valen asks, bracing his arms on his knees.

“Yes, I think that’s why Dad has been helping Nixon. Ava said Nixon gets Shadow Pack lands if he can't cover the debt.”

“How much is the debt?” Valen asks. I shake my head.

“No, idea, but enough that Dad was willing to marry Ava off to you so she could hand over half your territory to Nixon,” I tell him.

“I'm surprised your father would agree to that,” Valen says, his brows pinching together.

“Yeah. But it explains why Nixon refused to sign my petition about the rogues now, especially since his only child was attacked by one, even if it was his fault,” I sigh.

“Carter isn't an only child; he’s a twin. He has a twin sister, Alisha,” Valen says

“Ava never mentioned her,” I tell him.

“Probably because most don't know she exists. I only know because my father told me. Alisha has been in a coma since Carter found her; she lived with their mother. She wasn't a forsaken, though. That's the odd thing. She was able to survive having a forsaken for a mother, but when Carter found them, Leah attacked him. Alisha saved him and her mother turned on her. She’s been in a

coma since, like Emily. Carter managed to find a way home, but she never woke from the coma, and Carter was sent away to the mental hospital.”

My mind is reeling at what he just told me. This is so much information to take in.

“Wait, he only took Carter?”

“Yeah, Nixon has always been a piece of shit. Not only did his mate end up a forsaken, but he also ditched his daughter and only took his son.”

“How doesn't the city know about this?”

“Same as no one knew about my mother or you being John's daughter—he made her disappear,” Valen tells me. “But I want to know why Carter is suddenly back in the city.”

“Maybe he recovered,” I tell him.

“No, that’s what I’m finding weird. Why would Nixon risk it? Everyone knows about Carter killing his own people. If the city found out he was back, it would cause hysteria.”

“What do you mean?”

“Carter didn't just kill his pack members. He ate them and hung their pelts on border fences. The man is sadistic,” Valen says.

“Yes, but he’s also Nixon's only heir, isn't he? And he can't be too crazy—Ava met him. She said he was a pig but never mentioned him acting insane,” I tell him.

“Hmm, I think tomorrow I may have to go see for myself,” Valen says.

“You're going to go see Carter?”

“Yes. This is my city, Everly, and I want to know why the fuck Nixon brought a psychotic serial killer back without informing me,” Valen says, getting to his feet. He offers me a hand and I grab him, letting him pull me to my feet. He pauses for a second, his hand cupping my face, then smirks, his eyes flashing black.

“What?”

“I suppose I’ll be getting that BJ,” he purrs.

“Yeah, not likely,” I tell him, and he chuckles.

“We'll see,” he growls, yanking me toward him and wrapping his arms around my waist.

“You seem so sure of yourself,” I growl as he buries his face in my neck and inhales deeply before purring.

“I am, because you're going into heat,” he purrs, nipping at my neck. Chapter Five
Valen jinxed me. He said I was going into heat and I am. Here I was, thinking I'm coming down with the flu. If only it was that. The last thing I want is to go into heat. It irks me.

I wake up to his fingers trailing up and down my spine. Valen seems to be enjoying himself, like he's been waiting for it to get so bad that it would wake me. The flare of instant heat rolls over me from head to toe as I roll over and find him smiling at me seductively. He traces his fingertips around my areola, making me look down to find I had stripped in my sleep. I groan when I lift my head to see my clothes have been dumped on the floor. By me? Or by Valen? Either way, Valen just lies here expectantly, like he was simply biding his time until I woke.

“Well, would you look at that? I was right,” he purrs. His hand grips my arm and he drags me on top of him. I try to growl, yet I'm surprised to hear a moan escape my lips instead. His skin makes mine tingle and cool as I lie on his chest. His fingers move lazily up my sides and I bury my face in his neck. My tongue rolls over his mark. Coherent thoughts become harder to maintain as his scent consumes me, his gentle touch electrifying. He lies there, teasing the heat that starts to overwhelm me, threatening to set me on fire.

Valen chuckles as I nip and lick his skin. I want to devour the man, climb inside him. I can't get enough of him, can't get close enough as my lips nip and lick my way down his body before wrapping around his cock. Valen laughs. I stare at him, trailing my tongue up the side of his hard length, enjoying the taste of him on my tongue. His eyes flicker black and he smirks mischievously.

“Looks like I don't have to worry about the IOU,” he chuckles, confusing me for a second until I take him in my mouth. His cock hits the back of my throat as I take him deeper before it registers. I peek up at him to find him smirking as he places his hands behind his head.

I raise an eyebrow at him and feel my own eyes flicker before dragging my teeth up his length. Valen hisses and his hand moves to my hair like he's worried I may bite it off. Instead, my tongue teases the rim as I wrap my lips around the head, swirling the tip of my tongue around it. He relaxes and sighs. My lips suction around the tip before leaving his aroused flesh with an audible pop.

"Okay, okay, I won't tease," Valen growls. I growl back at him and he puts his hands up in surrender.

My eyes narrow at him, yet my lips return to his cock. He groans as I take his entire length, loving the saltiness of his flesh on my tongue. His fingers tangle in my hair before he fists it, pushing me down on his cock. In response, my hands grip his thighs and my nails dig into his flesh as he brutally thrusts into my mouth, making my eyes water as his cock hits the back of my throat.

The heat craves this rough side of him, relishes the way he forces more of himself in my mouth. The heat soars and my arousal coats the insides of my thighs before he yanks me off him by my hair, pulling me up his body. His lips are demanding and they crash against mine hungrily as he dominates my mouth.

Valen groans, his other hand gripping my hip tightly; so tight I know it will leave bruises as my skin pinches between his fingers. His hold on my hair grows tighter as my heat sucks him in, unleashing the beast that lives within him.

My hips roll against him. His hand gripping my hip moves to my ass, his fingers digging into the flesh there. A whimper escapes my lips, turning to a moan as he squeezes my ass before sitting up with me on his lap and turning.

His movements are too quick to react to as he slams me on my back. Desire writhes through every cell as I stare up at his lust-filled, demonic eyes. His canines jut out between his parted lips. Valen's hands move down my legs, then back up my thighs to my hips before he grabs me again, flipping me over onto my stomach and pulling my ass up into the air.

Sparks rush over my flesh and my pussy clenches in anticipation as he sinks his cock into my depths with one hard thrust. The heat flares to life with a renewed vigor, craving his touch and what it has to offer. His pelvis slaps against my ass, and my walls clench around him like a vice. My legs tremble with need and desire

as he drags his cock out slowly, his fingers digging into my ass as he watches himself slipping out of my wet confines before slamming back in.

A moan escapes me as the top half of my body flattens against the bed, my fingers clenching the sheets as he drives himself into me. His hard length scrapes along my inner walls, building friction. My blood ignites like fire in my veins and sparks rush everywhere with each harsh thrust, making me cry out in pleasure.

My insides clench around his large, thick length, my legs shaking and threatening to give out under me, sweat glistening on my skin. My entire body heats as I climb higher into this incredible feeling, my entire body tensing for the exhilarating rush. Valen's hold tightens, his grip almost punishing, yet I relish the pain and pleasure, the line between them blurring as I writhe beneath him, pushing back against him, forcing him in deeper and harder.

