

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

Chapter Eleven

Everly

Valen is working with Marcus tonight, so after I get Valarian from school, I decide to have dinner with Zoe, Macey, and their girls. The kids have fun, and it reminds me of before our lives got so complicated—when it was just us against the world.

It's comforting knowing that nothing has changed even now with my title. To them, I will always just be Everly—not Luna, not rogue-whore. Here, I'm safe to be my normal self and am free to do as I please without judgment or someone scrutinizing me somehow. When the 7 o'clock news comes on, I send the kids to play with the Lego sets in Casey's room.

"Remote! The news is on," I say, waving my hand at Zoe. She passes it to me and I quickly flip to the channel.

"Since when do you like watching the news?" Macey asks as I race to the sofa and sit in the middle in front of the TV.

"I like the news when I don't star in it. I may have handed a list of evidence to the media about Nixon and my father this morning," I tell them.

"What! What'd you give them?" Zoe screeches excitedly and rushes over to sit on the other side of me. It was petty, but if they want to talk shit about me, I should be able to have fun returning the favor. I'm far from apologetic, even over the one thing that was total bullshit, but then again, it could be true! Either way, it makes for exciting conversations at dinner meetings. I chuckle to myself; he's going to kill me.

"Oh, this I gotta see!" Macey says, snatching the cold bowl of popcorn off the coffee table. Both Zoe and I looked at her questioningly. We all squeeze onto the sofa and get comfortable, Zoe sitting with her legs over my lap and her feet on Macey's.

Macey sits un-blinking, chowing down on cold popcorn from the kid's movie we watched after dinner. She's shoveling handfuls in her mouth in a very un-ladylike

but completely Macey-like manner. When the news anchor comes on and Nixon's photo pops up in the corner, we lean forward eagerly.

I purse my lips. They burned my hotel and I will burn their reputations. The newswoman reports on Nixon's first mate and how she became forsaken, how his wife isn't the mother of his child and—the most damning part to him—that he abandoned his daughter to the forsaken. I even managed to find some old photos of Leah, his mate, and a hospital report of a young woman named Kayla, who was Carter's twin sister, which would push the evidence along.

Plus there was an accidental photo that, from the awkward angle, looks like he was picking his nose while sitting in his car outside the pack hospital. Man, it was hard getting a hold of hospital footage, but somehow Valen had managed it. The news anchor even says that they will pay for the DNA test if he wants to prove his innocence. Of course, we all know that won't happen, only making him look more guilty.

The news anchorwoman then goes on to talk about his hate for rogues and speculate that this may be the reason why his daughter is still technically rogue and his mate has turned forsaken. Sitting back, I smile smugly; suck on that, Nixon!

Both Macey's and Zoe's eyes are glued to the TV and Macey is shoveling popcorn in her mouth so fast that she starts coughing and spluttering, choking on her popcorn when my father's turn comes next. I snicker, and Zoe snorts. I smack Macey's back and she sucks in a lungful of air. Instead of his usual portrait photos, Ava and I had managed to find some old pictures on the family link app that he forgot to remove. It was a photo from when we were kids at a dress-up party.

We had sent three photos to them. My father had been wearing one of my mother's mini dresses and fishnet stockings with a wig and high heel boots. One picture was of him in the wig, all glammed up as a woman; another was without the wig, revealing that it was definitely my father, because the photo was of him in our bathroom putting on red lipstick; and the last image was him bending over drunk, his nuts hanging out since he was also wearing my mother's lace panties.

There was absolutely nothing wrong with the photos in general, but I know my father won't see it that way, especially when the news anchor tells the city that

he's secretly a crossdresser and that his two daughters confirmed it. We all burst out laughing, knowing how horrified my father will be over this. Though there really is nothing wrong with it, it had all just been for fun, it will definitely taint my father's conservative front he puts up.

"Man, I wish I could wear heels that high. Any more than an inch and I can't walk straight," Macey laughs.

"There is so much I could say to that comment," I tell her, and she glares at me. I snicker at her outraged face.

"Damn! Papa John got some nice legs on him. A bit hairy, but look at them muscular thighs," Zoe says, and I elbow her, a little grossed out she's checking out my father.

"Oh my God! I bet your father had a heart attack seeing this pop up on the news," Macey chuckles.

"You know there will be backlash," Zoe says, and I shrug.

"What are they going to do? Accuse me of lying about who Valarian's father is? It's obvious whose child he is by the eyes, and I am pretty sure there isn't one article that doesn't taint me poorly. Sticks and stones," I tell them.

Valen starts blowing up my phone. He had no idea what I wanted the footage for; I'm sure he thought I would try to blackmail Nixon with it, not hand it to the media. With a groan, I get up. I know I have to face my mate, and I'm sure he'll have plenty to say about it.

Macey also has to leave, so we both load the kids up in our cars, and I wave as she leaves before driving home myself. I'm still chuckling quietly and Valarian keeps asking why, but I just shake my head. Pulling up in the parking lot, Valarian rushes ahead to the glass doors and is greeted by the doorman. I throw my keys to the valet and retrieve my handbag from the trunk, along with the few groceries I had stopped and grabbed on the way home. Suddenly, I jump as I'm grabbed and yanked away from the door. My bags drop, and I turn to see who it is, only to find myself glaring up at my father.

"What the fuck do you think you are doing?" he growls at me.

"Well, I was getting groceries from my car," I snarl back, picking up the spilled oranges. My father crouches down and starts helping me re-bag everything. While I chase a runaway apple, he picks up my handbag and gasps. I snatch my bag and the pregnancy test out of his hand.

"You're pregnant?" he asks, looming over me.

"Shush! Keep your voice down!" I hiss at him, glancing around.

"You can't fucking shift! The challenge is the day after tomorrow," my father growls, forgetting what he came here for, though I know it has to do with the news.

"Challenge is still going ahead. I am not backing down," I tell him.

"You can't shift, Everly! Why would you challenge me when you're pregnant?" he growls

"I only just found out today, but it changes nothing,"

"Like fuck it doesn't! I am not fighting a pregnant woman!" he snarls.

"Then stand down!" I tell him.

"No! It is my pack. I can't, even if I wanted to," he says, making my brows furrow before I shake my head.

"Then I will see you in two days," I tell him, snatching my bags up. Valarian comes out the doors, looking at us.

"Does Valen know?" he asks as I start to head inside.

"No, and you will keep your mouth shut until after the challenge," I tell him. He scoffs and shakes his head.

"It's my birthright! I'm the rightful heir! Do the right thing, Dad. Hand me my title."

He says nothing, and I start walking off when he chases me, stopping me again.

"Mom?" Valerian calls out, looking at me worriedly. Guards start moving in, but I wave them off.

"Your mother will be with you in a second, Val. Wait inside. It's cold," my father tells him, and Valarian looks at me. I nod for him to go in, and he does, standing just inside the doors.

"What?" I asked, turning to look back at my father.

"You fucked up."

"So, it's ok for you to paint me in the media as a whore but don't like the favor returned?" I laugh.

"I don't care about the photos of me. I will deal with that. It's Nixon; he will fucking come for you for what you did. You need to leave the city. Get Valarian and Ava and your two girlfriends and get out while you can."

"What? No! I am not leaving the city."

My father grabs my arms. "You need to get out! Nixon is planning something! Something big!" he says, staring me dead in the face. This is the moment I realize that he knows something he's trying to keep hidden.

"Like what?" I ask. He says nothing and curses.

"This is about your debt?" I ask, and his head snaps back to look at me.

"How— ...bloody Ava," he curses, then sighs. "No. I don't know. But I have a funny feeling it's to do with the rogues and forsaken going missing," he says, glancing around nervously.

"What do you mean?" I ask him.

"You need to leave the city!"

"Tell me why. What have you done?" I ask him.

"I haven't done anything, but I found documentation on a hard drive Nixon left at the council one morning. He's building an army to take down Valen's pack and the Night Slasher Pack. That's why I tried to marry Ava off to Valen. Not just to absolve my debt, but to ensure Valen holds his reign over the city. If he married Ava, I would have had sway over Valen, but—"

"You want Valen to remain in control?" I ask, a little skeptical.

"We may have our differences, but if Nixon takes down Valen's pack and the Slasher pack, he will hold control."

"We outnumber his pack. You aren't making sense!" I tell him.

"You don't! Think, Everly! The forsaken! Nixon is behind it, and he is building a fucking army out of them!"

I stumble back. "And you're helping him?"

My father shakes his head. "No, it's not like that. I got the pack in debt with Slasher Pack's Alpha. Nixon dug me out, so now I owe him. I will work that out, but...."

"What aren't you telling me?"

My father hangs his head. "He was trying to find a vaccine for his daughter and son. Nixon managed to make the vaccine, but he also stumbled onto something else. He found a way to replicate the venom," Dad says, and my eyes widen in horror.

"And you're helping him kill rogues?" I asked, disgusted.

"No, that's not me. I..... I can't..... Fuck!"

"You want my help, you fucking speak," I snarl, trying to figure out what it is he's wanting. My father sucks in a deep breath.

"It's my fault because I got the pack in debt. I made a stupid bet while drunk."

"You bet the pack land?" I ask, and he nodded.

"Yes, or three million dollars. I'd already gambled everything. Nixon loaned me the money and the pack is collateral. He gave me five years to pay it back or hand my firstborn over. I was going to find the money, but Nixon was pushing for you to marry Carter, and when you said you were pregnant, I knew you wouldn't get rid of your son. So I made you a rogue to cover up the fact I faked your death. If Nixon knew you were pregnant he would have used Valarian against Valen," he explains.

My head is swimming with all this information. I have so many questions, but my father's nervousness and the way he keeps glancing around tells me he can't be seen here.

"So, why are you helping him now?"

"I asked for more time after I met Carter—I couldn't let him have Ava either. When I refused, he kidnapped your mother. It's why I don't let her leave the packhouse. He injected her last year with the venom."

"What?" I exclaim, my heart racing.

"Every month, he gives her the vaccine. It stops it from taking over, but when it does, she's like one of them. The vaccine is the only thing that stops her from turning completely. It's why I went against the petition. He wouldn't give her the vaccine if I signed it," he says just as Valarian calls out.

"Mom!"

My father looks over my shoulder. "I have to go. But I... I'll see you at the challenge," he says, rushing back to his car.

"Come on, Mom!" Valarian whines. I collect the bags and rush to the front door. Moving across the foyer and into the elevator, my father's words replay in my mind, but as we approach the penthouse floor, another worry sets in.

The elevator doors open and Valarian runs ahead, opens the front door, and holds it for me. I drag the groceries to the kitchen and place them on the counter.

"Finally, you're home," Valen says, walking out of the hall with a towel around his waist.

His hair is wet and his skin is glistening, obviously having just stepped out of the shower. Valarian rushes over and hugs him. Valen scoops him up and walks over to me. He pecks my cheek and reaches for the handbag I still have over my shoulder. My heart thumps harder in my chest and I pull away. He gives me a funny look, but Valarian distracts him by talking about Taylor and Casey fighting over her Barbie dolls.

Moving quickly, I put the groceries away before rushing back to the bedroom, needing to hide the damn pregnancy test, at least until after the challenge. I know

if Valen finds it, he'll make me back out. But now, even more is at stake, and I'm not about to back down after everything that's happened.

I need to do this! Valen wouldn't understand that, especially if he knew I was pregnant—and he can't claim my title for me. Glancing around, I rush into the closet. As soon as I hear him come up the hall toward the room, I panic and jam it inside one of my knee-high boots and set it back on the shoe rack. Just as I finish placing my bag on the small shelf just inside the walk-in closet, Valen walks in, retrieves some shorts from the shelf, and slips them on.

"Why did you rush off in a hurry?"

"I want to shower; I feel gross," I tell him, retrieving my pajamas and walking out to the ensuite. He follows and leans on the doorframe while I get undressed.

