

Chapter 122

March

Ava tried her best to clear her mind as she ran, but just as she'd come to expect, it was... difficult to give in to the motion. In fact, the more she tried not to think, the more vivid her waking terrors became, going from blurry, confused memories to technicolor visions in a literal blink of an eye.

The chirping of birds sharpened to the rat-a-tat-tat of gunfire, while the soft, melodic trickle of fountain water distorted into the hazy rush of a man-made fire quickly growing out of hand....

Ava squeezed her eyes shut and turned up the volume on the quick, synth-heavy music blaring in her ears as she focused on pumping her arms and legs, slowing her harried breaths. Soon enough, Ava was once again able to lose herself to the blessedly consistent rhythm of the music paired with the satisfying thud of her sneakers hitting the pavement.

Soon enough, she was able to open her eyes without comparing the green of the park's grass to the eyes of the disembodied woman she'd seen and pass an airborne frisbee without ducking out of instinct.

Damn, she thought, Pretty sure I'm going to need an extra session with Kim this week.

Bren had insisted on looking up local therapists for Ava to see almost as soon as they'd landed in Oakland. Between the nearly constant stream of nightmare-induced panic attacks triggered by her memories of the attack on Alliance Tower and her persistent anxiety over the fallout of the attack, Ava hadn't slept for days after arriving.

Kim had been a blessing and a curse, helping her parse through the chaotic jumble of terror and grief she'd been submerged in after the attack at the cost of having to purposefully relive the night over and over in order to make sense of her trauma.

After five months, she was much improved, although there were still tougher days like today when everything just felt...fresher. These were usually the days when Ava ran herself to the point of exhaustion, turning the beautiful city of Berkley, California, into her suburban playground.

And then there were the days where life managed to step in and intervene on her behalf.

"Ava? Hey!"

She slowed to a stop and turned in surprise to see Aiden gleefully waving at her from across the way.

"Aiden! Is this what you've been working on? It's...."

Ava trailed off as her jaw dropped in awe. Her brother hadn't spoken much about the new job he'd taken about a month after they'd arrived in California. He'd muttered something about landing a decent construction job that should last him through Bren's semester.

He'd made it sound as if he'd been contracted to help erect yet another Starbucks on a street corner somewhere. What Ava saw before her, though, was art. Spread across a good chunk of undeveloped park space looked to be a nearly completed statue garden filled with a host of delicate marble figures and stone water features nested beneath glistening metallic trees.

Aiden laughed rubbed a bashful hand over his closely cropped hair, "Yeah, well...it gets the bills paid."

"Shut up, Aiden, this is incredible! Why didn't you say you were working on an art installation. And where does the construction come in?"

"Uh, well, I didn't want to make a big deal out of it, you know? I've honestly been waiting for the foreman to realize my sculpting skills are miles behind everyone else's."

Ava's eyes popped wide, "You're sculpting. You're a sculptor? Since when?!"

"Since it got cold and boring as hell between rounds up in Maine. I picked it up as a hobby, but I didn't think anything would come of it, you know?" He shrugged, but Ava could see the pride in his work that he insisted on downplaying. "Then, I saw that someone was hiring builders and artists for this interactive exhibit for the city and...I sent in a few pictures of some of my old pieces. I didn't expect anything to come out of it."

"Are you allowed to show me what you've been working on?" Ava asked.

Aiden threw a quick look over his shoulder before tugging her behind him, "Not really, but come on. I can show you a few things while everyone's at lunch."

Ava followed Aiden behind the construction guardrails and straight into what was truly a fantasy wonderland, filled to the gills with every fairy tale character she'd ever seen and more than a few that she hadn't. The whirling iron tree branches were tipped with blown glass flowers while whimsical creatures of all shapes and sizes peeked, trotted, and flitted across the mosaic stone pathways.

"Is that a unicorn?" Ava gaped at the life-sized marble statue posing majestically against an empty fountain dressed up to look like a miniature pond.

"Yeah, neat, right?" Aiden grinned as they passed the statue and a dozen more similar to it. "My buddy Ted headed that one. Water's going to pour out of the horn; a little cheesy, but the engineering behind it's pretty impressive." They approached a break in the trees where the mosaic path branched out into a circular promenade.

"And this is my contribution...."

Aiden's wide smile was tinged with doubt as they passed through the tree line and into the center of the exhibit, but Ava hardly noticed. She was far too consumed with taking in as much as she could of the enormous, winged dragon taking up the center of the promenade.

It stood well over fifteen feet tall with one St. Bernard-sized paw resting on a large glass orb, its massive wingspan stretched out on either side, providing shade in the hot California sun. Each individual scale glittered in the afternoon rays, standing out in startling detail.

"Goddess, Aiden...you did this?!" Ava gasped before cringing when she realized how callous she sounded. "I mean, no offense, it's just...wow!"

Her brother smirked and shrugged, "None taken. Really, I think the same damn thing every time I see it, and it's not even done."

Ava took a slow lap around the dragon, admiring the intense skill and sheer amount of time it had to have taken her brother to perfect each vein running through the creature's bat-like wings or how he'd learned to accurately capture the sinewy bulk of the dragon's muscles.

She was so enraptured that she almost didn't hear when Aiden cleared his throat, but when she looked up, the concern on her brother's face was evident. "What's wrong?"

"Nothing. I might have some good news, is all," Despite his cheery tone and forced smile, he still looked pained. "I've really bonded with a lot of my crewmates since the project started, right? And the foreman, he saw my potential pretty early on I was sculpting pixies for weeks when we first started-"

"Aiden," Ava interrupted. "What is it?"

He stared at her for a moment before clearing his throat, "This job might be transitioning into a long-term position with their architectural firm. If it does, I'd really like to take it. You know...for Bren...."

