

Accidental Surrogate For Alpha By Caroline Above Chapter 51

Chapter 51 – Ella Learns About Shifter Rela

Ella

My mind goes blank at first. Sinclair is too close to the truth, to figuring out that I'm not as immune to him as either of us would like to believe. The voice in my head is panicking, but I try to keep it together. Praying for calm. I take a deep breath, and as I exhale I recall the ability to speak.

"Because we're supposed to be in this together, and you played me." I murmur, speaking the truth – but not the whole truth. I can't admit to him that I feel utterly rejected by his ploy, that I feel unwanted on a visceral level and it's tearing me up inside for reasons I don't yet understand. "You played me like I'm one of those reporters, or the Prince."

Sinclair's face twists into a grimace. and the next thing I know he's reaching for me, "Please, come here Ella."

"No." I insist stubbornly, preparing to move away if he tries to approach me.

"I'm sorry" He expresses, looking truly remorseful. "I didn't mean to do that. I care about you, I don't want to hurt you that way."

"Well you did." I reply petulantly. I don't know where this comes from. With anyone else I would have accepted the apology and moved on, whether I actually felt better or not. I've always chosen peace over my

own feelings but I find it very hard to pretend with Sinclair. I think he would know that I don't actually feel better, so why should I fake it?

"I know." He nods grimly. "I promise I'll find a way to make it up to you."

"I don't need some sort of reparation." I insist, "Just... do better, Dominic."

"I will." Sinclair vows soberly, "You have my word."

I breathe a sigh of relief, but Sinclair is surveying me closely. I can tell he wants to metaphorically kiss and make up, but as I

suspected, he senses my upset is not wholly resolved. “What else?” He prompts.

“Nothing important.” I shrug, not feeling brave enough to ask the questions I’m most curious about.

“Ella,” He says my name as an admonition, scolding me for not being honest with nothing but those two familiar syllables. “Come on, tell me what’s on your mind.”

I gnaw on my lower lip, hating that he can read me so easily, but also relieved that I might get my answers. “Alright, what was all that about discipline? Those things the Prince said about my insolence? It didn’t just sound like Alpha stuff... I mean it’s one thing to be insubordinate to a leader, but the way you two were talking... it made it seem like all men expect to be in charge of their mates.”

Sinclair’s lips quirk at the edges, and the energy in the limo abruptly shifts. The air around us goes taut, feeling suddenly tense and electric despite the fact that nothing has actually changed. Neither one of us have moved a muscle. Still I know Sinclair feels it too it’s all too obvious in his reply. “Such a clever little human.”

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“You mean it’s true?” I gape. “Why, because of the dominance thing? But that’s so backwards! You just said that strength and all that doesn’t have true value.”

Sinclair emits a low rumble. “I said it comes down to power dynamics, and that dominance isn’t a virtue – but it is a reality in relationships.”

“So what, because men are physically stronger they get to boss around their mates?” I demand hotly.

Sinclair chuckles, flashing his fangs and clearly enjoying my indignation. “You have to remember that shifters are very primal beings. Whatever instincts humans once possessed have been socialized out of you. You’ve been completely detached from your inner animal. But for us? Our inner animal controls everything, our

instincts drive everything.”

“And everyone else has to submit?” I guess, feeling a shiver run down my spine. “Even to their lovers?”

“Especially to their lovers.” Sinclair smirks. “For she-wolves, the best mate possible is the one who can best protect and provide for them. Their instincts drive them to test potential partners in order to figure out who is the strongest. They need to feel their mate’s dominance to

know they’re safe, to satisfy their own inner animal. Only then will they submit.” Sinclair shares. “That’s part of why I think you’d make such a good wolf. I think you have some of those same instincts. You may not realize it, but you often test your limits with me, the same way she-wolves test their mates to ensure they have the strongest partner.”

“So all that talk about discipline... that was serious? Literal?” I squeak nervously.

Sinclair is up now, crossing the limo to sit beside me, invading my space with his big body. “Yes.” He rumbles deeply. “It was. Does that scare you?” I don’t know why, but for some reason, his ominous manner makes me think he wants me to say yes, he wants me to be scared. Oh Goddess, what do I do now?

Sinclair

Ella’s eyes are adorably wide, and she’s squirming in her seat. However she doesn’t look afraid, she looks intrigued – curious. I can see her thighs clenching reflexively, and I can smell the beginnings of her arousal. My wolf howls in triumph. The gendered nature of shifter power dynamics might outrage Ella’s human values, but she clearly craves a strong mate just like any she-wolf- whether she realizes it or not. Her body has always responded to my dominance even when her saucy little mouth argues against it.

“So,” her pink lips form a perfect “o” as she tries to wrap her mind around this idea, “if a she-wolf does something her mate doesn’t agree

with. she just gets abused?”

“Of course not.” I explain, pulling Ella into my lap. “Only weak men assert their authority through violence or mistreatment. That isn’t our way.”

“But you said –

“Consequences, not abuse.” I correct gently.

“What kind of consequences?” Ella asks, a tiny furrow appearing in her brow. I wish I could read her thoughts right now, but it’s enough to see the blend of eagerness and apprehension on her beautiful face – she’s excited by this conversation, and more than a little interested.

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“Well, what does that word make you think of?” I inquire, thoroughly enjoying watching Ella come to terms with these ideas. It hasn’t been easy for me to pull back my wolf from treating her like one of our own, especially when she shows so many wolfish qualities. I’d be lying if I said I wasn’t hoping this conversation might open a new door in our relationship

“With the children I nannied consequences were things like time outs and no screen time – groundings for the older kids.” Ella explains.

“It’s much the same with our pups.” I say, to Ella’s obvious relief.

“But mates aren’t pups. You aren’t a pup.”

“I don’t understand.” She frowns, fidgeting nervously. Her silky thighs

are still clenching and it’s all the more obvious now that she’s settled in my lap. The sweet little human probably thinks I don’t have a clue what she’s up to, but I know perfectly well that she’s trying to relieve the ache between her legs.

“Sure you do.” I encourage. “Just say the first thing that comes to your mind.”

“I mean, dominance and submission...” She trails off, her voice no louder than a whisper. “That makes it sound like... kinky sex

stuff.”

“It does, doesn’t it?” I tease, stroking her hip.

“You mean it is?!” Ella exclaims, looking scandalized.

“You never experimented with that sort of thing?” I ask.

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She flushes. “I’ve only ever been with Mike he wasn’t the adventurous type.”

“Well in my book, these things aren’t adventurous. They’re standard – normal and natural.” I relate, my voice low and husky.

“And more fun than you can imagine.”

“But it’s discipline.” Ella argues. “Isn’t that only fun for you?”

“Not if you’re doing it right.” I remark coolly. “And it’s fulfilling for us

both. She wolves need to submit as much as male wolves need to dominate it’s in our dna.”

“That sounds completely sexist. Would a she-wolf tell me the same thing?” Ella asks archly.

“Ask Aileen if you want.” I shrug.

“Well it’s not as if these things really matter for us.” She reasons, straightening up a little. “After all, I’m not a she-wolf, and we’re not actually mates.” Am I imagining a twinge of disappointment in her voice? But over which part? The fact that she’s human? That we aren’t mates? Or is she sad she won’t experience these things herself? I already know she never had anyone to take care of her she’s never

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had discipline or consequences in her life, she only knew neglect as a child. Does she want someone who will give her the care she was

denied now?

“True.” I agree. “But now that you know the consequences, I wouldn’t be too surprised if you get them the next time you act out.”

“But we aren’t lovers!” Ella objects, her pupils dilating and her breath coming in little pants.

“No, but you’re the mother of my pup, that makes you my
—
responsibility. I’m not saying it would be sexual – I know you don’t want that but if your behavior needs correcting, you better believe I’ll correct it.” I declare, knowing I’m playing with fire here. This sort of attitude might be catnip for she-wolves, but Ella might take it as at threat.

Her eyes are wide as saucers again, but she doesn’t look frightened, if anything she looks invigorated. “All those times you warned me not to

test you, that you were showing leniency because I don’t know your ways...” She realizes aloud.

“That’s right.” I confirm. I watch her closely as my words land, and sure enough, she deflates a little. “You know now, so sneak out again or stomp your little foot on me, and I won’t hesitate to put you over my knee like the naughty girl you are.”

Ella gasps at my blunt words, staring at my lips as though she might kiss me. At first I think I’m imagining it, but then she leans in. She’s going to kiss me.

Chapter 52 – Sunclair’s Warning

Sinclair

At the very last second Ella seems to realize what she’s doing and starts to pull back. Unfortunately for her, the scent of her arousal is filling the small space where we’re confined, and the desire in her eyes is so strong I can’t stop myself. I catch her nape before she can move away from me, claiming her lips in one swift move.

Ella offers me a plaintive little moan then sinks willingly into my arms, sliding her arms around my neck and pressing her soft body flush to mine. I growl in reply, my wolf chuckling in my head when she noticeably shivers. She’s so beautifully responsive, my

every touch sending ripples of heat through her small body. It's only too tempting to continue touching and petting her in new ways, just to see how she' ll react

Despite her reluctance or disinterest in getting involved with me. Ella shows no hesitance now I suspect our heated conversation pushed her past her inhibitions or worries. She's too turned on to think clearly and though I know I shouldn't take advantage. I'm not a saint. I don't know any man or wolf who could deny such a sweet offering – and Goddess is she sweet.

