

His Rejected Mateless Luna Chapter 31

DEREK'S POV

I might come off as the reserved kind but there are limits to which I could keep up with being that way and goddess help Collins cause he had done nothing since my getting to know him but crossed these limits more times than I could actually count.

I have been ignoring his annoying advances all these while because I knew it wasn't my place to punish him or such. Nathan was in the picture, and if I let myself act with my emotions then who was going to stop Nathan from killing him? This was the one reason why I had been putting up with all the annoying foolishness he had been accomplishing but now that there was no Nathan to stop, I would make sure to deal with him, the moment I felt stressed out by hi**d acts.

Spencer got the message immediately and stepped out of the car through the other end, leaving only Collins and my eyes solely focused on him.

"Consider my words before you make decisions. I see you are more sane than him" He commented, probably referring to Nathan. "Why don't you just calm down and we discuss and understand this whole thing? You might end up regretting this act of pressing charges. This is a minor matter that can be handled within us without the need to get the coos involved. Let us move away from here and speak about this" He looked disheveled.

With the length of everything he said, what got to my mind was just one sentence and I asked him to elaborate more on that.

"What did you say about me being a sane person?" I had this eeiry smile on my face as I asked which I knew definitely was going to terrify him which was the exact reason for it.

"Here me out, he didn't give me time to speak out my own side of the story, at least I was hoping you would" The b**d was a manipulative clown but he should know beforehand that his manipulation would never work on me.

"This...." I raised my phone containing all the voice records. "Is your own side of the story and I need not to hear another cooked-up version of it so do yourself a favor and get the hell out of the car so I can hand you over to them as soon as as I can and get the hell out of this space' I deadpanned, leaving no room for argument.

"And of course, you can let us do this the easy way or the hard way, whatever works for you. I would be very glad to comply with both" I smiled sweetly while he continued to stare hopefully at me.

If he thought Nathan was insane, then he should wait to meet the real me when I am pissed off. Nathan's actions were always hindered by his constant need to stay on course and not anger Terra whereas I have no one to prevent me from acting how I desire.

"Listen to me this once. Landon is a sin figure to me, I would never do anything to hurt him..."

"But you can hurt his mother? And his father? That alone is the same as hurting him if you ask me. There are no differences between them".

"No.....no no no you don't understand, let me explain, I was planning to confess to Terra myself whear everything went as planned, but everything disassembled and now I am made to face the consequences"

"That is only because you started the whole thing dummy, if your blocked head didn't decide to go on with that plan, you wouldn't have been here. We all wouldn't have been"

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By unspoken agreement we left the boys snoozing in the backseat as we brought in groceries and warm pasta dinner makings. Soon the cosy kitchen was filled with fragrant garlic and simmering marinara sauce. I sliced bread as Collins ladled out steaming servings. Finally the peaceful night wrapped just us two up in its scented embrace.

"Wish we could freeze time forever in that magical spot, you know?" I mused as we ate.

Collins nodded, eyes crinkling affectionately. "I know just what you mean. But then we'd miss them growing up into fine young men too."

"Very true," I sighed. "Till gladly take any phase, as long as it's them."

We clinked wine glasses, silently toasting our shared pride and marvelling over the mysterious workings of fate that had brought two lost souls together to nurture this unlikely but beautiful family against all odds. The past was written. But our story's next chapters remained ours to craft day by day

After we had cleared up and gotten the boys to bed through herculean effort, I knew the day's perfect are neared its close.

Dim silence blanketed the old cottage, only the ancient timbers creaking and rain's hypnotic pattern remaining

I curled deeper under the faded quilt, wishing fleeting moments like tonight's ordinary extraordinary magic could last forever.

Nathan

I stood frozen in the hospital corridor, mind reeling. Those three exuberant boys barreling past were the mirror image of my own boyhood self. It was impossible...wasn't it?

Curiosity rooted me in place a few moments more as I struggled to process logical explanations. But the revelations remained elusive. I had to know the truth.

Fortunately, even in human form an Alpha's nose exceeds average tracking abilities. I followed the boys' careless trail through various wings until it ended at an unmarked door, left slightly ajar.

