

## Chapter 125

### What Hurts The Most

Ava shifted uncomfortably in the plush upholstered seat as she peered around the tastefully decorated room. The pleasantly packed bookshelves and walls decorated with calming landscapes were designed to put people like her at ease. But, even after all of this time, she still found it difficult to get settled in enough to concentrate on opening up.

Which is a ridiculous concept in and of itself, she scoffed to herself. The idea that relaxation in any form is redundant...and not to mention utterly frustrating- "Ava."

Her therapist's soft but firm voice drew her attention back to the present. Right. She was at therapy. Where she had called this emergency session because, every so often, her anxieties grew just a touch too loud to handle on her own. "You know that this only works if you want it to," her therapist, Dr. Kim Schuster, reminded her. "You know, you usually only get this uncomfortable when you're withholding something."

Ava sighed, "I thought you weren't supposed to press about that kind of thing."

Kim smiled kindly, but Ava knew from experience that the human woman spooked about as easily as a velociraptor. It was how Ava knew that Dr. Schuster was the right fit for her. "I'm not pressing, just pointing out a particular pattern of behavior I've noted in you. Feel free to communicate at your own pace, but remember what I always say - discomfort is-"

"Is the body's way of calling for release," I finish. Yeah, Ava was well aware of her doctor's favorite catchphrase. But as much as she said tried to keep it in mind, Ava just wasn't sure the saying was the motivator Kim seemed to think it was. Ava was a child of discomfort. It certainly wasn't something she'd chosen for herself, but she lived and breathed it, thrived in it, and in some exceedingly specific ways she still couldn't bring herself to admit to Kim, Ava craved it. But most importantly, she'd grown desensitized to it.

That being said, Ava wasn't in the business of wasting any more time than she felt she already had, so she just had to come to terms with the fact that today wouldn't be the day she dealt with the needling guilt she felt about relaying her the information Noah had told her in confidence straight to Xavier without a second thought.

On the one hand, to the more pragmatic side of her, probing Noah for information was a no-brainer - a uniquely helpful way for Ava to provide

aid to those she'd left behind and couldn't help but feel partially responsible for. After all, it had been her plan that had prompted Noah's mother to take such extreme measures. Ava couldn't help but wonder if the events of the night of the attack would have gone differently if she hadn't gotten involved. But at the other end of the spectrum, the ever-persistent emotional side of her was gutted by the fact that she had willfully betrayed the trust of a male she still loved. And that she wouldn't hesitate to do it again. "I feel useless," Ava confessed. "Displaced."

Dr. Schuster hummed contemplatively, "We'll have to dive into that first statement in a minute, but as for the latter, you have been displaced, Ava. It isn't some great revelation that you might be experiencing a few growing pains while you adjust to your new home."

"But I'm not adjusting," Ava insisted. "And this isn't my home."

Ava sat back and blinked, a little surprised at her own outburst. But Dr. Schuster simply nodded and waited for Ava to continue following that train of thought.

"California isn't my home," Ava repeated, her voice barely above a whisper now. "But neither is New York."

"Did you expect to find a home in California when you got here?" Kim asked.

"Not necessarily, no. But I thought that I'd find a purpose, at the very least. Instead, it's been six months, and it feels as if everyone's managed to find a place to fit in except for me."

The therapist takes a moment to digest the new information, jotting down a few notes in Ava's file before clearing her throat. "I take it this new anxiety has been partially brought on by Brenda's pregnancy, but you've experienced this trigger before and overcome it. Has something else happened?"

Ava swallowed hard and nodded, "Aiden's construction job is going better than any of us expected. He and Bren are planning to stay long-term. They're even moving Bren's family in from the East Coast."

"And when they arrive, you're afraid you'll become obsolete."

She didn't phrase it like a question, and it was a little jarring to hear her own internal fears, once so loud and amorphous, stated so plainly.

"I'm grasping at straws."

"No," Kim stated firmly. "You're experiencing real, valid emotions."

"I'm failing to launch," Ava spat. "I don't even know why Layla wanted me to come here! She was the one with the plans. She could picture a

world where we could make some sort of difference, not me. She should be here. Not me." When Ava dropped her head into her hands and began to sob, she liked that Dr. Schuster didn't do that annoying thing where people immediately lunge for a box of tissues as if simply being in close proximity to someone else's tears might infect them with depression cooties or some shit. The good doctor didn't speak or write down any notes; she just let Ava work through this spot of turbulent emotion.

"She trusted me," Ava grated out between stuttered breaths. "It was her dying wish, the only dream she had, and I fucked it up. Just like I fucked up my plan to save Noah, and now he's being hunted like a fucking terrorist." "Oh."

Ava swiped away her tears, but more were soon to follow. "And I fucked up helping Xavier stop a war. Now, he's neck-deep in one, and here I am across the country leaving him to clean up the mess," she whispered. "My life has been my own for almost a year, and I haven't done anything with it. I've only made things worse for other people."

Ava choked on another round of gasping breaths, "I feel like I've forgotten how to be a person, and I can't seem to find my footing. What if I feel like this forever? What's even the point of being alive if I can't have a life worth living?" Silence stretched between the two as Ava battled against the stifling sense that she was drowning underneath the weight of her own thoughts, in her own skin. The stillness had become just shy of deafening when Dr. Schuster suddenly set her pen aside and shut her notebook with a snap.

"Ava, if you're up to it, I think we could use a change of scenery," the doctor stated, her tone betraying nothing more than a confident calm.

"Wha...we're leaving?" Ava stuttered, blinking in surprise.

"Only if you're up to it, but there's something I'd really like you to see."

The building Kim guided Ava to didn't look like much. It was a nondescript brownstone located on a reasonably busy street in the town's small business district. The lettering on the glass storefront read "Bright Light Community Outreach."

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"What is this place?" Ava asked.

"It's a community center and general support group for socio-disrupted individuals that a colleague of mine recently recommended to me."

That answer only left her with more questions, but even so, when Kim opened the door and gestured for her to follow, Ava did. "What is a socio-disrupted individual?"

"That is the more politically friendly term we in the public service industry use for people who found their former homes...disagreeable."

Ava turned toward the voice to see what had to be the most stunning woman she'd ever seen in her life. She had deep, rich skin and the sort of strong, symmetrical features that bordered on intimidating. And she wasn't human. And not a Wolf, either. Ava would have sensed if she were one of her own, but instead, she just felt the same sense of otherness she'd felt the first time she'd met Marnie, the witch she'd befriended back East.

"I'm Elodie," the woman said, offering her hand with a kind smile. "Fae."

Ava's eyes popped wide as she carefully shook Elodie's hand. "You're fae? I didn't know that any lived on this side of the Divide." The words were out of her mouth before she could properly self-edit, "Goddess, sorry! That was probably rude to ask. Let me start over. I'm Ava."

Elodie laughed, the sweet tone as melodic as a wind chime, "It's nice to meet you, Ava."

Ava looked uncertainly between Kim and Elodie before asking, "So this is a center for refugees?"

"That and more," the fae woman nodded. "We specialize in offering community and healing to those unfortunate enough to endure the worst

that life on the fringes of society has to offer. Everyone here has a unique pain. We offer a safe space to heal."

"Everyone?" Ava's eyes strayed behind Elodie to the open door behind the front desk. Inside, she could see at least a dozen men, women, males, and females milling about, talking and laughing. Each one looked so...orgfortable. And if what they said was true, each one was just like her.