Ella returns my kisses with open fervor, parting her lips for my questing tongue and shifting until she's straddling my lap. Before long her swollen center is pressed to my hardness, separated only by my slacks and her dress. I want to rip the clothes from her body, to expose every inch of her soft skin and finally fulfill my erotic fantasies about

her. I've become so pent up with sexual tension lately that I've found

myself making lists in my head, noting all the things I'd like to do with the lovely human if she ever decides to let me into her bed.

It's practically torture not to escalate our tryst when I know how close I am to making those dreams a reality, yet at the same time I'm overjoyed to simply have Ella in my arms this way. Her lips are completely addictive, and I could happily spend hours tasting her this way. Ella, on the other hand, seems more impatient. She gradually drags her lips from mine and trails them across my jaw and down my neck, her nimble fingers busying themselves with undoing the buttons on my

shirt.

When I realize what she intends I catch her slender wrists. “Take it easy, gorgeous.” I advise, worried she’ll regret this if I let it continue. “We’re not even home yet.

Ella grumbles wordlessly, continuing to lick and nibble her way over my body even as I hold her hands captive. The next thing I know, her little teeth are sinking into my pec not a nibble or a nip, but a true bite. It seems my sweet human didn’t care for being refused, and she’s reacting like any she-wolf who’s mate isn’t giving her what she needs. I fist one of my large hands in the silky strands of her hair, pulling her off of me before I lose control completely. It takes all my willpower not to throw her onto the seat and claim her once and for all, but somehow I manage. “Fuck, you can’t do that, Ella.” I grit out.

“Why not?” I look down at her, catching sight of an indignant pout so adorable I have to kiss her again.

“Because only mates bite one another.” I sigh when we part. “It’s incredibly intimate, it carries meanings you don’t understand.”

“So explain.” She counters, her brow crinkling in confusion.

Huffing out a laugh. I loosen my hold on her long hair, stroking my fingers through the tresses. “I can’t. It’s a wolf thing. It’s part of our bond, there’s magic that passes between two partners.” I continue. “And you biting me is like an open invitation for my wolf to claim you. It isn’t easy to hold him back.”

I don’t tell her that this shouldn’t be the case. A simple bite from any random woman certainly wouldn’t tempt my wolf, even a bite from a lover wouldn’t tempt him unless he wanted to claim her anyway. But Ella doesn’t know that and I don’t want to overwhelm her. Still, my words have the intended affect, the idea of my wolf claiming her sobers Ella more quickly than anything else, and the tension between us lowers to a simmer.

I carefully extract the sweet bundle from my lap, placing her on the seat beside me. The fog of lust is still covering her eyes, but I can see her slowly coming down from the endorphin high. Her pulse isn't racing so fast anymore, and I settle my palm on her belly, feeling our pup. He's awake and giving off pulses of happy contentment, no doubt pleased to have us both near. I tenderly stroke Ella's stomach, still reveling in our baby's elusive consciousness. "The pup's influence is strong you're acting more like a wolf every day." I observe.

"I'm sorry." Ella finally confesses, looking truly lost now. "Not just for the bite... for all of it. I don't know what came over me."

"You don't have to apologize." I answer. "I like kissing you."

"But it's not..." She shakes her head. "I don't want that." Ella insists, gazing up at me. "Thank you for stopping me, I don't... I've never lost control that way. I made such a fuss about us not blurring the lines of our relationship and then I threw myself at you like that... I really don't know how it happened."

I do. I think with amusement. I should have expected as much given Ella's mischievous streak and the way she's been playfully testing me from the beginning, as well as the times she's very seriously pushed back at my authority. She needs a firm hand, she craves the kind of care only a strong mate can provide – and it doesn't matter one bit that she's human.

"It's okay." I repeat, "And I will always do what I can to make sure we don't get carried away." One huge exception looms in my mind's eye, and after tonight, I know I can't put it off any longer. "But Ella, I really do need to warn you about the wild hunt."

"How so?" She asks.

“The wild hunt event happens on the second to last night of the festival. It’s a tradition where male wolves hunt,” I’m careful to put this word in air quotes, just in case she misunderstands, “their mates in the forest.”

“I know.” She breathes. “Aileen told me all about it. She said I would have to start the hunt, but it was okay that I couldn’t shift because I’d enter the forest in human form anyway.”

“Yes.” I confirm, wondering if my beta’s wife told her the rest. “And I assume you know what happens when the she-wolves are caught.”

Ella flushes scarlet. “Aileen said you celebrate by ‘making new wolves’.” As embarrassed as she seems to be saying these words, the darling human doesn’t seem to be taking it seriously. I understand why she might not think there’s anything to worry about in our case, but unfortunately that isn’t the reality

“Right.” I agree again. “But you have to understand that I will be shifted by the time I reach you. My wolf will be in control, and he’s not as gentle or patient as I am.”

“But you’ll shift back, won’t you?” She inquires, sounding suddenly

anxious

“Yes, but he’ll still be at the forefront, and we’ll have been on the hunt.” I wonder if she comprehends all the implications of this, then realize she can’t possibly. Only a shifter could understand. I know I have to be more direct. “That night brings the dawning of the Solstice, when our magic is strongest. Our wolves will be closer to the surface that day than they are almost any other day of the year. I won’t be myself, I won’t be able to hold myself back without help from you. My wolf will see the mother of our pup and

want to carry out the ritual to make love to you. If you encourage me, I won't be able to stop myself"

"So I won't encourage you." Ella answers, as if the solution is truly that simple.

"It might be harder than you think." I warn. "The pup is changing your behavior already, and the event is very heated from the beginning. We can't let what happened tonight happen at the hunt."

Ella grimaces, "Okay." She nods gravely, clearly taking the matter very seriously

"There's one more thing." I add, my mouth forming a hard line.

"Yes?" She prompts me.

"Once I've caught up to you, you have to stop running." I state, hoping the baby's influence isn't strong enough to make her do this. A true she wolf wouldn't give up until her mate actually pinned her to the ground, but if it gets that far I don't think I'll be able to hold myself back. "If you keep going it will send my prey drive into override and I will chase you down... It would be a different kind of encouragement, but every bit as dangerous. So whatever you do don't run."

Ella gulps, "I promise."

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I'm relieved to have this conversation out of the way, to know we're on the same page. And yet, I saw how curious Ella became

tonight about our ways, and I can see the same curiosity in her now. I just have to hope that curiosity isn't so strong that she decides to test me on the night of the hunt. If she does – we'll both be in big trouble.

Chapter 53 – Yuletide Feast

Ella

“You look radiant.” Sinclair's father is beaming up at me from his wheelchair, “how's my grandbaby treating you?”

“Oh he's certainly making his presence known.” I laugh, sliding my arms into the sleeves of my coat. Sinclair is holding the garment up for me, then straightens it around my shoulders as if worried I won't be warm enough. He's been particularly on edge tonight, and though I understand his agitation. I'm beginning to tire of being treated like a china doll. “Stop fussing. Dominic, I'm fine.”

“I'm still not sure this is a good idea.” He grumbles. “Your blood pressure was much too high this afternoon and you didn't get nearly enough rest.”

“You're the one who keeps telling me how important these events are.” I remind him. “And I feel perfectly well.”

He's still muttering to himself, and Henry chuckles, “You're fighting a losing battle, my dear. There won't be any reasoning with him – I was the same way when his mother was breeding and we weren't campaigning.”

“It's too much stress.” Sinclair agrees. “All the media and the royal family, on top of the crowds.”

Chapter 57

Tuletide Feast

“Not to mention your brother ” Henry adds darkly. It’s true that this is the first time I’m going to be encountering all of these people together. but it’s also far from the last. The Yuletide Feast is only the third night of the festival, and we still have four more high profile events to get through before we can relax. Even then it will only be a temporary

we still have the rest of the campaign to get through. reprieve

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“I’ll be fine.” I insist. “You don’t have to coddle me.”

Both men raise their eyebrows, as if to say that this isn’t my decision and I absolutely do need to be coddled. Sure enough, Sinclair shakes his head and overrules me. “We’ll come home at the first sign you feel overwhelmed and that isn’t up for debate.”

I turn away, rolling my eyes when I’m confident they can’t see my face. However as I begin to step towards the door, Sinclair pulls me back against his chest. The big Alpha lowers his lips to my ear, his deep voice like rough velvet. “I saw that, trouble.”

My stomach swoops with excitement and apprehension, and I try to make my voice sound stronger than I feel. “And?” I challenge him. “I’m not scared of you.”

A low chuckle vibrates in his chest, and I feel very overheated all of a sudden. “Liar” Sinclair croons, petting me affectionately. I’m only too aware that his father is only a few feet behind us and can hear every word: I feel my cheeks flush with color, but the elder alpha doesn’t

seem embarrassed at all.

“Alright you two, we’re going to be late.”

We pile out the door and into the back of the limo. Sinclair effortlessly lifting his father into the seat and stowing his wheelchair in the trunk before joining us. I’m deeply curious to know more about Henry’s relationship with Roger, especially given the way he warned us about his presence. “Do you see Roger often?” I inquire shyly.

Dark clouds seem to pass over the older man’s features. “No, I’m afraid my son has never forgiven me for naming Dominic my heir.”

“I’m sorry, I shouldn’t have asked.” I apologize, realizing how personal

the question was.

“Nonsense, you’re family now.” Henry assures me, looking pensive. “I love my son as any father should,” he shares thoughtfully, “and when you welcome your pup you’ll learn firsthand that children don’t always appreciate what’s best for them. Roger would not have made a good Alpha, and I had to do what was best for the pack as well as him. Neither would have thrived under his leadership, and I haven’t ever regretted passing the role to Dominic one bit. I just wish it had been possible to do the right thing without sewing so much discord in my family”

“Roger hated me long before you named me as your heir.” Sinclair interjects, and I can see his protective side coming out in response to his father’s sadness. “He’s been after me ever since Mom died, and becoming Alpha wouldn’t have helped our relationship at all. If anything it would have created more problems. He would have mismanaged things and I would have been compelled to challenge him. You did the right thing.”

