

Accidental Surrogate For Alpha By Caroline Above

Chapter 21- Sinclair Confides in his father

Vouchers

Sinclair

I think my wolf is broken.

Legitimately.

I can't figure out what on earth is going on with him. Last night the threat against Ella made my heart practically leap out of my chest, but that's to be expected. What was not to be expected was how upset my wolf became when he realized that Ella had washed my scent off. Despite what I told her, it had nothing to do with protecting our cover, and everything. to do with him throwing a tantrum that she was no longer scent marked.

Being naked with her was both a blessing and a curse. I could happily admire her beautiful body all day long, but the intimate physical contact got me more than a little excited. My balls were so blue by the time my wolf was satisfied that the only way I could calm down was by listening to the baby's heartbeat. It was an important reminder to be gentle with Ella, and gave me more joy than I can express.

My me*tal link with the pup is a fleeting thing, and most of the time all I can hear are blips of emotion. The baby is happy when it hears Ella's voice or smells me, it likes it best when we're together, and more often than not it simply sleeps. Still, merely being near it has given me new appreciation for my own father. I never knew it was possible to love someone I've yet to even meet so much, and the power of the bond astonishes me. Moreover, I want Dad to meet Ella – he's had a rough few years, and I can't think of anything that would

make him happier than meeting the woman carrying his first grandchild.

Ella looks nervous as the car moves along through the heavy mid-day traffic. I haven't told her who I'm taking her to meet yet and I'm getting the impression she doesn't like surprises. She's a fascinating puzzle, this little human. Clearly

accustomed to great hardship and yet obviously used to getting her own way. I suppose after such a turbulent life, control is a crutch for her, so much so that she panics when it slips out of her fingers. Is it terrible that I enjoy throwing her off balance so much, knowing what I do about her past? She's just so cute when she gets all riled up – I can't help myself.

When the car finally pulls to a stop, Ella blinks up at me hopefully. "Will you tell me now?"

“Come on, trouble.” I chuckle, sliding out of the car and extending my hand to help her do the same, “You’ll find out soon enough.”

Ella grumbles mutinously under her breath as she sets off down the street, and I catch her waist, pulling her under my arm. “Would you like to say that a bit louder?” I intone ominously.

“No.” She responds tartly. “I would not.”

“You know I have supernatural hearing, right?” I question, watching her eyes widen anxiously.

She processes this for a moment, then narrows her eyes suspiciously.

“Could you really hear me?”

“Not this time.” I admit, “you did a good job mumbling.”

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“Then I’ll do a good job in the future. too.” Ella decides, nodding in approval of her decision.

I’m reluctant to laugh and encourage her defiance, but I can’t stop the corners of my mouth from quirking up. I steer her into the house, pushing through the heavy door without pausing to knock. As we stride inside the familiar space, I’m transported back to my childhood, remembering walking these same halls as a young boy. It’s not as luxurious as my current estate, but it’s undeniably the place I consider home.

“Whose house is this?” Ella asked, surveying the comfortable rooms curiously.

“Actually, this is the house where I grew up.” I finally share, nodding towards the photos on the wall.

Ella is so preoccupied studying the images that she doesn’t seem to notice my father wheeling into the hall, seated comfortably but permanently in a high-tech wheelchair. Either Ella really is interested in the images before her, or human hearing is even worse than I realize, because she doesn’t turn around until I speak.

“Dad this is Ella.” I nudge her forward so they can meet, “Ella, this is my father.”

Ella blinks, seeming unable to find the words to reply. This was clearly the last thing she expected. My father was once a

I terrifying man – every bit as tall and imposing as I am myself. Now however, he’s a shadow of the man he used to be. He was paralyzed from the waist down more than five years ago now, and even though the injury stole his title, vitality and mobility, he’s never let it dampen his spirit. In intelligence and will he’s as strong as he’s always been, and I still learn from

him every time we talk.

“I hoped he would bring you to meet me soon.” Dad tells Ella. “I’m so thrilled that you found each other. I’ve been waiting for a grandchild for some time now.”

“It’s an honor to meet you.” Ella replies, “I’m happy too, I think we’ve all been waiting.”

“You can say that again.” I chime in.

“Please, come in, I want to hear everything about my new daughter-in-law.”

Dad encourages, wheeling into the living room. Ella, however, is frozen in place. At first I thought his allusion to our fake union might have blindsided her, but the more I watch, the more I suspect she’s more daunted by the prospect of sharing her story with him. Even though I know all the major moments in her life from my investigators, I realize Ella has never spoken about them herself. The more I think about it, the more I appreciate how little she speaks about her past at all.

I’m almost disappointed in my own powers of observation. She’s so charming and affectionate it’s easy to mistake her genial qualities for openness – but she isn’t open, not really.

Ella actually sighs with relief when her phone begins to ring, though she looks up to me for permission before actually answering it. “It’s okay, go ahead.” I permit, “I need to have a word with my Dad anyway.”

She nods appreciatively and raises the device to her ear, “Cora?”

I can hear the other woman’s voice on the other end of the

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line, and stride after my father to avoid eavesdropping. I really did want to introduce Ella to Dad to connect these new members of my family with the man who raised me – but I also need to speak to my father after what happened last night.

“Ella’s taking a call from her sister.” I explain when I enter the room alone, taking a seat across from him. “And as eager as I am to catch up with you, I need to speak about something and I don’t want her to overhear.”

My father was Alpha for almost 20 years before the attack, and he understands the need for discretion and secrecy better than anyone. No one understands the drive to protect your loved ones from unseen threats better than a pack leader. “Go ahead.”

“We went to a campaign event last night at the King’s palace it was Ella’s public debut.” I recount, “But when we came home there was a strange wolf in her room. They were gone by the time I reached her and I said it was just her

imagination, but I'm afraid whoever was there wanted to hurt her."

"She has no idea?" My father clarifies.

"I didn't want to frighten her more than she already was. The baby is still so little – she doesn't need the stress." I share, even as a stab of guilt assails me. "Do you think the King or the Prince might have been behind it?"

"You know as well as I do that the King will go to any lengths necessary to hold onto his power." My father rumbles, nodding to his mangled legs.

We've never been able to prove it, but the timing of my father's injury was always beyond suspicious. Rogues beset him after an event during his own campaign to be king five years ago, after the last king died without ever producing an heir. His primary competitor became king, and probably expected to rule for far longer than he actually has. I consider it karma, if you have to sabotage your competition to seize power, it shouldn't be any surprise when the alpha council loses faith in you afterwards.

"The King and Prince never paid any attention to me before though," I remind him, "do you think my perceived sterility really kept them at bay? Is having a pup on the way really all it took for them to finally see me as a threat?"

"You know the history as well as I do," My father murmurs, "They never believed the Alpha council would elect another ruler without heirs, even if you were the most qualified candidate for the job. Ella changes everything. Your pup changes everything."

"Then why not attack me?" I growl, hating the idea that finally getting a family of my own could also bring about the end of my career. "Why target Ella?"

My father rolls his eyes then. "Come on, Dominic. Whether they admit it or not, you're the strongest Alpha to enter the field of competition in half a century – stronger even than me." He concedes with a smile. "Going after you would be suicidal – but a breeding she-wolf? She's the perfect target." He shakes his head. "And if you don't have heirs, you might as well give up the throne now."

"That isn't fair." I snarl. "Ella is innocent in all this – and the pup..." I trail off, unable to comprehend the idea of anyone hurting an unborn child.

"I know." My father sighs, "But this cannot be ignored. If we're right, Ella and the pup are in grave danger."

Chapter 22 – Ella's Nightmares

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Ella

“Wait, what!” I exclaim, not believing my own ears. “You got your job back?” “It sounds like somebody very important called in some favors for me.” My sister confirms. “They even gave me a raise to compensate for my troubles.”

She doesn’t need to say more. There’s only one person with enough power to undo a command issued by Dominic Sinclair – and that’s Dominic Sinclair himself. “I can’t believe this. Why didn’t he tell me?”

“You mean you didn’t ask?” I can imagine the precise look on Cora’s face. Stunned and reeling at once.

“I mean, not after that first time.” I relate, wondering if I should have tried harder to help her. Did I misperceive my importance to Sinclair, or the power I hold now that I’m carrying his child?

“Well apparently that’s all it took.” She relates, her voice full of elation.

“Thank you, Ella.”

“Don’t thank me,” I object. “I’m the one who got us into this situation to begin with.” I remind her ruefully.

“Of course you didn’t.” She refutes. “Listen, I don’t know how it happened, but either I made a mistake or...”

“Or what?” I press.

“Or someone did this on purpose.” She sounds uncertain now, as if she can’t fathom the motive for such an act. I find myself equally confused.

“Why would they?” I fret, not wanting to believe my sister messed up so badly, but not seeing any logic in the alternative.

“I don’t know.” She confesses. “But that’s not important now. It’s all going to be okay from here on out. You get your baby, I get my career... the only thing we need now is to find a way to get revenge on Mike.”

“That was a much easier problem to solve before he fled halfway across the country.” I share. “I’m not sure how I’m supposed to enact any sort of plan against him when he’s so far away.”

“You could always ask for Sinclair’s help.” Cora suggests, a note of teasing in her voice – the same one children use on the playground to tease each other about crushes.