Slapping flesh and my cries fill the room beneath Valen's hard breathing. He leans over me, squeezing my breast before yanking me up to him, his hot chest pressing against my back. His grip is painful as he squeezes my breast while he uses his other hand to sweep my hair to one side. The points of his teeth puncture my flesh, breaking the skin as he sinks them in deeply, sending me blissfully over the edge.

The fall into pleasure is violent and tumultuous, and my body convulses in his arms, yet his pace never relents. He drives himself into me and impales me on his cock as his canines slip from my skin and his tongue rolls over my heated flesh, making my toes curl as I ride out the waves of my climax.

My pussy tries to keep its grip on him when he pulls out of me. I gulp when I'm shoved on my back. The intense, animalistic look on his face no doubt mirrors mine as he growls, shoving my thighs apart before sheathing himself inside me. The night slips by without any way to measure time, my heat not abating until I sink my teeth into his flesh.

Valen groans, his cock twitching deep inside me as my walls grip and squeeze him until his hot semen coats my insides. I pull my teeth from his neck, breathing harshly as he drops on top of me. Both of us are sore and exhausted beyond anything I've felt before.

Exhaustion smashes into me once again as my temperature drops, and Valen pulls out of me, rolling onto his back beside me, his breathing heavy. My eyes flutter shut and I welcome sleep.

* * *

My brain tries to process the incessant noise that's invading the darkness of my sleep. My eyes feel like sandpaper as I try to force them open. Light filters into the room through closed drapes and I can just make out the sounds of cartoons coming from the living room. My phone starts ringing again, the ringtone loud as it vibrates on the bedside table.

Valen groans beside me, slapping the table, trying to shut the noise off. My body feels heavy as I drag my body over his to reach for my phone. It stops ringing the moment I grab it and I roll back to my side of the bed. With sleepy eyes, I squint at the screen to see thirteen missed calls from Macey and seven from Zoe, and a ton of calls from the hospital. I'm about to unlock my phone to call them back when it vibrates in my hand. Sitting up, I realize instantly that something has to be wrong for there to be so many missed calls.

The fog lifts and fear seeps into me as I watch it ringing in my hand. Macey's face pops up on the screen and the ringtone blares loudly. My hands shake as I swipe my thumb over the screen and answer it.

"Everly!" Macey gasps before she sighs heavily; her breathing is shaky as I listen to her on the other end.

"What is it?" I ask and Macey makes a choking noise. My entire body trembles when she doesn't answer straight away.

"Macey?" I ask, my voice shaking with fear.

"You need to get here," she says, the words sounding so broken. The emotion in her voice as she stammers and cries into the phone has me scrambling to my feet. I jump to the floor and grab whatever my hands land on first.

"What happened?" I ask, frantically dragging a shirt over my head and placing the phone back to my ear.

Macey cries, the sound crushing my soul and twisting my stomach as dread fills me.

"It's Ben," she sobs, and my heart stutters and threatens to stop beating at her words. A cold, sinking feeling settles over me. Valen sits up, looking for danger, and tears burn my eyes as I stare at him, shell shocked. No! Not Ben! My heart and soul screams for the boy, for Emily. It would kill her if something happened to him. Valen gets to his feet, looking alarmed.

"Everly?" he asks.

"I have to go. I need to get to the hospital," I tell him as the cold feeling washes over me again, making me numb and turning my veins to ice. I feel like I'm moving on autopilot as I throw clothes on without seeing them. Valen chases me around the apartment as I grab my handbag and keys, only stopping when I notice Valarian sitting at the coffee

"Mom?" Valarian says as I stare at him unblinkingly; a parent's worst fear.

My voice is robotic. "Everything is fine. Eat your breakfast," I tell him.

"I'll head over as soon as Dad gets here," Valen tells me, gripping my arms. He shakes me a little and I blink rapidly, turning to look at him.

"I have to get to him," I gasp before turning on my heel and running toward the doorChapterSix

Walking into the hospital, I find Macey and Zoe pacing outside Emily's and Ben's room. Tears streak both their faces and Macey's eyes are puffy. Whatever is going on is terrible because Macey never cries; she never even gets emotional. She keeps her walls high and takes on the world with a no-fucks-given attitude. My stomach plummets as I approach them, my entire body shaking. The moment I get to them, the door opens and the doctor steps out with a grim expression on his face.

Macey instantly turns to face him. "Well?" she asks, but Doc's shoulders drop.

He looks tired, and I can't imagine having his job—having to deliver bad news to families or parents. Bad news is precisely what we got when he spoke.

“As you know, Ben deteriorated overnight. His blood test when he first came in showed some hope, he wasn't a full-blown forsaken, but now he is. His body is shutting down, his organs are failing; he doesn't have much time left.”

I swallow his words down and bite the inside of my lip to stop the quiver. “Emily?” I ask, clearing my throat.

“The only thing keeping her alive is the machines. Without them, she will die,” Doc answers. We already knew that, but I had some hope. Doc just killed that hope.

“Is he still conscious?” Zoe asks.

“He keeps coming in and out. One minute he almost seems lucid, the next, he is hurting himself or trying to attack the nurses,” Doc says.

“So, what now?” I ask.

“There is nothing else we can do. We did dialysis, but the infection is not just in his blood; it's in his muscles, bones, everything. I'm sorry, Luna, but now we just wait.”

“Wait for him to die?” I ask. Doc smiles sadly and nods. I press my lips in a line and gulp before clearing my throat. Zoe sits heavily in the chair by the door.

“He's just a child,” she says, putting her head in her hands. Macey grips her shoulder, hugging her against her hip.

“Thank you for everything, Doc,” I tell him.

“You're more than welcome to stay with him. I will send some chairs in for you all,” he says, wandering down the hall.

I stare at the ceiling, willing the tears to go before pushing the door open and stepping inside. Macey follows me in, sitting beside him and grabbing his hand. Zoe enters too, but remains close to the wall as she stares, not knowing what to do. Doc comes back in with two extra chairs, and I sit between Emily's and Ben's beds, holding Ben's hand and rubbing circles on the back of it. Hours pass.

Ben eventually comes to, thrashing and snarling periodically.

“He didn't deserve this,” Macey says, gently brushing his bangs from his deformed face. She sniffles when Valen walks in. He nods to us before hugging Zoe, who is a mess at the back of the room.

“Marcus is on his way,” he tells her, and she nods. He kisses her trembling forehead as she stares off vacantly, her eyes glued to Ben and Emily.

Macey falls asleep for a while, and Zoe leaves to get coffee and update the hotel on their wellbeing. She's been gone for about five minutes when the alarms start sounding as the monitors go off. Macey sits upright in a panic just as Ben starts thrashing, his heart rate increasing and blood streaming out of his ears and eyes as he tries to breathe around the tube in his mouth.

Nurses rush in, shutting everything off and I squeeze his hand while Macey whispers to him. Ben's eyes open with a crazed gleam, yet I see him—see the boy he once was, the scared look beyond them. He tries to speak around the tube, and one of the nurses runs out of the room, unable to watch when he gasps.

“Mom,” he rasps, the sound barely audible, and Macey breaks, sobbing while clutching his hand. The moment Zoe walks in with the coffees, she shoves the tray at Valen before rushing over, gripping Ben's legs, and rubbing them.

“Can't you give him something to help calm him?” Macey asks the doctor, who lingers helplessly.

“We have already given him everything. Nothing works,” he murmurs, holding back his own tears.