“Oh I know.” Henry reaches over to pat Sinclair’s shoulder, “I just can’t help thinking that there might have been a better way, I could have handled it differently, including losing your mother.”

“Everything is easy in hindsight.” I offer gently. “And grief blinds us all, there is no right way to handle it. Besides, it sounds like these cards were already on the table from the start. I’m sure you did the best

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you could and that’s all any of us can hope for.”

“Thank you Ella.” Henry proclaims, managing a dim smile. “I appreciate that.”

We continue to the fair in peaceful silence, and I find myself staring out the window at all the lavish decorations which were put up around the city yesterday I was too preoccupied fighting with Sinclair to notice when we departed the festival, but the old town has truly been transformed for the holiday Lights, greenery, ice sculptures and ornaments abound, glittering almost too brightly against the stark white mounds of fresh snow.

The feast is happening against the backdrop of the Midwinter Fair, and though I wish we had time to explore the carnival, when we arrive reporters and photographers are clamoring around us the moment we exit the car. Sinclair growls at them in warning when they edge too close to me, and though they back off, they remain persistent in their demands for questions and photos. So we head straight to the feast, eager to cross the velvet ropes that will block the clamoring media from the main party.

We have to greet the royal family first, bowing and curtsying to the

King, Queen and Prince and making polite conversation – at least, as polite as one can be with political opponents. Afterwards we move to our assigned places at the head table, relieved to have the tense interaction resolved.

Sinclair pulls out my chair, but I can't bring myself to sit down. "Oh

no," I gulp, holding my breath when I see a large platter of grilled fish on the table. "Is that fish?"

Sinclair follows my gaze, quickly growling at a waiter. "Can you remove the fish, please?"

"Remove it?" The man blinks, looking back and forth between us. I've got my hand over my mouth, and my face is probably very pale from holding my breath. I'm about to break, needing air but knowing the scent will be terrible.

"Yes, the smell makes Ella sick." Sinclair explains, getting impatient with the man's slowness on the uptake. "Get it out of here, can't you see what it's doing to her?"

It's too late, at that moment I lower my hand, heaving in a gasp of much needed oxygen, and feeling my stomach turn in the very same second. I shake my head, knowing I've probably turned green and whimpering when I feel my gag reflex engage. I take off for the restrooms, knowing if I stay I'll be sick all over the beautiful table.

I can hear Sinclair coming after me, but I race into the bathroom just as another woman is exiting. I can barely hear their confrontation over the sounds of my own retching, but when Sinclair doesn't enter I know the

stranger must have insisted he not set foot in the lady's room. Propriety must have won out, but I don't mind – I hate being sick

in front of people, especially handsome men who give me butterflies.

The door opens just as a second wave of nausea overtakes me, and I hear high heels clicking across the floor. “Oh you poor dear.” A feminine voice sounds behind me, and gentle hands pull the hair back from my face. “There, that’s better.”

“Thank you.” I croak, miserable beyond words.

“Nonsense,” My savior replies. “We she-wolves have to stick together.”

“Well I appreciate it.” I repeat, looking up for the first time. The other woman is beautiful, with short dark hair and bright blue eyes. She’s elegant and sophisticated in a way I’ll never be, and I feel a twinge of shame. I bet this stranger has never done anything as unseemly as vomiting in public – pregnant or not.

“This is your first pup.” She observes kindly, “They’re always the hardest.”

“Do you have any?” I ask, moving towards the sink to rinse out my mouth.

“No,” She frowns, a dark look crossing her features. “I haven’t been so blessed.”

“Oh I’m sorry, it was insensitive of me.” I realize, flushing with embarrassment

“Don’t worry about it.” She gives me a long, lingering look full of unspoken emotion. “You’re very lucky, you know” She murmurs meaningfully, then turns and leaves without another word. I can’t help feeling as though I’ve missed something important. It’s only after she’s gone that I realize I never even asked her name.

When I return to the feast, Sinclair stands to greet me, reaching for my waist. "Are you alright?"

"Yes," I try to summon a smile, "as long as the fish is gone."

"Do you want to leave?" He asks, stroking my cheek.

I shrug, leaning into his warmth and pressing my face to the curve of his neck. He smells so good, it's almost enough to make me forget about being ill. His arms come around me reflexively, and I can hear him breathing in my own scent. However rather than purring or humming with contentment like he usually does, his body goes completely stiff. He pulls away from me slightly, his brow furrowing in confusion as he searches my features.

"What's wrong?" I ask, feeling uneasy. He's looking at me as if I've grown a second head, and I don't like it one bit.

"You smell like my ex-wife." Sinclair grits out, his wolf suddenly glowing in his eyes. "You smell like Lydia."

Chapter 54: Lyda's. Ar

Ella

It takes me a minute to understand what must be happening. The only woman I've been near tonight, is the stranger in the restroom. So if I smell like Lydia... that must have been her. It's no wonder she seemed so mysterious and sad. I feel for her immensely. I know what it's like to try for years on end to get pregnant with a partner, only for them to succeed with someone else.

Of course, Sinclair didn't do to her what Mike did to me, they'd been in their struggle together- but it must still hurt. In fact, my pregnancy probably proves the problems they had conceiving were with her, which is devastating for any hopeful mother.

“There was a woman in the restroom.” I tell Sinclair hesitantly.
“She helped me, held back my hair.

“What did she look like?” He demands urgently.

“Dark hair, blue eyes, tall and willowy.” In fact she was my opposite in just about every way, right down to her perfectly manicured nails and custom designer shoes.

Before I can say any more, Sinclair turns and disappears into the crowd, scanning the feast for signs of his ex. My heart falls, faster and harder than I could have believed possible. I can’t believe how painful it is to see him running after her this way, obviously desperate to find her. One mention of Lydia and I might as well not exist. I feel like

Chapter 54 – Lydia’s Return

crumpling in on myself, though I don’t have any right to feel jilted. I’ve known the score from the beginning – Sinclair never pretended

otherwise. So why does it hurt so much?

“You should get off your feet.” Henry says kindly, urging me to take my seat. “You still look very pale.” I follow his gesture obediently, not sure how much longer my legs will support me. Sinclair is out of sight now, no doubt chasing down his true mate to convince her to come back to him. I can’t seem to conjure up any words or coherent

thoughts. I’m slowly being crushed beneath the weight of my disappointment.

I’m cursing myself for being so silly, for getting my hopes up when I knew better. It’s obvious now I’ve been lying to myself about my

feelings for Sinclair, or this wouldn't be so agonizing. At the same time. It's irrefutable proof that I was right not to get involved with him. I was right to try and protect myself – even though I failed. I can't imagine how much worse this would be if I'd actually started a relationship with him.

Stop this, the little voice in my head scolds. You're overreacting, he just went after her, you have no idea what he's thinking. You're assuming the worst because you expect to be let down.

I expect it with good reason. I reply bitterly. I learned the hard way,

remember?

Sinclair is different. She insists. He's special and he cares about you.

He cares about the pup. I correct her. He's protective of me for its sake

and he might be grateful to me for carrying it, but I'll never be a she-wolf. I'll never be in his league and we both know it.

That's your insecurity talking, not your brain. Think of the way he compliments you! You're more than just a surrogate to him. She presses.

And the moment I deliver this baby. I guarantee I'll cease to warrant his attention. I predict grimly. Just you wait and see.

Before my conscience can reply there's movement in my periphery, and a new voice joins the conversation.

“I tried to warn you.” Roger appears as if from nowhere, but he obviously saw what happened. “I told you she would always come first

to Dominic.”

“Roger, that isn’t fair.” Henry rumbles beside me, giving his eldest son a disapproving glare.

“Oh hello, Father” Roger quips, turning his attention to the former Alpha. “It’s been too long – I’m surprised you still remember my name.”

“That’s your own doing.” Henry answers fiercely. “I still call you every week though you never pick up the phone. I’d be thrilled to see you any time you like.”

I feel a rush of sympathy for Sinclair’s father. I might not be a parent yet, but I know that I already love my baby more than I thought

possible. I hate to think of how badly being rejected by him would sting – no matter how old he gets. Most parents would probably give up after a while, to save themselves the pain if nothing else. It speaks volumes that Henry has never stopped trying to be in his son’s life, and I’m glad that Sinclair learned how to be a father from him. I might not ever have my feelings for Sinclair returned, but I know my baby will always have his father’s love and protection. That’s certainly more than I could have said for Mike, and more than many women get from their

partners.

However Roger clearly doesn’t feel any sense of gratitude for his father’s dedication. Instead he turns his nose up in disgust. “You clearly let that injury steal your dignity as well as your mobility. No

true Alpha would shamelessly chase after someone who clearly didn't

want to be around them."

"No true father would let a bitter child push him away without a fight either." Henry growls back, showing a glimmer of his former strength. "Like it or not, I will always be there for you even and especially when you don't want me to be."

"That's called smothering." Roger complains, curling his lip.

"It's called parenting" Henry counters coolly. "And if I didn't teach you that well enough then I'm relieved you don't have pups of your own."

– men are

"Please don't fight." I cut in. I hate disagreements, especially between men. That's another lesson I learned the hard way dangerous when they lose their tempers. In fact, it's amazing that I'm not more frightened of Sinclair's temper- given how intimidating he

1. Maybe it's because he's always so in control, but somehow I know in my heart that he wouldn't ever raise a hand against me. The more I think about it, the more I realize that I can't recall ever trusting anyone the way I trust Sinclair. That must be the pup's influence too, he's bonded with Sinclair and knows he isn't a threat, so I don't fear him

either.