“No.” I don’t even need to think about it. “I don’t want him to think I’m high maintenance. He’s already helped me so much.” Glancing at the closed door Sinclair disappeared behind, I sidle back towards the entrance, lowering my voice to a whisper. “If I start to seem like too much trouble he might change his mind about letting me have visitation rights with the baby. It’s honestly driving me crazy – I’ve got to censor every single word that comes out of my mouth.”

“It’s not as if you were an open book before, Elle.” Cora replies wryly. “No, this is different.” I clarify. “I’m constantly afraid that I’ll say the wrong thing and make myself seem weak or fragile, too annoying to put up with. It’s exhausting.” I drag my hand through my hair. “I end up over-analyzing everything I do with him. I shouldn’t have cried, I was too sassy, too timid, too bold. It’s like walking an emotional tightrope. And the worst part is that he can read me so da*ned well that even when I try to hide what I’m feeling, he still works it out.”

“I’m sorry sweetie.” Cora commiserates.

“Thanks,” I sigh, “I think I just need a little more time to get my bearings. Once I figure Sinclair out I’ll understand what I need to do to keep my head above water.”

There’s a pregnant pause on the other end of the line.

“What?” I prompt my sister, knowing she wants to say something.

“It’s just that I worry when I hear you talk that way.” Cora admits. “It’s like you’re still in survival mode – ‘keeping your head above water,’ rather than taking care of yourself, making yourself happy and enjoying becoming a mother.”

“Yeah well, like it or not, this is a survival situation.” I counter cynically, “if I don’t perform well I lose my baby. The best I can hope for if I do perfectly is visitation rights after Sinclair finds his mate, and even that could mean anything from every weekend to once a year. I don’t want to risk landing with the latter or bungling the deal completely.”

Cora sighs heavily, and lets the matter drop. “How are you otherwise? Any morning sickness?” She asks, excitement entering her tone.

I laugh. “I spent all morning in the bathroom... but I’ve never been happier to be sick.”

“Aw, I’ve never been happier for you to feel miserable either.” She jokes. “I hope it keeps up.”

“Me too.” The more the baby makes its presence known, the more secure I feel that it’s growing big and strong.

“Anyway, I’ve gotta run. Sinclair brought me to meet his father.” I confess.

“It was great to talk though, let’s have dinner soon.”

Lunch with Sinclair’s father was surprisingly pleasant. I don’t know what I imagined when I pictured the elder Alpha, but the sweet man in the wheelchair was far from the imposing figure I expected. He radiated quiet strength and dignity, but he also welcomed me to his family with genuine warmth. I could see the shadow of a powerful leader in his stoic demeanor, but also the humility of a man whose circumstances had irrevocably changed and who chose to adapt rather

than rail at the world for its injustice. He was obviously incredibly proud of his son, and obviously thrilled to become a grandfather.

I felt far more at ease when we finally left his home, and I spent the rest of the day napping and reading my pregnancy books. I can't believe how tired I've been, or how hungry. I expected the changes, I just didn't think they'd happen so fast. Of course after so much rest, I couldn't sleep when night finally fell. It took me ages to finally drift off, and when I finally found rest – nightmares awaited me.

I found myself trapped in the horrors of my past: reliving the orphanage and the foster homes, all full of cruel adults and abusive parents. In my dreams I'm always running away from someone, trying to protect Cora and my other surrogate siblings. The dreams have gotten worse since I got pregnant, no doubt driven by my raging hormones.

Tonight takes me back to one of the worst days of my life. The sounds of my own screams and pleading tears fill my head, as dreadful images fill my vision. The next thing I know someone is shouting my name, and my eyes snap open.

"Ella!" Sinclair is sitting beside me on my bed, his powerful hands gripping my shoulders as he tries to bring me back to reality. It takes me a minute to realize it's him, rather than the man who'd been attacking me in my dreams. I jerk out of his hold and scramble to the other side of the mattress, curling up into a little ball and gasping for air.

"Easy sweetheart, it's only me." Sinclair assures me, making a soft purring sound that magically unwinds my taut muscles. How does he do that? There are tears streaming down my face, and again I feel a stab of shame for showing this weakness in front of him. "I'm okay." I stammer once I come back to myself. "I'm okay."

Sinclair shushes me softly, and though I thought I was out of his reach, I clearly underestimated the length of his strong arms. He plucks me from the corner and pulls me into his lap. "You don't have to be okay, Ella." He remarks gently, cuddling me close. "You're safe."

Those words are like a balm on my soul, but I know where they lead. If I let him comfort me, he's going to want to know what happened. And I don't want to talk about my dreams, I don't want him to feel like I'm some fragile creature he has to soothe. I scramble for something to pull his attention away from me, landing on a question that has been burning in my mind since this afternoon. "Why didn't you tell me about Cora's job?"

Sinclair seems taken aback. "What? Were you dreaming about Cora?"

"No." I sniffle, "I just want to know."

“You want to distract me, more like.” Sinclair guesses shrewdly. At first I think this means he won’t answer, but then he says. “I didn’t tell you because I didn’t do it for you. I did it because it was right.” Why does my heart sink when he says it wasn’t for me? Did I want it to be? Would it be better if he only took action to please me, rather than doing so for the sake of morality? No, of course not... so why does it sting so badly? “Oh.” I murmur, unable to conjure any more eloquent response.

“Does that disappoint you?” He asks, sounding curious, rather than judgemental.

“No, I just didn’t expect it.” I admit.

“Because I’m the big bad wolf?” Sinclair teases, petting me in long, tender caresses.

I nod, pressing my nose to his chest. “I keep waiting for you to huff and puff, and blow my house down.” I joke through my tears.

Sinclair chuckles, and for one long moment he simply holds me, rocking me back and forth until my racing heartbeat slows. “I ought to make you tell me about your dreams.” He muses, making my limbs stiffen up again. “But I won’t.” His lips graze my hair, and butterflies burst to life in my tummy.

“That said, I think you should sleep with me from now on.”

Chapter 23 Ella’s First Interview

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Ella

I must have misheard him. He can’t truly mean that he wants me to move into his rooms. Does he really think I’m that much of a baby, that I need constant watching?

“But it was only one dream.” I protest, my voice still shaky, “I swear it’s not a big deal.”

Sinclair purrs again, and I feel my insides melting against my will. “Maybe it is, maybe it isn’t. I just want you to sleep easily.” Before I can stop him, he’s lifting me into my arms.

“Sinclair-” He interrupts me with a growl, and I quickly amend myself,

“Dominic this really isn’t necessary. I can sleep on my own.”

“I’m sure you can.” He concedes. “But I want you close.”

“And what about what I want?” The words slip out before I can stop them, and Sinclair pauses, looking down at me with an appraising look.

“And what do you want, Ella?” He asks huskily, his deep voice reverberating down my spine.

"I-" I open my mouth to tell him I want to be alone, in my own space and without his intimidating presence. However somehow I can't make the words come. Why is it that I can't seem to stop myself from speaking when I don't want to, then can't make myself talk when I do? What is this man doing to me?

Sinclair smirks. "You know the problem, don't you?" He taunts, and I can only shake my head in reply. "You can't lie to me. The pup is making you more and more like a wolf, and wolves can't lie to their Alpha's, not directly at least."

The breath seems to evaporate from my lungs, I can't lie to him? My eyes go wide as I realize the implications of this, and I want to protest that such a thing isn't fair, people are entitled to their secrets! "But you're not my Alpha." I finally protest, my voice sounding very small indeed.

Sinclair cocks a brow. "Aren't I?" After a beat he continues towards the door, as if this settles the matter. I don't know why I don't object further – maybe because he's clearly made up his mind, maybe because I don't really want him to change it. I let him carry me out into the hall, flushing scarlet when I see so many guards waiting outside my room. Had all these men heard me screaming like a baby? Surely I hadn't spoken or said anything while unconscious?

"Do you always have this many guards posted at night?" | squeak.

"This pup is the most important thing to me in the world." Sinclair responds simply. "You can expect lots of guards to be around from now on."

Of course. I think, It's all for the pup. I'm just an afterthought. Will I ever be anything more?

I don't need to ask Sinclair to know the answer – it's already painfully obvious: No. In a world of mystically powerful beings like wolves, a human like me could never be anything but an afterthought. The only reason he's putting up with me at all is the pregnancy. And honestly, the only reason I'm putting up

with him is our arrangement... so why does it hurt so much?

The next morning I wake up to find a maid setting down a room service tray by my bedside, stacked high with my favorite foods. At first the smell of fruit and oatmeal has my stomach growling, but before I can so much as raise a spoon to my lips, a wave of nausea overtakes me. I rush to the bathroom and retch, groaning pitifully.

When I finally finish with the joys of pregnancy, I return to Sinclair's sprawling, king sized bed. The food which looked so appetizing a moment ago just makes my stomach churn now, but I notice a folded note on the tray. My name is scrawled across the front in the swooping handwriting I

now recognize as Sinclair's.

Ella,

I've arranged an interview for you this morning, with the leading news outlets in the area. We've been getting a lot of requests and the reporter promised you would only have to answer questions of which I approved. Call me if you have any questions. I'll see you tonight.

Yours,

Dominic

An interview?! I've never given an interview in my life! And this won't even be an interview as myself, this will be an interview under cover, pretending to be a completely different person, a completely different species! What kind of questions are they going to ask, what on earth am I going to say to them?

