

## Chapter 17

### Talk In Hospital : Part 1

Ava raced through the forest on powerful legs, hot on the other Wolf's tail. The forest in springtime was beautiful, but with Mia taking the reins, it was otherworldly.

Her nostrils flared, taking in a thousand unseen sights; a family of squirrels chattered away nervously as they watched the two Wolves below, safely perched in the hollow of the ancient oak tree they called home. She heard a doe and her baby cautiously wait for the potential threat pass them by; even though they stood completely still, the ultra-fast \*pitter patter\* of their heartbeats sung to her dual spirit like a ballad. Fortunately for them, she had other prey in mind.

Ava came upon a stream and paused as she momentarily lost her prey's scent. Dipping her broad, tapered snout low to the mossy forest floor, she drew in a long breath of woodsy air that carried the stories of a trillion different organisms intermingling to create and sustain this lush

environment. With a single sniff, Ava could tell how each being lived and died to maintain a picture of perfect harmony.

Hidden amongst the cacophony of living memories, Ava caught the faintest strains of the very smell she was searching for - fresh summer strawberries. The particular scent blended so well in the outdoor environment that Ava almost missed it, diluted as it was from the rushing stream water.

By closing her eyes and concentrating, she and Mia were able to paint a mental picture that would lead her to her quarry's hiding place. The Wolf had nearly passed the stream altogether, but had switched course at the very last moment, darting right and dashing through the water, hoping to fool her pursuer long enough to make it to sanctuary before they were any the wiser.

From there, the prey moved downstream, heading in a direction that would lead to a place Ava was familiar with. With their game back in their sights, Mia was off, sprinting through the brush and leaping over downed trees with a boundless grace.

Ava loved when Mia took over like this and experiencing the joy of running, the complexity of the forest, and the thrill of the hunt through the Wolf's eyes, never ceased to amaze her.

Finally, they came upon the clearing that felt like a second home and found their prey gleefully rolling through a patch of wildflowers. The happy Wolf watched her as she ran up and let out an amused yip as Ava nipped one of her ears. Simultaneously, both Wolves changed, their thick fur melting away to be replaced by supple skin and long, lustrous hair. Ava stared at Sophia and Sophia stared back, both grinning from ear to ear, still reveling in the freedom of their afternoon play.

Together, the girls fell back and laughed at the sun and talking about their hopes and dreams as they watched the burning orb dip lower and lower behind the tree line.

"Samantha has a thing for Xavier, you know." Sophia's bright hazel eyes shone with mischief as they peered out through honey-colored bangs, "I think she's going to tell him soon. I wonder how that will go?"

An unbidden sense of disappointment and foreboding swelled inside of her, taking her breath away. All of a sudden, the song of the forest seemed far too loud in Ava's ears. Without another word, she shot to her feet, determined to stop dragging her feet and do away with this suffocating feeling of impending doom.

Within the span of a few steps, the forest clearing melted away and tall, brick manor rose into view. As she drew closer to the centuries-old building that had been passed down from Alpha to Alpha for generations, the sky above seemed to lose its luster, growing dimmer and dimmer.

She stepped up to a beautifully wrought iron gate and reached for the handle to pull it open. Before she could make contact, another hand appeared out of nowhere to stay her movements.

Looking up, Ava saw a pretty girl with warm brown skin and a mass of curly hair falling past a delicately pointed chin. Layla. The name came unbidden, sprouting up in the jumbled mass of disconnected thoughts that was Ava's mind. The girl looked at her with large, pleading eyes filled with panicked concern.

"Please," the girl begged. "Ava you can't go in there. I promise you that nothing good will come from this. You have to be patient."

Ava frowned at the thought of being told to wait. She'd never been one to hold her cards too closely to her chest - she valued honesty in her friends, and so she gave them honesty in turn. The only thing Ava had ever held so dearly in regard that she refused to voice it outside of the safety of her thoughts, was her love for Xavier.

Every time she feared she'd let her mask slip, that Xavier could see past her flimsy veneer, she distracted him with silly words. Whenever he bruised her ego by talking up other girls or opened up to her about his hopes for the future, but failed to mention her, she lashed out with spirited barbs.

On every occasion, Xavier met her with a patient smile, an indulgent laugh, and laid the burden of his position at her feet - the ultimate trust.

But Ava hadn't trusted him back. She'd been too afraid of changing the tide of their friendship by burdening him with her secret - that her own hopes and dreams were dependent on his reciprocated affection. But she was finished hiding.