"I saw the news. I wonder how they got that information?" he chuckles.

"No idea. But I heard the Blood Alpha has an excellent hacker. I should ask him," I laugh, turning the shower on.

"Valarian said your father was downstairs?" Valen asks me, and I nod. Stepping under the water spray, I tell him what my father told me.

"Your father could be lying. But at the same time, why would he? Can he get evidence of this? It could also be a reason to make you to back out of the challenge. He may be trying to scare you?" he says, and he has a point. However, with the way Dad was and his nervousness, I know he wasn't lying.

"Are you nervous about the challenge?" he asks, and I swallow.

"Nope," I tell him, but I am nervous. Not because I don't think I can beat him, but worried Macey or Zoe might tell Valen I'm pregnant. I know I can beat my father in this form, but Valen won't care about that. He'll only care about the risk to our unborn baby.

"You sure you're ok? You feel off," Valen says, and I turn to face him while rinsing the shampoo out.

"Yep, fine, I'm just tired," I lie.

Chapter Twelve
Everly

Avoiding Valen's watchful eyes in the past 24 hours has been near impossible. It doesn't help that morning sickness decided to rear its ugly head. Now I know I'm pregnant, every pregnancy symptom has suddenly decided to spring forward with an ugly vengeance, trying to screw me out of hiding it.

Zoe and Macey have been at me all day about it. I've been hiding in my makeshift office in the event building—thanks to Alpha Nixon, it used to be a storage room for tables and chairs that's been repurposed to be my new office—but now, just when I thought I finally escaped them, it's nearly time to clock out and head home. Valen knows something is up because I have no doubt he can feel it. Apparently having confused my fear of him finding out with nervousness about the upcoming challenge, he said he would pick me up tonight, worried I would run myself off the road.

But Macey and Zoe aren't giving up so easily. They burst into my office, blocking the door as I switch my desk lamp off—I have to run the damn thing off an extension cord from the main room. I roll my eyes as they stop my exit and glance at the clock above the door, then pin them both with my glare. They know Valen will be here any minute, or maybe that's their plan so they can out me.

"Everly, you aren't leaving us much choice," Macey says as if reading my mind, folding her arms across her chest.

"That's because it isn't your choice. I have to challenge my father. The entire city knows about the challenge. I back down now, the rogues will think I'm running. I need to do this," I tell them.

"But the risks! You can't shift!" Zoe says, her hands reaching toward my non-existent bump like she pictures it round and full of limbs.

"I'm durable. I know what I'm doing, I won't let him harm me. Besides, he knows," I tell them, chewing my lip nervously.

"Your father knows, yet you haven't told your mate!" Macey growls at me.

"I didn't tell him, he found out. Listen, Valen reigns over half the city; Slasher pack, Shadow pack, and Crescent pack, which belongs to Nixon, together hold the other half; therefore, all three hold equal votes to Valen within the council. Valen

doesn't hold enough to change the laws himself without my father's pack. We only need to tip the scales a little more. This will make it happen."

"Yes, but not at risk to your... child. Think, Everly! If you do this, you are putting yourself at risk," Macey argues.

"I'm already at risk. But this is bigger than me. For all those in the city, my life seems a no-brainer. But don't worry, I'm not planning on losing, so it will mean something. Valen can't challenge for the title, only an heir can. My father holds the land titles to his pack. I need these land titles transferred over to me before Nixon gets his hands on them. This needs to be done. It's the only way to set everything right; back to the way Valarie intended," I retort.

"The city can wait!" Macey says. I shake my head and push past them.

"I won't blow my chance. Every fucking step we take, we get knocked back four. I am sick of playing this yoyo game of cat and mouse. I am done being the mouse! The laws pass when I beat him. For the first time, I hold power—the fucking rogues hold power for once!" I yell at them.

A couple of the workers in the event hall rush out, thinking we're about to come to blows. We never have and never will, but this shit is getting to me.

"Everly, please," Zoe murmurs.

"I'm tired. I'm so fucking tired of battling. Don't you get it? How many girls have come through our damn doors looking for a place to stay and work? How many?" I ask them. "How many times have we had to scrape them up off the floor when their families abandoned them, their packs shunned them? How many hungry mouths do we have to feed before we suddenly can't anymore?"

"It's not your battle, Everly," Macey says.

"IT IS!" I scream. Everything suddenly becomes too much—everything crashing and smashing relentlessly—and erupts in anger. Something's gotta give! I am drowning here; drowning in grief, responsibility, obligation, and the restraints are so heavy—so, so heavy. And everything is just adding more weight. I can't keep fighting. I am done fighting. I just want to rest, and if this is what I have to do to get it, then so be it.

Tears burn my eyes and Zoe's. Macey purses her lips, looks at the ceiling, and clicks her tongue. I suck in a breath before walking out toward the doors.

"Valarie wouldn't want you to risk yourself like this—risk her grandchild," Macey says, and I stop.

"That's unfair, Macey," I tell her, spinning around, and she shrugs.

"It's true," she says.

"Who do you think I am doing this for?" I tell her as tears slip down my cheeks.

"She gave me everything when I had nothing. She fought for me and all of us when no one else did. This—everything we have done and all those we helped—is for her. She had the vision to make this city free. It was supposed to be free. And they took it from her," I tell them.

"I'm just getting it back and doing what she wanted. Nobody knew sacrifice more than that woman did. So yes, she wouldn't want me to do it, but she would understand why I have to; you don't get to use her against me!" I tell them before turning on my heel and walking out before one of us says something we can't take back.

Her words sting because I know she's right. But Valarie, too, risked her life fighting for the rogues. She could have walked away, hung up the banners and stopped fighting, given in and reformed, but she didn't. She lost her son, her family's reputation, her home, and the city, and I will be damned if I let that keep repeating.

It takes me a few seconds to regain myself and I groan when I feel Valen getting closer at an alarming speed. I wipe my face just as Macey and Zoe come out behind me and Valen runs around the corner of the main building, looking panic-stricken. I'm a deer in headlights, suddenly feeling trapped—caught between my mate and my best friends, the girls I trust more than anyone. Valen grabs my arms.

"What happened? What's wrong?" he asks, his clothes in disarray from running. He looks around frantically for any danger before looking at Macey and Zoe behind me. I wait for it, wait for everything to unravel and fall apart again. We're so close, so close.

"I'm fine. Where is Valarian?" I ask him.

"In the car with Marcus. What's going on?"

"Nothing. We disagreed. I'm fine, everything is fine,"

"You don't feel fine," Valen growls, cupping my face in his hands and looking at the girls.

I swallow, waiting for them to say something. "Why is everyone crying? Answer me, someone!" he snaps, looking at us all, and I look at them. Zoe opens her mouth. I beg her with my eyes not to, and she closes it.

"Nothing. We had a dispute over rosters. We wanted her to take some time off," Macey lies, looking at me. Relief floods me and I hang my head.

"Well, that's a good thing. I agree with them," Valen says, rubbing my arms. "I thought someone died or hurt you. Geez, you nearly gave me a heart attack," he murmurs, hugging me. I keep my mouth shut, unable to speak, but I'm grateful they didn't say anything.

Macey walks over to me and throws her arm over my shoulder. Zoe follows. We walk out to the car and find Marcus leaning against the hood. He moves to the back door and opens it, and Casey climbs out.

"Everything alright?" he asks Zoe, who nods to him. He doesn't look like he believes her either, but we all say our goodbyes. Macey grabs me as Valen climbs in the car.

"Thank you," I whisper to her.

"Please don't ever ask me to lie like this again." She sighs. "But, I get it. Kick his fucking ass! I'll be cheering from the sidelines and ready to hammer him if he hurts you," she whispers, kissing my cheek, and I chuckle.

The drive home is silent, but Valen keeps glancing at me. I can even feel his eyes on me as I stare out the window. He clutches my hand and I look at him before his voice flits through my head. His eyes go to Valarian in the mirror.

'If it's about tomorrow, you can back out. I know it must be hard to challenge your father,' Valen says. I shake my head, and he squeezes my hand.

'It's not that. Just don't be mad afterward,' I tell him, suddenly feeling guilty. We've come so far, and now I'm not only risking myself, but us. But I have a reason. He turns his head to the side to look at me.

'Why would I be mad? I could never be mad at you,' Valen says.

'What's going on?' he asks when I don't answer.

'Nothing, I think Dad just got in my head,' I lie. It's becoming a thing. Lying shouldn't be a thing, yet I know the rogues need this. I need this. This will set us free. But why does it have to risk so much?

'If you're scared, Everly, you can back out. It's ok to be scared,' Valen says.

'I'm not scared,' I tell him.

'Good. Because the moment I think you're in trouble, I will be pulling you out. I won't let him hurt you.'

'Valen, it's a challenge; that's the whole point. You can't make him submit for me.'

'No, but I will. I don't care how many laws it breaks. I know only an heir can challenge, but I will not let your father kill you either, Everly. And before you try, don't ask me not to step in if it comes to that. That's something I won't promise you, so either win or back out now, because if you're on the losing end, I am getting in that arena,' he says, and I sigh.

'Ok, I won't ask that, but—'

'No. There are no buts. That's how it is. Sorry, but if I have to pull rank, I will if it means keeping you alive, Everly. I don't want to, but don't expect me to just stand there and watch you get hurt or killed. I wouldn't ask that of you if our roles were reversed, so don't ask something of me I know you wouldn't live up to yourself.'

I swallow down my guilt. His words hit home a little too closely. He knows me too well, which only makes lying to him tear me apart more.

* * *

All night, I'm restless and sleep doesn't come easily. Luckily, Valen didn't ask me to train, insisting I need a good night's rest, yet when I wake up the following day, I feel anything but rested.

I'm anxious and my eyes feel like sandpaper. My stomach twists violently and has me running for the bathroom as I retch and gag. Once I empty my stomach, I rinse my mouth and wet down my face just as Valen walks in and leans on the doorframe.

"Nerves?" he asks and I nod, trying to catch my breath.

"You alright?" he asks.

"Yep, never better," I lie. He nods, walking out, and I stare at my reflection, trying to get myself together. A few more hours and this city is about to have another power player, and for once the ball is in my court, I just have to win the challenge first.

"Everly, breakfast!" Valen calls out to me and I sigh. As long as I can make my father submit before we come to the second round, which requires us to shift, I could win this. If not, it may all be for nothing. That's not an option.

ChapterThirteen
Everly

The arena is basically just an old football stadium that no one uses anymore besides for city functions. The building is huge and well looked after, but it's rare for the entire city to participate in the functions; most packs tend to stick to themselves, and besides the annual alpha meeting, you rarely catch everyone in the same place. But this challenge is all through the media, so I'm not shocked to see this place packed to the brim, everyone crammed in like sardines in a can. Nervousness creeps in as we pull in next to the huge entrance.

People are walking in and I feel giddy seeing rogues entering a place that's otherwise forbidden to them; Valen's men made sure they had entry through his tunnel entrance. Macey and Zoe stand by the doors next to Tatum and Marcus. Macey is the only one out of the three of us that's still rogue, and despite the offers, she's refused, saying she's happy with her status. Although, I have a funny feeling with Tatum's infatuation with her it will only be a matter of time.

Valen will take and accept all the rogues without asking, but it's more than that. I may be pack, Zoe may be pack, but we're all rogues. Status may have been given,

but at heart, we clawed out from the rubble like the rest of them, bled beside them and took on society exactly the same.

No, my village doesn't need a pack, this city should be a pack; no names, no labels, no designation. One pack is how it should be, how it was supposed to be; everyone free—free to choose and free to live. That's what we want, just our freedoms, nothing more and nothing less.

Valen grips my knee as Valarian undoes his seatbelt when he sees Taylor and Casey. Casey is waving a snow cone in the air for him and he jumps out and runs over to her. His has no color, just ice—the girls know him too well. Valen shakes his head at him and chuckles before looking over at me.