Macey and the doctor talk, but I just can't stop staring at Ben's wide eyes looking back at me unblinkingly. Before I even think about what I'm doing, I undo his handcuff with the key that sits beside the bed and let down the guard rail on the bed. His hand flails, grasping air before I climb on the bed beside him. Ben snaps and snarls at me. He thrashes when I slide my arm under his body and sit beside him, pulling his legs over my lap

Gently, I guide his head to rest on my shoulder with my hand on his forehead so he can't turn it to bite as he squirms—not that he can do much with the tube in his mouth. Macey reaches over, holding out her hand for the key to unlock the other cuff. Doc protests, but I hand it to her, ignoring him.

“Luna, he is dangerous,” Doc says, and Valen goes to reach for me, but I pull away.

“No!” I tell Valen when he tries to pull me off the bed.

“Everly,” he whispers, watching Ben grip and claw at my arm with his free hand.

“No, he’s scared. Emily can’t hold him, so I’ll do it for her, as she would for me,” I tell him, my voice breaking, knowing she would. No matter the risk to herself, she’s part of our village, and when one falls, the rest pick up the slack.

Macey undoes his other hand and moves over, gripping my shoulder. I readjust him on my lap, turning my face into his hair and humming to him as Macey moves beside Valen. He steps out of her way so she can drag the little side table out of the way and drop the side rail on Emily’s bed before walking around to the other side of it. Doctors and nurses try to stop her, but they’re already dying; what does it matter if cords get tangled?

Macey pushes Emily’s bed flush against Ben’s, who gasps for air. I stroke his hair before gripping his wrist and moving it to Emily’s arm. He whimpers, clutching her forearm tightly, and calms; he stops thrashing completely. He may be forsaken, but he knows his mother’s touch.

“She’s right there, Ben. Right here with you,” I whisper to him. “She loves you so much,” I tell him as his breathing slowly evens out. His blood is soaking my shirt, which I realize is inside out anyway, but I simply stare up at the ceiling and just hold him. Macey rubs his back, and Zoe cries while stroking his legs in my lap. The room falls silent, the only sound, his heart rate monitor. I turn my head to look at Emily.

All the things she wanted for her son come to mind: how she worked her ass off to provide for him, never turning down a shift; how she would bring Ben to play with Valarian and Casey if she couldn’t get a sitter, just so she didn’t miss a shift. She wanted so much for him, and this wasn’t it. I look at Valen, who stands there with a hand under his chin, worry etched on his face at how close I am to Ben.

This boy is not a monster. He’s a sweet boy. Emily’s boy. I kiss Ben’s forehead. I can’t fix this; our emergency fund can’t bail them out; no cure will save him; there’s nothing we can do. But I can give her one thing.

I let my claws slide from my fingertips before digging them into my palm; my blood pools in my hand. Macey lifts her head and her lips quiver when I move him, making sure his hand remains on Emily. I pull his other hand from under him, preparing to slice his palm too. The moment I do, Valen reaches over the bed and grips my wrist to stop me. I just stare at him. He looks at Ben and drops his head. He knows what I want.

"You're not doing it. His blood could make you sick," Valen whispers.

"It's all she wanted, and he can't pledge; a blood link is the only way," I tell him, and he looks down at Emily, who he was leaning over. He sighs.

"I'll do it," he murmurs, gripping my wrist. He looks up at me and releases me, his eyes on me as he slashes his palm with his claws. Ben doesn't move or even flinch as I do the same to his free hand that's lying limp on my belly.

Valen reaches over and grips his hand, and I stroke Ben's hair. "I, Alpha Valen of the Nightshade pack—" his words cut off as he looks up. Marcus is standing behind Zoe, his arms wrapped around her waist and his eyes glazed over; he's mind linking.

"You sure?" Valen asks, and I see Marcus nod before Valen turns his gaze back to Ben. "I, Alpha Valen of the Nightshade pack, welcome Ben Steele and declare him the new Beta of the Nightshade Pack," he murmurs. Marcus gasps as his title is stripped, and Zoe reaches up, cupping his cheek with her hand. It will only be temporary, but it probably still stung Marcus.

Suddenly, the mind-link opens up and our pack welcomes Beta Ben, bringing tears to my eyes. I don't know whether he can hear them, but he will not die a rogue. Valen then does the same to Emily and I feel her tether form. Fear courses through me, knowing soon, both their tethers will sever and it will be crippling, but we can grant this wish. Doc stabs a needle in Valen's arm as he stands back up.

"Precaution," Doc murmurs to Valen, who nods. I swallow, knowing precisely what he risked for them, yet he did, so I didn't have to.

Macey grabs Emily's hand and kisses it as we wait. About an hour later, Emily's machine starts beeping, and Doc checks it, looking at me, and so does Macey. The

nurses bring paddles near the bed like they're waiting for the time they'll need them.

Ben's breathing slows, and his heart rate becomes weaker until I suddenly hear him gasp and stop. I clutch him tighter, whispering how much his mother loves him, how much we all love him when his heart rate monitor flat-lines. The newly formed pack tether snaps and pain ricochets through me, ripping at my heart, and my stomach twists. Valen clutches the bed, gasping and sweating until it passes.

I know he is gone.

Zoe sobs and Macey bawls; my entire body shakes as I hold him.

"Luna, we can..." Doc starts to say, and I stare up at the ceiling.

"Leave her, let her go. Let her be with her son," I croak out.

The nurses move around, fussing with lines and tubes when Macey grips one of their arms.

"If I was in her place, I wouldn't want to wake to my son gone," Macey stammers, choked with emotion. She's right; Emily wouldn't want to be here. Ben was her whole world, just like I couldn't live without my son.

"Turn her machines off," I order Doc. I don't care if they can restabilize her; I know Emily, and life wouldn't be worth living stuck on life support without her son. She held on long enough.

Nurses nod, turning machines off while Doc presses a stethoscope to Ben's chest, calling his time of death, though we know he's gone; his heart no longer beats and his blood pressure bottoms out as blood leaks from his eyes, nose, and mouth. Macey pulls the beds apart so the nurses can clean him up. I continue to sit up with him, letting them remove his tubes and lines before Macey moves his mother over. Emily's body convulses, and unconscious process has her gasping as I lay Ben beside her.

Standing beside her, I brush her hair back while Macey kisses her hand before cupping it to her cheek. She then lays Emily's hand on Ben's shoulder.

"It's okay, Emily. Ben is home," I tell her while patting her hand. "He's safe beside you," I tell her as my tears drip on his little shoulder.

I stroke her hair again, leaning over to kiss her head. “You got your wish. Ben was Beta to Nightshade. He’s pack, just like you. You can let go now. You don’t need to hold on. We brought Ben home. He’s safe with you now,” I choke, my voice trembling as her mouth opens, gasping but not actually breathing.

ChapterSeven
Valen

My heart breaks for Everly, Zoe, and Macey as they tell Emily it’s okay to go—that she doesn’t have to hold on any longer. Moments pass and hushed whispers circle the room as they try to soothe their friend. She gasps one last time and I hold my breath, waiting to see if it’s a false alarm, yet praying it isn’t. She shouldn’t suffer anymore, no one deserves to suffer this fate. Everly drops her head on Ben’s shoulder and sobs. I feel Emily’s pack link sever.

My heart pangs with pain—if only briefly—yet the pain, anguish, and despair that floods from Everly through the bond as she mourns her family breaks my heart further. Marcus hugs Zoe close as she falls apart. Macey just stares vacantly ahead, sitting back down in her chair.

