

Chapter 562

"Not yet, which is surprising as Lacey's in her second trimester," Rafe answered, his eyes shadowed with concern.

It took another couple of seconds for the importance of what he was saying to sink in and then Caleb stiffened too, their concern finally conveyed to him. "You were present when Liam had his outburst."

Large tears filled Lacey's eyes as she bit her bottom lip and nodded. "Mallen can't tell if there will be any permanent damage to the babies, Caleb. We've been keeping this quiet to try to prevent Liam from finding out. We were going to ask Annie to delve to see if she could feel anything but..."

"...she's not going to be back for a few more days." Caleb finished the sentence as she broke off and silent tears spilled down her cheeks. He stared at her; dread filling his soul as yet another nightmare was laid at his door. If anything had happened to the babies, then he would ultimately be the one responsible. He couldn't deny it and the magnitude of his mistakes was starting to reach epic proportions. How the fuck could one moment have caused such fallout? How the fuck could he be responsible for all this damage, when all he'd ever tried to do was protect those he loved?

Swallowing down his self-loathing, he held out a hand to Lacey. "Come here, sweetheart." His tone was gentle and encouraging. He could see her need to know, he could see Rafe's need to know, but he could see a hint of reluctance too at what they might discover. They were good people; they were his family, and they didn't deserve this.

As he took Lacey's hand and pulled her close enough so she stood before him, he raised haunted eyes to her. "I'm so sorry, Lacey."

She tried to give him a smile through her tears and that made him feel worse because she was trying to reassure him and forgive him when he may have unwittingly been responsible for the loss of her children. If that was the case, he would never be able to accept forgiveness from them because it would be something he would never deserve.

Their need to know was paramount and he needed to know too. Placing a gentle hand on her abdomen as Rafe came to stand behind his mate to hold her close, Caleb reached out with his mind, aiming his thoughts towards the life growing within. He had never done this before, had never needed to. Annie was always a hundred steps ahead of him and the one to do these things.

At first, he could detect nothing, but as he tried to narrow his thoughts further, he sensed a tiny thump, closely followed by another. It was the babies' heartbeats, strong and fast, echoing through his mind. The emotions flowing through him as he quietly listened was indescribable, the miracle of birth being something always denied him. He could hear two heartbeats and it was beautiful.

"Their hearts beat so fast," he whispered in awe, smiling up at them as he was caught up in the moment.

"Caleb?"

He knew what Lacey was asking and he tried to give her a reassuring smile as he concentrated harder, tried to pick up anything other than biological signs.

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Warmth. Contentment. Sleepiness. It wasn't thoughts he was hearing because they were too young for that. It was more like abstract emotions drifting towards him and he felt tears slide down his face as his smile widened at the amazing connection. "They're very happy where they are right now," he whispered again. "So content, Lacey."V(w)W.no(v)©QworM.c©m

He looked up at the two Alphas, his expression euphoric. "Your babies are fine, and now I know why Annie is so addicted to doing this. It's the most amazing experience in the world."

Lacey burst into noisy sobs, turning to throw her arms around Rafe as they wept and laughed at the same time. Their babies were safe and for the moment that was all that mattered. Rafe was kissing her so tenderly, his cheeks unashamedly wet as relief at the news overwhelmed them.

"I told you it would be okay, honey," he whispered, brushing away her tears and hugging her close again. His babies were safe, and his mate was crying tears of joy. Just to know they had some good news as opposed to everything else that had happened was enough to give him a new sense of hope they'd be able to work through everything. It was hard to stop his own tears flowing but he made an effort so he could concentrate on his mate.

"I was so scared, Rafe," Lacey whispered, trying to pull herself together and hiccupping as she swallowed back a sob. She turned to look at Caleb, her eyes shining with gratitude. "Thank you, Caleb."

There was so much emotion in her words that the Ancient's expression clouded, even as he nodded his head in acknowledgement. Lacey was thanking him for not being responsible for damaging her children. He didn't deserve her gratitude.

Rafe, too, turned to his friend, reading his expression, his lips tightening. "The babies are okay, Caleb. That's the most important thing. Even if the outcome had been different, we would have found a way to work through it." He could see the self-loathing in his friend's eyes, and though it would have been hard if they'd lost the children, he knew they would have overcome it together because they were family. It was pointless for Caleb to blame himself for something that hadn't happened.

Releasing his mate, he held out his hand, clasping Caleb's arm in a firm grip. His brother-in-law instinctively did the same although his expression remained tense.