"Are you sure you wouldn't be more comfortable in shorts? You'll ruin those pants shifting in them. I brought you a set in case you change your mind," Valen says while glancing down at my yoga pants. I shake my head. I won't be shifting, it would risk too much, my body would have to change too much.

"No, I'm hoping he submits in the first half."

"You realize how hard that is? We're instinctual. And you know how these things go—after 10 minutes and the horn goes off, everyone shifts. So unless you got some moves I don't know, you are gonna have to shift, Love."

I swallow. He's right. No one likes a challenge going on too long; after ten minutes of hand to hand, the air horn blasts and you have to shift. That was brought in decades before I was born after a challenge lasted three days while both of them circled each other looking for an opening. I laugh at that thought. Screw that, better to get it over with. Then again, I also understand it. What parent wants to fight their child and vice versa?

"Are you afraid to show your wolf?" Valen asks and I stare at him but he looks away. I tilt my head to look at him.

"What is that supposed to mean?"

"Nothing. I just know you're self-conscious about how small yours is. Though when the rogue attack happened, you were a fair bit bigger. Is that why you never want to train in your wolf at home?"

“Well, you would be self conscious too if you looked like someone's pet dog and not a werewolf,” I tell him.

“You're not that small,” he says and I shrug and open my door. Zoe and Macey are waiting for me by the entrance and I need them to keep me calm right now. We make our way through the dark tunnel and come out the other end, walking along the boundary line. I can see Nixon and his pack watching.

Slasher pack is also here, but Nixon and Dad stand on the other side of the massive ring that's etched into the grass with white paint. We start to make our way over to our place when I feel my head tugged back by my ponytail.

Valen's hand grips it and pulls me to a stop, turning me. His other arm wraps around my waist, pulling me against him, and he tips my head back. The way his lips cover mine in a heated kiss has my cheeks burning with his very public display.

“Valen!” I mumble against his mouth, and he chuckles. He's still laughing when he lets me go and tugs me along as Kalen rushes in quickly.

There's a park at the other end of the arena where he's taking the children to play so they don't have to watch. They could, because I was training at their age, however, a challenge is vastly different. It isn't screwing around, it's blood, claws, teeth, and fur—messy and terrifying. So when Valarian stated he wanted to come, we arranged for Kalen to watch them at the park and bring them over after.

“How are you? Are you still set to leave tomorrow?” Valen asks his father. Kalen stops and pecks my cheek and hugs his son.

“Yep. Leaving at 7 a.m.,” Kalen says and Valen nods.

“Where are you going?” I ask him.

“To pick up some supplies that got lost in transit for the hotel,” Kalen says with a shrug, then quickly hugs me. “Knock his ass out, love. Now, where are these munchkins of mine?” Kalen says, looking around for the kids. He waves toward the girls before rubbing his hands together and heading over to them. “Who wants to race Pop to the park over there?” he says, pointing off toward the other end.

The three kids look where he points before running off and Kalen chases them. Valen laughs at his father who could easily outrun them but lets them win.

Once they're gone, I turn around to face the pit. The place falls silent when my father steps over the barrier and removes his shirt, handing it to my mother. I suck in a breath and Valen grips my shoulders giving them a squeeze.

"Breathe, you got this," he says, yet my eyes are on my father. Images of training with him when I was a kid skip through my head—when I regarded him as my hero. But now, I'm no longer a little girl and he's no longer larger than life. Despite that, though, his size and physique remain the same.

This man is a giant, and powerful. I swallow down the dread, remembering when he accidentally broke my femur in training when he punched me a little too hard. One punch and he snapped it like it was a chicken bone.

I shake the memory away before tugging my shirt off. I have a sports bra underneath—my shirt would only give him something to grab a hold of. My mother stands beside Nixon, looking at us nervously. As I'm about to walk onto the field, I feel a hand grip my arm. I stop when I see it's Ava. She's staring at me.

"Dad's left knee is bad, he's had two surgeries on it. Watch his hooks, but if it comes to his wolf, back out! I'll take your place. I'm not good at hand to hand but," she glances at our father nervously.

It's clear she's terrified of my father, she always hated training and it scared the crap out of her. Ava isn't violent by nature, she wasn't trained the way I was; she was Daddy's Princess while I was his warrior.

"Ava, you don't have to get in there, and you aren't going to," I tell her and she swallows again, though I know she would get in there if I asked and would take a beating happily for me. A beating isn't needed here though—victory is, so I know this is on me.

Ava grabs me and hugs me.

"I know!" she whispers, and I pull away from her to look at her. "I know about the you-know-what. You back out or I'll—" she looks at Valen standing over at the sidelines.

“Who...” I ask, though I already know. “Macey and Zoe.”

“You can’t shift,” Ava continues.

“I don’t need to, I can beat him in this form. I was born for this, Ava. Trained in his image for this. I haven’t forgotten. I will win,” I reassure her.

“You better. If not, stand down. Your people will understand, they won’t see it as a failure,” she says.

“No, but I will. You haven’t been with us as long, you haven’t seen the half of it. This will change everything. Now, I am asking you, as a sister, to keep your mouth shut.”

She presses her lips in a line and nods. “Left knee. And try to keep on his right side, his vision isn’t the best in that eye anymore. Beat him before the shift. If you’re in trouble I’m telling,” she says, walking off, and I sigh before turning to face my father.

Once inside the circle there’s no backing out. My father stands in the center waiting, arms folded, to see if I’ll step in.

“Back out, Evie, you don’t want to do this,” Dad says to me and I shake away the shudder that ripples up my spine as his aura washes over me, then step inside the circle.

He curses and shakes his head but takes a stance. I move closer and further to his right, watching how he shifts a little more in that direction, and I realize Ava was right—his vision on that side isn’t the best. He growls and I see his eyes go to her off at the side. She waves to him before he turns back to face me again. Nixon calls out to him but my father ignores him. The whistles go off while we size each other up.

When he doesn’t charge at me or make a move, I know I’ll have to be the one to initiate the fight.

So I do.

He blocks my punch easily and ducks under my arm which leaves him an opening to my ribs, but he doesn’t take it. Nixon yells at him to fight, but Dad goes on the defensive. After a few minutes it’s starting to irritate me. I catch his left knee

three times but he never swings back. When I try to kick him again, he catches my foot, putting me in a bad position, and growls angrily at me.

“Submit!” he snarls at me before punching me in the thigh. I groan, feeling it bruise, and stagger back when he lets me go. My eyes go to the huge, digital display—4 minutes before we will be forced to shift.

“No!” I growl.

Dad growls back before rushing at me and tackling me. The air catches in my lungs as I’m flung airborne in his grip. I’m waiting for his substantial weight to smash me into the ground, but at the last second, he twists and I crash on top of him instead of being crushed under him. I sit up, shocked, and punch him even as he pulls me closer in a headlock that leaves me struggling to get out of it. My fists connect with his ribs and the side of his head, yet Dad is only holding me.

“Fight back! I am not a little girl!” I tell him.

“Wrong! You're my little girl! My pregnant little girl!” he snarls before rolling me off him.

I get to my hands and knees, then push to my feet.

“What are you doing John?!” Nixon roars from the sidelines. My father ignores him and gets to his feet, glancing at the clock.

“Stand down! Submit!” Dad says and I clutch my knees while he tries to catch his breath.

“I can’t!” I tell him, looking at the crowd of rogues.

“John! Stop playing with her and take her the fuck out!” Nixon booms across the field and I glance over my shoulder at him. My mother is standing beside him, her face pale as a ghost and I turn my attention back to my father. He looks torn.

“Please, Evie,” he whispers.

I take my stance and he growls, taking his before we start fighting again—or I do while he continues playing this stupid game of just blocking and dodging.

ChapterFourteen
Valen

This is not what I expected. Everly is on the attack the entire time, yet the longer I watch, the more I realize John isn't even fighting. He could have landed multiple blows on her, and she even left herself open a couple of times when he could have taken her out, but he didn't. Ava stands beside me chewing her nails nervously, her eyes glued to the match. Macey and Zoe are rigid beside her with the same frightened expressions on their faces.

Something is going on. It's almost like John is deliberately throwing the challenge. I've put up more of a fight when training with her, yet John almost seems scared of hurting her, and Everly is also holding back. He hit her once, but it was only in the thigh—he's had ample opportunity for body and headshots, but never took one of them. But Everly is becoming tired, and she only has two minutes left before they have to shift.

"Why isn't he fighting back?" Marcus whispers and I shrug. Nixon is screaming at John to take her out—screaming like a damn banshee and distracting both of them.

The siren blares, signaling it's time to shift, and I notice Everly glance at Ava nervously. I could see John talking to her while they were fighting, but now that horn has gone off, he has no choice but to shift.

However, Everly doesn't.

"WHAT ARE YOU DOING! SHIFT!" I scream at her and I see Ava take a step forward to the pit. Macey grips her arm and shakes her head. Ava's body trembles like she was about to shift herself and run in there if Macey hadn't stopped her.

'Everly, shift!' I Command through the mindlink. She tenses and looks at me over her shoulder, fighting my Command. When Ava notices my Command over her, she yells at me.

"She can't! Drop your Command! You're distracting her!" she snaps at me. My brows furrowed in confusion and I'm about to ask what she's talking about when John's huge wolf stalks toward Everly. She backs up, turning to her side, making herself a smaller target, but still, she doesn't shift.

Ava walks the sideline with me.

“Everly, back out!” she snarls at her sister, but Everly shakes her head, not turning her gaze away from the fight.

John charges at her and I hold my breath. Everly jumps back and pivots, her foot connecting with him under the ribs only for him to turn and slash her thigh. She staggers back and he pounces on her at the same time her fist connects with the side of his head. He shakes his head and backs up, snarling and snapping his huge teeth at her.

“EVERLY, WHAT ARE YOU DOING? FUCKING SHIFT!” I yell at her as her pants become soaked with her blood from his claws slashing her outer thigh.

Nixon screams at him, distracting him for a second. She seizes the moment and jumps on him, wrapping her arms around his neck and her legs around his torso, but he rears up, trying to throw her off. Once again, he nearly lands on top of her but twists at the last second, bouncing lightly off her before his weight can crush her. She rolls out of his way before he can snap his teeth at her face but he makes no move to, and doesn’t attack when she tries to get to her feet which leaves her wide open.

“Fucking take her out, John!” Nixon snarls angrily on the other side. He’s so furious his canines slip from his gums, and I glare at him. John looks in Nixon’s direction and hangs his head when I notice Claire beside the other man. Tears stream down her face as she watches her daughter and her mate.

“It’s ok, love,” she yells at him.

Everly circles around him but he hangs his head, then finally charges at her. My breath lodges in my throat as she runs at him too and I wait for them to collide—claws, teeth, and skin don't mix. Ava screams out and runs toward the circle just as Marcus snags his arm around Ava's waist, hauling her back.

My heart races. Suddenly, John jumps clean over her. Everly spins, her feet losing traction on the grass and she falls on her hip. Get up! Get up!

John turns around and moves toward her, snarling and snapping his teeth. Everly backs up on her hands and feet in a strange crab-walk. As he stalks toward her, she raises her foot to get ready to kick him just as he pounces on her. My breath

lodges in my throat and I move to run onto the arena but stop when John suddenly drops on his belly and she halts.

John tilts his head and bares his neck to her in submission while I try to figure out what just happened. I look at Marcus to see if he just witnessed the same thing.

John submitted.

Nixon curses and yells before storming out, shoving past his people, while Claire rushes onto the field with shorts and a towel. Everly reaches forward and brushes John's fur. He whimpers and Claire throws a towel over him while I gape. What the fuck just happened? Once the towel is over him, he shifts back and is on his knees in front of her. Everly gets to her feet.