The doctor checks Emily and nods, calling the time of death before saying he’ll leave to let them say their goodbyes. The girls tuck the two of them in like they’re saying goodnight and not goodbye, and the doctor comes back and tells Everly what will happen next.

“Come on,” Marcus whispers to Zoe, pulling her from the room, and Macey quickly follows, closing the door behind them.

Everly kisses the mother and son once again and stands upright. I watch as she swallows down the emotion that threatens to consume her. She tugs her shirt off, pulls it back on the right way, and cleans her face with some water from the sink basin, washing away the tears that stain her face. I move toward her, wanting to comfort her, but she pulls away, looking at me. I drop my hand.

“I’m sorry, but please don’t touch me right now,” she whispers.

I know if I do, she’ll break. I get it, but the urge is still there, the bond calling me to my mate. Her eyes soften as she stares at me and I nod, letting her get herself together. She loved, lost, and mourned, and I am awed by how quickly she slips back into business mode, shuts down everything, and forces her anguish back.

Her determination returns, knowing that she has work to do. She broke, if only briefly, before picking herself up and dusting herself off, ready for battle again.

I hate that she instinctively switched and shut down, a coping mechanism from years of taking on everything and everyone else's problems and emotions while ignoring her own. She has me, but Everly has been forced to be independent, endure, and never rely on anyone. She will deal, conquer, and then break when safely alone. But for now, she has to put on a front to do what needs to be done. It makes me realize what sort of leader she is and what sort of Luna she will be—unbreakable to the rest of the world. She's the rogue community's anchor despite the pressure of drowning herself, taking on the persona and getting things done.

The amount of impact she's had on the rogues and how much they look up to her doesn't hit me until I step out the doors after her. I hear Everly gasp before she moves down the corridor. Rogues line the walls, heads down, each one bowing as she passes.

Her village.

That word suddenly takes on a new meaning—what it represents. Everly, Zoe, and Macey were never rogue. The three of them brought hope to the rogues, and they rally for their leaders, and for Emily and Ben. A family built on love and respect. Everly grips my hand as I step beside her and I give it a squeeze.

"You don't have to be strong, you know," I whisper.

"Yeah, I do, for them," she whispers back.

Macey and Zoe wait by the exit doors and Everly lets me go. She walks toward them and they wrap their arms around her waist. The rogues look up to those three. And both girls—Macey, despite being older, and Zoe younger—look to Everly. She is the chief of the village they built. She is their armor, and she wears it proudly. Ava stands outside the doors, looking lost as her sister steps out with Zoe and Macey.

The three girls have a bond, a sisterhood built on their blood, sweat, and tears, and with undying, unconditional love. Ava, for so long, had a strained relationship with her sister and knows she isn't Everly's only sister now. I can see the pain in her eyes as she watches them. But like true queens, they stop, and Macey offers

her hand to Ava, who takes it, letting out a shaky breath. Macey tosses an arm over her shoulder, tugging her into their circle, accepting her as one of them.

I look at the overcast sky; storm clouds roll across the horizon. The day is as gloomy as it is depressing. Yet, as the rogues file out after their chiefs, their honorary Lunas, I chuckle and smile as Marcus stops beside me. He leans his shoulder against mine, nodding his head toward them. My mother's words about Everly are so true, and I now understand what she meant.

“Watch her.”

I do as she leads her people down to the parking lot. They stand in a circle, hands clasped, the four girls in the middle. Every rogue had come to say goodbye, no matter their state—some still in their work uniforms—having stopped whatever they were doing and running when their family needed them, running to see them off. She calls it her family, her village, but it isn't a village; they are a pack. And as Everly turns her face up to the sky and howls, everyone follows in unison, saying their final goodbyes.

They were never rogue. This is what a pack is. And at the center stands their Alpha. Not by birth, but because she earned the right; she earned their respect and fought for them when no one else would. A true leader. Everly's determination is admirable, and the woman truly is remarkable. A chorus of howls fills the silence, and I offer my own howls as they say goodbye. Mom would be so proud. I am proud.

Everyone thinks she is just a lucky rogue, who an Alpha claimed. Yet, looking at her now, I realize I'm the lucky one. I never claimed her. I thought I did, but a woman as strong as she can't be claimed. She was the one that did the claiming. She didn't need me; she had herself and the village she built. Furthermore, she knows who she is, and she isn't afraid to be it. She will fight, and I know she will win, and I will love watching every second of it as she reclaims the city and changes it.

As she makes Mom proud.ChapterEight

Everly

Four Days Later

We held the funerals yesterday.

Today, I just can't cope with work, so I've decided to start the mural on either side of the door leading into the old school, now the homeless shelter. I designed the sign and sent it off last night to my manufacturer. When I walk into work to find everything handled and for once, the sky showing no sign of rain, I get a head start on the mural.

I have two days until the council meeting, and two days after that, I have the challenge for my father's pack. I'm a little nervous about exactly what it is I'm getting myself into with his pack, especially if it's bankrupt like Ava believes. Yet, if I can restore a hotel to its former glory, I have no doubt I can dig the pack out of the hole my father dug.

I forgot how much I enjoy drawing and painting, though the old, rendered brickwork is making it a bitch to stencil out the design with my paintbrush. I've done the background white, like a canvas, though standing on a ladder while it's windy isn't ideal. Hearing a car pull up along the road behind me, I glance over my shoulder to see it's Valen's. He hops out, walking over to me.

"Everly, the wind is hectic today. Get down before you fall off," Valen scolds, coming over and holding the ladder. I shake my head but climb down anyway.

"I have a harness," I tell him, unclipping it as I reach each step on the ladder, but he shakes his head.

"A harness won't do much good if that ladder unhooks from up top. It's only hooked to the gutters. That's not the sturdiest thing, especially those old, crumbling ones. It would have been best if you had told me you were doing such a gigantic mural; I would have had a cherry picker brought over. Don't use the ladder. I'll get one sent over tomorrow," Valen scolds, and I shake my head.

He has a point, though, and the site supervisor also gave me a lecture about the same thing, making me wonder if he called Valen.

"The site supervisor called you, didn't he?" I tell Valen. He smirks.

"Of course," he says, and I roll my eyes.

"I thought you had your meeting today with your father over pack business?"

His eyes darken slightly, and he sighs. "I sent my accountant instead," he says while bending down to help pick up my supplies. I pack them into a box and put them in the cleaning closet just inside the school doors.

"You can't just avoid your father," I tell him, following him out to his car.

"Unless it has something to do with Valarian, I don't want to hear it," Valen growls, opening the driver's door.

"Valen, he is your father, and he's a wonderful dad," I tell him.

"He lied to me," Valen states. I sigh, climbing into the car.

"Your mother wouldn't want you to toss your father away. He fucked up, but he's trying to make up for it. The petition got pushed through by him. He drops everything he is doing whenever we need his help with Valarian," I tell him, and he starts the car, nodding his head in reluctant acknowledgement.

We head to school to pick up Valarian. When the bell rings, he comes running out excitedly, jumping up and down to show the painting he had done in class.

"Wow!" Valen says, looking at it. Casey comes over to show us her painting—it's covered with glitter and swirling scribbles, while Valerian's is all straight lines of paint that look like he used a ruler to make sure he didn't go out of the perceived lines. I smile down at him, and he grabs his father's hand as we cross the road to the car. Once in the car, we head home, listening to the radio talking about the upcoming council meeting.