What am I going to wear?

Two hours later, I'm seated in front of an intimidating man in a sharp looking suit, feeling very small and out of place. A camera is poised on my face, and I'm trying to look serene rather than panicked. I found a pretty sweater dress in the wardrobe Sinclair procured for me, and decided that simple elegance was the best foot forward. Now I wonder if I miscalculated, the reporter is watching me with sharp eyes, and I can already feel myself blushing.

"So Ella, it will come as no surprise to you that many shifters in the Moon Valley Pack and beyond are very curious about you." He begins obliquely.

"With you by his side, the Alpha is poised to become our next King, yet no one knows anything about you."

"I can understand how that might worry some pack members." I smile gently, trying to appear confident and self-assured.

"How did you and Dominic meet?" He presses. "When did it happen, I'd love to hear the whole story?"

Sinclair and I had discussed this at length, even before this interview arose.

"Well it will be obvious to all those in the know that we aren't fated, but I can't help thinking that the Goddess didn't play a hand in our meeting. For years my

family in the Shadow Pack insisted we had no other relations

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— apparently my parents cut ties with the Moon Valley before I was even born. It wasn't until they passed away that I learned about my cousins here — including Aileen Corentin."

We'd decided the story should be as close to the truth as possible, so my fake identity is an orphan just like I am in

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reality. "I came to visit her after making contact, and of course she's the wife of Beta Hugo. One day I was having lunch with Aileen and Hugo and Dominic walked in... and the rest is history."

"But you haven't known each other very long, is that correct?" The reporter inquires.

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"Yes," I confirm. "But when it's true love, it doesn't take long for the heart to recognize its mate. And then we were blessed with a pup without even trying."

"Some pack members might be worried that you come from such a humble background, you have no experience leading." The reporter states bluntly.

"How would you respond to their fears?"

This was a question Sinclair hadn't prepared me for in our earlier discussions regarding our cover. We decided on what we would tell people about how we met, nothing more. "I would say that great leaders come from all kinds of backgrounds, and in fact my humble origins give me insight into the needs of everyday shifters in a way that an aristocratic upbringing would not. I'm in touch with what regular people want and need, and I can speak for them with empathy and understanding, representing their voices in a forum where they often left out."

The reporter arches his brows, and I know I've impressed him. Take that! I think triumphantly. People always assume I don't have a brain in my head because I'm young and attractive, not to mention I chose to work caring for children. But I'm no fool, and hopefully this will help the shifters see that.

"And what do you think our society needs most at this time in history, what is the biggest issue the future King and Queen need to address?" He asks.

I navigate his questions with more or less difficulty for the next half hour, feeling better about some responses than others, and praying that I haven't put my foot in my mouth. I think I've done well, but I'm completely exhausted. At first part of me was excited to pretend to be someone other than myself almost like playing dress up or make believe. However that initial interest disappeared very quickly, when I realized just how stressful it is to constantly be acting.

I know what it's like to put up walls around myself, but this is the first time I've ever been forced to blatantly lie to those around me, to try to pass myself off as someone else. All at once, the gravity of this deal I've struck slams into me. If I'm exhausted now, how am I going to feel when I've been doing this for months? Years? Can I really do this for the rest of my life?

What will happen if the truth comes out? What will people do when they learn I'm a fraud?

Because, I realize, that's what I am. This isn't just a game or a play we're performing, I'm actively deceiving people. I'm campaigning to take up a public office, and lying every step of the way. Guilt and worry assails me in a tidal wave, this is wrong! I think frantically. I have to talk to Sinclair.

Chapter 24 – Cold Feet

Sinclair

I'm sitting in my office, speaking with my cabinet, when Ella's delicious scent fills my nose. I've been thinking about her on and off all morning, wondering how she took the news of the interview, and hating that I hadn't been able to tell her about it in person. Normally I wouldn't do such a thing, but I'd needed to check in with my guards about their investigation into the intruder, and she'd been sleeping so sweetly that I couldn't bear to wake her.

I can sense how close she is now, and wonder if something went wrong. I'm already on my feet when I hear my assistant encouraging her to stay, "No, he'll want to see you, just wait one moment."

"I'm sorry, it's really not urgent," Ella is protesting. "I should have known he'd be busy."

She's retreating, her delicate footsteps receding, and I push through the door before she can get away. "And just where do you think you're going?"

Ella freezes in place, her little body winding tight as a spring. When she turns, she's staring at the floor, "I'm sorry." She says again, "I didn't mean to interrupt."

I glance at the wolves over my shoulder, "Leave us."

Ella gnaws on her plump lower lip as my cabinet members file past her out of the office, shifting restlessly on her feet. I can tell something is bothering her, but I also can't help but think how lovely she looks in the cream-colored dress hugging her curves. "Come here, little one." I command, not moving from the doorway.

This gets her attention, and indignation flashes in her golden eyes as her gaze snaps to mine. I can tell she wants to disobey, but I arch my brow in challenge and she slowly crosses the distance between us. I drag my knuckles over the high plane of her

cheekbone when she's finally in front of me, enjoying the way her defiance becomes muddled with uncertainty once more. "How did the interview go?"

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"Good I think." She qualifies, unconsciously leaning her cheek into my hand. My wolf perks up at her obvious response to my touch, and I beckon her inside.

"Can I get you anything, have you eaten lunch?" I question, thinking of the pup.

"My stomach has been too unsettled." Ella admits, looking guilty.

I press my hand to her flat belly, feeling the pup's heartbeat and prodding the mental link. The babe seems perfectly content, but it worries me that Ella hasn't eaten. "We can order in some lunch." I suggest, resisting the urge to continue touching her.

"Sin-Dominic, I need to talk to you." She answers, ignoring the offer and just barely remembering to call me by my given name.

"Sure, what's going on?" I inquire, taking a seat behind my desk.

Ella's hands are fidgeting, and she's staring at the anxious movement rather than meeting my gaze. "I think... I think I'm having second thoughts."

This gets my attention loud and clear. "How so?"

"What we're doing... it's wrong." Ella chokes out, positively trembling. "It's fraud. I... I don't know if I can take the pressure." Her cheeks are flushing with color and she sounds as though she

might cry. "I know I said I could do it, but I'm not sure I can pretend

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to be someone I'm not for the rest of my life... but I don't want to lose the baby." Now she really is crying, and I'm on my feet in an instant. Ella turns her back on me, shoulders shaking, as if she doesn't want me to see how upset she is. "I don't want to fail you, I can't lose the baby. I just don't know what to do."

I approach behind her, my heart aching for the poor little human. I should have foreseen this problem. Ella is honest and good-hearted, of course a life of deceit would bother her. I suppose when we made the agreement I didn't realize how much integrity she has, but I know now. Ella flinches when I take her shoulders in my hands, and I have to forcibly turn her body to face me again. "Come here," I say again, but this time it's not an order. It's an invitation, one I have to force Ella to accept by pulling her into my arms.

As soon as I envelop her in my embrace, she cracks, emitting a heartbroken sob and wrapping her slender arms around my middle. She must be clinging to me with all her might, but it feels about as powerful as a child's grip compared to my shifter strength. "I'm sorry." I profess, kissing her hair. "I should have realized how much this scheme was asking of you."

"I can still do it!" She insists defiantly, clearly beside herself with the competing needs to prove herself, keep her baby, and do the right thing.

Doubts swirl in my own mind. Can this really work? What will we do after the baby comes, and she no longer has its smell? What happens if someone connects her to Ella Reina, orphaned human and disgraced nanny? Am I really willing to put her through all this? She doesn't even know about the true dangers she faces, and already the stress is becoming too much. Is asking her to pose as my Luna hurting the pup? What will it think when it gets old enough to understand our relationship is a sham? What would happen if the pack found out the truth?

Dividing into pages now

Even as all the potential calamities fill my head, my wolf surges to the forefront, insisting that we have to find a way to make it work. Ella has already proven to be my biggest asset in this campaign not only is she

giving me an heir, but she charms everyone she meets. I need her if I'm going to win. More importantly, my wolf won't abide the thought of letting her go. I try to tell him dissolving our agreement doesn't mean letting her go, but he's absolutely determined.

"Come on, let's talk about this." I suggest. Moving to the couch. "What worries you the most about our plan?"

"I don't want to hurt anyone." Ella whispers, tears clinging to her dark lashes. "I don't want to trick honest, hardworking shifters. I don't want my life to be a lie."

"How long have you been feeling this way?" I press.

"I guess a little bit from the beginning." She confesses, "but it really hit me today during the interview. I just thought about doing this for the rest of my life and it just felt so overwhelming."

I nod, pulling her between my legs and petting her sides. "The first, and most important thing I need you to understand is that shifter society doesn't work like human society does. We are a ruthless species, and we do whatever is necessary to ensure the safety of our packs." I explain. "I know it feels like a giant fraud, but you have to remember that my campaign is the only thing standing between a lot of innocent people and a tyrant. If the Prince takes the throne, he will wipe out the Alpha council and all his political competition in order to stay in power forever. He will oppress and terrorize millions of people."

"If he's that bad, why hasn't he already staged a coup?" Ella inquires, a few notable degrees calmer as my words sink in.

"Because he doesn't have the power yet." I clarify, "He doesn't have an army – yet. His father is bad, but he's old fashioned enough to respect our political system. The Prince on the other hand..." I trail off.

