

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

Chapter Twenty-One

Valen

Tatum and I dropped off the vial last night and Doc split it into samples before sending it off to the labs. Hopefully we hear some good news soon.

I'm taking Everly to the accountant; after last night I don't want her on her own anywhere. She's been nervous all morning, and I can tell she wants to ask me something. Even when I got home last night, she was weird, making me wonder if she argued with her father or something.

Glancing at her as I drive, I decide to ask her because her weird mood is freaking me out.

"What's wrong?" I ask as we pull up at a set of traffic lights.

"I'm worried about the accountant," she admits.

"Why?"

"Because I wasn't expecting you to come with me."

My brows pinch together, wondering what she means. "It's that bad?"

"No. I did something when I inherited everything, and I was hoping it would remain hidden, but now you'll find out," she says.

"What did you do?"

"I got even. I was angry at you, so just don't be mad. It was a lot of money, and I had this stupid idea, but it may piss you off." She shakes her head.

"You won't tell me?"

She shakes her head again.

"And you told no one? How much money did my mother leave you?"

"Zoe and Macey know. We had a good laugh about it, but I wasn't expecting you or anyone to find out."

I'm about to ask her what it is when she speaks again.

"I also wanted to ask you about the hotel. Macey said something to me last night, but I worry it might upset you too," she says.

"Why would it upset me? It's your hotel," I tell her.

"Well, legally, yes. But it was your mother's."

"You don't want to continue the rebuild or sell it?" I ask, wondering what she's getting at. I would never interfere with the hotel. My mother left it to Everly; she wanted her to have it—therefore Everly is free to do as she pleases with it. Though I hope she won't sell it off.

"No. Not sell it-sell it, I'll still own it, but..."

My brows furrow and I accelerate as the light turns green.

"Just say it, Everly," I tell her, and she sighs.

"I was planning on doing it anyway before you came back into the picture. But now you are, I thought I should ask," she says.

"It's your hotel. That won't change regardless, so tell me what you want to do."

"I'm running out of funds for the rebuild. The insurance didn't cover everything, and the savings set aside for emergencies are running out. Everything else is locked down in term deposits and trust funds, which I don't want to touch unless necessary. I know you offered to help, but—"

"But you refuse to take money from me," I growl. We have a kid and live together, yet she never lets me pay for everything for her or Valarian; she's always contributing, even though I don't want or need her money. But hearing all this makes me wonder how much she does have.

"I don't want a handout, and I don't want to owe anyone," she says.

"I'm your mate," I tell her.

"I've never needed help, and I don't want it, but Macey and Zoe have been pooling their money to invest..."

"You want to split the place three ways? Change ownership into three titles?" I ask, and she nods, glancing at me before she starts nervously defending herself.

"I know it was your mother's, and I'll still own it. But Macey was telling me last night, she and Zoe are looking into buying something investment-wise to leave to their kids, and I was already going—"

"I think it's a good idea," I cut her off, and she turns in her seat to look at me.

"You do?" She actually seemed shocked.

"It may have been my mother's, but you three girls built that place. I do have one condition if you go ahead, though," I tell her, and she clicks her tongue.

"I'm not losing ownership, just partnering up—" she starts to say.

"Give it to them," I interrupt her, and she gapes at me.

"I think you're missing the point, Valen. I kind of can't afford to unless I touch Valarian's money, which I don't want to do. I don't know how much they have, but anything will help with the rebuild, and the money will only be going back into the hotel until we can open, and then I would hand it back."

"I know that, but my condition is either I buy it off you, or you give it to them and let me cover the rest of the cost," I tell her.

"No. I don't want your money, and Macey and Zoe wouldn't agree to that anyway. They would think they owe you."

What is with these girls and settling debts—even gifts?

"Then split it four ways. We don't need their money, Everly, and they're like your sisters. You three built it. I can get contracts drawn up so they know I can't interfere with the hotel. I'll merely be an investor; I'll hold no control," I tell her.

"Once Valarian comes of age, I can transfer any title I have to his name."

"Just let me ask the girls first," she says, and I nod.

I would rather she take the money, but she's too headstrong. Maybe I can speak to the girls and get them to convince her. The way I see it, they helped build it to the way it is, they should have equal shares. Besides, they may not believe or

think it, but I owe them for being there when I wasn't. So if this helps them and clears my guilty conscience, it's a win-win.

When we pull up at her father's accountant's building, my father is already there, waiting. Everly climbs out of the car and waves to him. While I grab the box of files off the backseat, Everly opens the back door and snatches a pink folder from next to it.

"I can take it," I tell her, eyeing the folder. She shakes her head, making me confused. What has she done that she doesn't want me to see? She almost looks embarrassed.

When she closes the door, my father hugs her. I can tell he's tickled pink about her pregnancy. John also meets us and we all walk into the accountant's office, along with my own accountant that arrived at the same time. Not that I don't trust John's accountant, but I want to be sure.

Once through the doors, we move into a room with a huge oval mahogany desk and I take a seat next to Everly, who's clutching the pink folder.

The accountants start chatting amongst themselves and going over paperwork, but my father has a silly smirk on his face as he stares at Everly. Turning slightly in my chair, I see Everly's eyes go to his and her lips part.

"You know?" she asks, and he nods once.

"Honestly, it is something Valarie would have done," he chuckles, and the room falls silent as everyone looks between my father and Everly. The door swings open, and Everly shrinks down in her seat as her accountant walks in.

"Joseph," my father says in acknowledgment. My eyes narrow at my father, and Joseph smiles and sits next to Everly. He squeezes her hand. I have no idea who he is, but she said he would be here.

"Joseph, this is Valen," Everly says.

He nods. "Nice to meet you. Your mother was a wonderful woman," he says.

"You knew my mother?"

"Yes. I was her lawyer. Everly kept me on after she passed," he says, and I swallow, trying to figure out what's going on.

All the accountants start talking, trying to find the best approach to deal with Alpha John's pack. It's now technically mine and Everly's, but Everly doesn't want to take control from him completely, which shocks me. Instead, her father will continue running things.

"You still want me to run the pack?" John asks.

"Yes. You're Nightshade pack; you know them. I have my hotel and Luna stuff. I may be their Alpha now, but it's still your home."

"What's the catch?" John asks.

"For starters, no gambling. And you don't handle finances; Joseph will. And you answer to Valen now," she says, and my eyebrows raise. The room falls silent—you could hear a pin drop it's so quiet. Everyone looks at John, waiting to see what he says. Our packs have been rivals for decades and I don't expect him to agree.

"Okay, but can we please see Valarian? Claire has been asking every day, and Everly won't bring him to see us unless you say so," John tells me, and Everly looks at me.

I know she's trying to make up for not telling me about the pregnancy by letting me decide that, but I know she secretly wants her parents in her life. Despite having their differences, she still loves them. Everly is just no longer a child and has no problem cutting people out of her life now—she doesn't have time for bullshit.

"You want this?" I ask her, and she nods.

'Valen, they are her parents,' Dad mind-links. I sigh and nod.

"Fine. But, if Valarian doesn't want anything to do with you, you won't force a relationship with my son or our babies," I tell him, and he nods and lets out a breath, then gasps.

"Wait! Babies?! As in more than one?!" John blurts, and I pale. We were trying to keep that on the down-low for now.

"Yes, Dad. I'm having triplets," Everly admits. John gapes at her before gathering himself like he's doing the math in his head on the diaper changes.

“Can I tell your mother? She’s going to love this. More grandbabies—she’ll be so excited,” John says, seemingly quite happy about this information. “Yes! Yes. I agree to your terms,” John says.

I raise an eyebrow at his enthusiasm and my father mind-links me again a second later; he probably saw the look on my face—I was about to demand the reason for his sudden change of heart toward his daughter.

‘Valen, leave it,’ Dad says.

‘What?! He wants to pick and choose whose kid's lives he’ll be in? Where was the bastard when Valarian was born?’ I tell my father, watching John.

‘No. I get it.’ Dad says.

‘Get what?!’ I snap through the link. Everly looks over at me, probably feeling my sudden anger.

‘He is trying to make up for his mistakes. He can't go back in time to fix things with his daughter, but he can try to fix things with your kids—just like I am doing with you and Everly. That is what I get, Valen. That’s all I get. You don't have to trust him straight off, but let him try. Everly is a smart girl; she isn't the kind of person that will let someone hurt her twice,’ Dad says.

I feel Everly squeeze my hand under the table. I nod to my father and he turns his attention back to the accountants.

Dad bought a few of the businesses himself—those he thought would be suitable investments—to get rid of some of the debts, and a bunch are going to be put up for sale. But Everly makes it clear they’re not to be pack bought, and will only sell to individual pack members or any of the rogues. Yet that still leaves the debt to Nixon and also a backlog of debt from pack loans. Some I will sort out, but John really buried the pack deep and was stupid enough to take out loans from human banks out of state, which will be the biggest issue.

“You should have enough to cover those debts without touching the trust fund if you sell the land off,” Joseph whispers to her. My father snickers to himself, and Everly glances at me nervously.

“What trust fund? And what land? She was a Rogue. She couldn't have purchased land within the city; only inherited it. She owns the hotel and its land,” I ask, confused. Rogues couldn't own anything in this city once the packs took over and put the laws in place, so my mother wouldn't have been able to purchase anything.

“The trust fund is Valarian's. Half the money your mother gave her is in that trust—Everly set it aside for him. Everything else went into the hotel and on the land Everly bought. But you are correct; she couldn't buy more land within the city...” Joseph says, and now everyone in the room is looking at her. Joseph wears the same smirk my father has, and Everly looks like she wants to run from the room.

“I was mad at you,” she turns from me to her father, “and you!” Okay, now I'm intrigued.

“Spill. What have you done?” I ask her, but she presses her lips in a line.

“It is actually pretty funny. Checkmate,” Dad laughs.

“It is kind of funny. Well, Macey, Zoe, and I thought it was anyway,” Everly laughs.

“Okay, can someone tell me what is going on?” I ask, and John also leans forward. Funnily enough, my father is the one that answers.

“Since she was rogue, she couldn't purchase within city limits,” he says.

“I know that,” I tell my father.

“Nothing says she couldn't purchase the land outside of the city,” Dad laughs. John and I look at each other.

“I own all the forsaken lands,” she chuckles, and Dad laughs.

“You what?” I ask.

“Remember initially, when we were all looking for a treaty agreement and were looking at purchasing outside the city limits to start mining by the mountains?” Dad asks.

“Yes. None of the packs could purchase the land. The werewolf council said it was a forsaken habitat,” I answer. What a complete waste of time that was, months of planning only to not be able to purchase the land.

“I checked into that, and it was already bought,” Dad says.

“Wait! You knew the land couldn't be bought and didn't tell me?”

“At the time, I knew it would lead you back to Everly and your mother, so no, I never said anything,” Dad admits.

“So you own all the vacant land at the back of my pack up to the mountains?” I ask her, and she snickers.

“No,” she answers.

“She owns all the land outside the city borders—behind every pack,” Joseph laughs.

“Wait, how much land is that?” I ask.

“Enough to build an entire city on. Your mother was a very wealthy woman. Before her father started selling it off, they owned nearly all the state, and Everly bought a sizable chunk back,” Dad laughs.

“But why would you want all the land?” John asks her.

“So no one could grow their packs,” I grind out and Everly laughs.

“Not one of the packs could extend their border limits because I owned it. So technically, when you all did your border patrols, you were all trespassing on my land,” she chuckles.

“You cunning little....” I growl and shake my head.

“As I said, I was angry. So I purchased all the vacant land outside the city, spanning all around the city limits. All that empty farmland is mine and Valerians. With the city becoming overcrowded, I knew the packs would want to buy into that land; I made sure they couldn't,” she laughs.

“You are why we couldn't purchase the land for mining,” I growl at her. That was a big deal three years ago.

“So that is why Nixon couldn't build that mall,” her father laughs, and she nods.

“Every pack looked into why the werewolf council wouldn't sell the land. We were told it had an anonymous buyer and was for the preservation of the forsaken habitat. We thought they were being jerks, since they weren't part of the city,” John laughs.

“Wait! You stopped my skate rink idea,” her father growls, pointing an accusing finger at her.

“Yeah, and the subdivision I was planning out behind the reserve.”

“I said I was angry,” Everly says with a shrug.

“Angry? You plotted behind every pack and bought out their land!” I tell her.

“Smart,” my father says.

“Or stupid. What if the packs found out?” I ask her.

“They would have killed me. But at the time, I didn't care. I just wanted to hit back at the packs. They owned the city—I just made sure they couldn't extend it,” she says, folding her arms across her chest.

No wonder she refused to let me pay. After going over her books, in assets alone, she trumps everyone here. She owns more land than all of us—has more money and net worth than anyone in the room. It astounds me and, quite frankly, is a little intimidating. Every one of us was played by one little rogue who outsmarted us all. Dad was right; checkmate! She had us all by the balls and not one of us knew it!

Chapter Twenty-Two

Everly

Two weeks later

“Everly, wake up. You're late again,” Valen says, shaking me out of my deep sleep. A growl escapes and I tug my pillow over my head. He growls right back and yanks the heavy drapes open, flooding the room with light that sears my eyeballs from their sockets before yanking the blanket off me. “Everly, up!”

My eyes feel like sandpaper, and I'm so damn exhausted. No matter how early I go to bed, I always wake up feeling like crap. And it doesn't help that he watches me like a damn hawk and won't allow me any coffee, making me question if it's an addiction. I usually have two before I even do the school run. Now, no caffeine has resulted in me becoming a zombie.

"No. Leave me," I whine.

"Valarian was ten minutes late yesterday and today. You were supposed to do the school runs the last two days, and on both days, he couldn't wake you and I had to come home! The tantrum I just dealt with was insane! Now up!"

"I'm tired," I tell him, reaching blindly for the blanket that he tugged away.

"Up!" he says, slapping my backside and earning another growl.

"Why?" I whine.

"Because it is time to get up!" he snaps.