I hesitated, debating the ethics of eavesdropping. But my instincts demanded understanding. Bracing myself, I peeked through the narrow gap into a cosy office.

There sat the children, giggling as they showed Terra colourful drawings. Her body language exuded maternal pride and affection. My pulse quickened. Terra had always adored children, but treated none with such casual warmth before.

I watched, entranced by this glimpse of her tender nurturing side rarely observed during our youthful acquaintance. Her gentle teasing and praise came so naturally, so different from our guarded recent interactions.

Many puzzling things suddenly clicked into place. Terra's frequent trips away from the estate. Her fierce protectiveness- when questioned. The mystery of who needed the sanctuary she had built here. But how were those rambunctious youngsters connected to her?

Deep in thought, I almost missed Terra and the boys leaving the office. I ducked out of sight, pulse racing. The idea taking shape seemed fantastical..yet my instincts sang that it was so. Much needed unravelling, but direct confrontation would only estrange Terra further. I must bide my time and keep watch for now.

Over the next weeks, I found excuses to linger frequently at the hospital and clinic, observing surreptitiously. Between my duties tending Father, I searched for clues to confirm or dismiss my wild suspicions about Terra's newly revealed motherhood.

During occasional glimpses of her doting on the triplet boys, my breath still caught unexpectedly. Her unconcealed joy glowed, even from afar. Much buried emotion stirred watching Terra develop so fully into her nurturing role since the days of our naive youth. I ached up understand this enigma that was at once new yet familiar.

But Terra remained maddeningly elusive, disappearing for long stretches without explanation. The boys came and went in the care of a kindly nursemaid or the stalwart physician, Collins. His easy affection with them raised new questions.

Though I strained my ears when able, no answers were forthcoming. The boys addressed him familiarly as “uncle”, but something about their rapport conveyed a deeper bond. Puzzling indeed. But I remembered well how effortlessly Collins won over everyone the man seemed to hold no enemies.

Gradually insight distilled that Terra and Collins maintained no romantic connection. Her focus stayed singularly consumed with work and caring for the rambunctious trio. And there were no obvious signs of conjugal life in the clinic living quarters I discreetly toured while the occupants were away. Platonic friends and guardians appeared the full truth.

But that still left the greatest mystery unsolved – the boys’ origins. Details in their young faces, so uncannily akin to my own, convinced me we shared blood. But until I could gain Terra’s trust to explain fully, only hypotheses existed.

Patience wore severely testing my temper – but even I must acknowledge it was justly strained after hiding her traumatic departure all those years ago. Perhaps fate granted this perplexing puzzle as an opportunity to forge understanding and build trust anew where shattered. I must rise to the challenge.

Much inner reflection had revealed hard truths in our painful past. I too had much to answer for in youthful arrogance and headstrong-selfishness. We both played a role in our calamitous parting. Blame and denial would only perpetuate the lingering damage, as Terra’s secrecy proved.

I vowed to approach openly from now on, with compassion not accusations. My friend, confidante and first love yet endured within this woman who wore more masks and defences than I ever realised. But she was also the mother of children I now ached to know, whatever our history’s lingering echoes. We would find the way forward together, no matter how rocky the terrain traversed already. Of that, I was newly certain.

These children were breaths of fresh purpose finally filling my tired spirit. I lived no longer for sole duty, but with renewed hope and vision. Terra would see time’s changed me from the brash, controlling youth once too blind recognize her true needs. The man I became better understood life’s greys and honoured fierce loyalty defending one’s vulnerable loved ones. We would come to terms through open hearts, not hardened wills.

Until answers proved within reach at last, I contented myself studying the boys’ sweet faces from afar when possible. Their antics often made me smile even in gloomy moments. My own flesh and blood. However miraculously wrought, their existence gifted profound new meaning. I would know them, guide them, share in shaping fine future men. The patience required was but a small price.

Though mystery still veiled definitive truths, recent revelations whisper

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Terra

After a long day at the clinic, I decided to stay late catching up on paperwork. The quiet halls soothed my tired mind after the happy chaos of patients and my energetic boys. I treasured these rare solitary evenings immersed in the mundane rhythms of organising schedules and filing reports.