When it's clear it's over, I walk into the center of the arena, wanting to know what happened and why he suddenly caved to his daughter. Confusion is evident in the crowd as murmurs break out in a chorus—this wasn't what anyone was expecting, especially after all the fighting between packs. Everly's mother is talking in a hushed voice, and as I approach Everly, I catch the end of her mother's words to John. I halt my steps.

"You did the right thing, love. We lost one grandchild and daughter, we don't need to make the same mistakes again. You did the right thing; she's carrying our grandchild," Claire whispers and Everly tenses as I stop beside her. Claire is trying to console John, yet I can't take my eyes from my mate. They drift over her briefly before going to hers

"Pardon?" I ask Claire and she gasps, taking a step away from me.

"You're pregnant?" I ask, looking at Everly, shocked. Everly looks at me and clarity hits; what Ava meant when she told me to drop the Command, why Everly wouldn't shift, why she asked me not to be angry after the challenge. I look at John on his knees, then at Ava.

"They knew?" I ask Everly and tears shine in her eyes as she takes a step toward me, but I take a step back.

"Valen, I—"

“That’s what you were arguing with Macey and Zoe about, isn't it?” I ask her and she reaches for me but I take another step back from her. I feel betrayed. I can't believe she would go through with the challenge and risk our unborn child.

“Don’t!” I warn her when she reaches for me again.

“Valen—”

“No, Everly. That wasn’t just your secret to keep from me,” I told her before turning on my heel and walking away from her. Never have I been so angry at her, betrayed by her. I’m furious she would keep that from me. Needing to get away from her before I do something I regret, I go looking for Valarian. Marcus rushes over to me and grabs my shoulder but I shove him off.

“Did you know too?” I snarl at him. He puts his hands up in surrender but shakes his head. I growl at Zoe and Macey as they pass me; I feel betrayed by all of them.

My father walks over to me when he sees me walking in his direction but I don’t stop, instead, heading for my son, who’s on the swings.

“Valen? What happened? Did she win?” Dad calls out to me when I walk past him. I growl.

“John submitted,” I fume, too pissed off to form proper words.

“That’s a good thing, why are you upset?” he asks, trying to keep pace with me as I move toward my son.

“She lied to me!” I snarl, my entire body trembling with rage.

"Who did?"

"Everly. She’s pregnant!" I tell him and he grabs my arm, pulling me to a stop. I glance in Everly’s direction to see her chasing after me.

“What?” he asks, before holding his hand up at Everly, telling her to back off. I’m glad he did because I want to slap her for what she did. She stops, looking torn between ignoring him and obeying. He shakes his head and I growl at her.

"Valen, please. Let me—"

"I don't want to hear it! Just get out of my face!" I snap at her.

Valarian rushes over, looking between his mother and I. He stops a couple of yards away from me.

"Can Valarian and I stay at your place tonight? I can't be near her right now," I ask my father.

"Yes. Of course," he says. I stalk off, grabbing my son and picking him up. Everly rushes over, trying to take him from me. Tears streak down her face and my canines slip out as I push her hands away from him.

"Mom!" Valarian screams while twisting in my arms.

"Valen, give him to me." she says, reaching for him. Dad gets between us. Valarian cries out for her when I start walking away, heading for my car. My father, I can hear, is talking to her and trying to calm her down, but I ignore her and make my way to the exit.

"What about Mom?" Valarian cries, still twisting in my arms.

"Stop it. You'll see her later," I tell him and lift him higher, hugging him closer.

"Are we going home?" he asks. I fiddle with the key fob and unlock my car as I step into the parking lot.

"Dad! We can't leave Mom!" Valarian sobs, pushing on my shoulders and kicking his legs, forcing me to put him down. I growl when he takes off running back toward the entry.

"Valarian!" I growl while turning around, only to see Everly grab him. She scoops him up in her arms and my father messes his hair as I approach them to take him back again.

"I want to stay with you!" Valarian cries, clinging to her neck as she sets him down.

"I'm not going anywhere, you're just staying at Pop's for the night with Daddy," she says, wiping his tears. At least she isn't fighting me on this. She pries his fingers from her neck and steers him toward the car with me following closely behind her.

"It's just for tonight?" she asks me as she opens the back door.

Valarian climbs in and I quickly move to buckle him in, making Everly step aside. She touches my back and I look at her over my shoulder—she removes it quickly at the angered look on my face.

After I shut the door, she tries to grab my hand and I fight the urge to shift, instead, growling at her as my aura slips out. She takes a step back, her ass hitting the side of my car.

"You lied to me! Kept it from me!"

"You wouldn't have let me go through with it!" she snaps back as I step closer to her.

"With good reason, too! You didn't just risk your life!" I tell her, barely holding myself together.

She goes to defend herself or explain, but I cut her off before she can. "Enough! You're causing a scene and scaring our son," I tell her and she peers down at the window beside her. She swallows and looks back at me.

"You'll bring him back tomorrow?" she says and I clench my jaw. "Valen?"

"I need to go," I tell her, walking off to the driver's side. My father rummages in his pockets and pulls out his keys. He passes them to her.

"I'll talk to him, it will be alright," I hear him tell her and she nods, taking them from him. I climb in my car and Dad jumps in the passenger side before I tear out of the parking lot.

Chapter Fifteen

Valen

Dad's place is like a shrine of my childhood. Even today, he still has my artwork framed on his walls and photos hung or in frames on all the furniture. Growing up, his entire life revolved around raising me, and his house shows that clearly.

Despite having done some horrible things in the past; he loved me, and that much shows

One thing I love, though, is seeing that some of Valarian's artwork and school stuff also displayed like treasured possessions alongside mine. It's embarrassing that he kept some of this crap, yet I know it means something to him, despite how crappy my art skills were.

Dad cooked dinner for us, and we watched movies on DVD. Every channel is displaying scenes from the challenge and Valarian doesn't need to see that or become involved in adult issues, so after the fourth headline, Dad decided to put a movie on.

Later that night, Valarian wouldn't sleep without talking to his mother, so I let him call her. Still, he was restless, tossing and turning on the couch as I rested his head in my lap. I let my head fall back onto the back of the couch, trying to rest. My father had muted the TV, and we were watching it with captions.

"Everly alright?" he asks, and I nod.

"I have Tatum staying with her. He's outside the door," I tell him, and he nods.

Our argument was broadcast across every TV station. Luckily, no one knew what it was about, and John and Claire were tight-lipped and said 'no comment' when interviewed. John even slapped one of the reporters for coming too near.

It was all on display, and assumptions were made, so it will only be a matter of time before they figure it out.

Dad has been quiet most of the night and let me be, though I can tell he's itching to say something. Turning my head, I look over at him to find him watching Valarian.

"Just say it. I can see it's eating you up, so out with it," I tell him. Dad sighs and I turn my attention to him.

"Don't make my mistakes," he says, and I roll my eyes.

"I'm not abandoning her as you did Mom," I tell him, and he takes a deep breath. He shakes his head.

"Your mother was a spitfire. When my father met her, he told her she would never be good enough for an Alpha—that her status was as low as a dog," he says before laughing and shaking his head.

"You find that funny?" I ask him, shocked he would laugh over that.

"No, Valen. I don't. I always regretted not standing up to him, but what she did next is what makes me laugh," he chuckles.

"What did she do?"

"She slapped him and said 'No, your son isn't good enough for me. And the only fleabag is the ass-hat standing in front of me'," he says, then laughs.

"Bet Grandpa didn't take that well," I tell him, remembering the old prick. He was nasty right up until he died. Dad looked after him in his old age; he only lasted a year after my grandmother died.

"No, of course not. Yet, I kept sneaking off to see her. And she did whatever she could to make sure he found out about it," Dad chuckles. "She was right, though. I wasn't good enough for her. Your mother was tougher than I was. It wasn't about titles with her. She didn't care I was Alpha, she didn't care who my father was, and she sure as shit didn't care that she pissed him off. She and her pack of rogues turned up to every council meeting, causing havoc. Yet, no matter what she did, she never admitted to anyone that I was her mate," he tells me.

"What do you mean?" I ask.

"She knew it would cost my reputation, and she didn't want to ruin it. Once my father stood down and handed the title over, she hoped I would help her, back her, and claim her."

"Why didn't you?"

"Because I was an idiot. I feared my father. Scared he would do something to her or her parents; and he did. I knew if I claimed her, he would kill her like he did her parents," Dad says, looking down at his hands.

"Did she know it was him?" I ask him.

"I think she suspected it. I never told her, but I don't think I had to. When my father found out she was pregnant, he asked her to get rid of you. He wanted me to marry Stacey Langford, his Beta's daughter." Dad swallows and clears his throat.

"When you were born, she had you at that hotel. She didn't even tell me. I snuck over to see her and found you. Dad had me on a tight leash, even froze all my trust funds, and I hadn't seen her in months. I assumed she got rid of you, but there you were in your crib.

"I couldn't bear to leave and hid there for a few days. Dad came looking for me, of course. I always regretted that—wished I never went there—because he wanted to kill you and her when he found us. He said no rogue would marry his son and taint his reputation. I convinced him to let me take you and say she died," he said.

I've never seen him cry, but reliving whatever memory he's stuck in, I can tell that destroyed him.

"When you took Valarian today, Everly had that same look on her face—sheer panic. I get you're upset, but never keep your son from her. Nothing killed me more than prying you from your mother's arms and seeing that look on her face, hearing her beg for you back." He shakes his head and wipes his face on the sleeve of his shirt.

"But Dad would have made good on his threat. I knew that, and so did she. So she handed you over. She stopped fighting to protect you. I should have protected you both, but I failed her, and after that, she wouldn't forgive me. She even asked me to kill her and put her out of her misery," he whispers the last part.

"I snuck you to her for visits, but when you started asking for her, I knew I had to stop, and even she said it was too risky. If the media found out, she would be destroyed by my father, and so would I."

"I'm not taking Valarian from Everly, Dad. I would never do that!" I tell him.

"I know. You're better than me, you're a better man, I know that. And I know you won't give up your mate or your kids."

"Then why tell me this?"

"Because you're angry because she didn't tell you, but what would you have done if you knew?" he asks me.

"Not let her enter the challenge for one," I tell him and he nods.

"Exactly. She should have told you, but I get why she didn't. She reminds me of your mother."

"How so?"

"The fire in her, her will to fight for what's right, no matter the sacrifice to herself. She would sacrifice herself for her people, and that is what a good Luna does; that

is what your mother did for you and me and all the rogues when she rallied for them. I burned that fire out of your mother because I wouldn't stand beside her and fight for her. Don't make that mistake, don't extinguish the flames that make her brilliant," he says. Leaning forward, he smooths Valarian's hair with his hand.

"She didn't raise him on her own because she wanted to. She did it because she had to. The rogues, to Everly, were all she had, and yet you expect her to give them up and tell you? Knowing she would be forced to stand down? I know you, son. You wouldn't have let her enter, and Everly knew that too."

"Yes, because she is pregnant!" I growled.

"And so is every other rogue that is relying on her to change those laws. If the Blood Alpha's mate can't change them, what hope do they have of it ever changing? It wasn't about telling you or about her being reckless; it was about saving those who have no voice, all those other babies that will have it hard in winter while their mothers are scraping pennies for formula so they can leave them in someone else's hands all day and try to find whatever pitiful work they can," he retorts. I sigh and scratch the back of my neck. This is so fucked up!

"Everly sees the bigger picture, just like your mother did. She sees society for what it is and doesn't sugarcoat it. She knew the risks, but she did it anyway because one, she knew you wouldn't let her get hurt, and two, because even if she lost, she would still have fought, and it would still cause change. People would remember the Blood Alpha's mate taking on her own father for the rogues, fighting for change, and change only happens when people start questioning their beliefs."

"So you want me to forgive her just like that?" I ask in disbelief.

"No, son. I want you to stand beside her and fight for her like I wish I'd fought for your mother," he says, leaning back.