"Time for you to get up. I don't have to be anywhere," I growl. It's my day off. I want to sleep!

Valen growls and storms out of the room, and I snuggle beneath my blanket. A moment later, I wrinkle my nose at the smell of coffee. Damn, do I miss the taste and the energy buzz, but the smell I can't stand sends me running for the bathroom. I growl as his scent wafts in from behind me and the pungent aroma of caffeine goodness grows more potent.

"I swear, if you made that just to make me get up to puke, I will provide the damn vasectomy myself," I gasp, my throat burning. In general, once I throw up, I'm okay drinking it—it's just the initial smell that always gets to me. It's such an odd reaction to the one thing I love.

After flushing the toilet, I glare at him in the mirror as I watch him take a sip while I quickly rinse my mouth. He's pushing my limits. I snarl as I stand up while he simply smiles tauntingly.

"Ahh. Be nice, and I may let you drink it," he says.

"Hand the coffee over, Hun, or I feel this mining deal may not go through,"

I tell him. "I hear the owner is a real bitch without her morning coffee."

His smile falls. Maybe him knowing now will play to my advantage. When I originally bought it, I knew if the packs knew, they would hunt me down and probably kill me. But with Valen and my Dad behind me, no one would dare touch me now.

"You can't blackmail me—and that was my land you bought," Valen tells me.

"No claims, therefore, no-man's-land and now my land," I tell him, putting my hands on my hips.

"I still can't believe you did that. You nearly started a war between me and the Slasher pack Alpha."

I reach for the mug, but he pulls his hand away.

"That land would make a nice protected reserve," I muse, folding my arms across my chest. He glares at me before cocking his eyebrow at me and sipping the coffee without taking his eyes from mine.

I purse my lips. "Maybe I'll sell the land directly behind your territory. Slater, I hear, is looking to extend. I am sure he would offer a good amount for the spot right at the back. Do you know where I'm talking about? Where your packhouse is," I told him.

"You wouldn't dare. Then you'd get yourself in trouble!" he says and smirks.

"It was kind of the intention when I bought it. You know, to cause trouble. And I hear it was quite the headache for the Blood Alpha," I tell him, and he clicks his tongue.

"Fine, one coffee. One, Everly. And once that jar is gone, no more. It should last you a while," he says.

"The whole jar?" I ask excitedly, and he nods.

"Deal?" he asks, holding out his hand.

"Two a day?" I retort.

"One!" he says.

“Three!”

“One!”

“Three, and you have a deal,” I tell him, and he growls.

“Two, then,” he says, and I smile, shake his hand, and he gives me the cup. I take it excitedly and have a sip before it comes spraying out my mouth as I spit it back in the cup. Valen laughs.

“What the fuck, Valen! That is not coffee,” I snarl.

“We had a deal,” he laughs. “And you shook on it.”

“Yes, a deal for coffee! Not whatever the heck that is!”

“Decaf!” he says, and I growl. “Well, I know never to let you go over a contract. Always verify what you're making a deal on, Luna,” Valen laughs. I pull a face at him and flip him the finger behind his back as he walks out. I get dressed, pouting about my coffee fix that is not coffee.

Valen tells me he’s going to see his father, who’s meeting him at the homeless shelter, so once dressed, I text Zoe and Macey to see what they’re doing, since the hotel is under renovations. We have so much spare time on our hands now, but it was like the moment we stopped working, all of us crashed and burned. Working seven days a week for months

The girls agree to meet up with me for lunch, and before I know it, I’m driving over to the hotel to check it’s all still on schedule.

Everything seems to be happening so fast, but it’s a drama free day, which I like. Valen took care of most of the debts while I’m waiting for my accountant and some agents to sell off some of the land. I’m parcelling off everything except the land behind Shadow Moon and Nightshade packs, and out of spite, I’m also keeping the land behind Crescent pack. It might come in handy later on when dealing with Nixon.

Valen seemed rather shocked about everything to do with my old scheme, as one would be, but, though I knew I had it, I never actually thought of doing anything with it. I only bought it out of spite, but it may just be what saves us from going under. Valarian's money is locked in a trust until he comes of age. I could get it

out, but the hoops to jump through would be a pain in the ass. Plus, the thought of touching it sickens me.

Somehow, the morning seemed to slip by slowly. The girls and I meet for lunch in the city center, but it feels odd being served and not doing the serving. We all look and feel out of place. People stare and mutter, mainly at Macey because she still smells like a rogue.

The waitress places our food down in front of us along with a tea. I glance up at her.

"I think you gave me the wrong one."

She smiles apologetically. "I'm sorry, Luna, but—"

"Valen!" I growl and she whisks away quickly. I know it must be Valen's doing, seeing as it's one of his pack cafés we're sitting at. Macey glances around before sliding her cappuccino in front of me with a wink.

"I saw nothing. And I think he is being ridiculous over the caffeine thing," she declares.

"And cheese," I tell them, glaring at my salad.

"Cheese?" Zoe asks.

"Yep, listeria. Oh, and fish—mercury levels apparently. And since he can't be bothered looking up which fish specifically to steer clear of, he has banned all fish. Oh yeah, and mayonnaise, too. I'll kill him by the end of this pregnancy. Every night he has his nose in a baby book," I say with a roll of the eyes.

"Yeah, fuck that," Macey says, and Zoe glances around like she's waiting for him to pounce on me over the coffee Macey gave me.

"Have you told Tatum yet?" I ask Macey—she keeps avoiding it, although she has admitted that he's been hounding her since he found out about my pregnancy, especially now that they've officially moved in with each other.

"I will," she sighs, picking at her Caesar salad. Zoe smiles at her sadly. I feel terrible because I'm pregnant with not one baby but three, and Macey can't even have one.

“What about you? What's going on with you and Valen?” Macey asks, spearing a piece of lettuce and popping it in her mouth. I know she’s trying to change the subject away from not telling Tatum, but I’ll let it slide this once.

“Fine. He’s super annoying and clingy now, but I was thinking...”

“Thinking about what?” Zoe asks, biting into her wrap and watching me curiously.

When I signed the titles the other day, it bothered me that I was using my last name because, technically, the packs on the paperwork are separate packs.

“Do you think it would be strange if I proposed to Valen? I know it’s usually the other way around, but—” My cheeks flush. It’s been nagging at me, and even though we’ve marked each other and I’m Luna of his pack, the confusion of who is Alpha of which pack still makes me wary.

Macey stops mid-chew to stare at me, her eyes narrowed.

“Wait, you want to get married? I thought you were against the whole marriage thing? Aren’t you always saying it's just a piece of paper and blah blah blah?” Macey says, and she has a point; for so long, I’ve believed that. However, now it bothers me.

“Well, I am, but even though Valen is handling Dad's pack for me, he still has to run everything past me because technically, I’m Alpha,” I tell her.

Zoe snickers. “Valen is your Luna,” she laughs. I nudge her, but technically, whoever holds the title is Alpha, so I’m his Luna, and he is mine.

“And Valarian has Valen’s name now and—” I pause, chewing my lip, waiting for the reactions. Macey rolls her eyes.

“Oh my gosh, Everly, if you want to marry him, marry him, damn. You don't need to give us a list of reasons why you should; it isn't a business deal. Just admit you want to marry him!” Macey says.

“So, when are you going to do it?” Zoe asks, and I shrug.

“I don't know. I would have to get him a ring first.” I shake my head. “Just saying that sounds so backward.”

“Why?” Zoe asks and I shrug. It just does, and my face falls. What if he says no?

“What?” Macey says.

“What if he says no?” That would be mortifying, yet they both look at me like I’m absurd.

“He’s your mate; there’s nothing more permanent than the mark on your neck, but you think he won’t marry you?” Zoe laughs, shaking her head.

“I told you, ladies, we can become nonsexual lesbians if necessary. I will gladly marry you if Valen says no. And the same goes for you,” Macey states, nodding to Zoe, and I laugh.

“But I ain’t eating pussy. I don’t even like the look of my own vagina, let alone getting up-close and personal with either of yours. Valen says no, I’ll ditch Tatum and marry ya. I gotcha, baby girl, I’ll let ya put a ring on it,” she says, holding up her finger and blowing me a kiss. I laugh. It does sound rather silly that he would say no.

“I say do it. Besides, you’ve got options! Macey is your backup plan if he says no,” Zoey says, snickering before going back to eating her food. We all go back to our peaceful lunch and make small talk before deciding to check out some jewelers. As we wander around downtown, we come across one hidden up some side alley.

“I didn’t even know this place was here,” Zoe says, glancing up at the sign. ‘Dion’s Jewelers’. I shrug, opening the door and stepping inside to find some rough-looking biker man sitting behind a glass cabinet with his glasses perched on the end of his nose as he reads something. Tattoos cover his arms and neck, and from what I can see poking out from his button-down shirt, his chest, too.

He glances at us while we look around. “Luna. Ladies. What a surprise. What can I do for you today?” he asks.

“She’s looking for an engagement ring for her mate,” Zoe answers him, peering into the glass displays. He nods, sipping his can of coke and stepping into the main area where we are before turning to look at Macey.

“Oh, not me, her. She’s going to propose to Alpha Valen,” Macey tells him, and my cheeks heat. The man coughs on his drink before punching his chest.

My eyes widen and I move to pat him on the back while he gasps for air.

“Are you alright?” Macey asks, looking at him worriedly.

“Went down the wrong hole,” Dion gasps, sucking in a breath. I step away from him as he clears his throat. The man is a giant—not what I expected a jeweler to look like.

“How about I show you a few things, then?” he says awkwardly. Chapter Twenty-Three

Everly

“When are you going to do it?” Zoe asks as we wait for Dion to polish it; he’s taking forever. Macey drums her fingers on the counter impatiently. How long does it take to polish a ring? I think to myself.

“I don’t know. Kalen said he can take Valarian tonight. Maybe I can try to make us dinner and do it then?”

I say try because the smell of food really makes me gag; he may be eating Chinese from a container. How romantic. Not. Although, I should probably buy Chinese after I drop Valarian off at Kalen’s because the more I think about it, the less it seems possible I’ll be cooking.

“Yeah, do it tonight before you chicken out. You do that and I will tell Tatum about my broken baby maker,” Macey says, peering through the door out the back of the jewelers

“Really? You’re going to tell him?” I ask.

Macey sighs but nods her head. “Yes. If you have the guts to propose, I should woman up and tell him,” she says.

“So much going on today! So exciting!” Zoe gushes.

“Exciting? I am about to possibly ruin my relationship while she gets married!” Macey says, nodding toward me. Zoe rolls her eyes at Macey.

“So dramatic, but I’m here for it!” Zoe chuckles and Macey raises an eyebrow at her

“Tatum won’t leave you over something you can’t control,” Zoe says, and I agree. He doesn’t seem the sort to run just because he can’t have kids. He loves Macey.

"We'll see, but I am about to jump this counter and polish the damn ring myself if Dion doesn't hurry up," Macey growls.

"Kalen is alright with taking him at short notice? I can take him for the night if you want me to?" Zoe offers.

"No, he seemed excited when I messaged him earlier," I tell her.

"What did you tell him?" Macey asks.

"Told him I wanted to have dinner with Valen," I shrug.

Dion finally returns, looking extremely sweaty and nervous.

"Are you ok?" I ask him.

"Yeah, just not feeling well, Luna," he replies.

"Ah well, then that is our cue to leave before you give us whatever scourge you got. I don't need my ass sealed to the toilet, and I'm pretty sure Everly is puking enough for all of us, so I'll pass on the disease thanks!" Macey growls, stepping back from him like he has the plague. Dion chuckles, handing me the small jewelry bag and my receipt.

"Yeah, I agree. Sharing is caring, except when it comes to STDs and the flu," Zoe says, stepping closer to Macey.

"Thanks," I tell him as we all leave. We have to race to the school because the time we spent at Dion's jewelers took way longer than we thought.

Macey purchased another cappuccino as we left the restaurant, sneaking it to me when I hopped in the car. After taking a sip, I sigh in relief before reaching into the tote bag in the back for the canister of decaf coffee. Macey takes the jar and empties the dreadful contents into a bin near my car before Zoe fills it with real coffee that she snuck from home.

"I did not give that to you, and if he finds out, I will totally deny it and blame Macey," Zoe states with a soft laugh.

"Wait, why blame me?" Macey asks.

"You're scarier than Marcus—Valen won't fight you. He would fight Marcus though," Zoe says. Macey clicks her tongue and folds her arms.

"Is that so?" she asks.

"Marcus thinks so. Besides, Valen is his Alpha. I can't get him into trouble," Zoe tells her.

"Oh, I see. Choosing cock over your sister. I will remember that," Macey tells her.

"No, I am not! I just know you would protect me better than Marcus," Zoe says, batting her lashes at Macey. "Yeah, yeah. Whatever you say," Macey says.

"He won't know; it's the same jar. Besides, I'm a werewolf, not a damn human, and doc said caffeine has no effects on were-babies. He's just being anal," I growl, screwing the jar lid back on. I place it back in my tote bag on the seat and follow the girls to the school.

We wait in front of the school for the bell to ring, leaning against the brick wall.

"Geez, my hands are sweaty. I am so nervous," Macey says.

"Yeah, I feel a little nauseous myself. Should I get down on one knee? I have no idea what I'm going to say," I admit.

"I say go all Alpha on his ass and toss it at him and say 'we're getting married'," Zoe says, aggressively.

"Gosh, calm down, Mighty Mouse, why so aggressive?" Macey says.

"Channel your inner Alpha Female," Zoe states, and I raise an eyebrow at her.

"She is an Alpha female, Zo," Macey laughs.

"I guess you're right, so yeah. Do that! Why not? They mark away without asking. Just shove it on his finger and say 'pick a date!'" Zoe states.

"Yeah, don't listen to her. But I probably wouldn't get down on one knee. I just can't picture that," Macey says with a shudder.

"You two are not making me feel any better. What will you say to Tatum?" I ask Macey.