A light knock interrupted my focused data entry. I glanced up to see Collins leaning against the doorframe, trademark compassionate smile in place. "Burning the midnight oil, I see. Don't overdo it."

I sat back, rolling my stiff shoulders. "You know me, can't leave any task half-done. Did you need the office?"

"No hurry, just wanted to check in." Collins helped me tidy scattered papers into neat stacks. "With all your tireless work around here lately, I worry life is passing you by. When was the last time you did something fun, just for you?"

I paused, caught off guard. When had I pursued any interests beyond work and parenting? The days slipped by so quickly, each one devoted to others. Trying to remember my last purely self-indulgent activity drew a blank.

Collins nodded knowingly at my confused expression. "That's what I thought. You deserve joy too, Terra. Why not explore what makes your soul come alive?"

His insightful words resonated deeply, cracking open something I hadn't realised lay dormant. Dreams that once burned within now only flickered faintly after years of putting duty first. When did vibrant passions become hazy memories?

Collins clasped my shoulder, interrupting my reverie. "Just promise you'll take time for yourself soon, okay? Doctor's orders." With a playful wink, he headed out, leaving me smiling but pensive in the dim office.

His reminder lingered as I drove home under the emerging star. What did I desire apart from the endless needs surrounding me? So much of life was only about reacting and surviving day to day. But what might I create if unburdened by obligations and expectations?

I realised how little space I made for personal growth and exploration, my focuses narrowed to work and parenting alone. But Collins was right – regularly refreshing my own cup was essential to keep pouring into others.

By the time I pulled up the winding drive to our secluded valley cottage, resolve filled me. I would make time for self- discovery and living vibrantly again, not just existing. My boys and work would only gain from my renewed passion.

Over the next weeks, I cautiously rediscovered the bohemian free spirit that had been buried under so many grown up responsibilities. On quiet afternoons, I painted again, fingers staining with brilliant hues that flowed onto the blank canvas. Some evenings, I wandered new forest trails under the rising harvest moon, paying rapt attention to each small natural wonder missed before in my busyness.

And always, glimmers shone through suggesting more still lay buried. My curiosity felt newly awakened, possibilities beckoning from just beyond the horizon's edge. What else might I yet uncover in this winding adventure called life? The joy was not in arriving, but progressing through each moment's gifts fully.

On a clear night soon after the autumn equinox, I wandered up the cresting hill behind our cottage after putting the boys to bed. Here I lay gazing skywards, marvelling as stars emerged in their celestial finery traced my favorite childhood constellations, naming them softly. Then gasped a brilliant streak of light shot overhead, there and gone in an instant.

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My breath caught in wonder. I had forgotten the Orionid meteor shower peaked around now. And already another fiery flash crossed the sky, brilliant as a diamond against black velvet. Soon multiple heavenly trails blazed above as I watched spellbound.

I should wake the boys to share this, I thought dreamily. But paused, struck by the realisation that I needed no excuse. How often I denied myself experiencing life's majesty fully on the pretext it wasn't responsible or prudent? Only by opening to joy and beauty freely would my neglected spirit flourish again. This moment was mine to treasure, no guilt or sacrifice needed.

As I walked slowly back down the moonlit trail afterward, heart still soaring from the dazzling display, something fundamental shifted inside. I understood finally that being a mother, healer and friend could harmonise with cultivating my purpose. My happiest memories were often solitary moments appreciating everyday miracles that cost nothing. Seeking more such touchstones would bless everyone I cared for.

With rekindled curiosity I explored long abandoned interests – astronomy, writing, gardening. And uncovered new passions like photography, yoga, hiking. Each activity lit up neglected parts of my spirit. I was rediscovering myself, and it felt incredible.

Of course my responsibilities are still called often, demanding much. But I began carving out small pockets of time devoted solely to my personal wellbeing. Even brief

timeouts connecting with nature's beauty or meditating brought renewed perspective and energy I could pour back into caring for others.

Sometimes I grew discouraged when progress felt slow, or guilty for focusing on myself. But I knew staying the course was vital. My neglected inner light could shine bright again, illuminating new possibilities. It merely required constantly feeding my own soul.

