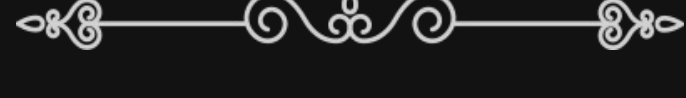


Accidental Surrogate

Chapter 271



My breath starts to come short and fast now as I press my hand desperately to my stomach, seeking that connection somewhere within me. But I feel like I’m grasping through empty air, my fingers searching for any touch, any tie, and coming up empty.

“Ella,” Sinclair murmurs, tightening his hands against my back. “Calm down – the doctors say that it’s okay, that he’s still with us –”

“Still with us,” I growl, my teeth clenched as I try to manifest that damn connection, to make it appear even when it stubbornly refuses to present itself. “How can he still be with us if I can’t feel him?”

Sinclair shushes me softly again, a soft rushing sound that despite my desperation – makes me open my eyes and look at him. My fear comes rushing in then, wiping out my anger and

frustration. “Dominic, what does it mean?” I ask, my voice trembling. “If the doctor’s say they have a heartbeat – but we can’t feel him?”

“I don’t know, Ella,” he responds, his own voice low with worry and despair. “But we’re going to figure it out, okay? Together?” He pulls his brows together, worried, and nods to me, begging me to see. “Please, just calm down. We’ll think it through.”

I nod quickly, bobbing my head in agreement and forcing my body to relax. Sinclair moves beneath me, folding his legs instead of kneeling, pulling me into his lap and cradling me against his chest. I rest my head against him, making myself breathe slow, deep breaths, letting the warm scent of him root me in my body.

God, how long have I been gone? I have...memories. Memories of being here, of dancing, of being in the clouds and in the trees...of flickering in and out of this place. I push my mind back further and remember, quite suddenly, the last place I was

On the steps, with Cora, handing her the gift...watching her use it...

I cringe at the memory, of the feeling of drowning in my mother’s power, of all of it draining from me as I handed it to Cora, taking my life with it. I look up into Dominic’s face then and find him there, ready, likewise peacefully breathing. Waiting.

“Cora?” I ask quietly.

He nods to me, smiling a little. “She’s totally fine. The world is fine. But...don’t worry about that, now, my darling. Just worry about you.”

“And Rafe,” I murmur, tucking my head back against him and closing my eyes. I turn my attention to my little boy, then, and my heart breaks. God, I want him so badly – have wanted him so badly for years and years. And in these past few months of happiness with Sinclair, I have letmyself imagine a beautiful future. I imagine him covered in pasta sauce the first time he tries spaghetti, imagine his first steps, imagine him playing baseball with his friends...

God, but now... the idea of losing him, of losing that beautiful future – it’s so horrible I can hardly stand it. I feel myself physically cringing at the idea, curling further into Sinclair’s arms as he tightens his hold around me, letting me feel the pain but also letting me know that he’s here to help me bear it.

How horrible, the idea that it could all be just a dream...

My eyes snap open at that. I suddenly sit up straighter in Sinclair’s arms.

“What?” he asks, curious, a little frightened that something might be wrong.

“A dream,” I murmur, my mind wheeling as I look around at our surroundings. “We’re in a dream.” “Well, yeah,” Sinclair says, as if it’s obvious. But he doesn’t get it yet.

“And here,” I continue, ignoring his interruption, “we can make anything happen that we want. Yes?” Sinclair studies my face and doesn’t say anything, letting me continue. “And you’re here,” I insist, starting to get excited now, “because I invited you. Because I wanted you here.”

“Yes?” Sinclair confirms slowly, still not getting where I’m going with this.

“So?” I say, smiling now, excited. “What if we invite the baby here too? Make him real so we can hold him, tell him how much we want him? You brought me back right now you kissed me – can’t we do it with him?” I lose track of my train of thought a little at the end there – but I don’t care, I’m too excited now. This is going to work –

I start to push myself from Sinclair’s lap, ready to get to my feet, to head into the forest, to find my son, but Sinclair quickly pulls me back.

“Ella,” he hesitates, “I don’t know if it will work –”

“What?” I ask, spinning to look at him and frowning. “Why not?”

He just shrugs and blinks at me. “I’ve just – I’ve never heard of it happening before. I’m able to come into your dreams because I’m your mate – I’ve never heard of a mother sharing her dream with her pup, even while pregnant

I scoff at him, rolling my eyes a little. “Well just because you haven’t heard of it doesn’t make it impossible –”

He laughs at me for a moment then and I stop, smiling a little back at him. This, I think, this is what we’re fighting for. For the bond between us, for the push and pull, for the fact that we’re sitting in a dream, in the midst of a tragedy, that I’m probably dying and somehow I’m still rolling my eyes at him and making him laugh.

Sinclair nods at me, his eyes fixed on mine, and I know that he completely understands. That he gets it too. That this thing between us? It’s worth trying anything so that we can share it with our child.

“All right,” he says, pressing a quick kiss to my mouth. “Lead the way, trouble. You’re in charge now.”

I nod, affirming this, and push myself out of his lap and to my feet, dusting off my skirts and looking around the forest. He rises next to me, the mass of him as steady and assuring in this dream state as it is in real life. I brush my hair behind my ear and look around, wondering where to begin.

“Um,” I hesitate, looking up at him. “When I was gone up in the clouds – what did you do? To get me to come back?”

“I called for you,” he replies, smirking down at me. “And, characteristically, you ignored me. Until I hollered at you to come back.”

I scrunch my face up in distaste at this. “Well I’m not going to yell at my child, the first time I meet him,” I murmur, turning away from him and scanning into the woods. “But the calling....it’s not a bad place to start.”

Then, feeling a little foolish, but believing in it anyway, I raise my hands to my mouth and cup them on either side. “Rafe!” I call, my voice echoing louder into the dream than I thought it would. “ Rafe, where are you baby! Mama wants to see you!”

We both wait for a second, holding our breath, but nothing. The forest even consents to go quiet, as if letting us hear more clearly. But still, not a sound.

“You try,” I murmur, nudging Sinclair with my elbow. “You’re louder than me.”

“I’m louder than everyone,” he replies, raising his hands to his own mouth, and then he, too, shouts into the forest. “Rafe! Come on, son!” I listen to the sound reverberating in the trees and hold my breath, hoping so hard...

Still, nothing. “Keep going,” I whisper to Sinclair, glancing up at him and then closing my eyes. Sinclair complies, calling out sweetly to our boy, telling him that we’re looking for him, that we want him, that we can’t wait to meet him. And as he does, I will him to be real, I demand the dream to make space for him, I cry out for him with every piece of

And just when I feel like I can’t bear it any more, I feel.. Just the tiniest tug.

And a baby’s cry sounds out in the forest.

my heart.