Ava placed a hand on her brother's arm and forced a smile even as she had to work past the tightness in her throat before she could speak, "Aiden, that's great. I mean it."

He shook his head, "It's not the plan."

"And plans change. Hell, according to the news, there isn't much left of our home to go back to right now, and I don't think that's going to change any time soon. You deserve to make your own plans for the future."

He put his hand over hers and squeezed, "As long as you're in it, Ava. I can't do this without you."

"I'm not going anywhere." The coy glint to her grin felt more like self-deprecation than humor, but she'd never let her brother know just how poignant that promise felt. How cutting.

Ava looked at her brother, and, in this light, it was clear that at some point during the last few months, a switch had flipped. It was in the way his eyes lit up as his gaze touched on each of the sculptures they passed, whether he worked on them or not. It was in the way his smile came so effortlessly whenever he spoke about his colleagues.

Friends, Ava corrected herself. Somehow, her brother had found his tribe thousands of miles away from Red Moon.

And she supposed that was especially good news given the circumstances.

Before she could fall back into the trap of her own all-consuming thoughts, Ava pulled back. "I should probably head out before your team gets back from lunch," she said. "Besides, I'm on my way to meet Bren to do some shopping." "Again?" Aiden laughed. "You're spoiling her, Ava."

She shrugged, "What else am I going to spend Red Moon's money on? Plus, she deserves it!"

Aiden's expression grew wistful, "Goddess if that isn't the truth. I really appreciate you looking out for her. I'm just...." His eyes turned glassy as he began to blink rapidly, "I'm really glad that you're here with us, Ava."

Ava pulled her brother into a tight hug, "Me too."

"I swear, I'm about thirty seconds from imploding, Ava."

Bren huffed as she looked from one package in her hand to the considerably more expensive one she held in the other, "Who needs a breast pump that fits underneath their clothes? It sounds convenient and all, but you don't think the milk happens that frequently, do you?"

Ava burst out laughing at her friend's thorough befuddlement, "I'm afraid I don't have any clue how often 'the milk happens.' Did you ask your mom?"

"She's just making me more confused! She keeps sending me articles on the newest gadgets that she swears will make my life sooo much easier than when she had my siblings and me." Bren scoffed and placed both pumps back onto the shelf, "I'm taking a hard stance and saying that I don't want a stroller that walks itself. Just seems hella sketch to me."

"On that, we agree," Ava sighed, placing the pumps back into the cart. "On everything else? Just get the pumps, Bren. You'll probably need a backup anyway!"

"Ava, I already feel weird about you buying me this stuff in the first place."

Ava held up her hand, stopping Bren before she could rehash the same conversation they'd been having since she'd held Bren's hand as they'd read the pregnancy test together three months ago.

"And I felt weird about living with the two of you rent-free. Making sure your baby wants for nothing while I'm freeloading feels like more than a fair trade!" "You're not freeloading, Ava. We wanted you to come."

"And I want to be one of those cool aunts who shows up, gives gifts, gets cuddles, and leaves just in time for bedtime tantrums. We're both living the dream!"

For nearly six months, Ava had been living well and truly as her own person. And in that time, learning that her brother and best friend were going to be parents was the first time she'd felt even an inkling of purpose - remotely needed. "Thank you, but I'll stick to the practical stuff," Bren scolded and placed the expensive robo-breast pump back on the shelf. "And you shouldn't blow through your savings; I don't care how deep they are. Especially since we're going to be here longer than we first thought we'd be."

"So, Aiden told you about his job offer?" Ava asked.

"Of course! I mean, it was pretty much a given we'd be staying after we found out I was pregnant, but it really feels like everything is falling into place out here, Ava." Bren gave a contented sigh as she browsed through a rack of infant onesies. "Transferring the rest of my classes here is easy enough, and with everything going on back East, my family is even thinking of moving to be closer to us."

Ava's eyebrows rose, "I thought that they were far enough away from the fallout in New York that they were safe?"

"They are. Relatively, anyway. Either way, we agreed that it's for the best that everyone come out here for a few years in case things...get worse. My family wanted to wait until they got new jobs, but I told them not to bother. If we're lucky, they'll be settled in by the time I hit my third trimester."

Curiously enough, Ava found herself once again forcing a smile that should have come naturally, "Oh, wow!"

Bren practically vibrated with excitement at the thought of her family reuniting, "I know! And the sooner, the better. That way, you can take a break from worrying about me and have a breather."

Ava nodded along to Bren's cheerful chatter as they continued to shop, but she failed to take in much else from the conversation. More than usual, today had put her reality into stark focus - the wasted time, the lack of prospects.... Layla had been right; California was a land of new beginnings. Just, it seemed, not Ava's.

By the time she was alone again, Ava's anxiety had thankfully abated, along with her inexplicable melancholy, leaving her an exhausted shell.

There were more days than she cared to admit where she ended the day feeling similarly, her mind utterly depleted from the effort it took to carry the brunt of her worries. It was days like this when she needed this most when the lines between her head and her heart got infuriatingly tangled.

Even though her bedroom was private enough, she never felt completely comfortable doing this indoors. Instead, she liked to wait until it was late - the later, the better, and after night had fallen, she'd walk to the nearby harbor where she could sit at the edge of the bay and stare out, feeling the sea breeze on her face.

It helped her to focus on that and nothing else. In fact, it was one of the few times that Ava was able to leave her trauma at the door, focused as she was on being who she needed to be over the next few minutes instead of running from the myriad of uncertainties plaguing her regular life.

Ava felt this now, that razor-sharp edge of anticipation as she waited for the call. When her phone dutifully rang, her pulse picked up its pace, nearly rendering her breathless as she answered the call. "Hey, Noah."