"You know I will. As I said before, I'm not leaving her or taking Valarian from her," I tell him, looking down at my son.

"Then why are you here and not with her like you're supposed to be?" he asks, and my brows furrow.

"It's okay to be angry, but don't walk away like a coward. She will test you, but don't you think you tested her enough? Five years is a long time to be on your own raising a kid and building an empire, yet she forgave you," he says with a shrug. I sigh, yet I'm not sure I can face her, and I'm still angry, no matter her reasoning.

"I am not saying you don't have the right to be angry, Valen. I'm just saying to be there. Everly has been on her own for so long and is used to doing everything independently. It will be hard for her to rely on anyone other than herself. You don't have to forgive her, but go home. At least let her know you're still there, and despite being angry, you love her and are still fighting alongside her."ChapterSixteen

Everly

All night, I can't sleep. Valen won't answer any of my texts and shoves me out whenever I try to mind-link him. His silence is driving me insane, and I'm worried about Valarian. He sounded upset on the phone and wanted to come home, but I managed to calm him down enough and told him I would pick him up from school. Valen didn't object, so I figure he's okay with that, or at least I hope he is.

Throughout the night, I obsess over the horrible shit that was portrayed on the news, saying Valen and I were fighting because he was cheating on me, that he finally realized Valarian isn't his son. It's all bullshit. I know it, they know it, but they will do whatever they can to sell a story.

The bed feels too big without Valen in it—cold and empty—the house too quiet without him snoring beside me and making me want to smother him while he sleeps.

Many times I get up and check the locks and windows and check Valarian's bed. That was something Zoe and I both did when we lived together, almost like we took it in turns during the night when it was just us. We were always scared because it was only us in the house, knowing that rogue-whores aren't much of a fight if someone broke in, especially with my tiny wolf and hers.

It's a habit I thought I outgrew, however, now I'm alone, I find myself reverting to old habits and nearly have a panic attack when I realize Valarian isn't in his bed when I check. I keep reminding myself he's safe with his father, yet knowing that

and seeing it for myself are two different things. Maybe if he wasn't angry with me, I would be fine, because I never had this issue when Valarian would sleep at Kalen's. I know it's because I'm entirely alone in a huge, empty penthouse, and without having anything to distract me, it reminds me of being on my own in my car. The feeling is still the same.

Having just closed my eyes again, I hear the front door lock twist and click, which has me sitting upright, panic coursing through me, and my hand instantly searches for Valen in the bed before remembering he isn't here. My heart thumps in my chest as I creep toward the hall. Then Valen's voice flits through my head.

'Calm down. It's just me. Don't hit me with anything; I'm carrying our son,' he mind-links, and I let out a breath of relief.

Walking down the hall, I see him step out of the entryway and into the dim lighting—I left the stove light on—and as I step into the living area, I see Valen is carrying Valarian, who's asleep in his arms. It's a little after midnight, and I move closer, wanting to take him, but Valen turns away.

"Get his bed ready. I'll carry him," Valen whispers, and I nod, rushing off down the hall and pulling his sheets back.

I step aside, flicking on his nightlight and lighting up the ceiling with his solar system projection. Valen sets him in his bed, tucks him in, and relief floods me that our son is home. Although, when I lean down to kiss Valarian's head, Valen walks out without a word to me. I hear him walk into the bathroom down the hall before the shower starts.

After checking the front door is locked, I climb back into bed; Valen comes in a few minutes later in his towel. Once again, he says nothing as he gets dressed, but when he grabs his pillow, I know he isn't coming to bed.

Instead, he walks out of the room, and my stomach twists, knowing he's still so angry with me that he won't even sleep in the bed beside me. At least he's home. Maybe now I can get some form of sleep.

No such luck. It takes hours to sleep and I end up staring at the ceiling most of the night.

The following morning, I'm awoken by morning sickness. It sends me running for the bathroom as I heave and throw up the contents of my stomach, splattering the front of my pajamas with my vomit. It's the first time I've woken up needing to be sick.

My stomach turns violently, but suddenly I feel Valen's fingertips brush the back of my neck and pull my hair away from my face. Catching my breath, I feel him sweep my hair over my shoulder before he wets a face cloth and hands it to me.

"Are you alright?"

I nod my head, feeling breathless. My throat is raw and burning and I wipe my mouth as he walks out.

I'm climbing in the shower when Valen walks back in. He's already dressed, and he places a towel on the sink basin. I watch him scoop up my dirty laundry, and when he starts to walk out, I call out to him.

"Are you leaving early?" I ask.

"I'm going with Dad. I already packed Valarian's lunch. It's on the counter," he says, walking out and shutting the door. So I guess unless it's to do with Valarian, we aren't on speaking terms. It saddens me, but right now, I'll take anything. It's better than nothing. When I finish showering, I hop out, and hear that Valen is getting Valarian up and ready for school. When I walk into the room, I sigh when I see Valen has set my clothes out on the bed for me.

As quickly as I can, I change into my work clothes; I want to try to speak to him before he leaves, but Valarian is animatedly telling him about something while he eats his Cocoa Krispies. Valen watches me as I walk into the kitchen before sliding a cup of tea and my breakfast in front of me. I scrunch my face up at the tea. I hate tea. What I really want is coffee, yet when I go to look for it, he clears his throat.

"I tossed it out. You shouldn't drink so much caffeine. Also, there are prenatal vitamins above the microwave. Make sure you take them. And you have a doctor's appointment tomorrow at 2 p.m. and an ultrasound," he says, and I nod, wanting to speak to him, but he turns his attention to Valarian.

"Why is Mom going to the doctor's?" Valarian asks, looking at me.

“Because Mommy is having a baby,” Valen tells him, kissing his head and grabbing his suit jacket. “Behave for your mother. I’ll see you in the morning,” he tells him before walking off.

“Wait, you're not picking me up from school?” Valarian asks, twisting in his seat to look at his father.

“No, I’m going with Pop and won't be back until late tonight.”

“Where are you going?” I ask him.

“To pick up that part with Dad. I have to go; I need to pick him up because you have his car,” Valen tells me.

I turn around to retrieve his father’s keys out of my bag, but by the time I do, Valen has already left. I sigh before pouring the tea down the sink; I can't wait to get to work to make some coffee, though honestly, I’m not sure my belly will handle it with how my stomach has been lately. The smell alone has made me sick a few times, yet I still crave my morning hit of caffeine.

The day goes by slowly, time really dragging out. I spent all morning at the hotel talking to contractors—they’re slowly getting everything done, but it will be a few months before we’ll be able to reopen—so after lunch, I go to the homeless shelter and continue painting my mural. It’s coming along nicely, and I meet with the sign manufacturer to approve the final sign design before picking Valarian up from school. I wanted Valen to come with me to see the sign, but I suppose he’ll see it when it’s set atop the old school.

Pulling up in front of the school, I receive a text message from him.

‘Don’t forget to pick up Valarian from school.’

‘I’m outside the school already. Roughly what time will you be home?’

He doesn’t reply.

With a sigh, I toss my phone into my handbag and wait for the bell. Everything is very routine; once home, I cook dinner while Valarian does his homework, then he has a bath, I shower, then put Valarian to bed. Once he’s tucked in bed, I make a coffee—I managed to sneak a small jar home from the hotel, hiding it in the back of the pantry—intending to wait up for Valen. I go over the hotel accounts

and pay some of the bills that are outstanding, watching our funds slowly dwindle away. But we'll grow again, that much I'm certain of. When I finish, I message my father.

'Can you send me the pack's accounting details, and the accounts and assets inventory?'

'If you want, I can meet you for lunch tomorrow and go over everything. I will have to sign the deed to the pack house over to you.'

'No, keep it in your name. I am not taking your house. Just make sure you leave it to Ava in yours and Mom's last will and testament.'

'You're not kicking us out?'

'No, of course not. It's your home. You're still my parents and part of my pack now. I just need to clean up the pack finances, you can still run things on your end.'

'Where do you want to meet tomorrow?'

'Can you meet me at the homeless shelter? I'll be there most of the day.'

'Can you bring Valarian? Your mother and I would like to see him?'

His message shocks me, and I chew my lip, debating what to reply.

'If Valen says it's ok.'

'Okay. I'm sorry he found out the way he did. Hope you are both doing well, we haven't spoken to the media or told them. See you tomorrow.'

'Night dad.'

'Goodnight, Evie. See you tomorrow. I will text when I am on my way.'

Well, that went better than I thought. Dad and I managed to have a civil conversation, something I wasn't expecting after the challenge.

* * *

It's hours later and early morning before I hear the key in the door. I glance at the hall leading to the front door to see Valen quietly walk in before noticing the lamp

on beside me. He pauses for a moment, then drops his keys into the bowl on the hall stand.

“How was your day?” I ask him.

“Long,” is all he answers before he heads down the hall, retrieves a towel from the linen closet, and walks into the bathroom. Packing up my laptop, I walk to the bathroom door and grip the door handle, but he locked it. I sigh and knock on the door, yet he ignores me. I know he heard me because I can feel his annoyance.

“I’m having lunch with my father tomorrow and I wanted to take Valarian. Mom and Dad want to see him,” I call out to him through the door. Yet Valen chooses to ignore me and I hear the water shut off.

Sighing, I move back to the couch and wait for him to come out. He does, walking off toward the bedroom before returning with his pillow and blanket.

“Did you hear me?” I ask him, though I know he did because I felt his annoyance earlier.

“Do what you want, you do anyway,” is all he says, tossing his pillow and blanket on the couch.

“Are you seriously just going to keep ignoring me?” I ask him.

“I have nothing to say, Everly. It’s late, I want to go to bed,” he says and I press my lips in a line before getting up.

“Don’t forget, you have the ultrasound tomorrow at 2 p.m.,” he says as I start walking off.

“I’m not sure what time I’m meeting Dad,” I tell him.

“Well, you won’t be meeting him at 2 p.m., will you!” he says before shutting the lamp off and sending the living room into total darkness.

“Are you coming to it?” I ask him, wondering if I’m doing this alone. My last experience wasn't the best and I couldn't even afford to go to ultrasound appointments; I had to choose between eating for the next week or not eating and going to the appointment.

The only one I had besides my initial one was at twenty weeks, and the only reason I got to go to that one was that I slipped over at the Chinese restaurant. My boss was worried I would try to sue, so he took me to the hospital and they did one because I started bleeding. That was when I found out Valarian was a boy. They put me on bed rest, like that was actually a possibility. Instead, I was back to scrubbing dishes mere hours later.

I try to remind myself this time is different, but though things may have changed, this one bad experience is enough to ruin this pregnancy for me already.

I dread being pregnant. It terrifies me, and I shudder when I think of giving birth—how the midwives sneered and taunted me while I cried in agony, the hunger from trying to produce milk to breastfeed only for it to dry up quickly from not getting enough food. If it wasn't for Macey, I would have starved those first few days. Who would have thought the offer of a granola bar would start a lifelong friendship.

Yet, the worst was seeing everyone's families come to meet their new family member while not one person from my previous life remembered I existed.

"Yes, Everly, so don't be late," Valen says, pulling me from my thoughts. He moves around on the couch trying to make himself comfortable.

"You can sleep in the bed," I offer suddenly, not wanting to be alone. He says nothing. I want to climb on the couch with him, just so I can shake the dread away. I take a step toward him to see if he'll let me until he speaks.

"Go to bed, Everly," he says, and tears prick my eyes as I turn around and head for bed. I don't know what's worse: being alone or having a mate and feeling alone. Another night of restless sleep and checking the damn locks. Fine. It's not like I haven't been on my own before. I'm no stranger to loneliness. Loneliness is something ingrained and woven through me.