"I'm sorry, Ella." Henry proclaims swiftly. "You're right, it's the holidays, we shouldn't be arguing like this, especially not in front of

you.”

“I’m sorry too.” Roger concedes, though he doesn’t sound it. “I simply thought you might need a friendly ear, what with Dom taking off on you.”

“He didn’t take off, he simply went to investigate.” Henry sighs, sounding as though he’d like to scold his son some more and is holding back for my sake.

“Investigate what?” Roger scoffs. “He knows it was Lydia in the restroom with Ella, and he knows she wouldn’t be here if she wasn’t still interested in him. If he went after her, it’s because he wants to see her. He chose her over Ella, just like he always will.”

Henry, who doesn’t have the first clue that Dominic and I aren’t really mates, looks outraged in my honor. “Why in the Goddess’s name would you say such a thing?”

“Because it’s true.” Roger states simply. “I’m not going to lie to Ella like the rest of you. Dominic and Lydia are fated, their bond is more

powerful than anything they’ll ever share with another.”

Henry shakes his head. “Then why did she leave? Why did Dominic let

her go?”

“Because she thought he couldn’t give her children and he believed it

too, he wanted better for her so he didn’t go after her. But now it’s clear he can father pups, they can try again.” Roger surmises, gesturing

to my middle.

“They weren’t right for each other.” Henry argues. “And though you don’t want to hear it, she wasn’t right for you either.”

“We were in love – every bit as in love as Ella and Dominic, but as soon as their bond kicked in, none of that mattered.” Roger reminds the other man. “The Goddess doesn’t make mistakes.”

I want to protest, to correct him and attest that Sinclair and I aren’t in love, or tell Henry that he doesn’t have to defend me this way I want to scream that it’s all just a sham for the campaign – just to make them stop talking about it. It’s no longer the disagreement I mind, I just can’t stand to be reminded of how little I mean to Sinclair over and over like

this.

I can see that Roger is biased, but I also feel for him. He lost his mother, he grew up in his younger brother’s shadow and lost his birthright and his chosen mate to him. He was clearly scarred by those experiences, and part of me agrees that Dominic shouldn’t have gotten involved with his brother’s ex-fated or not. Maybe Roger is trying to manipulate me, or maybe he really is trying to help either way, he

isn’t lying. Lydia and Sinclair are bonded in a way I will never be with any man – least of all the father of my child.

Before anyone can say another word, I turn on my heel and walk out.

Chapter 55 – Sinclair Catches Up with His Ex

Sinclair

It doesn't take me long to catch up with Lydia. Once I caught her scent on Ella, it was easy to track her through the fair. I leave the feast pavilion and set off into the twinkling lights, finally spotting her in front of one of the food stalls near the snow maze. She's standing in line for mulled wine, and she looks exactly like she did the last time I saw her.

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I wait for the familiar tug on my heartstrings, for our bond to trigger my wolf – to hear him chanting mine in my head the way he does with Ella. But it never comes. I don't feel compelled to claim her, or even to approach her. If it weren't for the fact that she'd been sniffing around Ella and my pup, I wouldn't even consider going near her. I'm amazed to realize that – after all this time – I'm finally free of her influence. I'm finally over her, and she no longer holds any power over me.

When did that happen? I wonder. The last time I saw her was over a year ago, and though I hadn't felt anything like affection for her, my wolf had still recognized our mate just like always. There was chemistry between us even though I'd wanted nothing to do with her. Then again, maybe the fact that I felt so much animosity for her then was evidence of lingering feelings. I can honestly say I feel nothing for her now, and that seems much more final than when I still held our past against her.

Taking a steadying breath, I approach. Lydia turns to face me when I'm still a few paces away, and she gasps in surprise.

“Dominic!”

I feel my hackles raise instinctively. I don't believe her show of surprise for one moment. She obviously knew I was here because she helped Ella in the bathroom, and my scent was all over the little human. In fact, knowing Lydia, she'd probably approached Ella in order to engineer this exact situation. I'm annoyed with

myself for playing into her hands – but I also couldn't do otherwise. A jealous female is a threat to a breeding she-wolf, especially when the title of

Luna is on the line.

“What are you doing here, Lydia?” I demand coolly, not bothering to greet her.

“Oh come now, Dominic, is that any way to greet your mate?” Lydia smiles, batting her lashes.

“Don't do that.” I growl. “We haven't been mates for a long time now, and I know you approached Ella – what are you up to?”

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“We might not be married anymore but we'll always be mates, whether you like it or not.” She reminds me, her smile dimming but not disappearing. “And I was curious. I heard you found a new Luna and I wanted to see my replacement for myself.”

“Ella isn't your replacement.” I bite back, “She's nothing to do with you at all.”

“She is a pretty little thing, I'll give you that.” Lydia sneers in return, flashing her fangs. “But she seems awfully meek for your taste. I thought you liked strong she-wolves, not frail damsels who are afraid of their own shadows.”

“I'm not going to talk to you about my mate, or dignify your comments with a response.” I declare icily. “Where's your new husband anyway, surely you didn't come all this way alone?”

“Oh, Sloan is back in the Bloodbane pack. He doesn't like to travel.” She answers boredly.

“Does he know you’re here?” I inquire, wondering if things are sour enough between them that he doesn’t care, or if she’s sneaking around behind his back. I don’t know an Alpha alive who would allow his Luna to go visit her ex alone, even if they were in an unhappy relationship – it would look too bad for his reputation.

“He knows what he needs to know and no more.” She answers archly,

confirming my suspicions.

“You can’t honestly tell me you were willing to go to all this trouble just to get a look at Ella.” I counter. “What are you up to?”

She laughs humorlessly. “I guess the damsel act works, you were never this protective of me.”

“Of course I was.” I hiss. “I loved you with all my heart realized you only married me for my title.”

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even after I

Lydia pretends to look offended. “How can you say that, we were fated.”

“Fate didn’t matter to you until after my father named me his heir.” I

recall, “remind me, how many years did you stay with Roger after figuring out I was your true mate? And how long did it take you to leave him after realizing he’d never be Alpha?” I don’t need her to answer me. I know the dates like the back of my hand. Roger never realized it, but our bond presented itself when I was just sixteen – two years before my father named me his successor.

Lydia broke my brother's heart the very next day. I knew it then, but I was young and foolish. My wolf had been pining after my mate for so long then that I would have done anything to be with her. I couldn't see her for the scheming social climber she is – but I do now.

"You're right." She simpers. "I wasted too many years on him hoping to become Luna. I should have listened to my wolf from the beginning. Maybe if I'd gone to you when the bond first appeared we would have had children and we could have avoided all this drama."

"Or maybe we'd be in exactly the same place we are now." I counter. I wish I could tell her how easy it had been for Ella to conceive with me. That even after the damage Mike did to her ovaries, one simple insemination had done the trick when years of trying hadn't gotten Lydia and I anywhere. I might point it out if I didn't think it was so cruel. For all her faults, Lydia had always wanted pups, and I know better than anyone how much it hurt her not to conceive.

"No." She frowns. "I obviously gave up on you too quickly. I blamed you for our fertility struggles but I was wrong. I think we deserve another chance."

Oh. Of course, now it all makes sense. She's back because she knows I'm not sterile, but she still can't conceive with her husband. "Go home,

Lydia." I grit out. "Go back to your husband. You're still young. It wasn't in the cards for us, but it obviously can be with other people. Ella proves that."

"You know she's not strong enough to be your Luna." Lydia whispers. in an undertone, looking up at me from beneath her lashes. "Keep her as a plaything if you like, but don't put her in

charge. If you care about her you wouldn't subject her to that pressure. Let me come back, we can keep trying and if it doesn't work I'll even adopt her pup as my

own."

It takes all my willpower not to reel back in shock. I always knew Lydia was calculating and power-hungry, but I didn't think she'd go to this length. I don't even believe this is all about Ella – except that Ella finally gave the Alpha counsel and the allied packs enough confidence in my ability as King to get me elected. Is Lydia here because she thinks I can give her a child after all, or because I might be king after all? Maybe it's both but either way, she isn't here for me.

Ella isn't here for me either, but her dedication to our baby is undeniable. I know she'd do anything for our child, and I've never seen that kind of emotion in Lydia. Ella has more love in her little finger than Lydia does in her entire body, and that's the mother I want for my

son.

"You're out of your mind." I tell her bleakly. "You can't honestly believe I would ever take you back after you walked out on me. You're the reason I might lose this campaign, and that puts the entire realm at risk. You should have stayed for that duty alone."

"I wanted more than duty, Dominic." She argues, puffing out her lips into a pout. "Is that so wrong?"

"You wanted power." I correct. "You've always wanted power, but never the responsibility that comes along with it."

"You're wrong." She insists. "And I'm going to prove it to you, I'm going to win you back. Dom!"

“You’re not, because I’m happier with Ella than I’ve ever been.” I’m amazed to realize I’m telling the truth. We’re not even together, but I feel like I’ve finally found the partner I’ve been looking for in life. Even if nothing ever happens between us, I know we’ll be good parents together, and lifelong friends to boot. I might wish we could be more, but I’m satisfied just having Ella in my life. As I think this, I turn away from Lydia, wondering why I ever let her drag me away from my heart’s

true desire.

“I’m not going to leave, Dominic.” Lydia says to my back, and I can hear other shifters murmuring around us. Our conversation is clearly private no longer, and I regret coming after her. “I’m not going to give up on you.”

