

CLAIMED BY THE RIVAL ALPHA

Chapter 1

Selena"Happy birthday, Selena!"

I laughed as the voices filled the dining hall. The sound echoed warmly against the stone walls of the castle while candlelight flickered across familiar faces gathered around the table.

I stared at them in surprise. "You all planned this?"

A few people chuckled.

My father stood near the head of the table with a small smile on his face, his goblet raised slightly toward me. Beside him were a few trusted warriors, servants who had known me since childhood, and my closest friend, the Beta's daughter.

"You thought we forgot your eighteenth birthday?" she asked dramatically.

"I hoped you did," I replied teasingly.

She gasped. "Ungrateful."

Laughter spread around the room again.

Warmth filled my chest as I walked further into the hall. The long wooden table was covered with roasted meat, fruits, fresh bread, and honey cakes. Someone had even decorated the room with flowers from the southern gardens.

For a moment, everything felt perfect.

"Come here," Father said.

I smiled and walked toward him immediately. He placed one large hand on my shoulder and looked down at me carefully.

"Eighteen already," he murmured.

"You say that every year."

"And every year I mean it." I smiled softly.

People feared Alpha William Vale. To the realm, he was the powerful Alpha of Nightbane Pack. Strong. Ruthless when necessary. Untouchable.

But to me, he had always just been my father.

After my mother died giving birth to me, he raised me alone. He never remarried, never allowed anyone to mistreat me, never made me feel like I lacked a mother's love.

Everything I had was because of him.

"Sit," he said gently and I obeyed happily.

The celebration continued with teasing, laughter, and far too many honey cakes. My friend kept stealing food from everyone else's plates while claiming she was "helping reduce waste."

"You've had enough cakes," one of the warriors told her.

"There is no such thing," she argued.

"There definitely is."

She pointed at me. "Selena agrees with me."

I quickly shook my head. "Do not involve me in this."

The room burst into laughter again.

At some point during the night, Father finally allowed me my first full goblet of wine.

"You're finally old enough," he said.

My friend nearly choked. "Finally? She's been secretly drinking from your cup for years."

I froze as Father slowly looked at me. "...What?"

"She lies," I said immediately.

My friend grinned wickedly. "Do I?"

Father sighed deeply, though amusement flickered in his eyes. "I truly raised troublesome girls."

The warmth in the room only grew from there.

For a little while, I forgot every responsibility waiting outside the castle walls. I forgot the pressure of being the Alpha's daughter. I forgot the whispers about mates and future duties.

Tonight, I simply felt happy.

Eventually, the celebration came to an end. One by one, everyone left the hall until only Father and I remained near the dying fire.

Rain had started falling outside and the soft sound filled the silence between us.

Father reached into his cloak slowly before pulling out something wrapped in dark cloth.

"I wanted to give you this privately," he said.

Curious, I accepted it from him and carefully unwrapped the fabric.

A pendant rested in my palm. It was old, with a deep purple stone surrounded by silver markings I didn't recognize.

"It's beautiful," I whispered.

"It belonged to your mother." I looked up immediately.

Father's expression softened slightly as he stared at the pendant. "She treasured it greatly," he continued quietly. "She believed it was a lucky charm."

I smiled faintly. "Lucky?"

"She claimed it helped her find her mate." Something warm stirred in my chest and my fingers tightened gently around the pendant.

"I thought eighteen was the right age to give it to you." He paused before adding, "Hopefully it brings you the same happiness it brought her."

Emotion suddenly clogged my throat."Thank you, Father."

He leaned down and kissed my forehead softly."Go rest."

I nodded before leaving the hall.

The castle corridors felt colder now that the celebration was over. Torches flickered along the walls while rain battered the windows outside.

When I reached my room, I immediately sat on the edge of my bed and examined the pendant again.It was the only thing I truly had from my mother.

Smiling softly, I placed it around my neck before standing to change for bed.

I frowned as I suddenly heard a strange noise.At first, I thought it was just thunder outside, but another sound followed almost immediately.

It's movements and voices.

My brows furrowed as I walked toward the window and pulled the curtain aside.

Shadows moved quickly through the castle compound below. Fear prickled down my spine as something felt wrong.

I hurried from my room and found the nearest guard standing outside the corridor.

"There are people moving around outside," I told him quickly.

The guard frowned immediately before placing two fingers against his temple, attempting to mindlink the guards stationed beyond the courtyard.

Seconds passed then his expression darkened slightly. "They're not responding."

My stomach tightened. "What does that mean?"

"I'll check."

"I'm coming with you."

"No, my lady. Stay here." Before I could argue, he walked away down the corridor.

I remained standing outside my chamber, wrapping my arms around myself while thunder rumbled loudly outside.