"It appears war is brewing between Alpha Nixon and Alpha Valen. Alpha Nixon was spotted today leaving the council chambers in a rage after learning Alpha Valen's mate, Everly Summers—the infamous disgraced daughter of Alpha John from Shadow Pack—has petitioned to have the laws involving the unfair treatment of rogues changed. Alpha Nixon refused to speak to the media today after he was caught in an argument with Alpha John just in front of the building before reversing into Alpha John's car. It appears tensions among the packs are high, and over the next few weeks, we will either see change within the city or war."

Valen turns the radio off, glancing at me, and I sigh.

Great, the media is going to blow this right up, and if there isn't a war already, they will ensure one starts with the hysteria they'll cause.

"Would the City really go to war over Mom's petition?" Valarian asks, and Valen glances in the mirror at him.

"Hopefully not, but unfortunately, people don't like change. Greed and entitlement start countless issues," Valen tells him.

"But rogues have nothing. They aren't even allowed to own housing," Valarian says.

"And that is why your mother is petitioning to have the laws changed."

"So, Alpha Nixon wants to take more from the rogues when they already have nothing? What's left to take?" Valarian asks.

"Their lives, that's all that's left; and people like Nixon think they deserve to play Goddess and dictate how people should live and what laws they should live by," I answer with a sigh.

"But isn't your dad on his side?"

"He's on the wrong side," I agree

"Does that upset you?" Valarian asks, and I look at him over my shoulder.

"No, because that shows his character, not mine," I tell him.

"But you're his daughter?"

"Yes, that's true, but I am not my father or my mother. I am my own person, just like you are your own person," I tell him.

"So I shouldn't be like you or dad when I'm older?" he asks.

"No. Strive to be better, surpass us. One day, be a better Alpha than me," Valen says.

"What if I don't want to be an Alpha?" Valarian asks.

"Then I will find someone else to take over the pack."

"What if I want to be Luna, like Mom?" Valarian asks.

“Then you will be Luna Valarian,” Valen chuckles.

“Doesn't sound very cool, no offense, Mom. I think I'll stick with Alpha Valarian,” Valarian says, and Valen snickers.

“What? The Luna is more important than the Alpha,” Valarian says.

“Is that so?” Valen asks.

“Yep. The Alpha keeps the packs in line, the Luna keeps the Alpha in line.” Valarian shrugs, and I laugh, glancing at Valen.

“You think this is funny? Our son just emasculated me,” Valen chuckles.

“Alphas—so sensitive,” I tell him, patting Valen's shoulder while shaking my head.

We head home, and on the way, I text Kalen to come over for dinner. It's time these two have a chat. Kalen is trying, but Valen has to put in some effort on his end.

* * *

Dinner was awkward. Valen and Kalen only spoke about Valarian until Kalen helped Valen do the dishes while I sat on the couch with Valarian; we were watching some kid's show while I tried not to listen.

Around 8 p.m., Valen got a call and walked outside to take it before returning, saying he had to head out. Kalen also said he should head home since it was a school night. Valen was gone for hours, and eventually, Valarian went to bed.

After reading to him, tucking him in, and getting into my own pjs, I only hear my phone ringing in the living room after I close the door; the call is from Zoe—it's unusual for her to call so late.

When I answer and hear her frantic voice, I know instantly something is wrong; the sirens in the background make my heart thump in my chest.

“Everly,” she sobs into the phone. All the air is sucked from my lungs at her words and tone.

“Zoe? What is it?”

“Can you hear me?” she asks.

"Zoe?"

"It's gone, Everly! It's gone!"

"What's gone?"

"The hotel! It spread so fast. You need to get here!" she cries before the phone cuts out. I try calling her number again, but all I get is her voicemail. I instantly call Valen's number.

* * *

Valen

My father and I stand awkwardly in the elevator together, both staring at the doors in front of us.

"So, where are you heading off to?" he asks.

It was bad enough that I had to sit through an awkward dinner, thanks to Everly. Now he wants to know where I'm going. I know she was only thinking about my and my father's relationship. It's still uncomfortable, yet I can't complain to Everly about my problem, so I tell him.

"Going to see Dion."

"The jeweler?" he asks, and I nod.

"Wait. Are you proposing to Everly?"

"Why else would I be going to see him?"

"Well, it's about bloody time," my father says, and I can't help the tug of my lips. I know that if he had his way, I would have married her the day I met her.

"So the ring is ready? What sort of ring did you get her?"

"One of Mom's rings. Valarian picked out the stone," I tell him, and my father nods and glances away. He swallows.

"So you are picking it up?"

"No, there's an issue, so I'm stopping over there," I tell him. The doors finally open, and I step out, heading for my car.

I pull up in front of the plaza and walk over to Dion's Jewelers. He had called, saying there was something wrong with the engraver. What I'm not expecting is for my father to follow me in his own car. He pulls up behind me.

"What are you doing?" I ask.

"Coming to see if I can help," he says, though I know he's trying to spend more time with me. He was always extra clingy when I was upset with him, and this feud of ours has lasted weeks. Though, I would be lying if I said I didn't enjoy his company a little.

We walked to the jeweler's together, and I knock on the door. Dion comes over and unlocks it, locking it behind us once we're in, and we follow him to the back of his store.

"What's wrong with the engraving machine?" I ask him. Dion shrugs, picking up a rag and wiping his forehead, which is covered in sweat from the lights in here.

"No idea. I've been pulling the damn thing apart, but I'm a jeweler, not a damn technician, and the ring holder won't spin," he grumbles. My father shrugs his jacket off before pulling a stool over and sitting in front of the laser machine.

They spend hours trying to fix it before deciding it needs some part. Dion then spends a few hours on eBay and various sites trying to find the part for the specific engraver he has. When he finally finds it, he tells me the shipment will take another two weeks on top of the time it will take for the stone to arrive.

"What is with shipments these days?" I growl. I was already impatient to get the ring back before—now it's adding even more time!

Dion shrugs apologetically. I sigh, knowing it isn't his fault when my father speaks.

"I can go pick it up?" he offers.

"It's a four-day drive," I tell him, and he shrugs. "Better than waiting. When does the stone arrive?" he asks Dion.

"Hopefully next week; they were able to ship it off on the next flight, so it's arriving early," Dion says. Well, at least something good came of this.

"It's settled then. I will go pick up the part and bring it back here, so you should have your ring earlier than expected," my father tells me. He looks down at Dion's

computer and Dion fills out something about picking it up. My father then jots down the address on a piece of paper.

As I'm leaving, my father follows me out and we walk back to the cars together.

"You didn't have to pick it up. I know you're only sucking up," I tell him.

"Is it working?" he chuckles.

"Kind of," I laugh. We stand there awkwardly until my father hugs me. After I stand there for a second, I finally wrap my arms around him.

"I miss you, son," he says, his voice cracking. I rub his back before he lets go and nods, racing to his car. He leaves before I get in my car. The moment I do, the mind-link opens up and Marcus' voice is in my head.

"Hey, what's up?"

"You need to get to Mountainview Hotel!"

"Why?"

"It's not good, Valen. The whole place is gone. It's just a shell."

"Excuse me?"

"Someone cut off the water and power. We were trying to figure out what was going on when we heard an explosion in the kitchen an hour after closing, and the entire place went up."