“I’ve made my decision, Lydia.” I counter, turning away again. “Deal

with it.”

My good mood only lasts until I get back to the feast table, where I find my father and no sign whatsoever of my little troublemaker. “Where’s Ella?”

My father sighs, looking tired and forlorn. “She left.”

Chapter 56-Ella Gets Her Hopes Up

Sinclair

I stare at my father, not comprehending his words. “What do you mean she left?”

“Well you took off and your brother came along and started whispering in her ear about Lydia and picking arguments with me” Dad explains

the poor thing pointedly. “I wasn’t surprised when Ella walked away clearly doesn’t like conflict. I thought maybe she’d just gone back to

the restroom, but she hasn’t come back and I haven’t seen hide nor hair

of her since.

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“Damn it.” I swear, dragging a hand through my hair and looking around. I don’t see the guards I specially assigned to her, and I can only hope that they’re with her not searching for her too.

“What were you thinking, running off that way?” My father scolds.

“I had to make sure Lydia wasn’t a threat to her or the pup” I grit out, wondering just how much damage my impulsivity has done. Between leaving Ella alone, publicly arguing with Lydia and now preparing to walk out before the feast has truly kicked off, it’s entirely possible that I’ve hurt my campaign – not to mention the mother of my pup.

“I understand that but you must know how that looked to Ella” My father sighs “And Roger didn’t help.”

“What did he say to her?” I demand, more harshly than I intended.

“About what you’d expect.” Dad grimaces. “That Lydia came back to try to mend bridges and you would dump Ella in a heartbeat to get back together with your fated mate.”

A low growl tears through my chest, and I’ve half a mind to go track down my treacherous brother and make him eat his words.

However my wolf won't allow that. He's demanding we see to Ella first – her welfare is more important than punishing Roger.

I make my excuses to the King and Queen, using Ella's illness as an excuse. No one could fault me for caring for my breeding mate rather than furthering my campaign, and Dad and I return to the limo without much objection. The driver confirms he took Ella home a little while ago, but I won't relax until I can talk with her.

When I get home, my rooms are empty, and I know it's a bad sign if Ella is sleeping in her own bed. She only ever does this if she's unhappy with me or Goddess forbid, in need of privacy to relieve our sexual tension. Still, after the night we've had I doubt there's much danger of the latter, so I make my way to her rooms without hesitation.

I enter without knocking, finding Ella curled beneath her covers but wide awake. She sits up when I enter, her golden eyes wide. "You're home already?"

"You didn't think I'd stay after you left, did you?" I inquire, coming to sit on the edge of her mattress.

"I don't know." She shrugs. "I wasn't sure you'd notice I was gone." She winces almost as soon as the words are out of her mouth. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean that I sound like a spoiled child."

"Don't apologize." I admonish, "not for sharing your feelings."

"But they're so petty." She whispers, flushing bright red.

"You're allowed to be petty every now and then." I tease, brushing the hair back from her face. "it's the least I can offer when you're giving me a baby. What you're not allowed is to run off without telling anyone where you're going." I continue sternly.

Ella peeks up at me from beneath her lashes. It's amazing how different she and Lydia can seem even when wearing the same expression. Lydia had adopted this look to try and manipulate me, but Ella's shyness is entirely genuine. "You asked me if I wanted to leave, but then you disappeared before I could answer."

"Uh-huh," I hum, sliding my hand around to her nape. I close my hand around the back of her neck, massaging her tense muscles with my thumb. "You don't really think I'm going to let you get away with that, do you?"

"I took the guards with me!" Ella protests, clearly knowing she was in the wrong, but attempting to push her luck. "I didn't break any rules!"

"But you didn't tell anyone where you went." I reply. "My father was really worried about you, and so was I."

"Oh." She frowns, looking truly guilt-stricken. "I'm sorry, that's not what I wanted."

"What did you want?" I press, encouraging her to lean her weight against me.

"I just wanted to get out of there." Ella murmurs, leaning her head against my shoulder.

"Is that really all? You weren't angry at me? Trying to punish me for leaving you alone?" I suggest, trailing my hand up and down the curve of her spine.

"Not consciously." Ella reasons, "I just felt overwhelmed, you were gone and Roger and your Dad were arguing, I didn't know what else to do."

"And I suppose it didn't have anything to do with the things Roger said to you about Lydia?" I inquire.

“He didn’t tell me anything that wasn’t true.” Ella remarks, repeating a sentiment very close to the one she’d shared the first time Roger sought her out. I hadn’t cared for her acceptance of his warnings then, and I certainly don’t now, given everything that’s happened between us.

“Oh yeah, like what?” I probe, overflowing with suspicion.

“That you two are fated and I’ll never have that bond with you. He’s not wrong.” She answers blithely. Despite her casual tone, I can see the

tension behind her eyes. Perhaps it truly doesn’t bother her but she understands he was out of line, or maybe she cares more than she’s

letting on. Is it terrible of me to hope for the latter? To hope she’s sad about this painful truth?

“We’ve talked about this once before, he shouldn’t be saying those things to you – he was trying to be hurtful.” I clarify, wishing I hadn’t been so thoughtless as to leave her alone and vulnerable to his interference.

“Or maybe he was just hurt.” Ella suggests, using a tone I haven’t heard before.

“What do you mean?” I ask.

Ella pulls away from me, though not by much. “Look, I don’t want to get in between you two, and I know you’re right. He lashes out at everything and everyone... but he does it the way a wounded animal does... I can’t help but feel sorry for him.”

My mind reels and I try to keep my wolf calm. Ella sympathizing with Roger bothers me more than I’d like to admit. I love that she has such a big heart, but she doesn’t know even a fraction of his

misdeeds, let alone what I suspect about his recent scheming. I guarantee she wouldn't be feeling sorry for him if she knew he might be behind her attack, or helping the Prince to keep me from winning the throne.

Ella leans closer to me when she feels my muscles tense, and damned if it isn't effective. It's very difficult for me to stay in a bad mood when her soft curves are pressed up against me. "He hasn't gotten what he

Wanted out of life and he might be wrong to blame others for his misfortunes... but I know what it's like to be denied that way." She continues, clearly feeling the need to explain herself.

At once I understand what Ella means. She sees something of herself in Roger, though she fails to grasp the core differences between them. Roger has let his misfortunes twist and corrupt him into a wolf without integrity or morals, whereas Ella has stayed pure of heart no matter

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what challenges she faced and I guarantee they were considerably greater than my brother's. "You did once, not anymore." I correct fiercely, taking her chin and forcing her to hold my gaze. "From here on out you're going to get what you want, Ella. I won't see the mother of my pup denied happiness."

Adorably, Ella places her hands over her ears, as if she might block out the sound of my voice. "Don't! Please don't." She pleads. "I don't want to get my hopes up, it will just hurt all the more when they fall through."

At once I'm furious with a world that has conditioned her to think this way. I wish I could go back in time and find her when she was a young girl, to take her under my wing and protect her from the

cruelties she's faced. I know she wouldn't be the same woman today without them, but I still wish I could spare her the pain.

"Listen to me very carefully, Ella." I instruct, staring into the brilliant pools of her golden eyes, "I'm going to do whatever I can to ensure your hopes aren't ever dashed again. I can't promise you'll never be disappointed, but you have my word that if it's in my power to give you what you want, you'll have it."

"I don't trust this." Ella confesses, not meeting my gaze. "It sounds too good to be true." She slowly raises her eyes to mine, taking a deep breath as she summons her courage. "You sound too good to be true."

"Then I guess I'll just have to prove myself to you, won't I?" I grin, grazing my knuckles over her cheek.

She shakes her head. "I don't need you to be anything more than you already are. just please don't tell me to wish for the moon when I can't even reach the sky."

"That's because you've been reaching on your own all this time." I inform her gently. "It doesn't have to be that way."

"No?" Ella questions, her eyes shuttering. "Then maybe you'd like to tell me what Lydia had to say when you found her?"

Too late I realize I pushed too hard, I promised too much, and Ella is calling me on it. I need to make a decision and fast. Do I tell her the truth and make her fear for our future with our baby, or do I shield her from Lydia's intentions and protect her peace of mind?

Chapter 57 tuncian Make Prog

Ella

I'm holding my breath for the second time this evening, though this time it isn't to save myself from any bad smells or illness. Now I'm waiting to see if Sinclair will be honest with me about his ex-wife, or if he'll let me down again with another lie. In truth I'm expecting him to disappoint me, though I don't believe he has bad intentions. On the contrary, I think he's much too determined to protect me – but he's very mistaken if he thinks keeping me in the dark is going to make me safer. If anything it will put me more at risk. I don't want to be blindsided again, and after what happened with Mike I feel especially sensitive about dishonesty – however well intentioned.

He sighs, and drops his hands from my face. His green eyes bore into me, and a muscle flutters in his cheek, betraying his agitation over the evening's events. "Roger wasn't entirely wrong. Lydia is back because she wants us to try again."

For a moment I'm so surprised he actually admitted this that I can't speak. At the same time, my heart sinks and swells. It hurts me to know this information, but I'm touched and impressed that Sinclair confided in me. He really does seem to be trying to do better and communicate more, and I appreciate it immensely. As I work through my conflicting feelings I gradually wrap my mind around his words. "Try again." I repeat. "For a baby, or as mates?"

"Both." Sinclair answers simply, shaking his head. "But it's not going to happen."

Chapter 57

I blink, "Why not?"

"There's a reason I didn't go after Lydia when she left." Sinclair growls, a dark look overtaking his features. "She might have walked out, but our marriage was over for a long time by then."