One luminous spring morning as I watched the boys scamper outside from the porch swing with a mug of tea warming my hands, everything seemed right in a way I hadn't felt for so long. No matter what came next, in this moment I brimmed with gratitude.

My journey was just beginning, endless horizons ahead waiting to be explored. Wherever it led, I knew the path was right because it was mine. That was enough.

"How's the surgery prep going. Lucy?" I asked my head nurse as I entered the clinic's small but capable operating room.

Lucy glanced up from arranging shiny instruments on the metal tray. "Nearly ready, Dr. Terra. Just need to stock a few more supplies when the order arrives."

I nodded, moving to help her finish the final checklist. My thoughts kept drifting back to the tense conversation with Collins two nights ago.

He'd come to find me after hours, face lined with worry. "Terra, we've got a major problem. Nathan cornered me at the hospital today demanding to know about three young boys who look just like him."

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My heart had stopped dead. I gripped Collins' arm. "What exactly did you tell him?"

"Nothing!" Collins held up his hands defensively. "But he's not an idiot, Terra. All it'll take is one more odd coincidence before he puts the pieces together."

Id collapsed into a chair, mind racing through the implications. There was no more hiding or denying it now. Nathan would keep digging until he learned the truth that my three beautiful sons were also his.

"Terra?" Lucy's voice jarred me from the anxious recollection. I linked and attempted a reassuring smile. "Sorry, just reviewing the surgical steps in my head."

She nodded amiably as we finished sterilising the area, but worry still gnawed at my gut. How would I explain all this to Nathan in a way that protected the boys?

I moved through the rest of the day in a fog, jumping at unexpected noises and losing my train of thought mid-sentence. Nathan's fiery temper once unleashed was a force to

be reckoned with. But my sons were the only thing that mattered – I had to shield them, no matter the cost.

Levi poked his head in my office door as I stared sightlessly at patient forms late that afternoon. “Mommy, can we have grilled cheese for dinner?” His sweet face is like his father’s twisted heart.

“Of course, sweetie. Tell your brothers I’ll start cooking soon. I managed a strained smile until Levi scampered off happily. Closing up shop early, I picked the boys up from aftercare and headed home to our cosy cabin in the woods. Making dinner together eased my nerves. Their playful laughter and spirited conversations always grounded me.

But that night as I tucked them snugly beneath quilts and dropped kisses on their foreheads, emotions swelled painfully in my chest. Would peaceful bedtime routines like this become impossible if Nathan discovered the truth? I had to find a way to protect my sons, no matter what.

I barely slept, thoughts chasing worst case scenarios relentlessly. By 5 am I surrendered to restless energy and went for a long run through the misty dawn woods. My feet slapped wet leaves as I pushed myself faster, trying to outrun the fear, But the miles brought me no answers.

Collins was already brewing coffee when I returned, sweat-soaked and shivering. His assessing eyes took in my state. “Couldn’t sleep either, huh?”

dishevelled

I just shook my head wearily, too exhausted to explain. He pulled me in for a bracing hug. “It’ll be alright, Terra. We’ll figure this out together.”

I absorbed his steadying warmth a long moment before pulling back. I wish that were true. But you don’t know Nathan like I do. His temper is vicious when roused.”

Collins’ jaw tightened. “I won’t let him lay a finger on you or the boys, no matter his rank. You have my word.” Fierce protectiveness radiated from him. My throat tightened with emotion.

“I know. But please, don’t do anything reckless.” My mind spun imagining Collins facing off against an enraged Alpha. “Just close to me. I’ll handle this.”

stay

Throughout the chaotic morning rush, I debated strategies fruitlessly. No options seemed foolproof with Nathan’s cunning intellect and determination stirred. A direct

confrontation might only provoke his volatile side. But refusing to speak with him at all would rouse dangerous suspicions.

By the time the triplets arrived after school, I was frazzled. They noticed instantly, little faces creasing in concern, "How come you look so worried, Mommy?" Luke asked, climbing into my lap.