"Fuck! I'm on my way," I tell him.

Hearing my phone ringing, I grab it from my jacket pocket. It's Everly. I'm about to answer when I see my father's car come to an abrupt stop at the traffic lights before he turns the car around and drives back toward me on the opposite side of the road. He stops across from me just as I answer Everly's phone call; she's sobbing hysterically.

"I'm on my way there right now," I tell her.

"I can't get a hold of your father."

"He's with me. We're on our way," I tell her before hanging up. Dad winds his window down and I do the same.

“Want me to take Valarian? It's all over the radio,” he calls.

“Head to the hotel. Everly is on her way there with him,” I call back, and he nods before taking off. I wrench the wheel and do a U-turn, following him.

Chapter Nine

Valen

Pulling up at the Mountainview Hotel, I see fire trucks lining the front of the hotel with police, ambulances, people running everywhere, everything is all flashing lights and shouting; it's a total fiasco. I can see Everly's truck and my father parks beside it, getting Valarian out of the car while Macey stands beside it. My father is quick to get Valarian, then waves Zoe over; she rushes over with Casey and thanks him. Yet, I can't see Everly anywhere. The entire building is on fire, flames spewing out the windows, bursting from the extreme heat that can be felt even from where I'm parked behind my father on the main road.

I glance around, waving to Zoe as I jog over to her and Marcus. Marcus has a tablet in his hand and people are lining the path, standing at the evacuation point as he finishes checking names off.

“Everyone is accounted for. The fire started in the kitchen; thankfully the alarms still triggered because of the backup batteries, so no loss of life,” Marcus tells me. I notice the tablet is a list of who was in the hotel. Ava is handing out bottled water and examining those Marcus marked off. Everyone is checked off and accounted for but one.

“Where is Everly?” I ask. As my father drives off with Casey and Valarian, he honks the horn and I nod to him. Zoe looks around before pointing between two fire trucks.

“The other buildings?” I ask Macey as she comes over.

“Fine—it was contained in the main building. The apartments out the back and the event room and storage sheds are fine; it's only the main hotel,” she answers. At least that's a relief. I nod, glancing around and finally spotting Everly, who stands in her pink and white cloud pajamas with her back to us. Moving across the large lawn, I head over to her.

When I spoke to her earlier, she was hysterical, but now I feel nothing but blistering, fiery anger, so hot it could give the inferno in front of us a run for its money. Yet, the underlying feeling below it is pure devastation. This place was as much her baby as Valarian is. This was hers. Coming up behind her, I grip her shoulders, but she's staring at the flames eating away her village—the village she built. I don't know what to say. There's no comfort I can offer to make this right.

"I'll rebuild. This is why we have insurance. This is why I have a failsafe. The main thing is no one is hurt—this place can be restored, but lives can't be replaced," she says as I rest my chin on her shoulder and wrap my arms around her.

"I'm sorry, Love," I tell her, and she nods once in acknowledgment of my words but says nothing else. Media and reporters start lining the streets behind us; murmurs can be heard, police taking statements. I wander off, helping where I can. So does Everly, organizing buses to take everyone that was staying here to my hotel.

* * *

The flames are finally gone. The place is nothing but a husk of what it once was. Everly watches the last fire truck leave, but the media linger, taking any last-minute scraps they can for their headlines. Bloody vultures.

"Come on," I tell her, trying to lead her away, but she shakes her head and walks toward the building. I need to get Valarian to school, so I'll have to come back. Yet, I have a feeling Everly isn't leaving anytime soon.

"They warned me," Everly said, staring up at what's left. The structure is sound, but the place is gutted. Yet, despite it all, the building still stands; the brickwork may be tainted black, the render crumbling, and the place hollow, but it's still there, standing against the odds.

"This is because of the petition; because I fought for the rogues, for this city, and this is how they repay me," she growls. "They won't stop, will they?" she asks, glancing at me. I hang my head, knowing this will only be the beginning.

"What's next, Valen? What would your next move be, if you were Nixon?" she asks.

"You think it was Nixon?"

“Who else?” she says.

“Everly? I....” I glance around at the media lingering, watching curiously when she walks off toward the wreck.

* * *

Everly

I walk numbly towards the building and stop again. The place is destroyed. As I take it all in, my heart and soul burn to charcoal. I stare at the front door; I can picture that first day like it was yesterday. The night before, it poured, and I had all but given up, until I met the woman who sat on a faded, plastic chair with a smoke hanging between her lips by that very door—the way her eyes looked me up and down with no judgment.

Valen comes over to me while I stare at the spot she sat that day, when I was wet from walking, hopeless, and homeless. He rubs my arms from behind me.

“We should go,” he whispers. I point to the spot.

“That’s where I met your mother,” I tell him. “I thought she was one of the people staying here. She had a cigarette hanging out of her mouth.” I chuckle. “She offered me a place to stay, a hot meal, and then a job. But she gave me so much more than that.”

“This place,” Valen says. I shake my head.

“Hope. She gave me hope. Then she gave me a family, and then a home,” I tell him, looking up at what’s left.

I point to the room directly above us. “That’s where I stayed. The next morning, I came out to her calling up to me, her truck loaded with baby stuff for Valarian. There was so much stuff,” I sniffle.

“‘It takes a village to raise a child. We are going to build our own village’. Your mother told me that, and we did,” I tell him before stepping through the front door. The glass is all shattered and crunches under my feet, the walls are black, and some of the floors are still smoldering. I walk into the back, to my office, which used to be her apartment.

“Everly! It’s not safe,” Valen calls out to me while rushing in after me. Yet, I don’t care; I have to see if it survived. The safe is supposed to be fireproof, but all I can do is hope. It holds something more precious than gold.

It has my letter.

Everything is covered in soot, the room crumbling around me as I fish my keys from my pocket and kneel next to the safe.

“Everly, we shouldn’t be in here! They haven’t cleared the entire place yet,” Valen says, but I’m not really listening. Through my tears, I place the key in and twist, pulling it out and using another key to twist the next lock and the next; the keypad for the digital screen melted, but the manual locks are fine. My heart beats faster when I hear the final lock click.

I close my eyes, gripping the handle, sucking in a shuddering breath before pulling the door open.

The safe is intact—the heat burned the outside hard and it’s warm inside, and a few things on top are curled and ruined, but as I dig to the bottom, I burst into tears when I see my envelopes. They’re brown from the smoke but intact. I clutch them to my chest and let out a breath.

“Thank you,” I whisper to no one in particular. If there was ever a sign that she’s still with us, this was it. Goddess only knows how many times I’ve pulled that damn letter from its envelope when I thought I would break, knowing it would help me carry on again.

Valen rubs my back, letting me fall apart. I can’t move as I stare at my safe—I have no idea how long I sit there. Valen goes to grab Valarian’s clothes from the apartment, yet I can’t bring myself to follow.

I’m leaning against the brown brickwork with my envelope, the one most precious to me. There are so many letters, letters of advice, letters of love. She wrote a new letter every day, each one a detailed report of what we accomplished that day—a reminder of how far we had come—a time capsule of sorts. I find every moment of this place flashing through my mind. Her voice is so clear, her memory still alive within these walls, even though it’s now only burned rubble.

Every day, she dropped one in the mailbox out front and sent it to her lawyer to hold on to. But one letter means the most to me—the one I’m clutching in my hand like it’s my lifeline, a reminder in case I forget. One thing about Valarie is that she’s unforgettable. I close my eyes, leaning my head back against the wall when her voice rings in my ears.