"No idea, but I'll wait until Taylor is in bed, then I'll bring it up."

"Want me to take her?" Zoe asks.

“Really? That would be good. Then I can try to tell him—no, I will tell him at dinner—he’s always in a good mood at dinnertime.”

“I would be too if my future mate is a chef,” Zoe says.

“Fill-in chef! I am not a chef; but yeah, I am a pretty good cook, even if I do say so myself,” Macey says proudly.

“Make him that crème brûlée he likes; that will soften the topic,” Zoe tells her.

“I don't know!” she groans. “Yes, I’ll make him something nice, but Tatum really wants more kids,” Macey stresses.

“It will be fine, Macey,” I tell her.

She bites her lip nervously. I have never seen her so anxious about telling someone something. Macey has no filter and at times her words can be brutal, so to see her so nervous tells me she really likes Tatum.

The bell rings and the kids come racing out. Macey makes arrangements with Zoe to drop Taylor off to her while I buckle Valarian in.

“Call me if you need me,” I tell Macey, and she nods.

“Good luck,” Zoe calls to both of us. “And I will see you at 4:30, Mace,” Zoe calls out.

Macey waves to her and nods once, then climbs in her car with Taylor. Jumping in my own driver's seat, I head home and get a bag ready for Valarian with some clothes for the night.

However, when I get to Kalen's, he doesn't seem to want me to leave. He keeps wanting to show me stuff and talk. Man, he can talk the leg off an iron pot. I try to remind him I’m going to cook Valen dinner tonight, but still, he insists I stay, dragging me off to show me some old record collection.

“Definitely Chinese food,” I declare by the time I’m about to leave. Valen mind-links me just as I sit in the driver's seat.

“Having fun with Dad?” Valen laughs.

“Did you set me up?” I ask him, and he laughs through the link.

“Yep, Dad said you were dropping Valarian over and you were going to make me dinner?”

“Well, it looks like Chinese now. It's almost dinnertime already,” I say with a sigh

“Good thing I organized dinner, then,” Valen says.

“It better not be your sausage; I intended to cook actual food,” I growl.

“It is real food, but you will definitely have a feed on my sausage later,” Valen laughs.

“What are you making?”

“Hurry home and find out,” Valen purrs through the mind link. I laugh, then cut the connection.

Driving home, I park underground before grabbing the small, velvet box and slipping it into my handbag. It feels like it weighs a ton; I can't believe I am actually going to do this. My palms become sweaty as I wait for the elevator to take me to the top floor. By the time I reach our floor, nerves twist my stomach as I push open the penthouse door while giving myself a mental pep talk; Zoe's idea is sounding better and better.

Yep, I am going to do what she said or I will chicken out. I wander down the entryway, flicking the hall light on and shaking my head, wondering why it's so damn dark. I know he's home—I can smell something cooking.

“Valen?” I call out, but get no answer. I mutter to myself. Dropping my bag on the hall stand, I rummage through it and grab the small box out, gulping. I turn the corner into the living room and kitchen area to find the whole place lit with candles on every surface and rose petals scattered across the floor.

Stunned, I stop and gape, wondering how long I was gone—this must have taken some time to set up! It's only 5:30 p.m. and when I left here at 4:30, the place was normal. Now there are hundreds of candles. I consider the fire risk briefly until Valen clears his throat, making me realize he's right in front of me on one knee.

“I intended to do this next week. But Dion called, so I had to improvise,” Valen says.

“How?” I ask; This would have taken more than an hour!

“Marcus and Tatum, while I cooked and screamed like a banshee for them to light them and rip roses apart,” Valen chuckles and I peer down at him.

“You don't get to take this from me,” he whispers, turning his palm over, and opening a velvet box, revealing a ring.

“I watched, I saw, and I loved you more, so Everly Summers, will you marry me?” Valen asks. Thank the Goddess he asked, because I was about to chicken out.

I can't stop the stupid grin that splits my face or the tears that roll down my cheeks as I nod my head.

“Yes,” I reply, and he lets out a breath before taking my hand and slipping the ring on my finger. I peer down at it. I recognize this ring! Only, now it's shiny and the stone is replaced.

“Is this...” I'm about to ask, recognizing it as one of Valarie's rings, and he stands up.

“My mother's, yes. Valarian helped choose the stone, but,” he slips the ring off again, showing the inscription inside it is what he said.

'I watched, I saw & loved you more.'

“I will spend the rest of my life loving and watching you,” he whispers before slipping the ring back onto my finger, lifting my chin, and kissing me.
ChapterTwenty-Four

Everly

I kiss him back before remembering his ring in my hand and pulling away. He growls, gripping the back of my neck; his lips cover mine again as he kisses me deeply, his tongue dominating my mouth.

Oh, well, I guess I'll give it to him later, I think as he pushes me against the entryway hall stand.

My ass hits it, making everything on the top rattle, and my handbag falls off with a thud. I put the ring box in the small bowl that rocks precariously on the edge just as he grips my thighs, making me shriek as he sits me on top of it.

He chuckles, his lips moving to my neck, but I grip the collar of his shirt and yank his head toward me. I bite down on his lip with a growl and kiss him while my fingers work down his buttons, trying to undo them as desire burns through me, searing my veins and making my skin warm. As soon as I finish undoing his shirt, he pushes himself between my legs and my fingers trail down the hard ridges of his chest and abs before I tug on his belt.

Valen's tongue tangles with mine in a fight for control that I am on the verge of losing when I push him back, trying to undo his damn belt. His fingers wrap around my wrists, prying my hands away before one arm goes around my waist and the other to my thigh. With strong fingers, he hoists me higher and nearly stumbles into the dining room table. I wrap my legs around his waist and he growls, about to press me against the dining room table when I pull away and shriek.

“Candles, candles!” I tell him—he nearly lifted and cooked my ass on a bunch of them.

“Whoops,” he laughs, turning and heading for the bedroom.

“No! Put them out first,” I gasp, and he groans, moving toward the table and blowing them out quickly before he turns toward the hall leading toward our room.

What about the rest? Now that I’ve pointed out the candles, I keep thinking of the fire hazard in the living room, dining room, and kitchen. Valen doesn’t seem to care—his lips leave mine and nip at my chin and neck before his teeth graze over my mark, making me grip his hair to tug his head back. His hands squeeze my ass and I moan into his mouth

But again, what about the candles!

“Valen, the candles,” I murmur around his lips that assault mine as he pushes me against the bed and presses himself between my legs. He keeps his weight off me with his arm beside my head as he rocks his hips against me, making me moan softly.

“Valen, the candles. Candles!” I shriek, and he groans, pulling away and looking down at me.

“They're fine,” he growls, nipping at my lips, but I shake my head. “Everly, I will smell them if they set anything on fire,” he says, and I purse my lips.

“Geez, woman, you're a pain in my ass,” he purrs, pushing off me and walking out, muttering about having to blow out the candles. I hear him groan and I laugh as he blows them out.

“Fuck! Whose stupid idea was this?!” I hear him curse, and I laugh again as I move toward the edge of the bed and remove my shirt and bra. When he walks back in, tugging his belt from his black slacks, I reach for him the moment he's close enough, gripping the waistband of his pants and yanking him toward me.

Desperately, I unzip his pants, shoving them down his legs, making him laugh as he steps out of them. Almost immediately, I grab his hard cock in my hand, wrapping my lips around the end and licking up the pre-cum, making him groan.

Valen's hips jerk and he sighs. His fingers run through my hair as I run my tongue up the side of his shaft, sucking on the tip. My hands move between his legs, cupping his balls before tugging down on them. He groans as I take him in my mouth, sucking every inch of his aroused flesh, bobbing my head as I find my rhythm while enjoying the noises he makes. I know it's hard for him not to thrust into my mouth as he wants—his legs are shaking when I grip his hips, pulling him onto the bed.

“I'm not sure how I feel about you manhandling me,” he laughs as I shove him onto his back and move to kneel between his legs. My fingers wrap around his shaft again and I stroke his hard length, dipping my head and wrapping my lips around him once more.

“Fuck!” he curses, his hand fisting my hair as his cock glides over my tongue. Lifting my eyes, I watch his reactions as I suck harder, enjoying the way his hand trembles in my hair as he tries not to force me down on him but then fails. I gag and growl, and he lifts his hands in mock surrender, placing them behind his head.

“I won't touch, promise,” he smirks. I return my lips to his cock, swirling my tongue around the tip.

“But I'm glad I was right,” he chuckles, and I look at him, taking more of him in my mouth and his lips part.

‘Right about what?’ I mind-link, since my mouth is full of his girth.

“That you would be eating my sausage,” he laughs. I graze my teeth up his cock and raise an eyebrow at him.

‘Hmm, I should probably chew my food before swallowing,’ I mind-link back.

“I’ll be quiet, just keep sucking, I’ll be quiet,” he says, winking at me. I cover my teeth with my lips again and continue sucking his cock while running my tongue along his length.

“Just eat your sausage,” he chuckles, and my lips leave his cock with an audible pop. I’m about to go off on him, but he suddenly sits up, pinning my arms and yanking me against his chest before quickly rolling so our positions are reversed.

He kisses me softly, cutting off the profanities I was going to spit at him. His hips roll against mine suggestively and I gasp before he sits back on his knees and grips my leggings, pulling them down my legs. After tossing them aside, he grips my knees and pushes them apart before running his hands up my thighs, exposing me to him. His gaze makes me hot. I never feel self-conscious with him, the complete opposite, so I don’t feel the need to cover up or close my legs as his eyes trail over my naked body.

With his gaze between my legs, his hand moves down my thigh to the apex of my legs so he can brush his thumb against my clit. Fingers splayed across my lower abdomen, he rubs his thumb over it, making me moan softly as he teases me. I rock my hips against him, but his other hand pushes on my thigh harder, holding me still.

His hand moves again and he runs his fingertips over my lower lips before twisting his hand and slipping his index finger inside me, making me gasp as he slides it out, then watches as he corkscrews it back in.

He adds a second finger, and I throw my head back, lifting my hips for him. He fucks me with his fingers, sliding them in out, watching my reactions as he forces them in deeper with his thumb pressed against my clit. I squeeze my eyes shut as I feel my orgasm building, getting nearer as he builds up friction.

The bed dips as he leans over, sucking on my nipple before tugging it with his teeth. After a moment, he sits back, watching his fingers plunge inside me before

placing his other hand on my chest and squeezing my breast. His fingers move harder and faster while he squeezes my breast with the other, rolling my nipple between his fingers, watching me squirm. The entire room smells of lust and my arousal.

Once again, Valen leans down and kisses me. There's an urgency and heat to the kiss as our tongues tangle. His tongue is hot as it dominates my mouth. Without pulling away, he pushes my leg higher, trapping it between his arm and body as he positions himself at my entrance before sinking his hard cock into my depths and our bodies come together, his hips flush against mine.

Valen holds himself up before dragging his cock out and sliding it around my opening, then farther up towards my clit, coating himself in my arousal. He groans before pushing the head of his cock inside again.

Slowly, inch by inch, he pushes in until he's sheathed deep inside me. His lips move to my neck and up my jaw before kissing me once again. Equally slowly, he starts to pump in and out, his cock brushing all the right places and driving me wild with the slow pace. I rock my hips against him, wanting him to move faster.

He squeezes my thigh harder before grabbing my hips and pounding into me. My muscles squeeze around him with each thrust. My skin heats and my breath turns to pants as I roll my hips against him, trying to take more of him. Enjoying the friction he's building up, I feel my walls grip his cock as my orgasm rolls over me, making me cry out. His lips cover mine, swallowing my moans as he slows, letting me ride the orgasm out while I tremble beneath him.

Abruptly, Valen pulls out.

And I sit up on my elbows and watch him climb off the bed, knowing he hasn't finished. He wanders into the closet before returning with a bottle of lube and something else tucked in the palm of his hand. Kneeling on the bed, he watches me as he drops the bottle on the blanket beside him, but not whatever is in his hand.

Instead, he grips my ankles and drags me toward him, making my head hit the mattress. Immediately, his hands grip my hips, and just as I wonder what he's doing, he flips me over and tugs my hips up in the air. I groan when his cock pushes inside me with one thrust before he drags it out slowly.

After pulling my cheeks apart so he can watch himself slip in and out of me, I feel his hand move over my ass, his thumb pressing against my back entrance. I squirm when he probes it with his thumb and I pull away slightly, only for him to pull me back, slamming me back on his cock. I groan, relenting, and he pumps himself into me a few times before slowing again, his thumb still pressing against the one place he hasn't gone.

"Valen, you are not sticking anything in my ass," I growl at him, and he chuckles.

"Really?" he purrs, pressing his thumb down harder and making me squirm.

"I won't hurt you, and I'll stop if you don't like it," he says and I roll my eyes as he thrusts into me slower. Won't hurt? Yeah, right! Has he seen the size of his cock? It isn't going anywhere near my ass.

"Nope! Not happening!" I tell him.

"It's happening. I'm locking in the hubs and going up the mud track," he says.

"Don't be crude! And no, we are not!" I screech.

"We're going to brown town!" he states with a laugh.

"Fuck, you suck at the dirty talk," I snarl, but also can't help but laugh at his vulgar words.

"I'm fucking that ass," he purrs before slapping my butt and making me hiss. He rubs away the sting, and I jump when I feel the cold sensation of the lube as it trickles between my cheeks. Valen thrusts into my pussy, his thumb returning to my ass, and I growl, but I figure I'll entertain his silly little obsession with my butt.

Valen groans as his hips slap against my ass, and I push back against him, meeting his thrusts. The hand on my hip moves, his rhythm remaining steady, and I moan as his cock hits my cervix. This position is deeper and so much more thrilling when he grips my shoulder, shoving it down to the mattress.

Pushing the top half of me entirely on the bed, he picks up his pace, pounding into me and making me scream as my walls grip him, fluttering around him. Then I feel his thumb slide into me. It isn't painful, just an odd sensation, an odd but good sensation, making me push back against him.