"So basically you're saying that lying is the lesser evil." Ella summarizes.

"Honesty is an incredibly admirable trait." I relate gently, "but it's also a luxury that shifters can't afford right now. I know it feels wrong, but when your enemies are as abominable as the Prince, you have to bend the rules to survive."

“Like wartime spies?” Ella suggests morosely.

“A little.” I crack a smile.

She nods, thinking so deeply that her brow furrows, and I have to resist the urge to smooth out the adorable wrinkles with my fingers. “I want a safe life for my baby. If the Prince wins the election... would he...?” She trails off, unable to utter the horrible words.

“It’s highly likely” I confirm, I have no doubt the prince would try to kill my heir – he probably has already.

Ella frowns, “Then I’ll do whatever it takes to help you win.” She seems much more relaxed now, but I can still sense her lingering nerves.

“Would you feel better if you could spend more time with shifters, get to know our ways better?” I ask, suspecting that at least some of her unease is due to the fact that she’s afraid she’ll fail.

Ella nods, and I give her a squeeze. “Okay, then you and I are going to start going out more, so you can get to know my world and my people.”

“I think that would help.” Ella admits. “I’m sorry I lost it that way, I don’t know if it’s the hormones or the stress, or what! I just started spiraling and I couldn’t stop.”

“Hey,” I interrupt, “It’s okay. I want you to tell me when you lose it, I want you to talk to me when you have worries or doubts, okay?”

“Okay.” She nods, giving me a shy smile.

“Now let’s get some food into you, and tonight – we’ll go out.”

I don’t say what I’m thinking, what my wolf so desperately wants to add to that sentence. I know it’s too soon, and Ella is still too skittish of me. Still, it feels too exciting to deny. Tonight we’re going out together – On our first real date.

pages

Chapter 25 First Date

Ella

223 V ko

It's not a date, it's not a date, it's not a date.

I've been repeating the same thought over and over again. I know Sinclair is only taking me out tonight because I fell to complete pieces this afternoon. I'm still kicking myself, totally ashamed of my weakness and determined to prove myself to him after all. I spent the better part of an hour picking out my dress for tonight, eventually deciding on a little black dress that shows off my figure and makes me feel strong and sexy, nothing like my usual self.

I wrap a heavy winter coat around my body after Sinclair's makeup artists and hairdressers finish making me up, sliding on a pair of strappy stilettos and taking a few deep breaths before heading downstairs. Sinclair is waiting for me at the bottom of the stairs, his emerald gaze raking up my bare legs and lingering on my coat, as if he's tempted to unwrap it and get a preview of what's underneath. It's amazing how overheated he can make me feel from a single glance – he's already seen me naked, and it's not as if there's any true feeling behind it anyway.

"Ready?" He asks, his deep voice making my heart stop for just a few beats.

I nod shyly, and let him guide me out the door with a hand on the small of my back. However as soon as I take a step outside, I find myself backing into Sinclair's protective shelter. A sea of reporters is gathered just outside the estate's gates, cameras flashing and voices raised in shouts for our attention. It's precisely like the scene which had awaited us outside the King's palace, only this is a random Tuesday evening at the place I'm gradually beginning to think of as home.

"Dominic?" I squeak.

“It’s okay,” His lips brush my ear as he tucks me under his arm, “your interview aired this evening, that’s all. Early feedback would indicate you’re a hit.”

“You mean, they’re here because of me?” I whisper, praying I can walk gracefully in my heels, and that Sinclair will catch me if I start to fall flat on my face.

“That’s right.” He grins, waving at the reporters. “If you feel nervous just take a deep breath, and remember it will all be over in a few seconds.”

I do as he advises, and sure enough the next thing I know, I’m safely ensconced in the back seat of his limousine. “Do you ever get used to it?” I ask shakily.

“No.” Sinclair admits, “but it gets easier.”

“So are you going to tell me where we’re headed, or is it another surprise?” I guess, trying not to sound too petulant.

“This time I’ll tell you.” Sinclair conceded, in a tone that sounded as though this was a grave sacrifice. “I think you’ve had a hard enough day already.”

“Thank you.” I note primly, gazing at him expectantly.

The corner of his mouth tilts upwards, “It’s just so tempting.”

“Dominic!” I exclaim in exasperation.

He laughs. “Okay, okay. We’re going to a little French restaurant I know, and afterwards we’ll go dancing at a popular shifter club.”

I find myself practically bursting with curiosity. “Is shifter food very different from human food? Do shifters have their own dance styles?”

Sinclair smiles, and I suddenly wish I’d chosen to sit beside him, rather than across the car. “We eat more red meat than humans – rarer steaks too – but otherwise it’s not so different.” A low rumble, somewhere between

a purr and a growl sounds in his chest. "And our dancing can be a bit more.... Sensual, but don't worry, I'm looking forward to teaching you."

Oh god. His intense focus and scintillating tone has my body heating up like a bonfire, and I have to squeeze my thighs together to relieve the sudden ache at their center. It's not a real date, it's

not a real date, it's not a real date.

To my dismay, the reporters have followed us to the restaurant, and they're waiting when Sinclair helps me from the car. Their cameras are still flashing when the hostess helps me out of my coat, capturing images through the glass of my slinky black dress and Sinclair's ravenous expression when he takes in the sight. It speaks volumes that despite their blatant observation, all I could focus on in that moment was Sinclair, and his glowing green eyes.

Before I know it he's pulled me into his arms and is claiming my mouth in an earth-shattering kiss. I'm sure it's only for the benefit of the cameras, but I melt against him immediately, letting him ravish me for all to see. My heart is hammering so powerfully when he finally releases me that I almost don't hear him tell me how incredible I look. I'm in a complete daze as he guides me to the back of the restaurant, trying to recall if I've ever felt so overpowered by lust. I'm a grown woman who's had a healthy sex- life, but I can't ever recall feeling as though I'll die if someone doesn't make love to me in the next five minutes. But that's exactly how I feel now.

"Ella?" Sinclair's voice drags me back into the present, and I realize

Dividing into pages now

W288 Vouchers

more time has passed than I realize. We're seated at the table, and waitress is standing beside him, watching me with an expectant smile.

"Something to drink?"

"Just water." I manage huskily, trying to pull myself together.

"You still with me?" Sinclair teases a moment later.

I'm beginning to wonder if werewolf pheromones are extra powerful on humans, the more time I spend with this man, the more I feel like I'm being drugged by desire. "Mhmm," I murmur, my voice much higher than I intended. "Do you have any recommendations?"

I was talking about the menu, but Sinclair's sultry reply comes back, "I always recommend sitting side by side, rather than across from one another."

"I don't know." I answer coyly, "It's awfully warm in here, I wouldn't want to overheat."

"You do look a bit flushed." Sinclair observes, "should I have them turn up the air conditioning?"

"Then I'll be cold." I argue.

Sinclair arches a brow, "then you'd better come over here so I can keep you warm." It wasn't a request. I rise from my chair and circle the table, sliding into the booth next to Sinclair even as he signals the waitress to lower the temperature in the room. He slides an arm around me and purrs with contentment. "There, much better."

Maybe for him, I'm squirming in my seat, painfully aware of the wetness pooling between my legs. In hindsight I can't even begin to follow the circular logic that brought us here – but I'm not complaining. I feel safe being so close to Sinclair, and the

butterflies in my belly are fluttering out of control. It's not a date, it'

is not a date, it's not a date.

Of course it only gets worse as the night progresses. Our intimate dinner turns into him hand feeding me dessert, then leading me around a darkened dance floor with our bodies pressed flush together, whirling through unfamiliar, infinitely seductive steps. I haven't had a drop of alcohol given my condition, but I feel completely drunk on Sinclair. The evening flashes before my eyes, and I spiral into my desire: my world reduces to the

feeling of his body moving against mine, his hands gliding over my waist and hips.

It's a good thing Sinclair is so intimidating or I might have tried to make a move, and I'm not sure I could survive getting involved with this powerful wolf. My body might want him, but when my senses return I'll remember how completely mismatched we are. We could never be together, and indulging my physical desires can only lead to disaster.

I'm slowly beginning to suspect that Sinclair isn't completely immune to me, but I know it could never be more than physical attraction on his part, and I'm not the sort of woman who can handle casual sex. I know I'll catch feelings sooner or later, and then I'll get my heart broken. Sinclair could never want me as more than an amusing distraction or plaything and more importantly, I'm carrying his child. I have to be able to get along with him for the rest of my life, and I know I'm not what he wants.

I fall asleep tossing and turning, until Sinclair loses his patience and pulls my body to his, spooning me and purring until I drift off. We went to bed late, but I wake up when it's still dark out, a sense of dread flooding my form.

Something is wrong.

There's wetness between my legs, but not the slick desire that

Dividing into pages now

tormented me earlier. I reach down and when I withdraw my fingers again, they're stained with sticky, red, blood.

Trying not to panic, I shake Sinclair awake. He groans and opens his eyes to slits, mumbling blearily.

"Sinclair, something's wrong!" I murmur frantically. "I'm bleeding. I think... I think I might be having a miscarriage."

Chapter 26 At the Hospital

288 You hors

Ella

Sinclair is instantly alert. He sits up in bed and pulls the covers back, staring at the red stain on my nightgown with an unreadable expression. He presses his palm to my belly, undoubtedly trying to communicate with the pup through their mental link. I'm trembling while I wait for him to give his verdict, terrified that the new life inside me might already be coming to a heartbreaking end.