“But I thought...” I trail off, remembering Sinclair and Roger’s conflicting statements about mates. Roger made it sound like fated couples shared a love deeper than any ocean and no chosen bond could ever compete, but Sinclair described things differently. He said that he and Lydia hadn’t been good for one another, that some chosen couples were happier than fated ones. “You’re fated,” I finally continue, wondering if I’m asking this because I believe it, or because I’m afraid of the possibility. “Don’t you love her?”

The corner of his mouth twitches up into a sad smile, and for a moment I can imagine the boy he once was. I can imagine a young Sinclair diving headfirst into love without any fear at all – driven by his strength and innate confidence. Now he looks as though he learned his lesson the hard way, and though some bitterness remains, there’s also

acceptance.

“Sometimes I think the Goddess fates some couples because they have to go through the experience in order to become the person they’re destined to be, not because she intends them to stay together forever, or even that they’re well suited to each other.” Sinclair explains thoughtfully. “Sometimes they might be sent to test a chosen couple’s bond, or even to break your heart. There’s always a larger plan, though it’s hard to accept that the painful parts of life serve any purpose other than tormenting you.”

“I actually think that’s a comforting idea.” I reply, thinking of my own relationships. “I’ve never believed in fate or destiny before... but I’d much rather think that I spent all those years with Mike for a reason I don’t yet understand, than believe it was all just a waste – that it was all for nothing.”

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Sinclair does smile now, pressing his hand to my belly. "That's right. If it wasn't for him, you never would have conceived this baby." His eyes sparkle with mischief, and his grin turns positively canine. "Though I'd still like to let my wolf have a go at him."

"You didn't answer me, you know." I point out, covering his hand with

my own and wishing I could feel our child's emotions the way Sinclair does. "You didn't say whether you still love Lydia."

Sinclair makes a low rumbling sound, "I don't want to talk about Lydia anymore. I just want to be here with you and this little one."

I pull my hand away, sensing I've crossed a line. It worries me that he won't answer me, but I prefer his silence over untruths or empty platitudes. Besides, he told me he wasn't going to get back together with Lydia, and I don't feel confident enough with him to press my luck on the matter. I know the look of a man who's said all he's going to say on a subject, and if I keep pushing he'll just double down. There

will be time to talk about her more in the future.

Sinclair, meanwhile, is gazing at all the bedding piled around my body. "It's only eight o'clock." He reminds me, his brow wrinkling with concern when he realizes I'm still wearing my feast dress. "Were you too exhausted to change?"

I flush. "No. I was just really cold after the festival. I couldn't feel my fingers or toes."

He tsks, grazing his knuckles over my cheek. "Poor baby, do you feel better now?"

“I did.” I answer, tilting my chin up and shooting him an accusing stare. “Until you came and untucked me.

His wolfish smile is back, the one that makes me feel like I need to

lock myself behind a closed door before he huffs and pulls and blows my house down to devour me. Suddenly the goosebumps covering my arms have nothing to do with the cold air, and everything to do with the predator in front of me.

“Then let’s warm you up.” Sinclair purrs, just before he pounces.

I squeak and cry out as he joins me beneath the covers, and though I’m not sure why, I immediately try to wriggle away. I know he just plans on snuggling with me, but the little voice in my head pushes me to give chase, and my human instincts don’t need any encouragement to run from the big bad wolf. Of course Sinclair catches me easily, tickling and playfully wrestling until I’m giggling uncontrollably.

I barely notice when he strips off my dress, and I don’t complain when he removes his own clothes either. Soon we’re both in our underwear, and my entire body is surrounded by Sinclair on all sides. The blankets are over our heads, and all I can see is the dim glow of his green eyes. “I thought the idea was to warm up.” I say, laughter still filling my

voice.

“Body heat needs skin to skin contact to work.” He smirks – I can’t see it, but I hear it in his voice as clear as a bell. “Don’t they teach you humans anything in school?”

“I dunno,” I muse suspiciously. “I think you just like having me naked. I think maybe I should go climb into a nice hot bath instead of letting you take advantage this way.”

Sinclair makes a low grumbly sound that sends delicious shivers down my spine. “First of all, you aren’t naked, not yet anyway.” He counters, his words a sultry promise. “Second, baths are dangerous business, I think you might need supervision.”

“Dangerous?” I scoff, still giggling.

“Mmm.” He confirms gravely. “Slips and falls, drowning, bath snakes – you definitely need a lifeguard.”

My cheeks hurt from smiling, but I can’t seem to stop. “Did you say bath snakes?”

“Oh yes, we get whole infestations in these parts, they’re terribly venomous.” Sinclair replies, still sounding very somber and serious.

I love this playful side of him, even though this is all starting to get a bit too close to the romantic territory I’m desperately trying to avoid entering. The only reason I can handle this is because it’s dark and he’s behaving himself. If I have to see him undressed feel the heat of his gaze on my own body or goddess forbid if he decides to help me wash and starts touching me I’ll be a goner. The idea is incredibly

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enticing, but I have to stay strong, I can’t fall for this man.

A spark of inspiration strikes me then, “But if you’re playing lifeguard, who’s going to feed me dinner. You know I left the feast without eating?”

Sinclair stills, and I can tell my words did the trick. He might be enjoying flirting, but I know his instincts won’t allow him to let me go unfed. I’ve learned that he considers it his duty as an alpha and the father of my child to make sure the baby and I have

enough to eat, and the only way I ever get away with skipping a meal is if I'm sick. "And I lost my afternoon snack at the feast." I remind him.

Sinclair growls, "You're a clever little minx, you know that?"

"You've mentioned it once or twice." I murmur, wondering if he can see my blush.

"Alright, you go have your bath." He sighs, his wonderful heat leaving me as he untangles our bodies and rises from the bed. "When you're warm and clean I'll have dinner waiting, just be careful" He drops a kiss to my temple and strides out of the room. "Watch out for snakes."

Once he's gone I flop down on the bed and exhale deeply. "I am in so much trouble."

Chapter 58 – Damage Control

Ella

On the fourth day of the festival we wake to headlines about Lydia's reappearance in Moon Valley. I'm just coming out of the bathroom following my morning bout of vomiting, when I find Sinclair standing in the doorway, glaring at the newspaper. I startle slightly, not expecting to see him in my rooms. I left his bed only half an hour ago, and wasn't planning on seeing him again until breakfast. I'm not sure what's on the front page of the paper, but it must be bad if it couldn't

wait.

He glances up at me, frowning deeply. "I thought I asked you to tell me when you feel ill."

“Dominic, it’s happening so often now that it would be impossible to tell you every time, and it’s not as if I have a lot of warning when it comes on.” I argue, though this isn’t the full truth. As much as his presence and gentle hands soothe me, I still find it horribly embarrassing to be sick in front of him, and I avoid informing him whenever possible.

Sinclair narrows his eyes, but before he can call me out for bending the truth I cross the distance between us. “What’s going on?”

He shows me the paper, which is dominated by a large black and white photo of Sinclair and Lydia by the snow maze. The headlines are in bold black lettering above the image. Trouble in Paradise? Former Luna Returns to Reclaim her Mate.

My eyes widen in shock, and I quickly scan the article. While the media had been kept away from the main feast, they clearly hadn’t been barred from the rest of the fair. Worse, it seems like they overheard most or all of Sinclair’s confrontation with Lydia.

—

Though Moon Valley Alpha Dominic Sinclair seems to have won the lottery with his second chance mate, Ella Correntin, his attention wasn’t on his bride-to-be at the annual Yuletide Feast in Oldtown. Instead the prospective King was seen chasing his ex-wife Lydia Davis – now of the Bloodbane pack through the fair, causing his pregnant mate to walk out of the event in protest. Onlookers report that the two engaged in a heated conversation wherein Lydia professed her desire to mend bridges with the Alpha, claiming she still loves him and that his second chance mate isn’t strong enough to lead the Moon Valley Pack. let alone the Kingdom. Though Sinclair rejected her advances, Lydia fiercely declared she wasn’t going to give up on him, leaving

many to wonder if the fated pair might be able to repair their relationship.

“They’re all like this.” He shares, tension lacing his words. “Every paper and tabloid is some version of this Fucking Lydia probably planted the story herself, given the way they left out the pieces that might make her look bad.”

Guilt washes over me as I realize how leaving the festival must have looked to onlookers, especially given this information. “I’m so sorry I left.” I murmur “I didn’t think, I should have stuck it out and waited for you to come back.”

Sinclair frowns down at me. “What are you talking about?”

“It makes it look like I was angry with you and we’re on the rocks.” I explain, my pulse fluttering.

“Ella, none of this is your fault.” Sinclair promises. “If anyone is to blame it’s me for arguing with her in public, and Lydia for turning up to cause trouble in the first place.”

—

“But I try to object.

“I said it isn’t your fault, and I meant it.” Sinclair interrupts, placing his pointer finger against my lips

“Is this going to hurt the campaign?” I ask, though it comes out rather muddled since his finger is still pressed to my mouth.

“It’s a hiccup.” Sinclair states simply, “We’ll do some damage control at the festival tonight. I’ll invite a few trusted reporters and make a statement refuting all this, but the more important part is that we put on a good show. We’ll look so happy and in love that everyone will forget this ever happened.”

“Okay.” I nod, trying to steady my nerves. “And it’s wassailing tonight, right? So all we have to do is drink and sing carols and enjoy the fair.

“Right,” he confirms.

“I wish I could really drink.” I lament. “I could use a bit of liquid courage tonight.”

“You have nothing to worry about.” Sinclair croons. “I know it makes you nervous but you always do beautifully at these events.”