“See?” he murmurs, drawing his cock out slower and slamming back into my pussy. His hand fisted on my hip suddenly starts vibrating, and he reaches around, pressing something small against my clit. The sensation makes me gasp as it sends shock waves through me.

It takes everything not to sink into the bed at the feeling. Valen leaves his fingers with the vibrator there, and I move my hips against them. Suddenly, he moves them away, making me growl at the loss of the new sensation. He leans forward, gripping my wrist and tugging it behind me, then drops the bullet-shaped thing in my hand.

“Touch yourself with it. Just don't press the button until I tell you to,” he says, drawing my hand back toward my hip. He doesn't have to tell me twice. I'm not a prude and I've spent a reasonable amount of time searching adult toy stores with the girls.

My hand moves between my legs and I moan as I run the device between my swollen pussy lips while Valen rams into me, his thumb still inside my back entrance. When he pulls out of me, I miss the fullness of him stretching me

His hand locks around my wrist, placing my hand back between my thighs and I moan at the vibration of the small toy and his hot breath sweeping over my pussy.

His hands on the back of my thighs push my legs open more before he forces his tongue inside me, licking up my arousal as it spills from me, teasing more out of me. As he moves between my folds and back to my opening, hungrily tasting every part of me, his hand on my ass moves between my cheeks; I feel him ease his lubricated finger inside my back entrance.

I moan at the sensation when he slides his finger out, adding another, stretching me while I play with the toy in my hand. As his fingers push in deeper and harder, my walls clench. There's something thrilling and very sordid about it, but erotic. Valen sucks on my swollen lower lips, dipping his tongue inside before standing and lining himself up with my back passage. The tip presses against my back entrance and I tense.

“Press the button on the top of it,” Valen purrs, and I do. The vibration grows stronger and I moan, my body relaxing as he rubs my ass. But when he begins

pressing further inside me, I choke, my hand clutching the sheets as I hold my breath. He stills, pulling my hand back between my legs.

"Don't move your hand," he says, kissing my shoulder and pressing the button on top again. The thing feels like it will explode in my hand as the vibration intensifies, and I quickly place my hand back between my legs. Valen remains still until I feel him coat himself in more lube and work his cock into me slowly.

"That's it," he whispers, leaning down and kissing the side of my ribs, his stubble making me shiver as it brushes my sensitive skin. I moan as the small device vibrates against my clit, and Valen increases his speed before I finally feel his hips meet mine and he groans. He stills for a second when I rock back against him, letting me move against him for a few minutes until I'm a moaning mess and slow my pace. Then he grips my hips, slamming into me; I'm so close and am pushing back against him, taking what he gives me.

Valen's grip tightens on me and he pumps into me harder. I cry out as my skin tingles when he grips my shoulder and yanks me back against him, his chest pressed against my back as he thrusts into me. The hand flat on my stomach moves to my hand between my legs, and he takes the device I'm holding in place. As he slides it between my soaking wet folds and rubs it against my clit, his lips travel down my neck and he sucks on my mark, his other hand squeezing my breast.

"Cum for me," he purrs, licking my mark before grazing his teeth over it. I come apart with a scream, his arms the only thing holding me upright as my legs tremble, wanting to give out from under me. Suddenly, he sinks his teeth into my neck, remarking me and extending my orgasm. Valen groans against my neck and I feel him still inside me. He clutches me tighter and pulls his teeth from my neck before trailing his tongue up my neck and sucking on my ear.

"I love you," he whispers.

"I love you too," I tell him, exhausted when he pulls out of me.

"I'll run you a bath," he chuckles behind me before kissing my shoulder. I nod breathlessly and collapse on the bed before he speaks again.

“And I should probably reheat dinner, even though you just had a meal of sausage,” he laughs, and I reach for my pillow before lobbing it at him. He ducks and laughs while walking into the bathroom.

* * *

It’s the incessant noise of my phone ringing that wakes me the next morning and has me untangling myself from Valen; it’s still dark outside, so it must be early. He growls, trying to tug me back to him while I lean over him, reaching for my phone. Valen’s hands trail up my sides before he purrs and his lips lock around my nipple as I snatch my phone from the bedside table.

Peering at the screen, I see Macey’s picture pop up on the screen. I sit up, but Valen tries tugging me back to him and successfully pulls me on top of him. I push off his chest, straddling his waist as I answer it. Valen’s hand rubs my thighs as he mutters under his breath.

“Macey?” I ask, answering the call and holding it to my ear. “Macey?” I say again when I hear a choked whimper.

“I didn’t know who else to call. I can’t go home. My brother moved back in with my mother when I moved out. Zoe’s place is too small, and you know we clash when living with each other,” she says before sobbing.

“Mace, what’s wrong?”

“Can Taylor and I come stay the night? I know it’s terrible timing, but I told him, Evie. I told him and he stormed out. I don’t want to be here when he gets back,” Macey cries.

“Of course, come over. I’ll set up the spare room,” I tell her, and she quickly says goodbye. Valen stares up at me, his amber eyes glowing in the dark.

“What’s going on?” he says.

“I think Tatum just broke up with Macey,” I murmur, and he sits up.

“What?” Valen says, shocked, but I don’t want to say anything more because I’m not sure what’s going on myself. I climb off him and retrieve some clothes.

“I need to set up the spare room,” I tell him and he gets up, grabbing some shorts.

"I'll help," he says and I nod as he pulls his pants on. Chapter Twenty-Five

Macey

I feel like an idiot calling Everly, but I can't sit at Zoe's and try to hold myself together in front of her; she's too emotional, and seeing her cry will make me fucking cry; the woman is a damn onion. Zoe wears her emotions for the world to see and tends to have an effect on people. I love that about her, but I just want silence right now.

Everly is the opposite. I swear she's made of steel. It takes a lot to break that woman. Everly is our rock—the glue that holds us all together; she never judges, or questions, and is just there when you need her, no matter what.

So that's why I chose her. I would have gone home to Mom, but even she isn't an option. She would blame me, and rightfully so. Mom loves Tatum, and so does Taylor. Now Tatum is just another person ripped away from her right as she got used to them—another way I've failed her.

Taylor is at Zoe's. I had been going to go over and pick her up, but I decide against it as I climb into my car; I would feel terrible knowing I ruined her night. I know Tatum will come home eventually, and I can't face him.

I should have known better. Werewolf men are all the same. They want heirs—something I can't provide. Is it too much to ask for somebody to want me and not what I can give them?

My phone vibrates as I'm about to pull out of the driveway. I stop, my shaking hands racing to dig it out of my handbag. Tatum's name pops up. It's only a text message, and I open it.

'Can you leave the back door open? I've lost my keys.'

'I'm still home. I haven't left.'

'I'll grab some clothes tomorrow while you're at work.'

'Want me to bring some clothes over to you? Where are you?'

'No, and I'm at Creed's place. I don't want to see you right now. Just leave me be. You and Taylor can stay there until we figure something else out.'

'I'll leave my keys in the mailbox for you. I'm not staying in your house while you sleep on your friend's couch,' I reply before tossing my phone back into my bag.

It rings and I ignore it. I don't want a handout, and I am not living in a house that belongs to someone who wants nothing to do with me.

Turning my car off, I twist the house key off the ring before heading inside. I grab one of the moving boxes from the shed and load up some of Taylor's toys I know she won't leave without, then grab her school clothes, my work uniforms, and our documentation. The rest, I'll organize to pick up later. If not, I'll just dip into my savings to replace it. I know how this works; it isn't the first time I let myself get my hopes up.

Once I have my bag packed and a box full of Taylor's stuff under my arm, I flick off the lights and lock the door.

After dropping the key in the mailbox, I pop the trunk and drop everything in before climbing back into my car. My mind is a mess as I drive to Everly's, angry with myself. If I had told him from the start, I could have avoided all this. We would still be perfect strangers that fucked once on a desk—how it should have remained.

Yet, as I pull up at Valen's and Everly's place, I can't bring myself to get out of the car. My mind is plagued with what I'll tell Taylor. She really likes Tatum, and he was good to her—the first real father figure she had. Her own father was a dropkick.

Taylor's father, Preston, beat me when I told him I was pregnant; he hoped I would lose her. My mother warned me not to get involved with him. She was right. He was no good. Mom patched me up, and we waited to see if I would miscarry. But my girl was a fighter.

My next encounter with Preston was at the shopping center when I was with Valarie. I lost sight of Valarie as I wandered down an aisle with Taylor in her stroller. The panic I felt when he walked into the same aisle with his pregnant sister nearly made my heart stop. He'd looked into the stroller and snarled when he realized he didn't successfully abort his child.

I had left the aisle, searching for Valarie, but when she couldn't be found, I went to the parking garage. I had just gotten Taylor into her car seat when he attacked me from behind. He slammed my head into the door frame, splitting my forehead open. Luckily, the keys were still clutched in my hand, and all I kept thinking was that I needed to lock the car. I needed to protect her from him. So I hit the lock button on the key fob and got to my feet as he tried to rip the car door open.

Me or her.

And I chose her.

I will always choose her, even if it costs my life. That's what being a parent is. You give your last breath so they can take another. I was a rogue, and Preston was Slasher pack's Gamma's son. His reputation was on the line, and Taylor could destroy it.

So I did the only thing I could at the time: I hit the speed dial on my phone, which was Valarie's number. I dropped the phone when he smashed the windows, trying to get to Taylor. Until Valarie could get to her, I needed to keep him distracted. And that's what I did. Taylor was screaming her head off in the car, but I just kept thinking I couldn't let him touch her, so I kept getting back up, no matter how much he hurt me.

As he reached through the driver's seat window to unlock her door, I picked up a broken piece of glass and plunged it into his neck. Valarie came out moments later, frantic, with a stolen bat she grabbed from one of the display stands. Yet, it was too late, Preston was bleeding out at my feet, and I was looking at prison time.

Or so I thought.

Valarie had grabbed my arms and shook me because all I could do was stare at his dying body, choking and gasping for air as he stared at me helplessly.

"You didn't kill him," Valarie said to me. "I did!" I remember staring at her when she raised the bat and hit him in the head.

One.

Two.

Three.

"Now get in the car while I clean this up," she'd said.

However, I couldn't function and she ended up putting me in the car, as she made a call. At the time, I was in too much shock for it to register who she called, yet he came.

"Get home. I'll take care of it," Kalen told her, and that was the end. Kalen took the rap and said it was self-defense. The camera footage miraculously disappeared, and it was splashed over every newspaper about how Slasher pack's Gamma's son attacked the Blood Alpha's father.

Only four people really knew what happened. Valarie, Kalen, me, and Everly, because when Valarie brought me back to the hotel, she called her to help clean me up and we never spoke of it again. After that, she put me in self-defense classes and watched Taylor for me while I went to every class, determined not to feel helpless again. I still have the bat—the bat Valarie gave me.

Yet right now, as I sit in the parking lot of Valen's hotel—one so similar to that mall lot—I'm reminded of that helplessness, only this time, it's my fault.

My phone vibrates in my bag and Everly's ringtone plays. Reaching over, I grab it out and answer it.

"Where are you? Did you pick up Taylor?"

"No, I didn't want to wake her or Zoe," I answer.

"Okay, where are you?" she asks.

"In the parking lot," I admit. I just can't make myself move and destroy their good night while mine falls apart. So stupid! So, so stupid!! I think when the phone hangs up. I can't remember if I said goodbye or not, or even if I hung up on her. I feel numb, stuck in memories of so many men's worst and the one good one I just drove away.

The driver's side door opens.

"Move over," she says, and I undo my seatbelt and slide into the passenger seat. She climbs in, starting my car and leaving the underground lot, winding her way up the ramps to the rooftop lot. She parks up top and swings her door open.

“Get out,” she says. Walking to the front of the car, she climbs on the hood and rests her head against the window.

“Everly, it's freezing! And you're pregnant,” I tell her, but she pats the hood and I roll my eyes.

“Better warm me up then,” she says, and I laugh, climbing up beside her. She wiggles closer, the metal creaking under our weight. Everly rests her head on my shoulder and I wrap my arms around her. When she asks what happened, I explain as we watch the sunrise together.

“Where's Valen?”

“Dunno. Probably still inside,” she says.

“I'm sorry for ruining your night.”

“Nah, you're good. Valen knows us girls are a package deal.”

I laugh because she's right. No one will ever come between us three—we have a sisterhood stronger than any bond.

“He'll come around, Mace,” Everly says.

“And if he doesn't?” I ask.

“Plan B! And Valen gets an extra wife,” she laughs. I sigh. Everly can always switch a situation around.

“I'm dreading telling Taylor,” I admit, and she nods.

“It'll be alright. She has you, Zoe, and me.”

I nod, again knowing she's right. We have each other. Always each other.

We lie there in silence, watching the colors of the sky change until someone clears their throat. I turn my head to find Valen holding a blanket and a tray of coffee.

“Room for one more? Or will we break this rice bubble car?”

I chuckle. We've definitely dented the hood already, yet we shimmy over and he climbs on next to Everly, passing us our coffees. Everly raises an eyebrow at him cautiously.

“Don't think I don't know that it was Macey or Zoe swapping out the coffee in that jar,” he says, kissing her cheek.

“It was me,” I lie for Zoe, and Everly laughs. Valen clicks his tongue.

“You three are terrible, but I'll let it slide,” he laughs while tossing the blanket over the three of us.

“Did Evie tell ya, you may have an extra wife?” I chuckle, messing around with him.

“Really? Sounds like a bad reality show,” he says, kissing her head and rubbing her arms to warm her freezing skin.

“I'll have the hotel set up one of the apartments for you until you and Tatum sort everything out. If you don't, you know you're always welcome here. Until your hotel opens up, then I'm sure you'll want to move back there,” Valen says.

“Yeah, true. I could stay with Zoe if it puts you out too much,” I tell them.

“Or you could stay in one of the apartments there, since you own it,” Everly says and Valen moves, digging in his pocket. He hands me some rolled-up documents.

“What's this?” I ask.