"I think he's okay." Sinclair murmurs after a moment, looking up at me with a furrowed brow. "But we should get you to the hospital right away."

I slide out of bed on autopilot, my mind spinning with all the terrible possibilities. What if my ovaries were too damaged by Mike's sabotage to support a healthy baby? What if my uterus isn't strong enough to carry the child to term? Was the doctor right at our last appointment, was something wrong from the start? Is that why it was so small?

I can only wrap my arms around myself to try and cease shaking as the blood rushes in my ears. Please don't take this baby from me. I silently beg the universe, it's all I have, I won't survive losing it.

Sinclair dresses quickly, but I'm only vaguely aware of him moving around in my periphery. I'm standing there frozen, too afraid to move in case I somehow make the bleeding worse. Without asking, Sinclair comes over and sweeps me up into his arms. He only pauses to wrap me in a coat before heading out into the snow, then bundles me into the car and takes off into the night.

We arrive at the emergency room in minutes and Sinclair doesn't even bother parking. Instead he skids to a stop in front of the main

entrance, once again scooping me up and charging inside. I've been to the hospital before, and it's always been a long, drawn out process of triages and waiting to be seen for hours on end.

Not this time.

The moment the staff sees Sinclair they leap into motion, eager to do his bidding. I've never been more grateful for his wealth and influence than I am in this moment. Nurses and orderlies gather around us, leading us

straight into the treatment area. The nurses bring forward a wheelchair, but Sinclair holds onto me tightly. “She’s three weeks pregnant and bleeding.”

Seeming to realize he’s not going to release me, the nurses take the wheelchair away and direct us into a consultation room, “Okay honey, just hold on.” They advise, “we’ll get someone over to take a look at you right away.”

No sooner has Sinclair set me down onto a reclining gurney that an orderly comes in with a scratchy hospital gown and an ultrasound machine, shortly followed by a doctor in a white coat. The man nods to Sinclair, “Alpha.” Suddenly I realize the special treatment we’re receiving isn’t only because of Sinclair’s wealth. This must be a shifter hospital, which makes a lot of sense in hindsight. He wouldn’t take a werewolf child to a human facility.

Sinclair greets the man stiffly, still hovering protectively over me. I haven’t had time to change into the gown or even get comfortable on the gurney, and I find myself leaning towards Sinclair’s solid strength, finding relief in his presence amidst all the hubbub and uncertainty.

“Is it alright if I examine her?” The doctor asks, nodding towards

This strikes me as a very odd question – first because it was

directed at Sinclair and not me, and second because an exam is the entire reason we’re here. Of course it’s alright! However a low rumble sounds in Sinclair’s chest, and when I look up at him I realize how menacing his outward energy has become. He’s glaring at anyone who comes near me, and strategically placing his body between me and everyone else. He wouldn’t appreciate the comparison, but his behavior sort of reminds me of a dog guarding a bone.

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I hiccup a hysterical laugh as the image forms in my mind the big bad Alpha getting possessive about his new human pet- but when the doctor and Sinclair look down at me with concern I quickly sober. “Sorry, my nerves are fraying a bit.” I explain, prompting Sinclair to wrap one of his muscular arms around me.

Turning towards the doctor, I add. "I don't know how long I've been bleeding, I just woke up and felt it."

The doctor looks back to Sinclair, waiting until he gives his permission before approaching me. "Have you had any other symptoms?"

I shake my head, "nothing out of the ordinary. A bit of morning sickness, mood swings, cravings – everything you'd expect."

"That's good." The doctor confirmed, offering me a smile before looking to Sinclair. "And the mental link?"

"Strong heartbeat and consistent emotional blips," My stomach is quickly becoming Sinclair's favorite spot to rest his hand, and it returns there now. "It's sleeping – I think."

The doctor nods, "Alright, then what I'd like to do is run some tests and make sure everything is alright with mother and pup. Spotting isn't unusual in the early stages, though there's a bit more blood than I'd like. Elia, why don't you get changed and then a nurse will

288 Vou het.

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be in to run your vitals – then we'll take some blood and do an ultrasound."

He steps out, and before I can even think about changing, I find Sinclair pulling my nightgown off over my head. "Oh! Dominic, I can do that myself."

"Just let me take care of you, Ella." He responds sternly, leaving no room for argument as he fits the loose gown around my body. In the end, I think fussing over me is his way of finding some control in a helpless situation, so I comply without further complaint, telling myself it's all for his benefit rather than my own. I don't let myself think about how nice it feels to have someone helping me

not to have to go it all alone for once.

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“Lie back now,” Sinclair encourages once the ties are secure, helping me recline on the gurney. He leans his elbow on the mattress near my head, looking down at me intently. “How are you doing?”

His scrutiny feels too intense, and I can’t bring myself to look him in the eye. I shrug, “I’ll decide how I feel when we know what’s going on.”

Before he can respond the nurse returns and begins taking all my vital signs. Everything seems perfectly normal until she takes my blood pressure. She purses her lips at the numbers on the screen, and I feel my pulse race even faster when I follow her gaze. One forty over one hundred! I think frantically. My blood pressure has never been so high in my entire life.

“Is that reading normal for you?” The nurse asks with false nonchalance.

“No, my blood pressure is usually below average.” I squeak, causing Sinclair to shift closer still.

He returns his hand to my belly, circling his fingers in soothing caresses over my skin. “You’ve had a scare.” He reasons, looking to the nurse for reassurance, “I’m sure that’s all this is.”

She doesn’t respond to his statement, instead eyeing me with concern. “You need to try to calm down, Ella. Take some deep breaths and let your mate worry about the pup.”

“Let my mate worry about the pup?” I repeat indignantly, sitting up. “I’m its mother, I can’t just turn off my love for it.”

“She wasn’t suggesting that, sweetheart.” Sinclair croons, gathering me to his chest and purring in that infuriating way that never ceases to make me unravel. Against my will I find myself leaning into his protective hold, falling victim to that strange power once again.

“That’s it.” The nurse encourages with a smile, “everything else looks good, we’ll check your pressure again in a bit, and I’ll inform the doctor of the situation.”

I'm sulkily snuggling closer to Sinclair as she retreats and glaring daggers at her back. "How do you do that?" I inquire sullenly, breathing in the Alpha's familiar scent.

"Do what?" He asks, stroking my hair.

"That purring thing!" I clarify, resenting him for making me feel better when my baby might be in danger, then feeling guilty for resenting him. My moods are so variable these days I can barely keep up with them. I've always heard how wild one's emotions can become when pregnant, but I didn't realize it would happen this fast.

Sinclair chuckles warmly, and an unwelcome shiver runs down my spine. "It's something all male wolves can do – it's how we soothe our mates when they're upset."

"Oh." I blink. "How did you know it would work on a human?"

"I didn't." He shares, "I didn't even mean to do it the first time – it was simply instinct, but you responded so beautifully."

"Hmph." I murmur, not sure if I like the idea of him having that kind of power over me. "Do female wolves have some way of soothing their mates?"

Sinclair laughs again, a deep sultry sound.. "Lots of ways."

"Like what?" I press.

"That's a conversation for another day." Sinclair remarks slyly, piquing my curiosity.

I want to object, to ask more, but the doctor reappears before I can respond. He does my ultrasound with quick professionalism, and I'm relieved to hear the baby's steady heartbeat through the machine. Still, I won't be able to truly relax until I know everything is okay. When he finally concludes the exam, I'm practically breathless for news.

"Well?" I ask anxiously. "Is the baby okay?"

Chapter 27 – Mike Meets Sinclair

3rd Person

The doctor smiled at Ella and Sinclair, pleased to be able to deliver good news for once. “Your baby is just fine.” He shared, watching the tension seep out of the expectant parents in front of him. “As I said, some spotting is perfectly normal in the early stages, and everything else looks perfect.”

Sinclair squeezed Ella to his chest, kissing her hair while she tried not to burst into tears of joy. The doctor let them have a moment to celebrate before continuing, “I am worried about Ella’s blood pressure, however. It was probably just the stress of the emergency, but it’s something we have to be very careful of. If hypertension persists, it could develop into a condition called preeclampsia, which can be very dangerous for both mother and pup.”

Ella was still reveling in their good news, but Sinclair was immediately alert at the mention of a potential danger. “So what do we do? Just keep an eye on it?”

“I’m going to send you home with a portable test kit so you can check her blood pressure at home, you should do it every day until it stabilizes and then every week until delivery. Of course if it remains high you need to see your regular OBGYN right away. And more than anything else, you need to avoid stress, Ella.” The physician advised.

Ella nodded in agreement, though in truth she wasn’t sure this goal was entirely achievable. She was about to be a first time mother, all the while grappling with a false identity, supernatural society, and political campaign. Stress seemed like an inevitability.

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“Thank you doctor,” Sinclair professed, “we’ll do everything we can to keep her relaxed.” Ella wasn’t sure she liked the sound of that if Sinclair tried to keep her on bed rest or anything of the sort, it wasn’t going to go over well. She was so lost in her thoughts, she didn’t realize Sinclair was watching her and all but reading her mind. “Won’t we, little mate?” He added pointedly.