The wait felt endless. Every frightening story I had ever heard about vampires suddenly returned to me.

The monsters beyond the eastern lands, The creatures children were taught to fear from birth.

Cold unease settled heavily inside my chest.

Finally, footsteps approached again as the guard returned. "Well?" I asked immediately.

He shook his head. "Nothing serious. The guards outside were drunk."

I blinked. "Drunk?"

"Yes my lady and that's why they ignored the mindlink."

I exhaled shakily, though my nerves still felt unsettled.

The guard gave me a reassuring nod. "You should rest, my lady."

"I'll try."

He walked away again, leaving me alone in the corridor.

I stared toward my chamber door for a moment before turning away instead.

I suddenly wanted to see Father again.Maybe hearing his voice would calm me down.

I made my way toward his office quietly while rain continued pouring outside the castle.But before I reached the door, angry voices stopped me.

"...cannot keep doing this." I froze instantly as the voice belonged to my father's Beta.

Another voice answered sharply. My Father's.

My chest tightened slightly knowing that they were arguing.I stepped closer to the door without thinking.

"You think I enjoy it?" Father snapped.

"What I think," the Beta replied bitterly, "is that I'm tired of selling our women like livestock."

I stopped breathing at the word selling. Confusion swirled through my head.

Father lowered his voice, but I still heard him clearly. "It keeps the vampires away from our borders."

A chill spread through my entire body. No. That couldn't be what he meant.

"The next batch leaves tomorrow night," the Beta muttered.

Batch? Fear slowly began creeping into my chest. My mind struggled to understand the conversation happening beyond the door.

Then the Beta spoke again. "And Selena?"

Silence followed briefly as my heartbeat became painfully loud.

"She was promised years ago," Father finally answered.

The world around me seemed to tilt violently.

"What?" the Beta hissed. "She's your daughter."

"She belongs to the agreement."

My hand flew to my mouth. No. No, no, no—

"The high lord specifically requested her since birth," Father continued heavily.

Terror crashed into me so suddenly my knees nearly gave out. I couldn't breathe. A vampire lord? Me?

The Beta cursed under his breath. "You're truly sending her with the others?"

Father didn't answer immediately. But eventually— "Yes."

The single word shattered something inside me. I stumbled backward silently, tears burning my eyes.

All those girls who disappeared over the years...They hadn't left to marry wolves from other packs like I was told by my father.

They had been sold to vampires and tomorrow night, I would be one of them.

Footsteps suddenly approached from inside the office. Panic jolted through me and I quickly hid behind one of the stone pillars just as the office door opened.

Father and the Beta stepped into the corridor."She must never know," Father said quietly.

My chest hurt so badly I thought I might scream as I watched the two men walk away.

I remained frozen behind the pillar until their footsteps disappeared completely. Then slowly, I stepped into Father's office.

The room suddenly felt unfamiliar and cold.

My gaze landed on my mother's painting hanging behind the desk. I stared at it through blurred vision.

'Did he truly love her? Did he truly love me? Or had he spent my entire life preparing me for this?'

A sob escaped my throat then my eyes fell on the large ledger resting on the desk. I remembered seeing Father write in it many times before.

Slowly, I opened it and my stomach twisted instantly. There were names, ages, dates and trade records of girls from different packs.

I felt sick seeing this was real. All of it.

My breathing turned shaky as I grabbed the ledger quickly. Then I snatched Father's spare cloak hanging nearby and hurried from the office.

I didn't think anymore. I just ran.

Rain soaked me the moment I stepped outside the castle. The cold wind whipped against my face as I rushed toward the stables.

My hands trembled while preparing one of the horses. "I need to hurry," I whispered desperately.

Within moments, I climbed onto the horse and rode into the storm. Away from Nightbane, away from my father and away from the fate waiting for me.

Rain lashed painfully against my skin as the horse raced through muddy paths and dark woods. Tears blurred my vision the entire time.

Every memory hurts now. Every smile, every embrace and every moment Father told me he loved me. Had all of it been a lie?

I crossed the pack borders sometime before dawn but still didn't stop.

Eventually, the forest ahead became too thick for the horse to move through properly. I climbed down shakily and began leading the animal on foot instead.

Thunder cracked loudly overhead.

My thoughts spun endlessly until suddenly— A growl echoed through the trees.

I froze as another growl answered from somewhere behind me and fear shot through my body instantly.

Shadows moved between the trees then men slowly emerged from the darkness surrounding me. Their clothes were torn, their eyes wild, their teeth bared viciously.

Rogues.

One of them snarled at me hungrily. Another circled toward my side, snapping his teeth.

The horse panicked beside me as the rogues closed in on us.