Yet, why does it hurt so much more now?ChapterSeventeen

Valen

I'm woken by noise up the hall. Rolling over on the couch, I rub my eyes and can feel that Everly is awake, hear her at the back of the place, rummaging around and doing something. I try to go back to sleep, but when I hear tiptoed footsteps

in the hall, I crack an eye open to see her go to the front door, whispering under her breath to herself. I sit up, wondering where she's going so late at night. I hear the door unlock, then relock before hearing her footsteps again.

"What are you doing?" I grumble and she jumps, startled.

"Nothing. I was making sure we locked the door," she answers before padding off back down the hall. Now awake, I go to get a drink, yet she feels off through the bond; it makes me wonder why she feels scared? The scariest thing in this damn place is lying on the couch. Does she really think I would let someone in to get to them?

Lying back down, I try to go back to sleep. Just as I'm in that part of sleep when you're asleep, yet also not, my ears prick at soft footsteps, only this time checking the balcony doors. What is she expecting? Someone to scale up the side of the hotel? I watch her, trying to ignore the nagging of the bond when she goes to the front door again.

"You already checked it," I say and she stops. I can just see her from where I'm standing in the hall. She rubs her temples and goes to walk back to our room when she pauses and walks back to the front door.

"Everly I said you already checked it," I growl at her.

"I just need to be sure," she mutters, and I listen to her twist the locks and relock them again. I click my tongue and sigh, listening to her walk off again before Marcus tugs on the mind-link.

"You just got home? I thought the company driver was meeting you halfway. Why are you up?" Marcus asks.

"They did meet us halfway; Dad and I took turns driving. And to answer your other question; because Everly keeps checking the damn locks."

"You two still not talking?" he asks.

"I don't want to upset her, I have nothing nice to say right now," I admit, feeling like a damn asshole. But I don't know what else to feel. I'm angry, and the words would sting, so I don't want to throw them out in anger and upset her.

“Try to get some sleep. I’ll be by at 7 a.m. to pick you up,” he says, cutting the link.

The last thing I want to do is go see Nixon, but after what we found out from John, I need to investigate, though I don't see him being cooperative, so I try to sleep.

I catch a couple of hours when I hear the damn lock on the front door twist again. Though I’m trying to ignore her, I listen as she checks the balcony doors, then the kitchen window. She’s driving me up the damn wall, but when I hear her check the kitchen window, I sit up. Valarian would struggle to fit through it, let alone any ninja that managed to scale up the building. She rushes back off to the bedroom and I shake my head, lying back down and closing my damn eyes, only to feel eyes on me a few minutes later. Unease rolls over me and I know she’s awake. What I’m not expecting is to open my eyes as I roll over, only to find her next to me. I nearly shit my pants and jump out of my skin. She jumps in fright when I do and I groan, clutching my hair.

“What?!” I snap, annoyed. I’ve spent all damn day and night in a fucking car and now all night with her waking me up every Goddess damn second! I growl at her and sit up, only to notice her blanket and pillow on the floor next to the couch. The look on her face makes me feel like a prick for snapping at her when I realize it was her staring at me in the dark.

She says nothing, but I don’t miss the way her lip quivers as she stands up to go back to the room. As she reaches to grab her blanket, I grip her wrist and feel the tremble in her hand. With a sigh, I lift the blanket and tug her on the couch with me.

The stupid bond!

She rolls into me and I slide my arm under her head so she can bury her face in my neck. She says nothing and falls asleep almost instantly. Her breathing evens out, her heart rate slows, falling in sync with mine. However, I find myself now unable to sleep, trying to understand her strange actions and the weird look of fright, but also humiliation on her face, like she was caught doing something she shouldn’t. Eventually, her scent calms me as I tuck her closer and finally fall asleep.

The following morning, however, I wonder if I dreamed it because I'm on the couch alone and Valarian and Everly are nowhere to be seen. I reach for my phone to find missed calls from Marcus; it's 10 a.m.!

I open the mind link and feel for Marcus' tether. He answers immediately. 'Why didn't you wake me?' I snarl at him.

'I tried, but Everly said she kept you up last night and to let you sleep.'

'Fuck! I'm getting ready now.'

'All good, I canceled with Nixon until tomorrow. He said he had to leave the city anyway.'

I sit up and rub my face. 'What time tomorrow?' I ask and yawn.

'11 a.m. tomorrow, go back to bed,' Marcus says, but I shake my head before remembering he can't see me.

'“No, I need to check the homeless shelter anyway. Make sure you wake me tomorrow. I don't care if I'm tired or she keeps me up, we need to get this meeting out of the way and see his reaction,” I tell him.

'Okay, well, John just got to Zoe's place with Everly, so I should go,' Marcus says.

'Wait, Everly is with you? Where's Valarian?'

'At school. She dropped Valarian here at 5 a.m. this morning and asked us to run him to school so she could get an early start on her mural. Zoe and I dropped him off for her.'

'So, she didn't take him to see John and Claire?' I asked him.

'No, Everly didn't want to upset you and bring him, though Claire looks pretty upset he isn't here.'

'Is Everly ok?' I ask him, slightly worried since she didn't wake me. I didn't even hear her leave.

'Yes, why wouldn't she be?'

'Because she kept checking the damn locks all night. She seemed frightened.'

‘Ah, yeah, Zoe does that. Drives me nuts. Anxiety. Zoe takes medication for hers, but isn’t so bad when I’m here. Old habits die hard,” Marcus says with a sigh.

‘What do you mean?’

‘The girls. Zoe said they hated living at the back of the hotel because it was so close to the reserve, paranoid about forsaken breaking in and taking the kids. Apparently they had a few scares there. Everly must have been scared last night. Anyway, I know she said she’s going to the homeless shelter later; her sign is finished, so she's going to watch them set it up at 1 p.m.. Maybe you’ll catch her there.”

‘Okay, thanks. Mind-link me if John tries anything,’ I tell him before I cut the link.

In an effort to wake myself up, I walk to the bathroom and shower, pondering what Marcus said about the girls. Does that mean Everly doesn’t feel safe here with me? I don’t understand it; she was fine before and it's the first time I’ve seen her do it.

My shower is quick and I dress equally quickly. I can’t believe I wasted an entire morning! I know Everly is going to be at the homeless shelter, so I’ll make sure to meet her there so I can take her to her appointment. After having lunch at my father’s place, I drive over to the homeless shelter just in time to see a crane lifting a huge sign on top of the building, but my eyes are drawn to the mural on the front of the building.

Climbing out of the car and approaching the building, I can see she’s finished it, but as I get closer, my footsteps halt at the front gates and I find myself staring up at my mother. Everly, I can see, is guiding the men on the cherry picker, telling them the sign isn’t straight as they attach it above the mural and front doors leading in.

My eyes go back to roaming over the huge mural; last time I saw it was a blank canvas. On one side of the doors is the woman I remember from the pictures Everly had shown me. She used the photo layout, but instead of Everly, Zoe, and Macey beside her like in the original, my mother's arm is tossed over the shoulder of Emily, and her son stands between them both.

I suddenly feel like an asshole; she got up this morning to finish this despite us arguing. Emotion clogs my throat as I stare up at the women who influenced my mate the most and made her into who she is today. Dad's words come back to me about how the rogues were all she had, and seeing my mother up on the wall, I now know what he meant. Valarie was my mother but also Everly's, and now I understand why Everly went ahead with her challenge; it wasn't just for the rogues—it was for Mom! She wanted to fix the one thing my mother couldn't.

Walking over to Everly where she's staring up at the sign the men are placing in the brackets, I find her covered in paint and sweaty from the hot day. I wrap my arms around her waist and she jumps.

"Thank you," I whisper, kissing her cheek. She sighs in relief and points to the sign. I look up and watch as the men peel away the white film covering it, revealing the sign beneath.

'Valerie's Place'—Where your village begins.

"Now, no one will forget her name," Everly whispers. Chapter Eighteen

Everly

I worked on the mural all morning, only stopping when my parents arrived for lunch. The meeting with them went well, but the pack's finances are destroyed. Dad has been using loans to pay off loans, which only put him into more debt, and I have to think of a way to absolve all of that.

I don't have millions packed away. What savings I do have aren't enough to cover the debt and the hotel, and I'm not about to ask Valen for the money. Then there's the contract between my father and Nixon, who holds the pack as collateral for the debt my father owes. Dad has kept up with his repayments, but all those repayments are loans from the bank too.

I'm in over my head, I know it, and with Valen not speaking to me, I don't know anyone that can help without selling off the pack assets. All the pack businesses are in the red as well. A few of the loans taken out are through two of the banks owned by Valen's pack, so maybe I could at least have the interest rate lowered or relinquish those businesses back to the bank to remove those debts without filing bankruptcy.

I paid most of the others off completely today, but the larger sums I have no way to cover. As for the debt to Nixon, I called Kalen and asked him about it, since he handles most of Valen's accounting, and he said there was no way around the contract—that now that debt is mine because it was put on the pack's finances, not on my father's personal finances. The pack still owes Nixon 1.6 million.

Which leaves me with two options: sell what remaining assets my father's pack has or try to get a loan, which I don't want to do because it will just get us into more debt. We have six months left to pay off Nixon, or the pack—and all its assets and land—belong to him.

I know my hotel's land alone is worth more than that, but I'm not willing to give it up; this place isn't just mine. So now, I'm debating whether to see if, once fixed up again, Valen's pack would buy it. Then I wouldn't be losing it and neither would the rogues. But with how angry he is, I'm not sure if he would help, even if it was his mothers.

I get the text message saying the sign is ready to be placed just as Dad and Mom left after lunch. Before heading outside, I quickly check on Macey and Zoe, who left a little while ago to pick up the kids. They're inside the rec room, putting up the finishing touches. It looks great, and I quickly kiss Valarian before rushing back out.

I pause to check that the paint is dry on my way through the door, and it is. Seeing Valarie up on the wall makes tears spring to my eyes. Out of every mural I've done, this is my favorite; maybe because of its meaning. I just hope Valen likes it and the one I did inside the rec room.

I watch as they put the sign up and instruct them to move the bracket a little higher on the left, as it's a little crooked and I know it will set off Valen's OCD that he believes he doesn't have. They're setting it in the brackets when I feel arms circle around my waist and I'm tugged backward against a hard chest. His scent envelopes me. I was so preoccupied, I hadn't even realized he was here.

"Thank you," Valen whispers, kissing my cheek.

I look up and point to the sign. Valen tilts his head up to see, and I watch as the men peel off the white film covering the sign.

'Valerie's Place'—Where your village begins.

"Now, no one will forget her name," I whisper.

"Is that Mom's handwriting?" he asks, choking a little on emotion.

"Yep, I used the letters and blew it up so I could transfer her handwriting," I tell him.

Turning my head to look at him, he rests his chin on my shoulder.

"I'm sorry I didn't tell you," I tell him.

"I'm sorry, you felt you needed to hide it from me," he says, kissing the side of my mouth.

"Do you like it?"

"Love it."

"Then come on, I want to show you something else," I tell him excitedly.

"There's more?" he asks, and I nod, grabbing his hand that's around my waist and walking to the front doors. I grab two hard hats and drop one on his head.

Valarian's, Casey's, and Taylor's voices reach our ears, and Valen squeezes my hand.

"Valarian is here?"

"Yep, the girls picked the kids up on the way over after Dad left. We promised they could help with this part. Valarian asked me last night. They helped me pick out the frames last week," I tell him, tugging him down the hall.

We stop in the old cafeteria that's been done up as a huge living area for those that come here. It's the first place that Valen had done up. It has a kids' play area, three huge dining tables, and on the other side is a huge TV and couches. But the walls had looked bare, so I wanted to do something so it felt more homey.

Valen stops at the double door leading in and gasps. Valarian spins on his heel, noticing his father, and squeals, rushing over excitedly. Valen stares around the enormous room and scoops Valarian up when he rushes over.

“What's wrong, Dad? Don't you like it?” Valarian asks when seeing his father become teary-eyed.

“No, I love it,” he chokes out.