“We wanted to give it to you and Zoe when we opened back up,” Everly tells me.

I unroll it and look at it to find the title to the hotel. It's been changed. Mine and Zoe's names are now on it, as equal partners with Everly.

“I can't accept this! Zoe won't accept this!” I tell them, shaking my head.

“You can and will. Everly wanted to cut you girls in anyway, but I don't want her taking your money. Save it for the arcade. But you all built that place—made it what it was—and you looked after my mate and son when I didn't, so I will foot the bill as my way of saying thank you. And you will accept and sign it,” Valen says.

“And you're okay with this? It was your mother's,” I ask him.

“Of course! Besides, you just said I have an extra wife, so I'm not losing anything,” he laughs.

“Guys, I can't—”

“If not for you, accept it for Taylor,” Everly says, cutting me off. I nod. Zoe is going to lose her shit.

“Thank you,” I tell them, not knowing what else to say.

They both nod, and Everly lifts my arm and places her head back on my shoulder. Chapter Twenty-Six

Everly

We helped Macey settle in. Valen is pissed off with Tatum and even called him. When they finished speaking, Valen assured me that it wasn't that she can't have kids, it's because she didn't tell him from the start and to give him space. I tried to tell Macey this, but she wouldn't listen, saying she's done and that it's for the best.

This morning, Macey heads out to get Taylor from Zoe's—they'll be staying on the floor below us. I know everything will work out in the end, but Macey is stubborn, and once you hurt her, she walks. She always says she doesn't have time for drama, and she's right. None of us do, yet somehow we always find ourselves stuck in it.

“I'll go grab Valarian from your father,” I tell Valen as I scoop up my handbag from the floor by the hall stand. I rummage for my keys before spotting the ring box—with everything going on, I had forgotten to give it to him. I grab it just as his arms wrap around me from behind and he kisses my shoulder.

As I start to open it, I suddenly realize why Dion was so insistent on this particular ring—because it actually matches and has similar patterns etched around the outside. Valen's hand clamps over my mine, closing the box before I can open it properly.

“Put it in the safe. Save it for when I marry you,” he purrs.

“You don't want to see?” I ask him, and he confirms my thoughts.

“Nope. I assume Dion helped you pick it out, so I know it will match,” he chuckles. I sigh, closing it, though I want to show him the engraving it has inside. I guess it can wait.

“Go get Valarian,” he says, turning me around to face him.

“Then you can put this away then,” I tell him, handing him the box, and he pockets it with a nod.

* * *

Three weeks later

Nixon is really pushing my father to go to the media to back him up, but after his claims, the city is divided. Valen's pack scientists have been trying to replicate the vaccine and have so far been unsuccessful.

Despite Nixon saying he was doing it to help the city and the forsaken, he's refused access to this so-called facility, even when Valen mentioned it at the Alpha conference meeting. Nixon claimed he didn't want the pack becoming involved and the vaccine slipping into the wrong hands.

In other words, he doesn't want the vaccine replicated, knowing he would have nothing to use over my father. And with the debt hanging over my head, he uses it to get his way in the council. Nixon is also still fighting me about the Rogue laws.

We're still fighting for the change, but until the debt is paid, Nixon still has partial ownership; therefore, my vote doesn't count. And if I marry Valen before it's paid, then we're one pack with Nixon still holding partial ownership and Valen's vote won't matter either, leaving the Slasher pack in a precarious position if he goes against Nixon, seeing as they have business dealings together.

Nixon has the people of the city wrapped around his demented finger, and now he claims that my father handed the pack over after threats from Valen. He also claims that removing the restrictions against the Rogues would endanger the city, since they're only one step away from becoming forsaken. His logic makes no sense, yet the media eats it up. Ballots go out and the city is given a voice, yet most are too scared to go against Nixon, and our packs aren't even allowed to vote on it.

The Slasher pack Alpha has confided in Valen that he's also worried about Nixon, and how the constant media attention is dividing the city. Like us, he believes Nixon is doing something that will sway the city to get rid of the rogues completely. We just have to figure out what.

And just to add extra protection for himself, Nixon has reporters with him constantly, so no one can get to him and his every move is watched, suggesting he's being completely open and honest.

The rogues are being painted as villains. Nixon claims that the missing rogues are choosing to turn forsaken, and that it will only be a matter of time before the rest follow to take down the city. He looks like the city's hero and has caused hysteria within the packs, including ours, who have been questioning everything now, so we're at a standstill.

I'm headed to the hotel after dropping Valarian off at school when sirens go off behind me and I'm pulled over by one of Nixon's officers. This is becoming a daily thing, and before the officer even reaches my car, I wind down my window and hold up my license and registration.

"What is it today, Cleo? Bald tires? No, you claimed that yesterday. Tail light? Nah, it can't be that—that was the day before. You're gonna have to be crafty this time," I tell him.

"And why is that?" he asks, peering in the window. He looks in the back at the empty car seat.

"I'm sure you're running out of bullshit to fine me for," I tell him.

This is a waste of time, and it's starting to irritate me. I rest my head back on the headrest, rubbing my hands over my huge swollen belly. I'm only nine weeks pregnant, but my stomach is already looking quite round. Macey was right; I'll be the size of a house!

He examines my truck, writing more tickets and passing them to me—I stuff them in the glove box with the rest. Officer Cleo follows me all the way to the hotel, so I drive extra slowly, earning honks from drivers behind him.

Pulling into the lot, I see the place is nearly halfway to being finished, and I'm more and more excited to open it again. Yet, the bigger I get, the harder it's getting to move around, and I'm constantly hungry and horny. Damn, am I horny! Poor Valen has his stamina tested frequently, that's for sure.

I speak with the project manager while waiting for my mother. She called yesterday, asking if she could go baby shopping with me. It's such a bizarre

situation for me to see her so supportive of this pregnancy, and I have to keep reminding myself things are different this time around. Yet, the same fears remain. Even with Valen's reassurance, I'm constantly waiting to be thrown out and cast away like last time.

I know a lot of it has to do with pregnancy hormones, but my anxiety levels are constantly through the roof. Sleep has become troublesome, not only for me but for Valen. As much as he tries to understand, I know he doesn't get the lock thing. Anxiety is making me paranoid, hormones are making me overly sensitive to everything, and the stress is getting to me.

I'm still talking to the manager when I see my mother's car pull into the parking space beside mine; we're going in her car. I smile and wave when I see her. Quickly, I finish my conversation with the project manager before wandering over to her.

I climb into her car, placing my handbag between my feet before pulling my belt on, while she reaches into the back to retrieve something from the back seat.

She drops a bag on my lap. "I made them something," she tells me, and I open it to find matching yellow crocheted booties and beanies. I smile and thank her, looking at how small they are. They look so tiny in my hands—it's hard to remember Valarian being that little.

"We can go to Baby Bunting first if you like?" she suggests, and I nod.

"Yes. Valen said he would meet us for lunch, though," I tell her. Every weekend now, my parents come over on Saturdays for dinner to spend time with Valarian. At first, Valarian was wary of them, although recently he asked me if he could go to training with my father. It's a little odd and took some convincing for Valen. Valen has been taking Valarian along with him, but only to watch. He thinks Valarian is too little to train, but I was training from the moment I could walk, and I know my father won't allow him to get hurt.

We've merged pack training, so both packs now train in the arena every Sunday together. Any rogues that wish to attend also train with them. I attended the last one, and it was odd seeing my father training my son, so similar to the way he taught me.

For the most part, life is good. Even Ava is even training, and I can tell it means a lot to Mom that everyone is getting along again. However, pulling up at the baby shop, my mother is just staring out the window as she stops the car.

"I should have done this with you last time," she murmurs, gazing blankly up at the store decorations. I swallow but say nothing.

"We failed you," she adds, and I nod, not knowing what to say. They did, big time. I accepted it and moved on from that, or so I thought. My anxiety says otherwise. For the most part, though, I've come to terms with everything and don't see the point of dwelling on things I can't change—it's in the past.

"You're here now. Let's focus on that," I tell her, but she shakes her head.

"Nixon would have made you keep Valarian just to use him against you and your father. We knew that was no place for a child to be raised, amid war. We should have told you, protected you properly, and gone to Valen. We messed up. We thought we were protecting you, but instead, we destroyed you."

"You think you destroyed me? You didn't," I tell her.

"How can you say that? When your father came home and told me you were going to let us be a part of your life, I almost didn't believe him. After everything we did, we didn't deserve a second chance," she says, staring off vacantly.

"No, you didn't deserve a second chance."

She looks at me and nods, her lip quivering.

"But hating you won't hurt you, only me, and I haven't got time to hate, Mom. I haven't got time to harbor the sort of energy that would take. You say you destroyed me—yes, you did. And I'm not sure if I will ever fully forgive that, but at least some good came of it," I tell her.

"Valarie?" she asks, and I nod. Valarie was a massive part of it. Mom knows Valarie took her place in my life, and I'm not afraid of hurting her feelings by her knowing that. Valarie's influence in my life is greater than any passage of time I endured, but that isn't all.

"Yes, but also, through everything, I found myself. I grew up too soon, but finding my place came with finding my purpose—a purpose that was more than just

being the Alpha's daughter. I found my identity, who I am, the person I was born to be. And that isn't in the shadows of another. With that comes acceptance, Mother. I am not some little girl anymore. I am not frightened of the world, because I saw it at its worst, lived and endured it, and it didn't break me. It stoked an inferno inside me to prove everyone wrong. It showed me I was more than an Alpha."

Mom chews her lip. They think I hate them. I don't. I hate the things they have done, hate the feelings they invoked, but not them.

"I don't know if I would feel the same if our roles were reversed," she admits.

"I used to put you and Dad on a pedestal, higher than life. I tried to live up to that ideal. Then it fell apart. I went from future Alpha to rogue. But there was one title that meant more than that—the title of being Valarian's mother," I tell her and she smiles sadly and nods.

"And I was yours. I always regretted not fighting harder for you. I should have, as your mother. We wouldn't be here like this now, wouldn't feel awkward."

So I wasn't the only one that felt odd. My family had become strangers to me over the years, but still, I love them.

"I gained so much more because of it, though. So for that, I don't hate you, because I found I was more than that title. More than your daughter. I just needed to climb my own pedestal and hold myself higher. Doing that made me see everything clearer than when I was just the Alpha's daughter. Now, I am a mother, a friend, a Luna, an Alpha, and I amme. So you don't get to claim that you destroyed me, because I wasn't born yet. I wasn't built. And only I can destroy what I built. Only I can destroy my value. Because it isn't up to you to give it to me. Yes, at first, you destroyed me in a way, but I rebuilt myself—in my image and not that of others," I tell her, reaching over to grip her hand. "And you're here now." I squeeze it.

"So don't reminisce about a past that no longer exists. That was just the foundation of a better future," I tell her, and my hands go to my belly—my future, Valen's, and my kids'.

“So come on, let's shop before I need to pee again. I know that is definitely in my near future,” I laugh, and so does she. We climb out of the car and head inside.

We pick out a few things but, not knowing the genders, we opt for neutral colors. However, on the way to the next store, I notice my mother is becoming fatigued and irritable, not at me but at herself as she tries to keep up. I'm looking at crib sheets and mobiles when she makes a strange noise down the aisle. I glance over my shoulder and see her clutch a rack, her body trembling, making the stand shake under her grip.

“Mom?” I wander back over to her and touch her arm. Her head whips up, canines protruding, and bloodshot eyes stare back at me as she snarls. I stagger back a step and she takes one toward me before shaking her head.

“What did you ask?” she says, looking at me expectantly, like I asked something of her. “Oh, this is cute,” she gushes, holding up a onesie against my belly. Did I imagine it?

“I'm kind of tired. I was thinking of heading home soon,” I lie. Seeing that frightened me.

“What? We just got here. Didn't you want to go to Baby Bunting?” she asks me, and my eyebrows almost rise into my hairline. We just left there!

“We went there first,” I tell her, and she seems confused.

“We bought the bassinets,” I remind her, and her brows furrow.

“I must be tired,” she murmurs, so softly I almost miss it.

I need to speak to Dad and Valen. It's like a switch had flipped within her, and so suddenly.

“Come on, we'll get you home,” I tell her, leaving my basket. I text Dad to come get her, not wanting her driving.

He meets us in the parking lot, and despite me telling her he was coming to get her, she seemed surprised to see him. Dad places her in his car and hands me Mom's keys so I can get back to my car.

“Is she always like that?” I asked worriedly.

Dad sighs. "Yes. When she's due for another dose," he says, looking in the window at her.

"It shouldn't be coming on so quickly," he said, his eyes darkening to black.

"Nixon hasn't stopped treatment?" I asked.

"No, he wouldn't risk it. But the vaccine is not lasting as long now. Wearing off faster, like she's becoming immune to it."

"I'll speak to Valen and see what the scientists have come up with. If need be, go to the media and declare the vaccine isn't working. Maybe we double the dosage?" I ask.

"Nixon would kill me," Dad says.

"Not with everyone watching, he won't. He'll have no choice but to agree or admit his vaccine doesn't work and let other pack scientists in to help. If he does that, he'll lose his sponsors from the other cities. Big pharma won't back him if he can't disprove that it doesn't work," I tell him, and Dad nods.

"It will buy us time to find a cure," I tell him. Dad nods again before turning to me.

"Have you sold that land yet? Nixon said the other day he was going to file against the pack soon if it isn't paid," he says guiltily. I shake my head. Valen said he would sell some of his shares and help cover it until we can sell off the land, but it looks like I may need to dip into Valerian's trust. I'll have to put it back though.

Valen could pay it, but a lot of his money is also the pack's money, not just his to blow how he likes. As it is, our pack is already questioning his authority, what with all the media attention; we don't need tensions to rise more. It could make everything fall apart if he did.

"I'll speak with Valen and try to call a pack meeting. We need to get this taken care of before it's too late," I tell him, and he nods, giving me a quick hug before climbing in the car to take care of my mother.