I smoothed their hair, forcing confident calmness into my tone. Oh, just an upset patient earlier. But I feel much better now that my boys are here!" I tickled them until they collapsed in giggles, their distress forgotten.

If only my own uncase could be dispelled so easily. But I maintained a facade of cheerful energy through dinner prep and evening routines, reluctant to taint their childhood innocence. My problems were not theirs to worry over.

Only after they were tucked in and their rambunctious play-by-play reenactments of the day finally gave way to soft snores did I release the tense smile. My weary thoughts spun useless circles trying to discern Nathan's intentions.

A firm knock on the front door nearly made me jump out of my skin. I froze, every sense on high alert. We never had visitors this late. Collins was bunking at the clinic tonight on call Who could possibly be brazen enough to show up unannounced past 10 pm?

I crept to the window and cautiously peeked out. My blood turned to ice. Nathan stood on the moonlit porch, imposing figure unmistakable. How had he found me?

Fear morphed to anger in a flash. This was my territory, my sanctuary, and I would not be caught cowering. I flung the door open, eyes blazing. "Get out! You're not welcome here."

Nathan seemed momentarily taken aback by my ferocious tone. But he stood firm, amber eyes burned with banked fury. "We need to talk, Terra. Now

"I have nothing to say to you." I moved to slam the door, but Nathan wedged his foot in swiftly. We stared each other down, both radiating barely leashed rage now.

"I will get the truth from you one way or another, Nathan growled through gritted teeth.

I bared my own teeth right back, shoving against the door with all my strength. "Over my dead body. Now leave!"

For a breathless minute we strained in stalemate, neither budging an inch. But I could not risk the boys waking to the sound of fighting. They came first, always.

With immense effort I regulated my furious breaths and released the crushing door pressure. Nathan eyed me warily but eased back a fraction too.

Jaw aching from clenching, I bit out, “You have no power here, Nathan. I won’t warn you again – stay away from me and mine.

Before he could respond I stepped back swiftly, slamming the door with an echoing finality. My hands shook violently as I threw the lock and stumbled back. I had no illusions the brief confrontation was over. Nathan did not take defiance lightly, and his ruthless tenacity was infamous. But I would weather any storm before allowing my sons to become casualties of the unfinished war between us.

Over the next week I kept the boys closer than ever, barely letting them out of my sight even just in our own yard. I jumped at every unexpected sound, constantly scanning for threats. Such hypervigilance was exhausting, but my protective instinct ran hot and fierce. No one would harm my family while I still drew breath.

The boys noticed the change instantly, their play growing subdued and tentative. At their pleading gazes, I forced myself to relax my smothering hold somewhat. They deserved to feel carefree and safe in their own home, not smothered by my paranoia

So I allowed supervised forest adventures again, stood watching from the porch as they ran wild chasing leaves and sticks. Their joyful shouts echoed between the fiery-leaved trees, bolstering my weary spirit. No matter what storms loomed ahead, I must shelter the innocence of their childhood for as long as possible.

Some afternoons we baked cookies or crafted tissue paper trees to decorate the windows, immersing ourselves in the simple delights of their laughter and wildly creative ideas. Other days I lay beside them on a pile of quilts telling stories until their exuberant itraginings lulled me to sleep too

During quiet mornings at the clinic, Nathan’s ominous threat clung close, suffocating in its uncertainty. But then the boys would burst through the door in a whirlwind of enthusiasm and light, sweeping away the shadows. Each new day with them remained a gift not to be squandered worrying over forces outside my control.

But the illusion of security was shattered late one evening by an insistent banging at the door. My heart seized – I knew that commanding knock. But how had Nathan found me again?

The boys looked up from their movie, eyes wide. “Who is it, Mommy?” Landon asked nervously.

“No one, baby. You three keep watching. Mommy will see what they need.” I tried to keep my tone calm as I strode to the door, pulse racing.

Nathan’s imposing figure loomed on the shadowy porch. Jaw clenched, I stepped outside and pulled the door firmly shut behind me.

“What do you want now?” I demanded in a harsh whisper.

His eyes glittered with banked fury in the moonlight. “I want answers, Terra! I’m done playing games. Those boys are mine and you know it.”