All of Valarie's banners from her protesting days are framed on the walls, along with the blown-up and framed newspaper articles about her efforts to change the city.

On the far wall is another painting I did of Valarie, using the photo of her standing on the cop car, a banner raised above her head which reads, “No Packs, One people”. It takes up an entire wall. This is who Valarie was, and despite Valen not knowing her, he'll know how many lives his mother changed.

Valen sets Valarian down, and Valarian tugs him over to the wall that's full of handprints—rogue handprints. Everyone who knew Valarie had put their handprints on the wall and written something about her on each one. Hundreds, showing how many lives she had touched over the years.

Macey and Zoe come over. Macey rests her head on my shoulder and Zoe leans against me.

“She would love this,” Zoe says, and I nod as I watch Valarian point out his handprint; his reads 'My Nana'.

“No, she would ask why we're dredging up the past and tell us to get back to work,” Macey chuckles, and so do I. She's right; Valarie was a tough cookie to crack, yet when she did, she crumbled.

Valen stands by the wall reading each one, and I move away from the girls to go over to him. When I touch his back, he looks down at me, tears trekking down his face.

“It's dusty in here,” he grumbles, wiping his cheeks.

“Pretty sure I saw someone cutting onions back there,” Macey states, coming up on his other side and gripping his shoulder. He laughs and tugs me closer, hugging me and kissing the top of my head. Reaching over, he grabs Macey and Zoe to embrace us all.

“Thank you,” he says to all of us.

"You should be proud, Valen. She was an amazing woman. I wish you got to know her as we did, but we'll always remind you of who she was, and there is no bigger reminder of her than the woman who carries your mark," Zoe says, and I smile sadly. I feel him nod against my shoulder.

"Fuck, the dust is terrible in here," Macey mutters, and Valen laughs.

"Fucking terrible," he agrees. He lets us go and wipes his face, looking around. "This is amazing."

I couldn't agree more.

My phone beeps in my pocket—the reminder to go to the ultrasound. I pull it out and sigh.

"Want me to take Valarian?" Zoe asks, but I shake my head.

"No, he can come with me," I tell her. She nods before rushing off to wrangle the kids, and I look at Valen nervously.

"You're still coming with me?" I ask, and he gives me a funny look.

"Of course. You aren't alone this time, Everly. I'll be right beside you every step of the way," he says, draping his arm across my shoulders. He tips my chin up to look at him.

"Mine," he whispers, leaning down and kissing my lips before his hand drops to my stomach. "Ours," he adds, rubbing my belly. "Don't ever doubt that. I will never leave you to do this on your own, not again, no matter what," he says, kissing my temple.

I sigh, relieved; I don't think I could do it again by myself. The last time, I had Valarie; she was a godsend. But I would have if I had to.

"Come on," he whispers, holding his hand out to Valarian, who waves to the girls, and we head to the doctor in Valen's car.

Nerves kick in as we pull up and Valarian asks why we're here.

"Because Mom has to get a check-up, and then we get to see the baby," Valen tells him.

"Will we find out if the boy wrestling worked?" Valarian asks.

“No, not for a while, and it will probably look like a jelly bean,” Valen laughs.

Valarian scrunches his face up, looking confused.

This time around, it’s different. My father isn’t here to demand I abort; there’s no judgment, no worry as I wait for the urine test to come back. Once it’s confirmed, the doc takes blood samples before leading us down the hall to where they do ultrasounds.

“You can lie down,” Doc says while motioning toward the gurney. I lie on it, lifting my shirt, and Valarian watches with avid fascination as the doctor squirts the jelly on my belly.

He fiddles with the device, and after a few minutes, we hear the heartbeat. I sigh, not realizing just how worried I was about the fetus until now. During the challenge, I was so concerned with protecting my stomach that I could hardly fight. I was making sure to pick my moves and keep my abdomen out of reach. I would hate to see a video replay, because not much action happened in it. Dad was worried about hurting me, and I was concerned about hurting myself, so it probably looked more like a synchronized dance than an actual fight.

Doc takes some measurements, then announces, “There we are.”

I peer up at the screen, then squint when he moves to the next view.

“Wait!” I gasp, and Doc chuckles.

“I wondered when you would notice the other one,” he laughs, and Valen looks between the doctor and me.

“What's wrong?” he asks, sounding frantic.

“Nothing, Alpha; both heartbeats are strong,” Doc says, and Valen sighs, leaning back.

“Wait! Both?” Valen suddenly shrieks, leaning forward to look at the screen and making Valarian fall off his lap.

“Yep, you're having twins,” Doc tells him, and his eyes widen. He looks horrified, and I laugh at his face. He looks like he’s calculating some math equations.

“Two. There are two in there? Are you sure?” he asks, looking at my stomach.

"Yep, definitely two," Doc says, pointing at the screen to show him.

"That is so many diapers. We're never gonna sleep again," Valen whispers, shaking his head and trying to wrap his head around it.

"Twins? Mom is having twins?" Valarian gushes.

"Yep, you are going to have two—"

"Two brothers! This is awesome. Can they sleep in my room?" Valarian says, cutting me off. I laugh, and Doc chuckles.

"What if they're girls?" Doc asks.

"Na, Mom and Dad promised to wrestle in the boy way, right, Dad?" Valarian says, tapping his father's shoulder, while Valen appears in shock.

"Uh, yeah, right, in the boy's way," Valen mumbles, staring at the screen.

"See, I'm gonna have two brothers," Valarian declares.

"If you say so," Doc laughs. Chapter Nineteen

Valen

Valarian is bouncing excitedly on the balls of his feet as the doctor points to the two beating hearts. Not even I can sit still. This is too much information to process. I expected one. Is it hot in here?

Everly reaches for my hand when I stand up and tug at my tie; I'm overheating. Doc falls silent again and squirts more jelly on her belly. After turning the screen away for a second, he clears his throat and tugs on the collar of his shirt.

I stop my pacing and notice him becoming a little nervous as he moves the device. Valarian is babbling happily about the twin brothers he thinks he'll have. Doc's nervousness has me uncomfortable. Why did he turn the screen away?

"Doc, is everything alright?" I asked, suddenly frightened that something is wrong with the twins I wasn't expecting.

"Maybe you should take a seat, Alpha," Doc says, and I freeze. Something is wrong. I glance at Everly; her fear is just as bad. She leans up on her elbows to look at Doc.

“Take a seat,” Doc repeats and he motions toward the chair. Yet, now he has me panicking. I didn't necessarily want twins, but the thought of something being wrong with them makes my heart race faster and my stomach drop. I shake my head.

“Just spit it out, Doc,” I snap, becoming annoyed.

“It appears I was wrong about there being twins.”

I clutch my hair and let out a breath. “Oh, thank the Goddess,” I sigh.

“It's not twins?” Valarian asks, pouting.

“No, I found another heartbeat!”

I nod along at his words. Thank Goddess; I wasn't looking forward to never sleeping again.

“What!” Everly shrieks, “but I saw two.”

Doc holds his hands out in an apologetic gesture. I know she's outraged, but this is a good thing; I only planned for one.

“I was wrong; I found another, so you're having triplets,” Doc says, and I blink. I must have heard that wrong.

“Triplets?” I murmur, looking at Doc as he turns the screen.

“Yep, Everly is five weeks along. Here's babies A and B, and this one, Baby C, was hiding behind the other. I thought it was a shadow.” Doc says while pointing at the screen.

My vision tunnels and his words fade away along with the room.

My head pounds as I open my eyes only to see Everly's worried face hovering above me. She taps my face with her hand before sighing. Oh Goddess, I fainted!

“Thank the Goddess, and why are you fainting? You don't have to carry them!” she laughs.

“Please tell me that was a dream. Are we having a litter?” I mumble incoherently.

“Uh, no, there are definitely three. We finished the scan while you were... uh... napping,” Everly says, holding up the printed picture. I snatch it from her and peer up at it.

“I’ll give you both a moment,” Doc says, leaving the room.

“We’re having triplets!” I repeat, trying to wrap my head around that information. I have some super sperm. I should be selling that shit! This is a damn nightmare. She’s getting her damn tubes tied afterward.

“Valen?” Everly says, staring at me worriedly. Man, how embarrassing.

“You didn't tell anyone I fainted, did you?”

Everly presses her lips in a line and shakes her head.

“Nope,” she says, but I can feel her lie.

“Who did you tell?”

“Marcus. You were out for about ten minutes. I thought I was going to have to carry you back to the car,” she says and I huff. Great, he’ll never let me live it down.

“Did you tell him why?”

“No, Doc said it was too early. Best not to announce it until I hit twelve weeks.”

That makes sense, but I know Valarian will blab to the girls. His excitement is kind of annoying, yet also contagious. I look at the small ultrasound printout in my hand before getting to my feet.

“Give me your keys. I am driving,” Everly says, holding her hands out for them. I reluctantly give them to her before following her out to the car.

Triplets. What the heck am I going to do with triplets? I pictured one baby, and I ended up with a damn litter! Well, almost. My head is spinning the entire way home. Valarian is chatting away happily about his baby brothers.

Please, Moon Goddess, be boys; he’ll be on the warpath otherwise. Valarian is already picking out names and they haven't even got a brain yet! Literally, a heartbeat, and that’s it. She’s only five weeks pregnant, so we still have thirty-five weeks left.

“Are you alright?” Everly asks me. I swallow. Mentally, I prepared myself for one, but now there will be three. Three!

“Yep, fine,” I tell her, a little embarrassed that I fainted on her. Thankfully, the drive home is uneventful, but I have so much to do tomorrow. Marcus and I are going to visit Nixon tomorrow. Everly tells me her plans over dinner—she’s meeting with her father’s accountant and checking over some business accounts; both of us are going to be busy.

I’ve just put Valarian to bed when I hear Everly curse from the living room. When I walk out to check on her, she turns the news up.

“What is it?” I ask, but she holds a finger to her lips when I see Nixon is in some sort of conference meeting with one of the news channels.

I move toward the couch and sit beside her. She turns it up a little more. So this is why Nixon didn’t want to meet today. He was doing damage control. I growl as I watch him give some sob story, which I know is a lie. My father told me the real story. Nixon handed himself in, knowing we were onto him.

He tells the news reporter he was trying to find a cure for his sick daughter, leaving out the part where he abandoned her to her mother. Instead, claiming she had been sick all her life, and he was trying to find a cure—that he has top leading scientists working on a vaccine. He knew we were going to uncover everything, and we blew our chance. He painted himself a saint, so when this came out, he already had an explanation.

He made it look like Leah, his mate, dumped her kids on him, including a sick baby, before running off with another man.

“What is he doing? He’s admitting everything!” Everly exclaims.

“Damage control. He knew he was about to be busted. Nixon covered his tracks and got those in the city on his side.”

He then says he tried to offer me the vaccine for Emily and Ben but I refused. We listen a little more and it’s clear to me this is his way of covering up. He’s trying to save his reputation while destroying mine.

Everly's phone starts ringing, and so does mine. Pulling it out of my pocket, I see it's Marcus calling. I quickly answer it.

"Are you seeing the news? Nixon is being broadcast across every station," Marcus tells me.

"Yep, I'm watching it now," I tell him and I hear Everly on her phone talking to someone. It only takes me a moment before I realize it's her father.

"Dad, slow down, let me think. You need to calm down. I'll think of something," I hear Everly tell him. The mind-link also opens up and my father's voice rushes through my head just before utter chaos ensues when every pack member suddenly starts trying to alert us through the pack link. Everly screams, clutching her head, and my own spins as voices flit through the open link.

Dropping my phone, I race to her before booming through the link, 'Don't use the mind-link. We are aware!' I order my pack before shoving them out. They'll give one of us an aneurysm!

I help Everly to sit on the couch before flicking the damn TV off. John, I can hear, is calling out to her. I look around for her phone and find it on the floor. John's voice screeches in my ear when I pick it up.