Chapter Twenty-Seven
Everly

Another four weeks later.

Life is hectic. I've just hit my second trimester, and the hotel is only a few weeks from being finished. Macey and Zoe are doing everything at the moment, from school runs to managing the renovations, now that the structure is fully fixed. Kalen is running the homeless shelter, while Dad works for my pack and Valen his.

Valen's scientists have managed to replicate the inhibitor that Nixon created and have started working on finding a cure. Mom is getting blood tests but the vaccine needs to be administered every few days now; as we suspected, she's becoming immune to the vaccine. The disease has also brought on early onset dementia; she's losing her grip on reality. Dad is beside himself, and Ava is devastated.

Ava and I are tasked with watching over Mom, which means taking her to these appointments. We're also forced to carry tranquilizers everywhere we go with her, just in case, but she seems to have been able to pull herself out of her episodes each time before anything bad happens.

Mom thanks the nurse who takes her blood before the doctor administers the next dose, shivering when the needle stabs into her arm. Because of the inhibitor, her hair is beginning to gray and she's aging quickly.

Valen hates that I offered to help watch over her, said I was putting myself at risk, and he's right, but she's my mother. The woman taught me to walk, speak, and use a damn spoon; I know if our roles were reversed and it was his father, he would be by his father's side too.

My mother is deteriorating fast, and the scientists who are working on the cure are working around the clock. More rogues have gone missing, turning up along the borders as forsaken, which only amps up Nixon's claims that they were deliberately turning forsaken to overrun the city.

Speculation and theories over whose claims to believe hang over the entire city like a dark cloud.

Valen sold most of his shares in businesses outside the city to pay half the debt owed to Nixon. Still, Nixon presses for more, and we've had enough. We've filed against Nixon to have his pack dismantled. My father even went to the media two nights ago and outed everything, including the debt and how Nixon was the one who injected my mother.

Now, we're waiting for the repercussions. Nixon is officially under investigation, and the werewolf council is now involved. Everyone is on edge since Dad went to live across the city.

Unfortunately, that means my father is also under investigation and forced to remain in his pack territory, the same as Nixon; another reason why I have to help Ava with Mom. Dad can't leave pack borders, and until I marry Valen, he has to stay on the opposite side of town because our packs are still separated. However, the forsaken enzyme inhibitor, now that Nixon won't administer it, can only be given on Valen's territory. The investigation is a slow process that will buy us time, though maybe not much with tensions on the rise.

Riots have started in the streets already, and the city wants answers. Nixon's pack has gone quiet—they don't leave their borders, and only trucks with supplies have entered since he found himself in hot water.

Mom is in a cheery mood as we leave the doctor's office, almost childlike and giddy as she climbs in the car. Ava sits next to her. As I clip my seatbelt, my phone starts ringing and I quickly answer it after seeing Zoe's name pop up on the screen.

"Hey, what's up?"

"I need you to pick up the kids for me. We've sprung a leak. And the fire alarms, for some reason, turned on and have yet to turn off. Macey is also locked in the basement because it tripped the locks and I'm currently standing in water to my knees." She sighs heavily, sounding frustrated.

Great, this is all we need. This new tech system is becoming a pain in the ass—so many sensors—and I'm starting to second-guess the entire thing.

"Is Macey alright? Is it flooding down there?"

"Yeah, she's fine. Currently eating all the chocolate and drinking all the wine. At least we know the basement is waterproof," Zoe laughs. I chuckle. More bad news, but we'll live.

"The damage?"

"Expensive," she answers, and I groan.

“Okay, I’ll grab the kids.” I glance at my phone screen, seeing I have to get them now, and curse.

“I may need to drop Mom home first. I only have five seats in this car and I have Mom and Ava with me,” I tell her, which means I’ll be late. Just then, I see Tatum outside, walking directly toward us. Shit! He must have followed us out. He’s on security at the clinic and had tried to stop me on the way in but got called away.

“Never mind, I have a solution,” I tell her, hanging up just as Tatum taps on my window. I push the door open and climb out.

“I thought I missed you,” he says, tugging on the tie around his neck to loosen it.

“Nope, still here. And I kinda need to ask you a favor,” I tell him.

“Great! Then maybe you could do me a favor in return?” he asks. I know what he wants; we’ve all been at Macey for weeks about it, but she refuses to listen; the woman is stubborn. But this is the first time I’ve spoken directly with Tatum about the situation. Usually, all messages come through Valen to me, then through me to Macey. It’s driving me insane!

“You first,” I tell him.

“Macey hasn’t answered a single call from me. She refuses to speak to me and I can’t even mind-link with her since she isn’t pack-linked.”

“Well, since you are about to solve my problem, I have a solution to yours, too,” I chuckle.

“I’m all ears,” he says.

“Macey is stuck in the basement, but it has an intercom. Zoe is held up and I need to get the kids from school, including Taylor. Come with me and help pick them up. I don’t really want them in the car with Mom,” I whisper, and he glances behind me and nods his head.

“Now, that I can do. I haven’t seen Tay in ages. Wait! Will Macey be okay with that?” he asks, and I shrug. Either that or I’ll be twenty minutes late getting them by the time I drive Mom back home.

“Well, I’m out of options, so she’ll get over it.”

“Are you sure?” he asks, looking worried.

“She has no choice. Besides, you should both talk. I’m sick of passing notes for you both,” I tell him, opening my door.

“I’ll meet you at the school,” he says, and I nod. We drive over and pull up out front, and I quickly race in and get the kids from their classes. Valen’s pack school is under heavy security at the moment—all children are required to be signed out. With the growing missing reports of the rogues, better to be safe than sorry.

Walking back out to the car, my phone rings and I pull it from my pocket and answer it. My father is on the other end.

“I’m just about to drop her home,” I tell him.

“No, don’t. Investigators just showed up. I’m calling to see if you could hang onto her a bit longer. She doesn’t do well with strangers in the house and I currently have seven with warrants,” he tells me.

Fuck! Could anything else go wrong today?

I pinch the bridge of my nose in frustration. “That’s fine. I’ll figure it out.”

“Why? What happened?”

“Nothing; I have the kids, is all,”

“She won’t hurt them.”

Yet I can hear the worry in his voice.

“It’s fine. Tatum will drop the girls off and I’ll ask Kalen to get Valarian. Valen doesn’t want Valarian around her when it’s only Ava and me, since I can’t shift,” I explain and Dad sighs.

“As soon as they leave, I’ll send someone to come get her.”

“Okay,” I tell him, hanging up. The kids look up at me, but I shake my head. Walking out of the school, Taylor spots Tatum and squeals, running ahead of me.

“Hey, Tay!” he says, scooping her up, and she wraps her arms around his neck before showing him her pasta necklace around her neck. She takes it off and wraps it around his neck.

"Aw, thanks," he says, pecking her cheek.

"Are we coming back home soon?" she asks. I know she must be confused. Tatum has been part of her life for months now, only for her to wake up and not see him again.

"I'm working on it. And I'm hoping to see your mother this afternoon," he says before looking at me. "I only have two car seats in the car. Her old one and my sister's daughter's one."

"On it!" Ava calls out, pulling Valarian's car seat from out of Valen's car I'm driving. We spend a few minutes anchoring it before buckling the kids in.

"Change of plans," I tell Tatum. "Mom is staying with me for a few more hours, so can you swing by my place before you drop the girls off? Ava texted Zoe on the way over to tell her you were dropping the kids off. She also assured me that Macey is still locked in the basement." I chuckle, knowing it's already been fixed and Zoe is just keeping her locked in there so Tatum can talk to her.

"I feel like a dick." Tatum sighs heavily.

"Yeah, well, she thinks you left because she can't have kids."

"Well, if she would let me explain, that wasn't the reason I left."

"Then why did you leave?" Ava asks, her tone coming off as defensive. He looks back in the windows, ensuring the kids aren't listening.

"Macey said she never wanted kids. She made that clear. I thought I could change her mind. When she finally told me, I felt a little angry that she didn't tell me right away, but more because I had been bugging her about kids for weeks and hurting her the whole time!" He groans.

"I even went and bought baby stuff. I wondered why she got so angry and tossed it out. Then the next day, she told me, and I haven't heard from her since," he says.

"It'll work out," I tell him.

"Yeah, but I feel like shit! My sister went through IVF for years before having Sam. Had I known, I wouldn't have pushed so hard, or at all. My sister hated when

people mentioned anything baby-related or asked when she would have kids. I became one of those people. That's why I left," Tatum growls, shaking his head.

"I was angry, but more embarrassed than anything. I'm happy just having Taylor; even though her toy collection takes up half our house!" he chuckles.

"Well, Zoe locked her in the basement. So now she has no choice but to hear you out," I tell him, and he nods his head, then turns to the driver's door.

"And Tatum?" I call, and he stops, looking at me.

"Every person she has dated walked the same day she told them. She held off with you, hoping you would stay. The only reason she didn't tell you is that she was worried about losing you."

"I know that. But I wasn't going anywhere," Tatum states.

"She didn't know that, though. Before you, she went on dates, and all of them walked out once they learned she couldn't provide them an heir," I tell him, and Tatum frowns, then nods his head before easing himself into the car. I go back to mine and climb into the driver's seat, and Ava gets in the back with Mom.

I get Ava to text Kalen on the drive home; he says he'll be there in half an hour. We are just down the street from home when static crackles over the radio. I flip through the stations to find them all the same. Suddenly, the traffic lights go out up ahead. I peer up at the sky. Is a storm brewing? Yet the overcast day is the same; the sky hasn't darkened more. I glance at Ava, whose face is scrunched up as she peers at her phone. She's been playing some game on it.

"I have no cell service," she says, and I reach over and pass my phone to her; she unlocks it.

"Neither do you," she replies, just as the tornado sirens blare. However, the sirens aren't used for tornado warnings; we never get tornadoes here. I haven't heard that noise since I was a kid—and I only ever heard it once.

My eyes widen and I peer at Tatum's car behind me when Valen's voice and my father's boom through the mind-link.

'All warriors to the borders! Everyone else, get inside and lock your doors!'

I swallow. My mother is blissfully unaware as she speaks to herself, looking at me and smiling.

“What's that noise?” she asks. Neither of us answers her and I glance at Ava. She stares back, looking petrified when Valen mind-links me.

‘Get home and lock the doors!’ he repeats.

‘How many? And where?’ I ask, opening the link to Marcus, Zoe, and Tatum.

‘Get home and lock the door, Everly!’ Valen orders.

‘Valen, how many?!’ I snarl.

‘Hundreds!’ he says.

‘The girls?!’ Zoe screeches through the link.

‘I have them and Valarian. I'm behind Everly now,’ Tatum chimes in as we pull into the hotel parking lot. The shutters are sealed on the lower-level windows and doors. I roll my window down, waving Tatum toward the underground car park and he gives me a thumbs up.

‘Zoe, get to the basement! I'll get to Casey!’ Marcus orders her, and she whimpers before being shoved out of the link.

‘Where are they coming in?’ Tatum asks.

‘Everywhere!’ Marcus and Valen say. The mind-link turns to chaos and I nearly run into a pillar before I manage to force everyone out of my head. We pull up and start yanking the kids from the cars when my mother finally comes back to her senses.

“We’re under attack,” she gasps as she shoves them toward the elevators.

“That’s...?” she starts, looking at Ava, who nods to her.

Valarian hits the button, but the doors don't open. The emergency generators don't operate them, leaving only the stairs.

“Fuck!”

The roller shutters start dropping to the underground parking lot as we rush the kids to the fire exit. The bells sound as I throw the door open and we usher the

kids inside the stairwell when snarling growls echo through the underground parking lot.

Tatum pivots just as a group of forsaken rush inside the parking garage. He rips his shirt off before looking at me over his shoulder.

“Get inside, Luna!”

My heart races as I stare at the forsaken stalking into the place.

“Tatum!” I call out. Tatum's eyes are on the forsaken, and he is too focused on them circling him.

“Inside, Luna! Now!” he roars before shifting as they run at him. My eyes widen, and I rush through the door, slamming it shut and locking it. Turning around, I see the kid's frightened faces peering back at me.

“Tatum?” Taylor says, her eyes on the door, where vicious growls and banging come through.

“He's okay. He'll be okay,” I tell Taylor while turning her and pushing her up the stairs. Ava stares at me. I nod to her and her eyes turn glassy, but she nods once, pushing Mom up the stairs. We're locked in the stairwell, all the doors are locked as we climb the levels.

“Valen, we can't get inside!” I call through the link. I get no answer, meaning he's blocking me out of whatever is happening outside. We're halfway up the stairwell when we hear desperate banging on the door below.

“Tatum!” Taylor squeals, rushing back down. I just manage to grab her before she gets past me when I hear the door burst open below. Ava looks over the side of the railing and the blood drains from her face. I follow her gaze over to see forsaken rushing up the steps.

“Run!” I scream. Ava grabs Valarian and Mom, who's struggling to climb the stairs—she's exhausted after being given the inhibitor.

“Get to the roof!” I scream while grabbing Casey and Taylor.

Mom rips her hand from Ava.

"I'm slowing you down. Get the kids up!" she growls at Ava, who looks at me. I place Taylor on the ground and Ava's hand locks around her wrist.

"Valarian, like we practiced at training," I tell him. "Don't look back. Don't stop."

"Mom," Valarian stammers with tear-filled eyes, and his lip quivers.

"Don't look back. Don't stop," I repeat, and he nods. Seeing the fear on his face makes me want to hug him, but he listens and takes off running up the steps while Ava hauls the girls up behind him.

"Three more flights, Mom," I tell her. She keeps trying to pull my hand from hers, but I snarl at her before Commanding her.

"Move faster! Now!" I order. I hear my sister and the kids make it to the roof while vicious snarls come from below, but the Command works, and she's forced to move quickly. Only, they're gaining ground fast. We're one set of steps away from the roof when I hear a snarl behind me.

Mom freezes and so do I. Turning, I find the two forsaken on the steps prowling, stalking up the steps toward us. My mother's hand grips the back of my shirt.