“You don’t need them. They aren’t wasting tears on you, so don’t waste your tears on them. They don’t deserve them,” Valarie had once told me. Her voice is on replay and I savor the sound of the memories she imprinted on me, and it only makes me angry that someone would try to take that memory from me—from the rogues. They burned my village and I will burn this city to the ground. I burn, they will burn with me.

“Hold on to that anger, because sometimes it’s the only thing that will keep you going,” Valarie had also told me. So I let it fester now, needing something to keep going.

I hear the crunch of somebody walking into the place. I wipe my tears but sigh when I realize it’s only Valen. He crouches in front of me, tipping my chin up to meet his gaze

“Where’s my girl gone?” he whispers, his eyes searching my face.

“Sitting in the wreck of her village,” I murmur.

“This is not my girl. My girl is a Luna, and chief of her village.”

“My village is gone,” I tell him.

“Will you rebuild?”

I sigh. I want to punch something, scream and fight, yet at the same time I want to curl into a ball and die along with this place. But he’s right. I have a city to burn, and I can’t do that here, feeling sorry for myself. I nod, and he stands.

Gently, I open the letter, reading through it for the hundredth time—the one thing that kept me going time and time again. Valen stands back but remains quiet as I skim the page. Valarie’s words are unmarred and untainted as I stare at them.

“What’s that?” Valen asks.

“A reminder,” I tell him. Leaning forward, I grab the others from where they sit and hand them to him. He looks at the hundreds of envelopes.

“These are all from my mother?” he asks, and I nod.

He holds his hand out for the one in my hand, written in her immaculate handwriting, the one letter that means the most to me. It’s the shortest of all the letters she wrote. The others are a detailed, day-by-day account of what we had achieved. What we built. But this one is something else. I pull it a little closer and gaze at the words I memorized years ago but still need to see when things get to be too much.

Just in case no one has told you today!

YOU WILL NEVER DO IT!

I’m watching, always watching, my girl. And I will be watching when you prove them all wrong!

With that, I tuck the letter back in its envelope and hand it to Valen to hold with the others before walking out of the office.

“Everly? What are you doing?” Valen calls as he follows me through the charred remains.

“Building a village,” I tell him. He laughs, and I look at him over my shoulder.

“What?” I ask, and he shrugs and shakes his head. Untucking the envelope I gave him, he opens it and scans it once.

“Build your Village, Love,” he says.

“Oh, I am. I built this place from nothing. I will do it again,” I tell him, shoving through what’s left of the doors and outside.

I stop in tracks as I step into the parking lot. Valen walks up behind me and wraps his arms around my chest, pulling me back against him. The letter in his hand is open, yet my gaze is on the hundreds of rogues and pack members that cover every inch of the lawn, shovels, and supplies in hand as a convoy of trucks and machinery pull into the hotel. I suck in a breath and swallow. Every rogue must be here, and all of Valen’s pack. I glance at him over my shoulder.

“Only, this time, it isn’t just four rogue-whores and three babies. You built a village and these are your people. You never have to do anything alone again,” Valen whispers, and tears fill my eyes as I stare back at everyone who showed up. Macey and Zoe both stand at the front with shovels in hand. My lip quivers. The fact that they would all show up for this place...

Valen kisses my cheek and lets me go. My knees shake as I walk toward my village before they finally give way from under me. Everyone, they all suddenly drop to their knees and bow their heads. The sight of them is just too much.

I break. Tears fall as I place my head in my hands and cry.

Moments later, I feel small hands touch my neck and I look up to see Valarian standing beside me.

“Don’t cry, Momma, your village is here to help,” he whispers, wiping my tears. He’s wearing a neon, HiVis shirt, jeans, and little steel cap boots.

“Hey, Everly!” Valen calls from behind me, and I turn to look at him over my shoulder. Valarian stares at his father when Valen yells out to me:

“You’ll never do it!”

I chuckle. I open my mouth to answer him when a chorus of voices rings out through the crowd in unison.

“Watch her!” they all scream back at him.

Chapter Ten

Two Days Later

For three hours, I’ve waited, sitting in the council for my petition meeting. My ass is going numb, and this skirt is so tight it’s digging into my hips. The air conditioning in here sucks too, making me feel queasy, and when I see Alpha Nixon walk out of the chambers with a smug smile on his face, my mood sours even more. I stand up, placing my folder on my seat, and move toward him. My appointment was three hours ago. My father comes out and rushes past, heading for the doors before I can even say anything to him—not even a glance in my direction, yet Nixon is all too happy to approach me. He strolls over in his tailored

suit, briefcase, and black leather shoes. He stops in front of me, giving me the once-over.

"How lovely to see you, Everly. What brings you here?" he asks with a sly smile. My eyes narrow at him as people push out the doors behind us, leaving the council chambers and heading out past security. They cast us nervous glances, which sets me a little on edge.

"You know exactly why I am here," I growl at him.

"Oh, nobody told you?" he asks, smiling wickedly. He glances at the receptionist. My brows furrow, confused at his words. No one told me or notified me to say it wasn't going ahead, so I have no idea what he's talking about.

"Your meeting was postponed. We postponed it on compassionate grounds after hearing about your tragedy at the hotel. What a shame!" Alpha Nixon says in a mocking tone.

"Compassionate grounds. It was not necessary. I never asked for it to be postponed and nobody notified me that it had been." I look at the foyer desk, and the woman behind it ducks her head when I turn my glare on her. That woman stared at me for three hours and did not say a goddamn word! Just kept saying 'be patient ma'am, someone will be right with you'!

"Not to matter; these things can't be helped. I was coming to see you today, anyway. I wanted to make you an offer," Nixon says, forcing my attention back to him. I purse my lips and fold my arms across my chest, scoffing at his words. This man has done enough, and I won't accept any offer he could ever make.

"How much for what is left of that dump?" he asks.

"It isn't for sale, and if it was, you would never be able to afford it," I tell him

"Now, don't be rash, Everly. That place is rubble and soot, holds no value."

"Then what do you want with it if it holds no value? I know exactly what that land is worth and what it will be worth once I rebuild. Though I should say thank you for burning it to the ground!"

"I have no idea what you are talking about," he says, fiddling with his cufflinks.

"Sure you don't, but thank you anyway," I smile.

“And why is that?” Nixon chuckles arrogantly, and I lean closer to whisper to him.

“Because I just realized how much larger my pack is. You know numbers; that's all you Alphas care about—the number of members you have, warriors. Well, I outnumber every pack here, so Alpha, I suggest you fall in line before I make you my omega bitch,” I tell him.

“You are asking for war, Everly. How will your father feel going to war against his own daughter?”

“That is where you are wrong, Alpha Nixon. In two days' time, I will own his pack. It would be wise to check your alliances because I will own you too,” I sneer at him and Nixon laughs.

“I am the mayor of this city, or have you forgotten? I am not going anywhere, Everly. I run this city—you are merely a rogue whore that trapped an Alpha. Don't you read the headlines?” he chuckles.

“Savor your time as mayor, Nixon, because you won't be the city mayor for much longer,” I tell him, leaning down and grabbing my handbag and folder.

“And why do you think that?” he asks. I shrug.