"Everly, what's going on? Do you need me to come over?" John says, sounding rather panicked.

"She's fine. The pack link overwhelmed her," I tell him, moving into the kitchen. "What is it you want? We already know of Nixon's bullshit interview."

"I called for the same reason, and also to warn her that Nixon has told me if I don't verify this to the media, he's stopping Claire's treatment."

"Fuck!" I curse under my breath. I fill a glass with water, take it back to Everly, and pass it to her, watching as she sips it.

"What happens if she doesn't get the vaccine?" I ask.

"She will eventually turn forsaken," John says. "I have one more dose, but it will only hold it off for another month. She needs that vaccine every month. I'm sorry, but I have no choice, Valen."

I growl—he gets up there and states Nixon's claims are valid, it's going to cause a rift between all the packs and the rogues.

“Wait! You have one vaccine left?” I ask.

“Yes, so?” John says.

“Give me the vaccine. I'll see if any of our doctors can replicate it. If we can't, then go public as he wants.”

“I haven't got the money to fund a science team. Everly has seen my pack's accounts,” John tells me.

“I'll pay for it, but if you have to, go public. You out Nixon, you tell them everything. Even if you are involved in any of it, you go public. It will force him to hand the vaccine over to Claire and buy us some more time to prove a case against him,” I tell him, and I see Everly's head turn to look at me as she listens in on the conversation.

“Or better yet, we beat him at his own game—tell them about Claire, paint him as the hero and tell the city he promised to give her the vaccine free of charge. If he backs out, it will backfire on him. I know he won't, and it gives us time to work out a cure while she receives treatment,” I tell John. I could hear him talking to Claire in a calm voice before returning to the discussion.

“I get seen going over there, Nixon will know we're talking,” John says, and I look at Everly. We go over there, Nixon will definitely know—yet one of the rogues might be able to meet John somewhere.

“I'll send Macey to the gas station near your place; give it to her,” I tell him and we discuss details of the time, etcetera. Everly uses my phone to call and gives Macey her father's number. Once we hang up, we wait.

Chapter Twenty

Everly

Macey drops the vial off later that night. However, when I hear the knock and open the door, I'm stunned to see Tatum with her. I knew they were close, but to see him with her so late at night makes me wonder if more is going on than them

than just being friends with benefits. Macey, noticing my shock at seeing him, speaks.

"Oh, we weren't... Tatum just came with me... just in case."

"You woke Tatum up at one in the morning to see my dad? You sure he wasn't already at your place?" I laugh, raising an eyebrow. I don't understand why she's being so secretive about it. No one will care, but I know Macey still hates packs, so I wonder if it's because he's one of Valen's pack members. I let them in and walk into the kitchen to make coffee.

"Hey, Mace," Valen says as he comes into the kitchen to help. Only then do I realize that by getting my hidden coffee out, Valen would see it. He snatches it off the counter.

"No caffeine. You're pregnant," Valen growls, and I try to take it from him, but he holds it above his head.

"It's basically morning. I'm tired, and I have to be up soon. So there is no point in me going to bed now," I growl at him.

"You'll make them come out with six heads," he snarls. I shake my head at his logic. Caffeine is fine. Macey, taller than me, snatches it from him and sticks her tongue out at him, handing it to me.

"It won't hurt her. But why aren't you going to bed?" she asks. I point to all the files on the coffee table.

"Have a meeting with Dad's accountant tomorrow. I'm going over everything first to figure some shit out," I tell her, and she sighs.

"Make me one; I can help."

"Don't you have to get home to Taylor?"

"Nah, Mom has her," Tatum says. I look at him and smirk before eyeing Macey, and her face heats.

"Just friends, huh? But his mom now has Taylor?" I ask, knowing Macey doesn't trust anyone with Taylor other than her own mother, brother, Zoe, and me.

“Oh, for Goddess’ sake, babe! Just tell her already,” Tatum says with a shake of his head. I look at Macey expectantly.

“Nothing! There is nothing to tell at all. Crystal is just babysitting because I had dinner with her,” Macey says, and Tatum growls.

“Macey is moving in with me. Mom has Taylor for a sleepover while I move all her crap. I filled a damn trailer with toys. Toys!” Tatum says, shaking his head. “I swear if there’s a Troll or Smurf toy on this earth Taylor doesn’t have, I will eat my left kidney! Fucking crazy the amount of toys that girl has. We could use a break so we can move the rest tomorrow.”

“She doesn’t have that many toys,” Macey says, rolling her eyes at him.

“We fit an entire living room in and bedroom in that trailer, Macey. She has too many toys. My house only has three bedrooms. One room will be just for all of her toys!”

I snicker at their quarrel. I know Macey spoils the crap out of Taylor. I do the same with Valarian, although he never asks for anything. That kid is limited in what he likes, so his toy hoard isn’t even a quarter of what the girls have. He wants order, and regularly cleans out his toys to make room for new ones. However, when he does want something, he always gets it; same with Zoe.

I understand it. For so long, we scraped coins to make ends meet, and often that meant no toys and buying only the staples. So after the hotel kicked off, once we had money, we made up for lost time; we spent it on the kids, giving them what we couldn’t before. I get it.

“So you’re moving in with Tatum?” I ask, pouring the hot water into the mug. Valen growls and reaches for my cup, but I glare at him.

“Oh, here,” Macey says, distracting him by giving him the vial. Valen holds it up to the light and I can see the metallic silver liquid inside.

“By the way, how did your ultrasound go? I forgot to ask earlier,” Macey says, looking at Valen. It’s Macey, and I know she wouldn’t blab to the world, and neither would Zoe; and Valen told his father already.

“You jinxed me,” I tell her with a giggle.

“Jinxed you?” she says, her eyes sparkling with mischief. “Twins?”

“Triplets,” Valen says behind her, and her lips part as she looks at my nonexistent stomach.

“Girl, you gonna be huge! Like beach ball huge!” she laughs.

“Wow, bet that was a shock,” Tatum says before coming up behind Macey. His arms encircle her waist as he buries his face in her neck.

“Yep, you can say that again. Everly will get her tubes tied after.”

“Oh really,” I scoff.

“Yes, I am not being neutered,” Valen says.

“Yeah, I’m with Valen. No man wants someone cutting into their junk,” Tatum agrees.

“But someone should cut into mine?”

“They will already have to. How many triplets have you heard of being born vaginally?” Valen asks. I suppose he has a point, but why do I have to get it done?

“Nope; if I’m carrying them, you can sacrifice your balls. Your balls caused it,” I tell him, sipping my coffee.

“No way.”

“Why?” Macey demands, just as outraged.

“Because I don’t want my balls cut off!”

“They don’t cut off your balls,” Macey says, shaking her head.

“I am not losing my manhood.” Typical male response.

“Idiot. And I am not getting my tubes tied. You will either get the snip or wear condoms.”

Valen pulls a face. “It doesn’t feel the same.”

I shrug, uncaring. He’s getting it done if he doesn’t want any more after these ones.

“Bloody damn litter.”

“Bet Valarian was excited,” Macey teases.

I sigh. “Let's just hope they're boys,” I tell her, and she laughs.

“I hope you have three girls.”

“Hey, don't say that! You jinxed me last time, so close your damn swallow hole.”

“I can assure you, she doesn't swallow,” Tatum says, and Macey elbows him.

“Prick, will you shut up! Go annoy Valen and compare dicks, or whatever it is you men do,” she snaps at him.

Tatum chuckles but doesn't leave her, and Valen grabs a beer out of the fridge and passes one to him.

“Maybe you can convince Macey to let me put a baby in her,” Tatum says, wiggling his eyebrows at me.

“Fat chance. I like the babies I can hand back to their mothers. Taylor is enough for me,” she says, and Tatum pouts.

“Just one.”

Macey shakes her head.

“Two,” Tatum says.

“How did we go from one to none and now two?” she says, shaking her head.

“Just get. You want kids, go find someone else. When I agreed to move in with you, I told you that I didn't want any more children,” she tells him.

I know why that is, which makes me wonder if Macey told him. She can't have children; she had a hysterectomy with Taylor because she bled out and nearly died.

“Macey?” I whisper once he wanders over to Valen in the living room.

“I know, I have to tell him, but...” She looks over her shoulder at him. “He'll leave when he finds out,” she sighs.

“Is that why you didn't want anyone to know you moved in with him?”

She shrugs. "Just enjoying it while it lasts. Once he finds out, he'll run for the hills. They always do."

I smile sadly. In the last five years, Macey has had two serious relationships. She even got engaged once, but both left her once they found out she couldn't have children. She told the first one just before they moved in together, and he walked out as quickly as he came into her life. The other she told the day after they got engaged—same thing.

"I don't think Tatum is like that, but you need to tell him before he gets his hopes up."

She chews her lip nervously as I tell her. I pray I'm right. Finally, Macey nods and sighs before running her fingers through her hair and grabbing her mug. "Come on, let's sort these papers out," she says, wandering over to the coffee table.

Valen is on the phone with Doc, who's waiting for the vial. They speak for a few minutes before he stands and looks at Tatum.

"Want to come for a drive with me to the hospital to drop this off?" Valen asks, and Tatum gets up off the couch.

"You've been drinking," Macey scolds.

"I've had one mouthful," he says, passing his almost full bottle to Macey. She takes it and looks at it.

"Fine, go then. Can you bring me some Pringles back?"

Tatum laughs and leans down as she looks up at him, then pecks her lips.

"Yes. Be back soon," he tells her.

Valen kisses me before walking out with Tatum, leaving us alone. Macey and I go over the paperwork for the pack, and I sigh, finding it getting worse the more we dig.

"This one here," Macey says, holding out a slip of paper. I take it from her and glance at it. It's an old arcade that's in the red.

"Yeah, what about it?"

"Want to sell it?" she asks, and I glance at it.

"You want to buy an arcade?" she shrugs.

"Zoe and I were discussing pooling our savings and buying something to fix up and invest in," she says.

"But we have the hotel?" I ask her.

"No, you have the hotel, Zoe has her apartment out the back of it, and I have nothing. Not that I'm complaining—I know we've always split the hotel income—but I want something to leave to Taylor; same with Zoe. So we've been looking into it."

I chew my lip, feeling bad now she's said it like that. I was initially planning to cut the girls in before I got my father's pack. Maybe I still can, though.

"You can have it if you clear the electricity bill on it. Just pay what's outstanding on it. It just shut down, but hold off buying anything with Zoe for a bit. I want to speak to Valen first."

"You're giving it to me?" she asks, glancing down at the arcade. It's owned outright by the pack, but it's rundown and the electricity bill is nearly ten thousand. The machines needed work, so Dad just shut it down and it's been sitting vacant since.

"Ten thousand and it's mine?" she asks, checking the electricity. I don't know how much she has exactly, but I know she can cover it easily. One thing all of us are good at is saving. The only time we really splurge is with the kids.

"If you want it, you can keep all the crap in it, too," I tell her. I have no use for an arcade and have no idea what state it's in, but it would be one less bill for me to figure out how to pay.

"Valen won't have a problem with that?" she asks.

"No. I may have something else if you want it, but I need to speak to Valen first."

"Are you sure? The building is worth a lot more than that. It has a bowling alley in it and it's on the main drag," she asks.

"Macey, if you and Zoe want it—or even just you—cover the electricity bill and it's yours," I tell her. It will only help me out if she takes it off my hands. I have no

time or funds to fix it up. If she wants to put her time and money into it and save me the headache, that's fine by me.

"Thank you," she whispers, looking at its portfolio. Now, I just need to speak to Valen about the hotel. Maybe I won't have to sell it to Valen if he lets the girls chip in as partners. They know what it holds in value, and it could help cover the rebuild cost. Besides, they helped fix the place; it seems only fair they also own it along with me.

But the rest of this crap, I'm in way over my head with.