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"Thank you for easing our minds, Caleb, for helping Lacey. This has been hurting her so much and you've taken that from her. I can't adequately thank you for that, my friend. I know you feel responsible, and maybe there would have been some merit in that if the worst had happened, but it's foolish to feel guilt when everything is okay. Let's not focus on what hasn't happened and instead work together as a family on what we can effect positive change to. We have a hidden war to fight and our people to protect. You've always been there for us, let us be there for you. Just tell us what you need."

It was more than he deserved and he instinctually wanted to refuse their forgiveness, but then he thought of his Annie coming home to a chasm deep within her family and he knew it would hurt her. Hadn't he'd done enough of that already? What Rafe said made sense. He would concentrate on what they could fix and worry about everything else at another time. He applied pressure to Rafe's arm, silently acknowledging his words.

"So, what is the situation with Liam and the woman?" He kept his tone business-like, sitting back down as the Alphas shared another kiss.

"We've moved her to Day and Freya's place," Rafe answered as he too sat back down and watched as Lacey made her way out of the study to prepare some drinks. "Her rejection of Liam and inability to come to terms with her humanity was felt to be too dangerous for her to remain in the Eriksson home. Ashleigh's having a hard time accepting her too, so it seemed wise to try and take some of the tension out of the air."

"You call placing her under Freya's care taking some of the tension out?" Caleb's tone held more than a hint of disbelief.

"Whatever Reasa's actions, the damage she's feeling is on a level so deep it's unlikely any of us can even begin to relate to it, with perhaps the exception of Pietro. He's more likely to kill her on the spot, so that's not a good idea. Out of everyone, maybe Freya is the one person who will be able to relate to her, given her own past? She'll contain her own feelings because she's close to Liam and won't do anything to hurt him. If she takes it into her head to help him...it could be a win-win situation."

His logic appeared sound when put that way, so Caleb put aside any foreboding he had on that matter. Rafe knew what he was doing so it was best to let him get on with it. That brought up the topic of Liam and the injured vampires. He had a feeling he was going to hit a brick wall with that one. "Is Liam strong enough to visit the injured vamps and try delving?"

The Alpha was shaking his head before he'd finished the question, his expression resolute. "No way, Caleb. Don't get me wrong, I really feel for them...especially since Lily's friend is involved. Until Liam resolves his issue with his mate, he's much too volatile to trust around compromised minds. He needs to be where we can support him. I can't let him out of the pack and he won't leave anyway, not without Reasa going with him."

It was as he expected but Caleb was still disappointed with the response. He wanted to do something for his people, anything. It left a bitter taste in his mouth knowing that the more time passed, the stronger the likelihood became that they would need to be dealt with permanently. "I could try doing it myself, but I'm pretty sure it will have no effect. Whatever Liam did that day, his mental abilities are so much stronger than mine and probably everyone else's".

Rafe frowned, pursing his lips. "I'm sorry, Caleb, I really am, but I can't change my mind on this. Liam has to come first. I have to do what is right by my pack."

The Ancient gave him a brief smile. "I respect that, Rafe, and understand. I don't want to jeopardise Liam any more than you do. Let me know if you feel the time is right and we can revisit this discussion then. I had to ask though."www.noVelwOrM.©©m

There was a knock on the door and Aaron entered before Rafe could respond, his expression a little less happy than earlier. "I have an update from the lab. We're working as hard as we can and Cassia is trying a new avenue using some of Pietro's hair, but so far we haven't been able to isolate all the components of the toxin."

"Cassia? She's driving the research?" Caleb couldn't keep the surprised note from his voice. Another thing he hadn't known.

Rafe smiled widely, pride in his expression. "Yeah, it turns out Cass has a natural flare for the healing arts as well a strong grasp on all things scientific. I think it surprised her as much as the rest of us. If anyone can find an antidote, I have faith she will. We just don't know how long it will take."

Caleb digested the information, taking a cup of coffee from Lacey when she came back in, smiling as she dropped a quick kiss on the top of his head. Maybe things had gone tits up for a while, but his visits to both compounds showed him that everything that could be done was being done. Demetri and Mara would keep the Council in check, which left him with tracking down his mate and fixing the mess he'd made there.

He had a lot to answer for, but so did the European vampires, and whoever was pulling their strings. Now that he was getting back on an even keel and could see things were in hand, he would have more time to concentrate on Europe.

As he sipped at his coffee, listening to the Weres chat among themselves about pack matters, Caleb's eyes hardened, his gaze fixed on the wall. He felt a stirring of power deep within; the restlessness of a vampire king too long denied his mate, too long an observer of his people being under threat. "Our time is coming, Callain. Whoever is responsible for this madness will be brought to justice and you have my word that you will be present on that day."

The power flared brightly and then dimmed until it was barely noticeable. "I will hold you to that."