“Reputation is everything in this city, Nixon. I can't fall from grace because I apparently already did. As you said, I am just a rogue-whore who trapped an Alpha. But don't forget, everyone has skeletons in the closet, and I hear yours is full to the brim with dirty secrets and clingy cobwebs. Be sure to watch the 7 o'clock news tonight; I hear you're starring in those headlines,” I laugh before turning on my heel and walking toward the doors. Alpha Nixon grabs my arm and yanks me back, earning some shocked gasps from a few stragglers still leaving.

“What have you done?” he snarls.

“I do not know what you're talking about,” I tell him, sending him a wink. I shake his hand off before walking to the doors.

“Sign the petition, Nixon; I'm only just getting started. By the time I am done, your reputation will be lower than any rogue-whore!” I call to him, shoving through the turnstile and out the doors into the blistering hot sun. My father is waiting by his

car and starts to walk over to me, but halts his steps when Nixon comes out a few steps behind me.

Ignoring both of them, I climb in my car and send a text to Macey and Zoe to meet me at Zoe's apartment before putting it in reverse. Only, when I glance over my shoulder, I see Nixon's brand-new Jaguar in the spot across the aisle behind me. I slam my foot on the gas, hitting it so hard it pushes his precious metal baby into the brick barricade in front of it. His horrified face makes me chuckle as I wind the window down and look out my window at his crushed back end.

"Whoops! I'm sure it will buff right out," I tell him before taking off, cackling like a madwoman. I notice him race toward his car and clutch his hair as he looks at the damage. I rub my dash. "Good, Beasty, good girl," I tell my car.

The drive back to the hotel leaves me sweating, and I'm pretty sure I need to get the air-conditioner refilled. By the time I reach the place, I'm drenched in sweat. In two days, with all of Valen's pack and every rogue in the city helping, we stripped the place down to the bare brick and scrubbed it down. The entire site is gutted, and contractors are walking around wearing hard hats and taking things inside to the kitchen and restaurant structure. Giant jacks are holding up some of the floors above while new support beams are put in place.

Pulling into the parking spots out front, I see the safety inspector. With a groan, I shrug off my blazer and climb out of the car. As I walk toward him, he goes to open his mouth, no doubt with some complaint, but I pluck the paper he's holding up from his grip.

"See you in a month," I tell him, not bothering to stop as I flip him the finger above my head; I'm not in the mood to deal with him. I stroll around back and up the steps toward my old apartment. As soon as I unlock the door and step inside, I flick the kettle on, dumping my keys in the fruit bowl. It feels so normal—like home still.

Raiding the fridge and pantry, I grab coffee and milk out, yet the moment I open the coffee canister, my stomach turns violently and has me rushing toward the sink to hurl my guts up. What the heck just came over me? Rinsing my mouth, I quickly clean the sink, wondering if I have heat stroke from sitting in the

overheated council lobby all day. Once my stomach settles and the kitchen is clean, I'm about to start making coffee when Macey walks in with Zoe.

"How did it go?" Macey asked, rushing toward the air-conditioning panel on the wall and turning it up full blast. Zoe lifts her hair off the back of her neck and stands under the vent in the living room. "Gosh, it's hot today," she whines, her skin glistening with a sheen of sweat. Macey walks over to the freezer, opening the door and pressing her face inside it, trying to cool down. I move to one of the chairs at the dining table and undo the top button on my shirt.

"It was postponed; waiting for email on a new date. Also, I may have accidentally reversed into Nixon's shiny new car," I shrug before catching Macey stealing ice cubes out of the freezer drawer, pulling her shirt open, and dropping them in her bra. Zoe and I stare at her.

"What? Cooling my girls down," she says, like it isn't an odd thing to do. She reaches for more and Zoe snaps at her.

"Nope, you best leave my ice tray alone. I know you aren't about to stuff them down your pants!" she shrieks and Macey looks at her, appalled by her words before she pops the cubes of ice in her mouth.

"Not all of us are like you, Miss Hotbox, stuffing frozen vegetables in your pants."

Zoe flashes me an accusing glare for telling Macey and I giggle.

Macey starts making coffee and I tell them about my interaction with Nixon. When Macey sets the steaming mug in front of me and sips her own. I grab it and take a sip before my stomach turns again and I'm rushing for the sink. Coffee comes out of my nose and mouth as I spew. Gagging on the taste, I quickly rinse my mouth and wet my face, trying to cool down.

Once I feel slightly better, I stand up and turn to find them both staring at me.

"What? Your damn milk must be off," I tell them.

"Wait, you were in heat, right?"

"Weeks ago!" I tell them, shaking my head and grabbing a Pepsi out of the fridge. I swallow it down to rid the rancid taste from my mouth. Macey clears her throat awkwardly, and I glance at her. "What!"

“Hundred bucks says you're preggo!”

“Nope, we used....” I stop. Did we use protection?

“She’s knocked up!” Zoe exclaims and slaps Macey’s waiting hand.

No! I can't be; my heat came and went..... In a day! I look at Zoe, horrified.

“How long does a heat last?”

“Three or four days, give or take, and from memory, yours lasted a night? Not that I’m heat cycling you or anything,” she says innocently.

“See? All the proof right there, you are preggers—he knocked you up first dive into your coochie because you're definitely pregnant,” Macey laughs.

“I can’t be pregnant. I have the challenge in two days!” I snap at them, horrified. They glance between each other nervously.

“Shit! I have tests; we can check.”

“Maybe your dad will postpone on compassionate grounds for the hotel?” Macey offers while Zoe rushes off toward the bathroom.

Macey eyes her suspiciously when she comes out with four different pregnancy tests. “Why have you got half a pharmacy’s worth of pregnancy tests?” she asks.

“No reason,” she says, shoving them in my hands.

“Wait, are you and Marcus trying to have another crotch goblin?” Macey asks excitedly.

“No. It’s just in case,” Zoe says.

Macey pouts. “Fine, at least I get to be this one’s cool auntie,” Macey says, rubbing my belly like I’m a Buddha and she can rub some good luck out of it.

“Please be triplets, or quadruplets—a whole damn litter!” she whispers. I slap her hand away.

“I am not pregnant!” I tell her, and she folds her arms.

“Well, one way to find out!”

I stalk off to the bathroom. Minutes tick by while I wait for the digital screen to light up along with the other three that I took as a precaution. Chewing my lip, I glare at them, willing them to be negative and crossing my fingers and toes, praying to the Moon Goddess I'm not. I can't afford to be. I have a hotel to rebuild, a war brewing, a challenge to fight, and a Valarian to take care of!

As soon as the screen lights up and the timer beeps, I nearly dive into the sink basin where the tests are perched. I grab them, examining them.

"Wrong!... Wrong!... Wrong!" I cry.

I hear a knock a second before the girls barge their way into the small bathroom as I fling the third one back, hitting Macey in the head with it. She cringes but catches it.

"You jinxed me! Unjinx me! Now!" I demand as she reads the test before fist pumping the air in victory and bouncing on her feet.

"I'm gonna be an auntie again! You owe me— Shit! I forgot to tell you the bet!" she curses. Yet, all I can think about is what fucked up timing this is as I sink onto the edge of the toilet and put my head in my hands.

"Come on, Evie. It's not the end of the world. You won't be alone this time, and Valen is great with Valarian and..." Zoe says, but her words don't help, so I drown her out as memories of my last pregnancy flood me. And what the hell am I going to do about the challenge?