“You’re crazy.” I spat back. “Now leave immediately before I call the authorities.”

Nathan’s lips curled in a humourless smile. “By all means, go right ahead. I can’t wait to share a few choice words with them about your willful negligence.”

I faltered briefly. Nathan could spin any story to bolster his case, with his reputation ensuring he’d be believed.

Sensing my hesitation, he pressed closer, voice dropping. This charade ends tonight, Terra. You will tell me the truth. Those boys deserve to know their father.”

His words sliced deep, echoing my own secret doubts. I looked away, turmoil churning.

Did I really have the right to deny my sons their biological father, however painful our past? Could Nathan and I ever move/ beyond the festering wounds we both carried to do right by the boys? I wavered, resolution fracturing.

Sensing imminent victory, Nathan grasped my shoulders firmly. Terra, please. Let us be a family.” His piercing gaze burned with conviction.

I stood frozen, emotions at war within me. Could opening this door lead to healing, or greater heartbreak?

The boys’ laughter echoed faintly from within, tugging my maternal instincts back to their defence. No matter the risks, my duty was shielding their innocence.

I stepped back forcefully from Nathan’s grip. “I will always protect them, even from you,” I bit out through fresh angry tears.

Before he could respond, I slipped inside, turning the lock with an air of finality, Nathan’s enraged fists pounding the door echoed through the cottage, but could not penetrate the refuge of my sons’ devotion.

Their little arms wrapped fiercely around me as I clung to them on the floor. No matter what, we had each other

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Terra

“He won’t stop, Collins! I can’t keep him from the boys much longer. I paced the clinic office agitatedly after hours while Collins watched me with worried eyes.

“Nathan’s always been relentless as a bloodhound once he fixates on something.” Collins agreed grimly. “What are you going to do

I sank down on the old leather sofa, emotionally exhausted. “I don’t know. He’s not totally wrong they deserve to know their father someday.” I looked down, ashamed. “But how can I ever trust Nathan near them after everything?”

Collins moved to sit beside me, radiating steadfast support. “You’re trying to make an impossible choice, Terra. But those boys are fortunate their mother puts their wellbeing first, no matter what.”

I blinked back useless tears, beyond grateful for this man who knew my tangled history with Nathan yet never judged. Collins simply accepted the boys and me as family, filling roles we desperately needed. With him in my corner, I could weather any adversity.

That reminder bolstered me enough to make it through the chaotic workday without completely crumbling under the oppressive weight pressing down. As long as I kept moving, staying present in each task or conversation, I could keep the creeping darkness at bay a little longer.

Late that afternoon, a surprise visitor stopped by my office- Nathan’s father, the former Alpha. I blinked in shock to see his imposing figure in my humble doorway, feeling suddenly self-conscious about the cramped space.

*Elder Wolf, welcome. What brings you today?” I asked politely, hoping my unease didn’t show.

But his keen gaze seemed to bore straight through to my soul. I’m still recovering strength after a long illness. Hoping for some of your restorative teas.”

Though simple enough, his request made me hesitate. The former Alpha had always taken pride in enduring sickness or injury without complaint. Why seek help now?

Still, turning him away was unthinkable. “Of course, I have just the blend. Please have a seat while I prepare some.”

Soon the earthy aroma of steeping herbs filled the small exam room where I had ushered him. But an air of expectant gravity remained between us. I busied my shaking hands preparing supplies for an impromptu check-up to fill the tense silence.

After glancing at his vitals and proclaiming them strong, I finally met the former Alpha’s piercing but not unkind gaze directly. “Your health seems excellent considering the ordeal you endured. I suspect you had other motives for visiting today?”

One corner of his mouth lifted approvingly. "Never could slip much past you, little healer. Yes, I'm here about the uneasy wind now blowing through my son's spirit."

I stiffened. So this impromptu visit was Nathan's doing. "Alpha, I don't know what Nathan told you, but "

He held up a staying hand. "Peace. I'm not here on any fool's crusade of his." Sadness tinged his expression. "I know the truth dwells in a few words left unspoken between you both."