“When I stay at them long enough to participate, you mean?” I correct him, still regretting my decision to run out yesterday.

“You’re growing the pack a prince.” Sinclair smiles, “you get a free pass when it comes to all these public responsibilities. In case you’ve forgotten I was voting for you to stay home entirely until you

convinced me otherwise.”

“I should have let you coddle me after all.” I sigh, “we could have avoided all this.”

Sinclair gathers me to his chest, hugging me tightly. “I’m glad to see you’re learning that I’m always right.” He teases.

Groaning. I try to squirm out of his hold – much good that it does. “You know I regretted it the moment I said it.”

“I’m not going to let you forget it, either.” Sinclair chuckles.

I laugh, ceasing my struggles and submitting to his petting. “Bossy

wolf.”

When we arrive at the festival, the media descends almost immediately. Cameras are flashing before we even exit the car. Sinclair

wraps a protective arm around my shoulders, growling softly when the reporters get too close, and eventually they back off, realizing they’ll be endangering more than their careers if they invade my space.

“Alpha, do you have any comment about the reports regarding your ex- wife?” One of the reporter’s asks, shoving a microphone forward.

“I’ll tell you what I told Lydia last night.” Sinclair begins coolly. “That I’m happier with Ella than I ever was with her, and there’s not a

snowball’s chance in hell that I would ever take back someone who

walked out on their pack when they needed them most. There’s no love lost between us, but I have no respect for a Luna who abandons her responsibilities as a leader.”

The reporter murmur and exchange glances, and suddenly the microphone is pointing to me. “Ella, how do you feel about Lydia’s accusations that you’re not strong enough to be the Alpha’s mate?”

I lean into Sinclair, trying to draw on his own raw power to give myself the confidence I need. “I think that Lydia is obviously the kind of woman who believes there’s only one way to lead, and one way to be strong. If she believes that compassion and

kindness are signs of weakness, well I think that says more about her than it says about

me.”

—

Sinclair leans down, dropping his lips to my ear. “You’re too humble.” He rumbles affectionately, making me blush. “You ought to tell them how fearlessly you braved those bath snakes yesterday.”

I can barely contain my laughter, grinning up at him and whispering, “I

can’t say that.

Sinclair’s cheeks split into a wide smile, and he kisses the tip of my nose before turning back to the clambering paparazzi. “trust me. gentlemen, this one stands up to me on a daily basis. She might come in a sweet package but she’s got nerves of steel.”

I’m blushing again, but the reporters are eating it up. They’re wearing the ravening expression of hungry jackals. and I suspect they’re thrilled to be getting this on tape. I can already predict the waves this will make when Sinclair looks at me the way he is now I feel like I’m the

center of his universe, and I know it’s all an act. To outsiders it will be beyond convincing. “Is there anything you would tell Lydia, if you

could. Ella?”

“I would tell her that if she cares about her life she’ll stay away from

my mate.” I growl, surprising myself with my own ferocity. Where on earth did that come from? “And that the next time she wants to get a look at me she can introduce herself directly, rather than sneaking up on a breeding woman while she’s suffering morning sickness.”

This last statement causes a near frenzy, and Sinclair growls again. I watch as the crowd cowers instinctively, tucking their proverbial tails between their legs. “When did this happen?”

“Last night.” Sinclair answers darkly. “Why else do you think I went after her, or that Ella left? We’ve all seen what jealous she-wolves can do at the best of times, and I don’t take threats to my family lightly. While the crowd immediately begins clamoring for more information, Sinclair raises a hand to forstall them. “Now, I’m going to take my

beautiful mate and get lost in the snow maze.” He announces, squeezing my waist. “And don’t be surprised if she’s seeing stars when we come out again.”

Hearty chuckles rise from our audience and though I assumed Sinclair was joking. I quickly learn quite the opposite. He spends the rest of the evening kissing and caressing me for all to see, and by the time we get back to the house I think I’m so turned on that I think I’ll go crazy if I don’t find a release. Unfortunately there’s no chances for that tonight because Sinclair takes me to bed almost as soon as we walk through the door. For the first time I seriously consider throwing in the towel and simply asking him to have sex with me, even though I know it’s just my libido talking. The little voice in my head is whining with need, and I find myself hungrily watching Sinclair as he climbs into bed beside me.

Can I really do this?

Chapter 59. Dream Date

Ella

In the end my exhaustion saves me. I hadn't realized how tiring the evening was, but the added pressure of putting on our show for the reporters must have taken more of a toll than I expected. I fall asleep almost as soon as my head hits the pillow, but as fate would have it. I can't even escape Sinclair in my dreams tonight.

I know I'm dreaming from the very start. I'm still in Sinclair's bed, but it's no longer in his opulent mansion. It's in the middle of a starlit forest, with nothing but trees and wilderness surrounding it as far as

more evidence the eye can see. I'm wearing a simple white negligee that this isn't real. I don't own anything like it. A cool breeze flutters over my skin, carrying the scent of evergreens and moss, rich amber and... Sinclair. I would know that scent anywhere, even though I can't

see him yet.

He appears slowly, moving towards me through the darkness, his green eyes glowing through the trees. He's wearing nothing but a pair of simply black slacks, and for the first time I don't feel shy about appreciating his gorgeous physique. I've always averted my eyes when he undresses in front of me, not that this prevents me from feeling his muscles or the huge member between his legs when our bodies are pressed up against each other in bed. But now I look my fill, raking my eyes over the rugged planes of his face and the contours of his chest.

His tall frame is padded with muscles most human men can only dream

—

about some of which I didn't even know existed.

“Hello beautiful.” Sinclair greets me huskily, prowling closer with every ragged breath I take, his naked torso gleaming in the moonlight “Didn’t you get enough of me when you were awake?”

“How could I?” I pout, feeling completely face to express my sullen mood. “You teased me all night long and I haven’t had any relief. It’s

torture!”

“It’s not easy for me either.” He murmurs sympathetically, crawling up onto the big bed. He moves with such lethal grace, crawling over the plush covers until he’s close enough to reach out and touch me, which he immediately does. He lies on his side, encouraging me to come rest in the protective circle of his arms. I don’t resist. I slide into his embrace as easily as I breathe, feeling completely at home with this dangerous man wrapped around me. It seems strange to think he terrified me a month ago, now he’s my safe space.

“It’s not the same.” I insist, looking over at him from beneath my lashes.

“Why not?” Sinclair asks, brushing the hair back from my face.

“You don’t know the effect you have on me “I confess, pressing a bit closer. I might be asleep but my breasts are still aching, and my sex is swollen and dripping with need. It’s rather freeing to be able to rub myself against Sinclair without fear of embarrassment or worries over opening a can of worms.

“Tell me,” He growls, his voice deep and rough. One of his massive hands tangles in my hair, forming a fist in the long silky strands while

the other slides down over my bottom, hitching my hips closer, until the pulsing bundle of nerves at the apex of my things is right up against his hardness.

“Even the smallest touch sets me on fire.” I complain. “You holding my hand feels more intimate and arousing than another man kissing me.”

“And when I do kiss you?” Sinclair prompts, encouraging me to move against him, guiding my hips to rock against his.

“I might as well be molten lava. My entire body turns to liquid-figuratively and literally.” I confess, and I know he understands. My wetness has already seeped through my panties and onto the sleek black fabric of his trousers. “You have a power over me I don’t understand. I’ve never experienced anything like it.”

“You don’t really think it’s different for me, do you?” Sinclair murmurs, lowering his mouth to my throat and brushing his lips over my pulsepoint.

“Of course it is.” I whine, so frustrated that I feel like I might cry,

“Can’t you feel how hard I am for you, Ella?” Sinclair inquires gruffly, nuzzling my skin, grazing his fangs over the spot where my neck meets my shoulder. “How hard I always am for you?” I’m shivering with need now, especially as his words combine with the feeling of his steely length against my clit.

“Well that doesn’t mean anything. You’re in bed with a half naked woman, it would happen with anyone.” I reason miserably.

Sinclair chuckles. “I think you’ve been around human men for too long, they’ve given you a very low opinion of my sex.” He raises his head at last, taking a break from laving the soft spot behind my ear. “Trust me, it doesn’t happen for just anyone, no matter what they’re doing or how lovely they are.”

“But I’m nothing.” I insist. “I’m just a human, I don’t have the kind of

power you do.”

“You’re not nothing.” Sinclair growls, a dangerous edge in his deep voice. “And you might be human but you have a power all your own. Don’t you know how difficult it is for me to be near you without

touching you? How impossible it is to hold myself back when you’re in my arms, when all my instincts are driving me to make you mine? Ever since we met I’ve felt like an addict, and you’re my only fix.”

“That’s probably just the baby.” I murmur, sighing when the fabric of my teddy slides off my breast, finally allowing one taut nipple to meet Sinclair’s bare chest, teased and tickled by the coarse black hair scattered over his pecs. “It has to be. It doesn’t make sense otherwise.”

“You don’t give yourself enough credit.” Sinclair answers, his lips mere inches from mine. “And you give me too much and too little all at

once.

“What do you mean?” I wonder aloud, not really wanting him to answer. I just want him to kiss me, to strip off my negligee and finally relieve the terrible ache which seems to have taken over my very soul. I think Sinclair can sense my growing desperation, but for some reason, he isn’t giving me what I need. He’s holding himself back, taking away

his kisses and questing hands.