Ava shook off the distraught girl's hand and pushed forward through the gate and up the winding cobbled path.

She came to the manor's massive solid oak door and pushed her way inside, only to find her worst nightmare splayed across the extravagant marble foyer.

There was so much red. Thick, pulsing rivers flooded the once rich domicile in waves of deep crimson ichor. In the center of the gore lay Sophia and Samantha, throats gaping open in long weeping smiles. "No!" Ava cried and ran to the corpses, staring into their wide, sightless eyes. With a shaking hand, Ava reached out to touch the body closest to her. "S-sam..."

The heavy oak door slammed open, a gust of frigid air turning Ava's blood to ice. "Murderer!"

Ava spun around at the enraged voice. Standing behind her was the entire Pack, glaring at her with hate-filled eyes. At the lead, in his rightful place, was Xavier who pointed an accusatory finger directly at her. By his side, her parents openly wept, but it was blame in their eyes, not sadness.

"No!" Ava backed away as the mob advanced on her. When Ava brought her hands up to plead for mercy, she found them already shackled. From deep within her, Mia cried out, unable to surface - unable to protect.

Ava's frightened gaze turned to Xavier, her only tether left in the void her life had become, "Xavier, please...I-I need you to believe me."

He nodded, and for a moment, Ava's heart leaped in stunned relief. The next thing she knew, calloused hands took hold of her from both sides and begun dragging her backward...and down, down. Xavier looked on with vindicated pleasure turning his beautiful features into a vengeful mask.

"NO!"

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Ava bolted upright once more. This time, instead of being greeted by a field of flowers, she was in an unfamiliar medical office. Her chest heaved in labored wheezes. The nightmare wasn't new to her, she'd been having one version of it or another in a depressing loop for the past three years.

It never mattered the setting, whether she was with Sophia or Sam, the end was always the same. Her family turned her back on her and reveled in her demise.

At least I wasn't burnt at the stake this time, Ava thought. Or hanged.

Suddenly, the sculpted planes of Madame Bella's face appeared before Ava's haunted eyes. "You fainted," she said and held out a mug of freshly steeped tea.

Nodding absently, Ava took the tea and gave it a cautious sip. Warm honey and ginger cascaded through Ava, warming a persistent chill she hadn't been fully aware of. She let her eyelids fall closed on a comforted sigh. "Feel better?" Bella asked.

Ava made to reply, but a nest of angry hornets had apparently taken refuge inside of her throat, causing her response to come out as a pained squeak. Instead, she nodded and took another sip of tea.

Bella laughed, "Yes, the flu is the gift that keeps on giving, isn't it?"

Ava sighed and nodded.

"You need to take better care of yourself." Ava met the other female's stark stare. "You've probably noticed that people in this world don't exactly

jump at the opportunity to care for others. So you need to make sure you care for yourself." Ava's eyes began to well as she thought back on her dream. This time, her nod came slowly.

After letting her words sink in a moment, Bella spoke again, "Can I ask you something?"

Wary of where this conversation might go, Ava signaled for her to continue.

"Why does Alpha Michaels hate you so much? He can be a grouchy bastard, but I've never seen him...lose his patience with another Wolf. Much less a diminutive girl like yourself."

Silence stretched between them as Ava gathered her thoughts. Eventually, she croaked, "I killed the two people he loved the most in the world."

Bella tilted her head questioningly, "Did you?" When Ava returned the gesture, she continued. "You're that Ava Davis, I presume?"

Ava gritted her teeth in a bitter grin, "Are there so many? Who are murderers, no less?"

A small half-smile slipped onto Bella's lips, "Who can tell? But I doubt any of them are murderers."

Ava stilled, almost unwilling to accept that she'd finally heard the words she'd craved for so long. Eyes wide with pleading, turned to Bella in disbelief.

"I don't know who you were before, but I know you now, and a girl like you would never stoop to something so...basic. You're too proud."

"H-how..."

"I know the spark when I see it. It's the same spark I felt when I decided to make a difference in this society my way. And it's the same ember I've seen in every one of my court's eyes when they decide to leave the pit I drug them from behind to forge their own path.

Ava felt raw, exposed, seen. Uninhibited tears slid down her cheeks as she stared into her steaming tea. This woman she'd all but written off as a pimp and a pawn in the Alliance's schemes, had finally put into words that driving need deep inside of Ava that refused to die, no matter the abuses thrown at her. She'd looked at Ava and seen her for who she was.

If this virtual stranger could do that, why couldn't her parents? Why couldn't Xavier?