"You're gonna run for me now, baby girl," she murmurs as we both walk backward up the stairs as they hunt us. Their fur is falling out and what's left is matted; blood drips from their muzzles as they snap their teeth and snarl while creeping ever closer up the steps.

I shake my head.

"I'm proud of you, baby. But I need you to do this for me," she says. I hear her bones start snapping just as she whips me backward behind her, and I only just catch myself

"Tell your father and sister I love them," she says just before shifting completely. I scream as she leaps at them and they begin tearing her apart.

I go to take a step toward her when I look down at my stomach. Tears burn my eyes, but I tear my gaze from the bloodshed and run for safety. Chapter Twenty-Eight

Everly

My hands hit the door, jarring them with the force as I burst onto the roof. Ava screams and shoves the kids behind her body, using herself as a shield, and I twist, slamming the door shut. The racket coming from the stairwell is deafening and I stare at the door where I had just abandoned my mother. Ava rushes over, jamming a piece of a broken pipe she ripped off from somewhere through the handle and pipeline that runs to the vents on the roof above it, and I finally pull my gaze from the door.

All I can think is, I left her in there. I ran and left her behind.

Ava whimpers as she secures the bar; I don't have to tell her. She knows because Mom didn't come out behind me. As she turns to look at me, I can see her heartbreak.

My entire body shakes with adrenaline and shock.

I left her.

My thoughts are consumed with that thought when a tiny hand slips into mine. Looking down, I find Valarian looking at me.

"Grandma will be okay," he says, only I know she won't be. I swallow and blink back tears before turning to him and picking him up.

"Yep. She found another open door," I tell him while walking over to the girls. I place him beside them where they're huddled on the ground by the air-conditioner vent.

Ava moves to the ledge of the building and I follow her, checking over my shoulder to make sure the kids don't follow. Together, we look over.

The city is in utter chaos and ruins. Buildings in the distance are on fire, screams ring out loudly, and a frenzied battle can be seen on the main street even from here. Warriors are trying to hold the forsaken back from their borders.

Valen is right—there are hundreds of them. They just keep coming. The street directly below us is a scene from a horror movie as our men try to keep them back. Two forsaken are dragging another wolf off, and I don't want to think about what they're doing to him as he yelps loudly.

"Her tether?" Ava asks me, and I swallow.

“Not broken yet. She’s fighting,” I whisper, staring out blankly. I notice from up here that not one of those forsaken are trying to get into Nixon's pack directly across from us. They’re targeting ours and Slasher pack.

“How is the city outnumbered?” Ava gasps when an explosion goes off down by the café on the main street.

Carnage.

There is no other way to describe it, and the pack warriors are outnumbered. Slasher pack’s men are trying to stop them from getting in, but a few slip through, and just like our men, they can't hold them back—they just keep coming. It should be impossible that so many could go unnoticed!

One of the high-rise apartments across from us catches on fire and more screams ring out from the apartment building as forsaken get inside. I just hope our roller shutters and the locked stairway doors hold.

The mind-link opens up, and I hear Zoe.

‘Is Casey alright?’

‘We’re on the roof,’ I answer while peering over my shoulder to look at the children. She sighs before sobbing through the link.

‘And Marcus? Is he there yet? I’m being blocked out. I can't get a hold of anyone,’ she asks, but I can't lie to her.

‘Not yet, but.... Zoe, the city...’ I don't finish. The place looks like a battlefield.

‘As long as Casey is safe,’ she says.

‘Are you safe?’ I ask her.

‘I'm in the basement with some of the younger workers. But Macey, she...’

‘Macey what, Zoe?’ I ask, panicked.

‘She heard the sirens when I opened the doors and bolted out. We tried to stop her,’ Zoe says. ‘She has no phone. We have no service in here, and—’

‘She has no pack link,’ I finish for her. My heart beats faster at her words.

‘We think she went to warn the rogues at the reserve and homeless shelter. This side hasn't been hit yet,’ Zoe tells me.

Yes, because they’re all over here trying to access our pack and Slasher’s, while Nixon's remains untouched. That isn't a coincidence.

The mind-link is stretched when I feel Valen force it open and Zoe is shoved out.

‘We’re trying to get to you. You just need to hold tight a little longer,’ he tells me, though pain radiates through the bond and I know he’s hurt.

‘What about Marcus? Zoe is trying to get a hold of him.’

‘No idea. Everyone is blocking the pack link so we don't become distracted. We—’

The mind-link cuts off abruptly, only for Zoe to reopen it, having felt the connection from Valen override hers.

‘Marcus?’

‘They lost sight of each other. Marcus is fine, Zoe. Valen would have felt the tether break,’ I tell her, though I have no idea if that will remain true. I feel helpless as I watch our pack getting slaughtered on the streets below while I’m holed up on a roof, unable to help them.

* * *

Tatum

Teeth, claws, blood, fur.

Everything is a blur as I try to hold them back. I’m screaming through the link for Valen to get here as a few slip past me. Men call through the link that they’re on the way, yet as one forsaken falls, another replaces it. They seem to just keep coming and I’m taking a beating.

The venom in my system is starting to make my muscles ache and lock. The only thing keeping me on my feet is adrenaline and knowing that Taylor, Valarian, and Casey are in that stairwell. I just hope they get inside the building and aren't sitting ducks in that stairwell.

My back leg is ripped into as two attack simultaneously, snarling. I pivot and twist, nearly ripping my leg off in the process.

Yelps and snarls echo from the stairwell, causing me to become distracted as I try to double back, only to be jumped on. His claws rip through my fur, making my back arch, and his teeth are like a serrated knife as they tear into the back of my neck.

The stairwell. The stairwell, I keep thinking, trying to toss him off as more flood into the stairs, escaping past me while I'm being ripped to shreds. My teeth sink into its front paw and I feel the crunch as its bones break under the pressure of my teeth, forcing him to release me long enough to fling him off. I turn, running for the stairwell, my vision blurring as I go, just as forsaken are suddenly running back out of the stairwell.

My heart jolts at seeing the rabid creatures running from something. One drops as a huge, molten-colored wolf tears into its neck. It takes me a second to realize it's Claire. Yet, she doesn't look like a pack wolf—she looks like one of the forsaken. Her blood-red eyes are savage, and venom is oozing and dripping from her teeth. Panic courses through me, knowing if she turns on me, I'll have to kill Everly's mother. Her head twists in my direction and her lips pull back as she drops her head, snarling and stalking towards me—then she runs at me.

I snarl back when she lunges, but she misses. I jump aside, skidding on the slick, blood-soaked floor, only to see her rip into a forsaken that must have been coming up behind me. Four more rush through the barrier and I leap over her, jumping into the fray.

She's a full-blown forsaken. However, she's fighting on our side, not theirs, which gives her an advantage, as they keep recognizing her as their own. With the savage gleam and the way she fights, I can tell John trained her himself—she's just as lethal, but with a vicious edge.

She tears into them, locking her jaws each time and ripping them to shreds, not even flinching as they tear into her back. Relentlessly, she fights, saving my ass twice, and I hers, as we fight tail to tail, trying to hold them back.

My back leg is useless—I'm running on three, the other hanging behind me.

'We're in the street!' Valen calls, but I can't reply. I'm too focused on the wolves in front of me. We need to try to push them back to the street through the broken roller shutters.

Claire is taking on three, but even she is on the losing end this time. I rip off one on her that's tearing into her flank, while her jaws lock around another one's neck.

My paw swipes at the other and together, we push them back, herding them up the ramp. Daylight breaks as we keep forcing them further. Suddenly, she lets out a whimper just as we make it out the front of the hotel. Pivoting, I run towards her when a deafening howl rips through the air as she sways on her feet.

Forsaken are swarming her; her throat is torn out. Her front legs buckle. A giant black and gray wolf starts wrenching them off her as another forsaken tackles me. I break the wolf's neck and I turn my head to find the black and gray wolf is John. The three forsaken that had attacked Claire are lying dead around him, and John now stands naked, petting her wolf. Her chest rises and she wheezes as blood pools around her—then her chest appears to deflate. The agonized howl that turns to a wail shakes me to the core when I hear Everly's keening scream ring out above as she feels her mother's link disintegrate.

Everyone stops at the noise—even the forsaken, who are flooding into the street. Valen's wolf is huge and the one beside him is equally big; I recognize the wolf as the Slasher pack Alpha. Marcus' gray wolf rushes past me toward the forsaken, his coat tainted red, and the chaos starts again.

John's angered roar makes my fur stand on end. He seems to erupt as he shifts and barrels towards the forsaken with blind fury, ripping them apart as the bloodshed starts again.

Now an observer, I realize something. The forsaken are only heading here and for the Alpha's homes, making this obviously targeted and well-thought-out. The information I hear coming through the link says the side of the city where the rogue's live and Everly's hotel stands remain untouched. The carnage is only happening on one side.

Nixon has to be behind it. And he's casting the rogues as the ones starting it. He's trying to divide the city.

Pandemonium ensues as we battle. Our men are falling, yet the forsaken keep coming. The four Alphas—new and old—work together, getting right in the

middle of the battle. Valen and the Slasher pack Alpha, even John and Kalen, are lethal beasts. They are huge, towering beasts compared to the forsaken. Their coats are dripping in blood, both theirs and the forsaken; there's not a speck of fur left untainted.

This is what makes them Alphas—pure, lethal muscle, and precision like no other. Despite their massive sizes, they're fast, running through forsaken like bowling balls knocking down pins. The street's gutters run with rivers of blood, and it stains everything.

They don't stop, but neither do the forsaken. These numbers should not exist! How can they outnumber us? Three packs are fighting, and we are still somehow outnumbered.

Suddenly, a tidal wave of snarls shakes the windows. The deafening force of pure rage reverberates around the street and everyone stops to stare down the road, searching for the source of the rumbling noise.

Macey appears.

My heart stops as she runs down the street straight at us with a huge bat in her hands. Fear courses through me and I run toward her. Forsaken take off in her direction, only to start skidding across the ground, trying to stop and double back. What could scare so many forsaken so badly? I stare up ahead of them in shock.

Hundreds of rogues are racing up the street toward us. I stop as she leads her army of rogues to the battle. They are a sight to be seen.

Our men are given some relief as rogues jump into battle without hesitation, saving the very people who shunned them, and cast them out. Pack members and rogues are fighting alongside each other—fighting as one—painting the street red with the blood of the forsaken and proving their innocence in their own desperate need to fight for our city.

Teeth sink into my neck and I'm flung across the road. My head smashes into the gutter, and I can hear screaming in the distance before I feel a violent breeze rustle the fur on my face as her bat smashes into the wolf's skull with a thud.

My eyes blur as I open them to see her bashing its head into the earth with brute force. Her clothes are stained with blood, her arm bleeding from where she's

been bitten. But even covered in blood, she is beautiful as she fights. I catch sight of Zoe's small, white wolf protecting Marcus, who is trying to protect her.

My heart thumps and feels like it's left my body as I try to get to my feet, staggering as the venom takes hold. Macey screams. Only, it isn't a scream of pain, but a war cry as she flings her bat at the wolf ripping into Alpha John. A grunt is knocked out of her when she's tackled from behind, only for Kalen to rip the wolf off her. I'm delirious from the venom. As I try to find my footing and get to her, I feel my surroundings flip and turn on their axis before I succumb to the nothingness. Chapter Twenty-Nine

Everly

There are no winners in war. Either way, somebody loses. Even the winners lose; they lose friends, family, humanity, and themselves. We may have won the battle, but no one truly wins the war because no one walks away the same after witnessing such carnage, such loss, and it always ends in grief.

Grief shows you how valuable life is, but also how cruel; how precious life is, but also how short; the darkness of loss and how torturous it can be when you lose someone you can't imagine living without.

Yet, somehow you do. Somehow, you're still breathing, even when the pain of grief is so intense you believe it will kill you—sometimes wishing it would, just so you don't have to know the pain of losing them. Nothing will kill your soul more than losing a loved one. Nothing will break you down more than realizing you will never hold them again, never hear their voices, never see them.

Standing in this hall with hundreds of faces staring back at us, you can see their grief as if they wear it like armor; as if it's branded into their very being like a tattoo, screaming their anguish. You can hear their gut-wrenching wails as they realize the pain they are feeling isn't hurt loved ones but broken bonds, broken families.

Just broken.

We stand on a podium while Valen calls out the names of loved ones, needing them to come forward to claim their dead sons, dead mates, and dead parents.

He does this while trying to mask my grief, trying to keep the bond blocked. I witness theirs, feel theirs, with each broken tether.

The way Valen calls out the names, it's almost as if he's desensitized to death, expressionless, emotionless. Yet, through the bond, I know he's barely holding it together as their screams and pain ripple through him like a stone tossed in the lake, that rippling tide on repeat. I don't know how he bears it. He's doing his best to block it all, but those emotions that sift through, I feel those. I feel them—our pack—and I feel him

We won the battle, but we lost too. One hundred seventy-six lives were lost, and ninety-one bonds were broken. Most of those deaths were men, and she-wolves rarely live without their mates, meaning a possible ninety-one more lives will wither away until either they die slowly or their bond does. Seeing my father sitting staring vacantly ahead, I know he wishes it had killed him instantly.

It feels surreal, like a nightmare, a loop of horror that we are desperately trying to wake up from. When Valen finishes, we make our way out and meet with the council investigators. They were raiding my father's house when the war started and were quick to jump in to help. Then, while we were cleaning up, they raided Nixon's pack.

A vast majority of the forsaken turned out to be from his pack, his own people, unbonded males that apparently volunteered in the name of science—they put up their hands for their own suicide. Half his pack gone, and for what? The other half is shocked.

Nixon used the attack as a distraction to escape from the city, while his pack was left abandoned. As each forsaken shifted back after their death, we were left with their true identities. He killed his people.

Those that weren't from his pack were the missing rogues. They were promised money, a cure, and a pack for their sacrifice. A sacrifice that ended in their deaths. Some thought it was worth the risk.