I studied his haggard features. However heavy the burdens Nathan now shouldered, they weighed perhaps even more heavily on this proud wolf who had guided the pack for so long, could not add to his pains by reopening old wounds

"You needn't worry yourself over this, alpha, I said gently. "I can reason with Nathan in time. Focus on continuing to regain your strength

The former Alpha appraised me with ancient eyes that seemed to delve to my very soul. "You protect others too readily at cost to yourself, child." His calloused hand covered my own. "But now I consider you and yours under my mantle also, whatever comes."

Unexpected tears pricked at his heartfelt pledge. After long years adrift, this gruff wolf's unquestioning loyalty still meant everything. Thank you," I whispered hoarsely.

We sat in strangely comfortable silence until the tea kettle whistled, breaking the spell. I carefully poured two steaming mugs. doctor and patient roles slipping back into place smoothly.

But as we sipped the fragrant brew, lighter conversation carried naturally again. The former Alpha trusted me with colourful tales of Nathan as a rambunctious pup that had me chuckling despite the day's shadows. In return I shared innocuous clinic stories, allowing this brief interlude of unexpected camaraderie to balm my weary soul.

Too soon the winter afternoon light faded, signalling the former Alpha should head home before the cold deepened. I packed extra herbal tea bags and vitamins for him, touched by his unexpected visit. However brief, the kindness had nurtured a flicker of hope I could hold darkness at bay a little longer.

After seeing the former Alpha safely to his waiting car, I stood alone on the clinic steps as dusk wrapped the little valley in deepening blue shadow. For the first time all day, I felt able to draw full breaths again. Hot tears trickled down my cheeks, washing away some fear and anger.

But the fragile peace was short-lived. Strident knocking sent dread spiralling through me again. I turned to find Nathan looming in the doorway, fire blazing in his eyes.

“What did you say to my father?” he demanded without preamble.

I instinctively moved to block his path inside. “Nothing of consequence. He simply came seeking medicinal tea”

Nathan’s lip curled derisively. “Yes, I’m sure it was all very innocuous. I know you’re trying to turn him against me, just as you poison so many with your lies!”

His bitter accusations battered already bruised emotions. But I stood steadfast. “I’ve never asked your father or anyone else to take sides, Nathan. Nor will I

We stared at each other, every muscle tensed for combat. Then Nathan’s furious expression cracked, sheer anguished desperation shining through.

“Just talk to me, Terra, I beg you! Before this rift between us becomes permanent.”

The rawness in his tone caught me off guard. This was not the aggressive Alpha demanding answers, but the young man who had once been a tender friend. Could redemption be found between us, if I let down my guard?

But then childish laughter echoed from the exam rooms down the hall, lancing straight to my heart. The innocent joy I would sacrifice anything to preserve from the ugliness between Nathan and I.

Face shuttering closed again, I stepped firmly away. “I can’t give you what you want. Please, just move on Before he could argue, I retreated inside, locking the doors with an air of finality.

Through the glass I saw Nathan’s shoulders slump in defeat for only a moment before anger tightened them again. He spun on his heel and stalked away, barely leashed fury in every line of his powerful body. I knew this was far from over.

Over the next week, Nathan’s covert surveillance became increasingly overt. I frequently spotted his sleek car idling nearby as I ran errands or picked the boys up from school.

Often I felt prickles of awareness, turning to catch glimpses of his imposing figure observing from a distance. The subtle intimidation wore at already fragile nerves.

“We need to get out of here for awhile,” I told Collins one evening after double-checking the locks and shutters. “Take the boys up to your cabin by the lake this weekend. The change of scenery will do everyone good.”

Though worry lurked in Collins’ eyes, he nodded. “I think that’s wise. I’ll pick them up from school tomorrow so you’re not. being watched.”

I exhaled slowly. Thank you. Hopefully some distance will make Nathan see reason.” But an uneasy pit in stomach suggested the coming confrontation was unavoidable now, only delayed a little longer.

After kissing the boys goodbye outside school the next day, it was agonising to turn my car towards the clinic alone instead of following them to the safety of Collins’ cabin retreat.

But work would keep me occupied and hopefully prevent alerting Nathan.