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This jolted Ella back to the present, and she looked up at Sinclair with wide eyes, thinking – not for the first time that she needed to do a better job paying attention to the powerful Alpha if she wanted to get through this pregnancy with her wits intact. “Yes, Dominic.”

That afternoon Sinclair struggled to focus on his work. All he could think about was Ella and the baby, and he was sorely tempted to take the rest of the day off to look after them. He’d already blown off all his morning meetings for that very purpose, and though Ella had encouraged him to go about his business as usual, his mind was on anything but business.

He was just about to collect his things and tell Hugo he was calling it a day, when a knock sounded on his door. “Come in.”

The investigator he’d hired to look into Ella and subsequently track down her lowlife ex-lover poked his head inside. “Alpha, he’s here.”

That got Sinclair’s attention. Maybe he would be able to get something worthwhile done today after all. “Bring him in.” He instructed coolly.

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When Mike stumbled in the austere office a few minutes

later

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he

practically thrown inside by Sinclair’s guards looked around in nervous confusion. Sinclair studied the human closely, trying to convince his wolf that attacking the wretched man wasn’t a very honorable thing to do – considering his advantages in speed, strength and power. Still, it was tempting. He didn’t know what Ella had ever seen in the man, and he

suspected that Mike's mental manipulation and gaslighting had gone a long way towards forcing her to settle for someone so inferior.

For all her spirit and intelligence, Sinclair knew that Ella had suffered a love-starved upbringing. It wasn't hard to imagine that she could fall head over heels for the first person to show her any attention, even letting them convince her she didn't deserve any better than their mistreatment and disdain. He thought of Mike telling her she was a bad kisser, wondering how far the creep's insults had gone – did she also think she was bad in bed, bad at keeping a house or doing everyday things? How worthless had this human made her feel for his own gain?

It infuriated Sinclair to imagine anyone mistreating sweet Ella this way, and he was all the more impressed that she had been able to come out of the ordeal with so much strength of will. He growled before he could stop himself, and Mike froze in his tracks, staring at Sinclair in surprise and obvious fear. "What is this? Why did you bring me here?"

"This, is your just desserts." Sinclair answered coldly, rising from his chair. "Do you know who I am, Mike?"

"You're that billionaire that's always on TV." Mike countered, barely containing a jealous sneer.

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"That's right." Sinclair smirked. "I'm also Ella's new fiancee."

He lied, going with a similar story to the one they were telling the shifters. "We're expecting a child together, despite your efforts to make her infertile."

All the blood drained from Mike's face. He stood frozen for a long moment before shaking his head in disbelief. "You're lying. We only just broke up and she would never have cheated on me, the stupid bitch was too spineless to -"

Sinclair's wolf snarled out a warning so fierce that Mike all but wet himself, suddenly realizing on an instinctive level that the being in front of him was no normal human. but a dan- gerous predator. "If you have any sense at all you'll shut your fucking mouth before you say another word against her." Sin- clair thundered.

Mike backed away towards the door, trembling like a leaf. "I... wh- what are you?"

"Not anyone you want to cross." Sinclair informed him, prowling forward, stalking his vile prey as if he were nothing more than a deer in the woods.

"This is crazy!" Mike objected. "I haven't done anything wrong."

"Do not lie to me!" Sinclair barked, "I know everything, you leech. You took advantage of that angel, knowing exactly how vulnerable she was. You ruined Ella's life – wrecked her fi- nances, poisoned her body, betrayed her commitment and made her think she didn't deserve any better!" Sinclair reached out and closed his powerful hand around the scrawny human's neck, forcing his back up against the door. "You are not a man, you are spineless, despicable little weasel, and if you want to keep your head on your shoulders you are

going to make things right!"

"What?!" Mike choked, clawing at Sinclair's tight grip,

"how?"

"You're going to go to the police, and sign a full confes- sion. Ella already filed a police report, and you're going to turn yourself in and pay back every cent you stole from her." Sin- clair commanded, "I don't care if you have to work for a hun- dred years, you're going to make it right."

"But I don't have that kind of money!" Mike objected fran- tically, becoming near hysterical as Sinclair lifted his feet off the ground. In the back of his mind Sinclair momentarily wor- ried about making a habit of attacking men this way, but he couldn't deny that Mike and Roger both deserved it.

"Then you can rot in prison!" Sinclair answered ferocious- ly. "It's that or I gut you right here."

“No!” Mike shouted frantically, “Please, don’t hurt me! I’ll do whatever you say!”

“Good.” Sinclair rumbled. “Because if you don’t I will make you wish you’d never been born.”

A little while later a shrill ringtone filled Ella’s suite at Sinclair’s estate. She picked up her phone, seeing the local police station’s number scrolling across the screen. “Hello?”

“Hello, Ms. Reina?” A male voice replied on the other end of the line.

70 57%

“Speaking.” She confirmed.

488 owners

“This is Moon Valley Police Department, we’re calling in reference to a report you filed last week?” The man referenced.

“Yes?” Ella questioned sitting up a little straighter. The officers hadn’t given her any hope that her case would ever be resolved, so she didn’t have the faintest idea why they were calling.

“Your ex-boyfriend turned himself in this afternoon.” The officer shared, “he doesn’t have the funds to pay the bills he accumulated in your name, but he signed a confession which should convince your creditors to remove the charges from your accounts, and he will be prosecuted to the furthest extent of the law.”

“I.. what? Really?” Ella couldn’t believe it. “How... Mike would never turn himself in, I don’t understand.”

“Well I can’t speak to his motives, but I can tell you he was dropped off by a pair of bodyguards employed by Dominic Sinclair, and he seemed very shaken. It sounds to me like you’ve got friends in high places, Ms. Reina.”

“Thank you.” She murmured, still trying to process this information. As she hung up she tried to comprehend this new development. Had Dominic really found Mike for her, forced him to do the right thing? She knew he’d

promised to help re- solve her financial situation, but making Mike stand trial seemed like a gesture far beyond their agreement.

What did it all mean?

Chapter 28 – Ella Pays A Visit

288 Vouchers

Ella

I hear Sinclair’s footsteps coming up the stairs just past five, and I realize he must have left work at the earliest available opportunity. I’m not complaining, I’ve been so eager to ask him about Mike ever since the police called me, and as unbelievable as it seems I even find myself missing him the more time we spend apart. I think it must be the pup’s craving to be near its father rather than my own interest, because more often than not I’m nervous or on-edge when we’re together. The one exception is when I go to his rooms at bed- time; I haven’t had a single nightmare since he insisted we begin sleeping together, and I look forward to falling asleep in his strong arms every night.

He comes into my rooms without knocking, offering me a wide smile when he sees me cuddled up in bed. The doctor gave me strict orders to rest today, and after the exhausting ordeal at the hospital, I actually didn’t mind. “Hello trouble.” Sinclair greets me fondly, taking a seat on the edge of my mattress. “How are you feeling?”

“I’m fine.” I promise, “No more spotting.” I blush, but I figure we have to get used to speaking on such familiar terms about my body. Pregnancy does nothing if not steal one’s sense of modesty, as the most personal bodily functions must be discussed to assess the baby’s health.

“I’m glad.” Sinclair sighs with visible relief. “Have you checked your blood pressure?”

“No, I’ve been distracted.” I admit.

488 Vouchers

“Tsk, tsk,” He teases, retrieving the home monitoring device from my bedside. “Let’s have your arm, gorgeous.”

I wait while he settles the cuff around my bicep and presses the machine’s start button. Once the cuff begins to inflate and pressure increases on my arm, I say, “I got a call from the police today.”

Sinclair keeps a perfectly straight face, as if he doesn’t have the first idea what I’m about to say. “Oh?”

“It seems that Mike turned himself in this afternoon.” I share, watching him closely. “He came all the way back from the coast and signed a full confession. He’s going to stand trial.”

Sinclair is busy watching the numbers on the machine, but he manages a distracted smile, “that’s wonderful, Ella.”

I wait for him to say more, but he remains silent, avidly focused on taking my vital signs. “You’re really going to pretend like you had nothing to do with it?” I finally burst.

The machine beeps, and Sinclair frowns, loosening the cuff. “Still too high.” He murmurs, looking back up at me. Sinclair scans my features, taking my cheek in his oversized hand. “Are you still feeling stressed?”

“I’m trying to talk to you about something.” I reply, rather than answering him.

“Ella it was nothing. I would have done it for anyone.” He states simply.

Of course. I think bitterly, better not go getting ahead of yourself, Ella. Don’t make the mistake of thinking you’re spe-

15.94%

cial when you’re anything but. “That might be true.” I murmur, “but it’s a very big deal to me. I don’t know how to thank you.”

“That’s not necessary.” Sinclair responds, as if this settles the matter. “I was happy to do it. That rat deserved a lot worse than a jail cell if you ask me.”

I don't know why, but his ferocity makes me feel better about his dismissive manner. At the very least it shows that he does care, and I decide then and there that I'm going to find a way to thank him whether he thinks it's necessary or not.

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The next day I spend the morning sick to my stomach, re-minding myself over and over again that morning sickness is a good sign, and I shouldn't complain. After my fourth bout of nausea, I take a few pillows and books into the bathroom, setting up a makeshift camp on the cold tiles so that I'm not constantly running back and forth. By the afternoon I feel well enough to go out and about, and I eagerly dress and depart, excited to follow through with my plans to thank Sinclair for his kindness.