“I don’t do casual either, Ella.” He catches my hips when I get so distracted rubbing myself against him that I stop listening. too intent on chasing my pleasure. I whimper when the delicious friction I’d been building ceases, and Sinclair clucks sympathetically. Still, he doesn’t show me any mercy. Instead he tilts my chin up so I’ll have to look him in the eye. “I don’t waste my time on people I’m not serious about, or relationships that aren’t going anywhere.”

“I don’t know why we’re even talking about this.” I relate, “It’s not like this is even real, it’s just my imagination run out of control.”

Sinclair’s eyes shutter, and he leans his forehead against mine.

“Goddess, sometimes I forget how much you don’t know about shifters, how much you can’t know.”

“Please, Dominic.” I beg, needing to move, to perform the carnal dance our bodies were made to create together. “Won’t you kiss me, won’t you touch me?”

“I’d like to touch you and taste you and all the rest.” He grumbles reluctantly, and suddenly his strong hands are gone from my body, and his warm limbs are pulling away from my own. “But I need to leave before I do something I’ll regret, something you’ll regret.”

“I don’t understand.” I admit, my nose crinkling up in confusion.

Sinclair pauses only long enough to lean over me and run his fingertip down my nose, straightening out the wrinkles. “You will when you

wake up.”

Before I can say anything more, Sinclair begins stalking away through the dream forest, leaving me alone, and entirely unsatisfied.

When I wake up, I find Sinclair watching me, stroking my hair and gazing down at me with a tender expression. “Welcome back.”

I blink and stretch, feeling as though I only just fell asleep. “It’s not morning already, is it?” I yawn

“No.” He smiles gently, “You’re just coming out of the dream.”

“How did you...?” I stop short of finishing my sentence. Logic tells me he must be guessing, or that maybe I was talking in my sleep or some other explanation. However when I look into Sinclair’s eyes, I see the truth. He isn’t speculating, somehow he knows I was dreaming, and as the seconds tick by it becomes more and more obvious that he knows I was dreaming about him. Worse, I fear he’s managed to decipher some of the details from the fantasy

“It’s okay, Ella.” He soothes, petting me as if I’m a skittish horse.

No, oh no. He knows he knows everything.

Chapter 60– Shared Dreama

Ella

Sinclair is watching me struggle through the idea that he somehow shared my dream, that he knows everything I said – secrets I would never admit if I’d known he wasn’t just some fantasy my sleeping brain cooked up. I just admitted how deeply I’m attracted to him, how much he turns me on. I can’t believe how shamelessly I rubbed myself all

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over him I might as well have been a dog in heat, practically begging him to make love to me.

I did beg, I realize belatedly, And he left. He walked away even though I was his for the taking. He must have thought my behavior was pathetic. He's wanted to kiss me in the past, he even said he wanted me in the dream, but that was before I debased myself that way. I suppose

that sort of thing isn't befitting of a Luna at all.

Suddenly Mike's voice sounds in my head, and I remember the way he belittled me for liking sex. You're a stunner, Ella, but you're too eager. Men don't want a girl whose legs fall open at the first opportunity – show a little class. He never realized it was the physical intimacy I liked, never connected the dots that sex with him was more about conception and closeness than pleasure. It would be different with Sinclair, I can tell that much already. I find more pleasure with him in the foreplay than I ever found with Mike in ten years of being together. He's awakened parts of my body I didn't even know existed – and now he knows it.

Sinclair is still stroking and petting me, and I can't take it. I've got to

put some distance between us or I'll lose it. I wrench myself out of his

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arms, and he lets me go again, the little voice in my head moans.

I

climb out of the bed and though my cheeks are already flooded with heat, I can feel myself flushing deeper still. "I... you... that was real?" I stutter, trying to comprehend the impossible.

“No, it was a dream.” Sinclair explains. “But we shared it. Bonded mates often visit each other in their dreams.”

“But we aren’t mates, I’m not even a shifter.” I protest. “How did this happen?”

“As you said, it must be another gift from the baby.” Sinclair replies easily.

“So you knew, all along, that it was real?” I gape, my embarrassment and shame quickly giving way to outrage. “And that I had no idea?”

“Yes.” He confirms gravely. “I knew.”

“Why didn’t you tell me!?” I burst out, feeling like I might cry. “You had to know I wouldn’t have said or done those things if I’d known! I was vulnerable and you took advantage!”

Sinclair rises from the bed, unfolding his big body and prowling after me. I can see now that he isn’t as unaffected by this situation as I initially thought. His eyes are blazing and his muscles racked with tension. His hands are closed into white-knuckled fists and his voice is low and husky. “Ella, I might be a shifter, but there are limits to even my abilities.” He rumbles. “I would have to be dead not to respond to

such a tempting invitation, and you called me to your dream, not the other way around I got caught up in the moment just like you did. I couldn’t resist... not until you reminded me that you don’t understand

our ways.”

“How can I have called you to my dream, when I didn’t even know I was doing it?” I question, confusion swirling around me in a dense fog. “And why did you come?”

“Because I wanted to ” Sinclair replies, his jaw clenched so tightly the muscle twitches. “I was telling the truth about the power you have over me. Ella. I might keep some things from you, but I don’t tell falsehoods. I don’t say things I don’t mean, even in dreams.

I wrap my arms around myself, unsure what to make of this new information I want to believe him, as terrifying as that is, but doubts continue to plague me. “Then why did you leave?”

Sinclair exhales, and I can tell his patience is hanging by a thread. “Because you thought it was just a fantasy and I’m trying to respect

your wishes.”

“Oh.” I utter softly, furrowing my brow. That isn’t what I expected, and though it should make me feel better to know he took me seriously when I told him I wasn’t interested in being with him, part of me is deeply disappointed. I know I’m being contrary and hormonal, but I can’t help it. I need more time to process this, and until I have it I’m not going to be making sense – even to myself.

Sinclair’s gaze sharpens on me, pinning me in place. “Why did you

think I left?”

I shrug. “I thought maybe I was being too eager. I know men don’t like that.”

The imposing Alpha crosses the floor until he’s towering over me. My first instinct is to back away, but I find my feet frozen to the floor, unable to move. I peek up at him hesitantly, and find a fierce expression on his handsome face. “Any man who wants a lover without passion is an idiot. Yours is electrifying, and knowing I can set you alight makes me feel more powerful than anything else. Your ‘cagerness’ as you call it, is a gift, and I’d like to hunt down

every man who's ever made you feel otherwise and beat them to a pulp.

I drop my gaze to the floor, staring at my feet. His words warm me through and through, from the top of my head to the tips of my toes. Still, I can't help thinking that this is very dangerous territory. It's getting harder and harder to resist my attraction to him, and it's especially difficult when he speaks to me this way.

So why are you resisting? The little voice in my head demands. You like him, he likes you, why are you fighting it?

She has a point. I've just been given proof that Sinclair not only returns my attraction, but also that he takes it seriously. Still, I can't help but remember the second half of his statement he doesn't waste his time

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on relationships that aren't going anywhere, but that's exactly what we would be. We have no future together, and we both know it, we're just in denial because we want to give into our desires.

Because there's one thing more important than either of us. I remind her, Our baby. We're about to bring a child into the world, and it deserves two loving co-parents who can give it their full attention, not a pair of exes too caught up in their own drama to prioritize their child's best interest.

But why are you so sure you'd end up as exes? She inquires. You're predicting the end before you've even had a chance to begin.

I'm being realistic. The best Sinclair and I can hope for is a temporary fling. I bite back. Maybe we could have some fun together, but at the end of the day he's going to end up with a she-wolf who can rule by his side. I'm playing a dangerous game

here pretending to be something I'm not, and it's safer for everyone involved if I fade into the background after the campaign while he finds love elsewhere.

Sinclair is watching me again, and he taps his finger lightly against my temple. "You wanna tell me what's going on in there, trouble?"

"We can't keep doing this Dominic." I state, drawing in a shaky breath. "If we stay on this path, we're headed for trouble."

He nods, cupping my cheek and smiling when I reflexively lean my head into his hand. "Listen Ella," He broaches carefully. "I don't need to know why you don't want to get involved, but I don't have unlimited self control. If you invite me into your dreams in the future, if you offer yourself up to me that way again, I don't think I'm going to be able to say no."

"But I didn't know I was doing any of that." I say, "not for real. I don't

even know how I called you to me."

"I know that." He remarks. "I'm just trying to be up front with you about where I am with all this."

"Well we only have to worry about this until after the pup is born right?" I ask, more upset by this thought than I could have predicted. "I'll lose the connection to you when I'm no longer carrying him."

"We'll always be connected through our pup." Sinclair corrects me, "but yes. I suspect many of these bonds will fade in time."

My face falls, and I wish I had the same talent Sinclair does for masking my feelings. I'm about to pull away from him when he stops me. "There's something else, Ella. This may sound terrible

to you, but there's something else you have to understand about shifter relationships."

"Yes?"

"It's in a she-wolf's nature to make her mate prove himself to her. She won't accept him until she's been convinced he's the one. It's a sort of mating dance – like the wild hunt, she plays hard to get and he gives chase."

"Okay, "I gulp, my tongue darting out to lick my lips. "So what does that mean?"

"It means that if you give me reason to think that you do want to be

with me but you're holding yourself back for some reason, my wolf is going to react the same way he would to a she wolf drawing him into the hunt." Sinclair announces ominously.

"You're saying that you might stop respecting my wishes if you think I don't mean them?" I repeat, indignance rising up inside me.

"That's what being an alpha is all about. Doing what's best for your mate even when she doesn't agree." Sinclair confirms.

"But I'm not your mate." I say, amazed that I'm having to remind him of this for a second time tonight.

"We'll see, Ella." Sinclair purrs, his eyes glowing with barely restrained fire. "We'll see."