We were shocked to find that his daughter is dead. He had apparently switched off her life support before fleeing the city, leaving his son behind in a padded room—the man that holds the cure in his veins. His blood is the key needed to save them.

The investigators told us that Carter is shocked by his father's plans, that he had nothing to do with it or knew anything of it. That he, too, is a victim of his father's cruelty.

Nixon had moved all his money and taken every cent the pack had—the pack that is now left to Carter to deal with—before killing Carter's sister and running away like a coward, leaving behind his mate and son. I thought I knew evil, but Nixon proved he's more than evil. There isn't an accurate word to describe what he's done to this city, to his people and his family.

Carter handed his blood samples to Slasher and Valen's packs for testing. He's a miracle. Nixon had accomplished something, at least. He managed to find a cure for the incurable. Of course, we also learned that he had intended to infect the world and then sell the cure to them.

Zoe is standing by the car with the kids and Kalen. I touch Valen's arm and he looks over at me. I nod toward Zoe, and he gives a swift nod before I make my way over to them. Valarian and the girls are sitting in the back of the car with the heat going; the night has turned terribly cold.

Cold. Just like the emptiness we all feel. I check on them before leaning against the hood next to Zoe when my father wanders out, looking rather lost. I'm about to go to him when Kalen grips my arm.

"I'll go check on him," Kalen says, and I nod gratefully.

"Macey is still with Tatum. He's gone in for surgery to try to save his leg," Zoe whispers to me.

"And Macey? She was bitten, wasn't she?"

Zoe shakes her head. "She isn't infected. She called me before; her blood tests came back clear. Tatum is riddled with venom though, and they aren't sure if he'll make it."

"Marcus?"

She nods toward him where he's walking over to Valen, who is still talking to the council investigators.

“He’s fine. Beta blood. He’s stronger than most, but so many are infected. Hopefully, Carter's blood really is the cure that's needed,” Zoe says, and I swallow.

“Have you seen Ava?” I ask her.

“I gave her your spare house keys.”

I nod. Ava had said she wanted to stay with us for the night. Dad, too, is staying at our place, not wanting to go home without Mom.

We wait. Neither of us knows what to do, so I leave it to Valen and the Slasher Pack Alpha. They seem to be in their element dealing with all the aftermath, and I don't know the first thing about dealing with the werewolf council or what we do from here.

When they’re finished talking and everyone eventually leaves, Valen comes over with Marcus and rubs his hands up my arms. His touch is warm, making me realize how cold my skin is.

“You should be in the car. It’s too cold out here,” he murmurs.

“Where did our fathers go?”

“Your father is staying with mine. Yours was apparently pretty drunk by the time Dad finished talking to him.”

“I could go for a damn drink myself,” Marcus says, sounding exhausted as he nudges Valen. Zoe shoots him a look, knowing I don't like Valen drinking. He’s been drinking again over the last few weeks and I don't want him to fall back into old habits.

“Come on, I should get you home,” Valen says, pulling me closer to use himself as a shield to protect me from the wind. He moves to the back of Zoe's little car where Valarian has fallen asleep with the girls.

“Am I taking Taylor, or are you?” I ask Zoe.

“Marcus and I will take her,” Zoe answers, and I nod, grabbing Valarian's blanket after Valen grabs him.

I kiss both the girls, who are sleeping soundly, before following Valen to our car. He puts Valarian in the back and I place his blanket over him while clipping him in. We drive home in devastating silence.

I'm glad it's dark because I know the roads are still painted in blood. A storm is brewing above and I'm hoping most of it is washed away by morning. Yet, we still have plenty of clean-up to do, and plenty of people still missing because it was dark before we found the vast majority of bodies.

Valen parks out in front of the hotel instead of underground. I stare at the front by the hedges where my mother's body was before Valen grips my hand, pulling my gaze away. Those were the most harrowing hours of my life, sitting on the rooftop watching, trying to keep the kids distracted from witnessing the horrifying scene below us, trying not to scare them. When it was all said and done, Valen's desperation to check on us sent him to the roof, which was not ideal, considering there wasn't a speck of skin that wasn't covered in blood.

Luckily, the kids were half asleep, so hopefully, the girls won't remember seeing him, though I know our son saw him. He didn't stop trembling until after Valen stepped out of the shower clean and Valarian realized it wasn't his father's blood, though he's remained silent ever since.

It had been impossible to convince the kids to keep their eyes closed while we left the roof, but Marcus brought blankets up to toss over their heads so they wouldn't see the forsaken my mother killed in the stairwell while we carried them to the first accessible floor.

When we finally get home, I unlock the door and Valen immediately goes to put Valarian in bed. The sound of crying I can hear up the hall makes me move to the guest bedroom. I nudge the door open to find Ava in bed, huddled under the blankets, her body shaking as she sobs.

Quietly, I move toward the bed before climbing in behind her and wrapping my arms around her, hugging her as close as my belly will allow. I hold her as she cries, the sound breaking me into a million fractured pieces with sharp edges that pierce my soul.

"She's gone," Ava whispers. I nod my head against her back and snifle.

"I know," I whisper, not knowing what else to say. I can't take her pain; it's mine, too, though I wish I could at least stop her from feeling it.

She cries herself to sleep, and I hold her until then. Slipping out of bed, I move toward my room and push the door open to find Valarian in our bed, Valen wrapped around him. I slip my pajamas on, and Valen lifts his head.

"He came in about twenty minutes ago," he whispers. I nod my head before quickly slipping into bed on Valarian's other side. Valen drapes his arm across both of us and his hand rubs the side of my belly.

"I was worried you would try fighting," Valen murmurs, propping his head on his hand to look at me. I shake my head, place my hand over his on my belly, and lean forward, kissing Valarian's head.

"No. I wanted to, but it wasn't worth the risk, and I would have been no help anyway; I was where I needed to be and where Mom wanted me to be—safe with Val," I tell him. Chapter Thirty

We've had an entire week of funeral services. Everything feels wrong, though.

Tatum is in a medically induced coma. They saved his leg, but the infection has spread everywhere and Macey has been sick with worry, barely leaving his bedside. Zoe and I have been alternating taking Taylor.

Ava has busied herself with work and so have I. Anything to take my mind off how quickly everything has spiraled out of control.

All morning, I was holed up in my office—which is finally finished—going over documents from both packs and the accounting from the hotel, leaving me scraping money left and right to pay bills. Then I spent all afternoon helping Ava move her stuff back home from the apartment out behind my hotel, which Macey will now take over.

When I finally get home from work and walk in the door, Valen looks over the back of the couch; the beer in his hand doesn't escape my eyes as he quickly places it down to turn to look at me.

"I put your dinner in the microwave, and Valarian asked for you at bedtime."

I nod while dumping my handbag on the hall stand.

“Why didn’t you answer your phone? I’ve been calling all afternoon. And you shoved me out of the mind-link,” he says, his tone clipped at the end.

“I was with my father and Ava. I helped her move back in with Dad,” I answer while moving to the kitchen. I put my dinner on to heat and finally sit down to wait. I’m exhausted, and even eating seems like a major task.

Valen strolls in and I eye the bottle in his hand. He quickly tips it up and drains it, then tosses it in the recycling. He catches me watching him when he turns around and arches an eyebrow.

“What?” he demands.

“You know how I feel about you drinking, and I definitely don’t want you drinking around Valarian,” I tell him, and he scoffs.

“Right. Because I’m an alcoholic?” He clicks his tongue and shakes his head. I lean back from the counter and fold my arms across my chest.

“Don’t put words in my mouth, Valen; I never said that. I just said I don’t like you drinking, but hey, if you say you are, you must be.” I sigh; I would rather not argue tonight. He growls but moves closer, his hands going to my bump as he caresses it.

“I only had one, and Valarian is asleep. I am not an alcoholic. Geez, Everly, I don’t obliterate myself,” he says, leaning closer. He dips his face closer, his lips brushing mine softly, before biting my bottom lip playfully. I roll my eyes, pushing on his shoulders, and he chuckles, stepping back and opening the microwave when it dings. He grabs the plate out, setting it on the kitchen counter.

“Did you sort out the finances for the hotel and find out how much is owed to the contractors?” he asks, and I nod.

“And you paid it?” he asks. I growl before walking over to my handbag and grabbing his card out. I hand it to him, but he pushes my hand away.

“Keep it,” he says, and I shake my head but place it back while he fetches me a knife and fork.

“The real estate agent called today. She said Alpha Daxon from Slasher pack wants to repurchase the land from behind his pack,” I tell him, and he nods.

“Yes, he wants to build some training grounds. He even mentioned wanting to train with our pack for a bit.”

“Sounds like a plan. Also I got a weird message from Carter today,” I admit. Valen points to the table, and I sit down while he brings my plate over, setting it in front of me.

“How did he get your number?” Valen asks, and I shrug. It wouldn’t be hard, probably from his father’s files.

“What did he want?”

“Asked if we had settled the debt. Carter said he found the paperwork and bank statements.”

“What did you say?”

“I told him the truth, then offered him the titles for the back of his pack, but he said no.”

“Yeah, his father wiped every cent from the pack's accounts. I’d say the pack will be dismantled if he doesn’t do something soon.”

“So, what should I do?”

“I’ll talk to him tomorrow and handle it. From what the investigators said, we owe Carter nothing. As soon as Nixon’s found, he’ll stand before the council and probably be executed, anyway, and Carter isn’t a part of that agreement, so has no warrant to claim it.”

“Have they seen any sign of Nixon?” I ask, moaning as I spear a piece of ravioli and pop it into my mouth—the sauce tastes heavenly. Valen chuckles, leaning down and licking it off my lips.

“I have something you can moan around that tastes better.”

“Somehow, I think this tastes better,” I tease, spearing another piece. He laughs, pecking my lips before walking off into the bathroom. I hear the water turn on a few seconds later while I turn back to my food.

* * *

Everly

Several Weeks Later

Valen sits nervously beside me, his foot tapping as Doc squirts the lubricant over my huge belly; the coldness of it makes me want to pee. It's my twenty week ultrasound already.

I glance at the clock above the door. Macey said she wanted to come. Maybe she got caught up at the hospital. Tatum is getting better with the infection gone, but because of the nerve and tissue damage left behind from his leg being nearly completely torn off, he has to go through physical therapy to learn how to use it again. He could shift to heal himself, but they aren't sure if his leg would shift with the rest of him, so until he's healed completely, it isn't worth the risk.

Doc starts the scan, taking measurements, when we hear a knock. He leans over on his stool, opening the door, and Macey walks in, tiptoeing as if making noise will somehow disturb the doctor. She bends over and pecks my cheek before deliberately messing Valen's hair, earning a growl from him as he swats her hands away. She laughs and stares at the screen before squinting.

"So, you all placed your bets?" Doc asks. He knows from previous scans that Macey and Valen have a bet on the genders; hence why she's here.

"Yep! Two boys and a girl," Valen says.

"Nope! I say three girls," Macey says.

"Well, for your sake, I hope there's at least one boy. Valarian said last time you promised to wrestle the boy way, and you'll break that boy's heart," Doc laughs. Valerian came to my last ultrasound with Valen. I will give Valen one thing. He has never missed an appointment. He's even had to remind me to attend a couple.

"Well, Mom, what do you think?" Doc asks.

"Two girls and a boy," I tell him, crossing my fingers. He laughs and moves the device across my belly. I close my eyes when he declares Baby A to be a girl.

"The next one is a boy," Valen says.

"Sorry, Alpha, Baby B is a girl, too," Doc says.

"Ha! It's a girl, and you owe me three foot rubs, and you have to refer to me as 'oh favorite one' for a full week!" Macey says. She rubs her fingers together, then

rubs the side of my belly. Doc chuckles and shakes his head, moving the device over my belly again.

“Stop with your karma voodoo!” Valen snaps at her, having already lost his bet.

“And what do you win?” Doc asks, since it’s down to us girls.

“A jar of coffee,” I say, and he turns his head to look at Valen.

“She isn’t human, Valen. I told you to stop reading those baby books. She can drink as much coffee as she wants,” Doc says, and I purse my lips.

“We don’t know that for sure.”

“Do you have a doctor's degree?” Macey asks.

“Just because you want to risk our kids coming out with three heads—” he retorts.

“I would hope so! Only two heads would be an issue, since there are three of them,” Macey taunts.

“You know what I mean,” Valen growls at her, and Doc laughs at their banter as he moves the device over my belly; it takes a while because the little bubba is hiding behind the others, but he’s finally able to get a good enough view.

“Baby C is.....”

Valen and Macey lean forward eagerly.

“A girl!” Doc says, and Macey squeals and jumps in victory while Valen deflates like a balloon.

“Looks like you wrestled in a girl way, Alpha.”

“Apparently so,” Valen mutters.

“Oh! That is so much pink!” Macey squeals excitedly.

“Maybe we can dress one in blue and hope Valarian doesn’t notice?” Valen says thoughtfully.

“He’ll notice,” I deadpan, and Valen sighs.

“I don’t know what to do with girls,” he pouts before glaring down at his crotch as if it wronged him in some way. “You had one job! And you give me three girls! You couldn’t have shot one boy out?!” he growls at his dick.

“I think he’s just trying to hide his excitement for the three foot rubs he owes me,” Macey says, and Valen pulls a face.

“I am not touching those Neanderthal feet!”

“A deal is a deal. Oh, and I’ll let my toenails grow just for you before I claim my first one.”

Valen pales and looks like he’ll puke.

“Tell you what? I’ll take one foot rub off if you give Everly her jar of coffee.”

“Wipe all three and I will.”

“She can drink coffee, and no, I’ll get rid of one,” Macey says, holding up one finger. He growls and scrunches his face up.

“Fine, and you better scrub those damn feet raw. And I’m wearing gloves,” he snarls when Doc leans down and whispers to me.

“Do they always fight like this?” he asks.

“No, this is their love language, and Macey will win,” I tell him. He laughs, finishing the scan.