At first I wasn't sure about turning up at his father's house unannounced, but when I arrive the elder Alpha greets me with so much hospitality and generosity I decide I should try and visit more often. "Come in, come in! What a lovely surprise!"

"Thank you." I flush, "I hope you don't mind me dropping by like this."

"Of course not, my darling. You're welcome anytime." He replies genially. "I was just about to have a late lunch, please join me."

"Oh no, I couldn't impose." I demur.

"Nonsense, I know the look of a breeding mother who's spent the morning indisposed." He observes wryly. "You're still green about the gills, dear one. Some food in your tummy will help."

"Thank you." I smile despite myself. "I see you're as perceptive as your son."

"And I see you would prefer it if he did not perceive so much." The old man answers.

"Is it that obvious?" I chuckle, taking a seat across from him in the sitting room as a servant runs to get another place setting for lunch.

“I don’t blame you.” He confides. “I expect if I were in your shoes I wouldn’t enjoy having someone read my every thought and feeling either.”

Unlike Sinclair, his father sets me completely at ease. So at ease in fact that I find the words sliding off my tongue before I can stop them. “I’m not used to men like you and your son, Alpha –

“None of that Alpha nonsense.” He interjects. “call me Henry.”

I can’t help but laugh, “you and Dominic really are a pair, you know that?”

Henry smiles warmly, “a high complement. I’m very proud of my son, you know. And I’m so thrilled he’s finally found his second chance mate.”

A stab of guilt assails me. Of any of the people we’re deceiving, Sinclair’s father makes me feel the most ashamed for our lies. “Thank you.” I manage to reply, unable to stop myself from confiding, “we’re both so excited for this baby I’m not sure if we’ve even discussed whether we truly are mates. I mean we’re saying it for the campaign of course, but I hardly think I’m what Dominic imagined for a mate.”

Henry shakes his head firmly. “Trust me, Ella. I know my son, and I know a good match when I see it. You two will get there in time.”

“Well, I have to say he has already done so much for me. I’ve been scrambling for some way to thank him, but I’m afraid I don’t know him well enough to know what he’d like best. I was hoping you might help me do a bit of plotting.” I confess.

“You’ve come to the right place.” Henry assures me, “what kind of surprise did you have in mind.”

“Just anything to show him how grateful I am.” I explain, “how excited I am to be having this baby together, for all his support.”

“Well one secret I will gladly tell you about my son is that he has a powerful sweet tooth.” Henry intones. “He doesn’t indulge it often, but the quickest way to his heart is probably through dessert.”

I giggle, “Really?” It seems so strange that the terrifying Alpha wolf might have a secret vice as wholesome as sugar. “Any particular recipes?”

“His favorite cake as a boy was simply chocolate with vanilla icing – simple but classic. If you make him that, it will transport him straight back to his childhood.” Henry explains.

“I like that idea. One of our first days together he called my sister to find out my favorite dish – I like the symmetry of returning the gesture.” I muse aloud.

“And of course, if you end up with too much left over, I always appreciate a good sweet myself.” Henry hints, “As well as charming company.”

“You have a deal.” I agree happily. “In fact, I was thinking I might visit you more often.” I suggest, “If you don’t mind having me around that is.”

“I would love nothing more.” Henry beams, “though you should probably clear it with Dominic first.”

I grimace, not caring for this idea. “Do you think he’d object?”

“I think he’s got a new mate and a baby on the way nothing makes an Alpha more overprotective.” Henry reasons.

“But surely he wouldn’t think you’re a threat.” I protest.

“Not me personally, but there may very well be other dangers out there.” Henry suggests, “in fact I’m surprised he let you come out without a guard today.”

“Well, he doesn’t know.” I answer hesitantly.

“You didn’t tell him you were leaving?” Henry clarifies.

“No, but I’m an adult.” I argue, confused. “I shouldn’t have to ask permission just to pay a visit to family.”

“Ella, you’re with an Alpha now.” Henry reminds me gently. “Everything is different now. Does anyone know where you are right now?”

“No.” Nervously gnawing on my lip, I wonder if I’ve made a bad miscalculation. “Do you think he’s going to be angry?”

“If I were you, I’d try to get back before he realizes you left.” Henry suggests.

I don’t need to be told twice, I finish my lunch and kiss Henry’s scruffy cheek, before heading out again. On the way home I stop only to purchase the ingredients for Sinclair’s cake, hurrying back to the house in the hopes that no one has noticed I was missing. Of course it’s just my luck that Hugo catches me coming up the walk to the mansion, arms laden with grocery bags. He doesn’t say a word, but I know the game is up.

I’m in big trouble.

Chapter 29 Ella Bakes

Ella

I’ve been avidly watching the clock ever since returning home. Neither Hugo nor any of the guards said a word about my absence, but they did immediately take the grocery bags from my arms, insisting I shouldn’t be doing any heavy lifting. I came straight to the kitchen afterwards, hoping that I might be able to finish my surprise before Sinclair comes home, and thereby counteract some of his displeasure that I snuck out.

In my defense it wasn’t really sneaking. Sure, I waited until the guards were distracted just in case they tried to stop me leaving, but no one ever told me I wasn’t allowed to do so. In fact Sinclair told me I was free to go where I wish... though in hindsight I imagine the Alpha wouldn’t like it if he came home

and no one knew where I was

yesterday.

especially after the hospital

I try to focus on baking rather than the scolding I’ve surely got coming from Sinclair. I’m really not sure how to handle the situation. It feels entirely unfair that I could be in trouble for breaking rules I didn’t know existed, but I’m afraid of angering Sinclair further by expressing my true feelings.

I'm starting to feel completely bipolar in this arrangement of ours. I'm perpetually afraid of saying or doing the wrong thing and provoking Sinclair's temper, but I'm not used to censoring myself this way. Eventually the truth inevitably slips out and then I worry I've ruined everything. So I try to reverse course and do damage control, and probably come off like I've got split personalities.

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I don't know what to do. I know I should try to keep Sin-

clair happy so that I have the best possible chance to stay with my baby, but I don't know how long I can keep this up. I also don't know what to make of Sinclair in the first place. He's the most confusing man I've ever encountered. I don't even recognize myself around him. One moment he's turning me on, making me feel safer than I've ever felt in my entire life, and doing sweet selfless things like helping Cora – and the next he's stomping around like a tyrant and ordering me about.

I've just finished mixing the wet and dry ingredients together in a big silver bowl when the door clicks open behind me, and Sinclair's familiar scent fills the room. Uh-oh, here we

When I turn around, I find him framed in the doorway, his arms crossed over his broad chest, and a thunderous expression on his face.

"Welcome home?" I greet him weakly, that statement sounding more like a question than anything else.

Sinclair's emerald eyes begin to glow as he studies me, raking his gaze over my body from head to foot and making me positively squirm. "What do you have to say for yourself, Ella?"

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"I'm making you a surprise," I explain, realizing telling him sort of defeats the point. "Or I was to thank you for your help with Mike."

"You left the estate." He growls, striding forward. "You didn't tell anyone you were leaving or where you were going."

"I was perfectly safe." I supply feebly. "I went to see your father."

"You just got out of the hospital yesterday." Sinclair rumbles, as if I could forget. "You shouldn't be lugging around groceries or going on extended walks, and especially not without guards."

"Dominic, you never told me that I needed to take guards with me if I went out, or that I had to run my plans by you first." I counter, trying to stay calm.

"Because I thought it was common sense!" He exclaims. "Ella, you know how crazy the media coverage has been lately, and you know I don't go anywhere without guards – and I'm a lot bigger and stronger than you are. What if something had happened- we wouldn't have known where to look for you!"

"I was just trying to do something nice for you!" I exclaim, fighting back tears. "I never agreed to be a prisoner here."

"Don't be so dramatic." Sinclair scoffs. "No one is saying you're a prisoner. But you are a public figure now, and you're in delicate condition. We're talking about taking basic precautions and keeping me in the loop. I need to know where you are, I need to know that you're safe and not taking

careless

risks!"

"Carrying a few bags of sugar is hardly a risk to my health!" I argue, smothering a few extra choice words. "I'm not so delicate that I need a constant babysitter. You forget that I was on my own for 30 years before you came along and I did just fine!"

"Oh right, so fine that a bottom dwelling asshole bankrupted and betrayed you for years on end!" Sinclair snaps.

35 73%

"That isn't fair." I fight back, my voice thick with emotion.

"Don't blame me for what Mike did!"

“I’m not.” He sighs, seeming to regret his rash statement. “I wouldn’t. But if you were vulnerable to scum like him in the human world, you’re five times as vulnerable among shifters. You don’t know how dangerous it is out there!”

“And how am I suppose to know, if you don’t tell me?” I demand. “How am I suppose to know I’m breaking your ridiculous rules if you don’t even tell me what they are in the first place?”

“They aren’t ridiculous, they’re for your own safety!” Sinclair grits out.

“That didn’t answer my question.” I remark, narrowing my eyes.

“I’m sorry Ella, I didn’t expect you to go galavanting around town when you’re barely recovered! I thought you would come to me if you needed something.” He grits out, his jaw ticking in annoyance.

“I don’t want to have to come to you every time I want to set foot outside the house!” I cry, “I don’t like having to rely on other people for things I’m perfectly capable of doing for myself.”

“You mean you don’t trust other people.” Sinclair corrects me, cutting to the quick. “You feel safer doing everything for yourself, and you don’t know how to ask anyone else for help let alone believe they’ll come through for you.”

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I don’t know how he managed to figure that out. He isn’t wrong I’ve always preferred to do everything myself, because I learned the hard way that I’m the only person I can

53.68%

rely on when push comes to shove. But I've never told him this – I've never expressed this to anyone. "I meant what I said." I insist, stubbornly notching my chin up.

"I understand better than you think, Ella." Sinclair relates, softening his tone. "But you're supposed to be avoiding stress."

"What's stressing me out is you standing here yelling at me!" I accuse, tears burning in my eyes. "I was just trying to do something nice, I didn't know it would upset anyone!"

"Come on, now." Sinclair admonishes. "At least do me the courtesy of being honest – you couldn't have gotten out of this house unseen without trying."

"Or maybe your guards aren't as on top of things as you think they are." I bite back.

Sinclair narrows his eyes. "You managed to ditch guards specifically assigned to you, Ella."

"What?" I squeak. "Why do you have guards assigned to me?"

"Because you're pregnant with my pup!" He growls, "because I have enemies who would target you at a moment's notice, which you very well know."

"Or maybe it's because you're just an invasive, overprotective ass!" I explode, "you haven't stopped bossing me around from the moment I got here!"

Sinclair's eyes flash dangerously, and the next thing I know he's prowling towards me across the kitchen. I back away until my body collides with the cabinets, suddenly won-

70 209

dering if I've pushed him too far. "Careful Ella." He warns, looming over me. He braces his hands on the counter on either side of my body, pinning me

between his arms. He ducks his head so that his face is only a few inches from mine, and I feel the power and authority rolling off him in waves. “I’ve given you a lot of leeway so far because you don’t know our ways, but if you keep speaking to me that way I won’t be accountable for my actions.”

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My knees turn to jelly in the face of his anger, but somehow this fear isn’t the same kind I’ve known in the past. I don’t believe he’ll hurt me, especially since I’m carrying his pup – as he keeps pointing out. No, his threats feel different darkly sensual in a way I don’t quite understand. All of a sudden I’m very curious to see what he’ll do if I keep pushing him. I’m sorely tempted to test him, to see just how far I can push my luck. “Fine.” I hiss. “I won’t speak to you that way. I’ll show you instead.”

I reach for the bag of flour on my left, taking a handful in my fist. Before I can think better of it, I act, lobbing the flour right into his incredibly handsome face.

Chapter 30-Food Fight

Ella

The flour collides with Sinclair’s face in an explosion of white powder, covering his features in dense grains and fluttering through the air around us. A low growl rumbles in his chest, and fear slices through me as I wonder if I’ve made a grave mistake. Sinclair takes a moment to open his eyes after the flour hits, but when he does, his wolf is glowing bright in his irises, and my instincts take over.

I try to duck under his arms, to evade his hold anyway I can. However the moment I begin attempting escape he leans forward, crushing my body between him and the counter. At once I’m reminded of how much larger Sinclair is. Sometimes it’s easy to be fooled when I’m dressed up in heels or there’s space between us, but now I can feel how helpless I am beside him. The top of my head barely reaches his sternum, and next to his muscles, my slender limbs feel terribly frail.

Sinclair's breath is coming in heaving gasps, and I have the good sense to remain frozen as he tries to gain control of his wolf. When I look up at him, I can see only the wild animal fuming beneath his skin, and I realize exactly how dangerous this man is.

I'm not sure if he's going to attack me, or yell at me, and my heart is racing a mile a minute. I instinctively flinch when he moves, but he doesn't raise a hand against me. Instead he reaches past me towards the bowl of chocolate cake batter, and the next thing I know, a river of the thick, sweet mixture is dripping down my face.

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I gasp in shock, realizing that Sinclair is pouring the batter over me, and try to jerk away. "Dominic, no!"

A dark laugh rolls through the big wolf like thunder, "Oh baby, you asked for this."

I raise my arms over my head, trying to protect myself, but when that doesn't work I reach for the bowl too, returning fire with handful of batter straight into Sinclair's expensively tailored shirt. Soon we're wrestling over the bowl, trying to retrieve more sweet ammunition to splatter each other with, and I'm laughing harder than I can remember laughing in a very long time.

The sound of Sinclair's own cozy chuckles fill my ears as I trade out cake batter for icing, reaching up with two hands and smearing it over his face as he playfully nips at my fingers, before positively squealing as warm, melted chocolate is drizzled over the low cut top of my dress, seeping down between my breasts and into my bra.

We're both absolutely covered in the various cake components, giddy with laughter and still searching for new ways to combat one another. The bowls on the counter are already empty, and I narrow my eyes at Sinclair as I contemplate moving to the pantry or fridge for more ammo. His white teeth flash, and the next thing I know he's racing towards the fridge faster than I can even comprehend.

I dart to the pantry, pulling open the door to use as a shield and disappearing inside, zeroing in on a bottle of caramel syrup, even as I see Sinclair plucking a can of whipped cream from the fridge. Soon we're stalking around the kitchen island, trying to get close enough to squirt each other with our chosen item, and inevitably laughing and racing away when the other gets too close.

18.81%

I try to feint around the edge of the counter, making him think I'm going to go in a direction other than the one I intend, but I'm outmatched in this game in every possible way. Sinclair is bigger, stronger and faster, and he can read my intentions far better than I can read his.

He snatches me easily, spraying me with cold whipped cream until I manage to wriggle free, even though I know he's letting me escape. If he wanted to he could have easily pinned me in place, but we're both having too much fun with our game.

It's making an unholy mess, but I can't remember the last time I had this much fun. Sinclair has completely surprised me too – I never expected him to have a playful side, and it's so different from the men I've known before. Mike and I certainly never did anything like this, and I doubt my ex would have had the inclination or the confidence to let a woman defy him this way. Sinclair, on the other hand, has no doubts about his masculinity. He can gladly let me tease and defy him without feeling threatened, because he knows at the end of the day his dominance is complete.

Too late I realize I'm thinking about Sinclair in comparison to my past lovers, when I know he doesn't see me this way at all. Yet I can't help it, the more time that passes the more certain I feel that Sinclair is attracted to me. I know it's only physical and that I could never be anything but a plaything to him, but it feels nice to be desired – even if it is superficial.

When the bottle of caramel is empty, I try to make my way back to the pantry, but Sinclair has other ideas. "Come here you." He purrs, snatching me up. "Such a bad girl." His fingers are digging into my sides, tickling me ruthlessly and making me giggle and squeal uncontrollably. I try to wrestle him for

38.68%

dominance, but I know it's a lost cause.

We tumble to the floor together, wrestling and writhing against one another, getting more and more dirty with every minute that passes. Sinclair lets me pin him to the tiled floor, straddling his middle and trapping his hands above his head. 'Ha!' I declare triumphantly, secretly needing him to prove my victory false, to take control and make me forget my own

name.

"Oh, you think you've won, do you?" He taunts, grinning

up at me.

"You're not so scary, you know." I counter, smiling widely. "What would all those big tough wolves say if they knew their leader was letting a weak little human throw food in his face?"

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The next thing I know I'm on my back with Sinclair looming above me. The air leaves my lungs in a great whoosh – I didn't even see him flip me, but suddenly our situations are completely reversed. I'm still straddling Sinclair, my legs spread on either side of his body so that his hardness is pressed to my most sensitive flesh through our clothes. "They'd say, lucky Alpha." He answers smugly, looking down at me with undiluted hunger.

The little voice in my head has me metaphorically squirming, needing to apologize for reasons I don't understand. It's almost as if I feel compelled to submit now that Sinclair has physically bested me, but why would that be the case? I try to hold the words back, but I can't stop them no matter what I try. "I am sorry I snuck out." I confess, peeking up at him from beneath my lashes.

60.45%

"You're forgiven." Sinclair rules gently, "As long as you

promise not to do it again."

My metaphorical squirming becomes very literal now, though I freeze almost immediately when I realize the way my nervous movement rubs my sensitive sex against his. Softening, I agree, "I promise."

I don't understand what's happening to me. I have all of these strange emotions bubbling up inside me. Is it all just the pregnancy, the pup making me feel and behave more like a wolf, or is it something more than that. "That's my girl." Sinclair praises, looking down at me with obvious pride.

"What are you doing to me?" I murmur, before I can stop myself.

"What do you mean?" He asks, frowning slightly.

"I don't know." I huff, "I just feel like a different person since we met."

"Maybe you're becoming the person you were always meant to be." Sinclair suggests, shifting so that my wrists are captured between one of his strong hands, while the other slides down my body. "It's finally safe to come out of your shell, so you are."

"I think you're giving yourself an awful lot of credit." I respond primly, even as I fight the desire to lean into his touch. "And it's a shame you were such a jerk." I add pointedly, "now you won't get to taste the cake I made."

Sinclair arches his brow, gazing down at my batter covered body and adopting a devilish expression. Before I know what's happening, he's lowered his mouth to the swell of my breast and is licking the cake batter from my skin, groaning

79.37%

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with delight. "Delicious." He praises, rising up over me again. His eyes drift to the curve of my full lips, then the whipped cream splattered across my clavicle – as if he can't decide what to taste next. A low purr vibrates against my skin, "I wantmore."