

## CHAPTER 113

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I want to believe Lucas. I want to believe that everything will be okay, that I'll come out of this stronger than before. But there's a part of me that's terrified of what's happening to me, of the changes. that I can feel taking place inside my body. Change is inevitable, Selene says, her voice gentle. But it doesn't have to be something to fear. I know she's right, but it's hard to let go of the apprehension that's taken root in my gut. I have a feeling Selene knows why I've been unconscious for so long, but I can't talk to her with Lucas here. Lisa squeezes my hand, drawing my attention back to her. "We're here for you, Ave. Whatever you need." I manage a small smile, grateful for her support. "Thanks, Lise. I don't know what I would do without you." "Probably starve," she jokes, trying to lighten the mood. "Speaking of which, I'm going to go track down 110- A New Change some of that liquid diet for you. Be right back." She slips out of the room, leaving me alone with Lucas and Vanessa. Selene hops down from the bed, stretching languidly before padding over to the window. She seems content to give us some privacy, though I know she's still listening to every word. Vanessa steps closer, her expression softening as she takes in the way Lucas is holding me. "Your body has been through a tremendous ordeal, Ava. It's going to take time to recover, both physically and emotionally. But you're strong. You'll get through this." She smiles, reaching out to pat my leg through the blanket. "I'll be back to check on you later. You'll probably be asleep soon. I'll be here in the morning, and we can talk more then." \*\*\* It takes three days until I'm strong enough to be discharged home. It seems like forever, but Dr. Beaumont assures me- and Lucas-that it's a miracle I'm going home so early. Having multiple giant meals of protein (rare steak being the food of choice) seems to have kick-started 15:31 217 113 Ava: A New Change some of that liquid diet for you. Be right back." She slips out of the room, leaving me alone with Lucas. and Vanessa. Selene hops down from the bed, stretching languidly before padding over to the window. She seems content to give us some privacy, though I know she's still listening to every word. Vanessa steps closer, her expression softening as she takes in the way Lucas is holding me. "Your body has been through a tremendous ordeal, Ava. It's going to take time to recover, both physically and emotionally. But you're strong. You'll get through this." She smiles, reaching out to pat my leg through the blanket. "I'll be back to check on you later. You'll probably be asleep soon. I'll be here in the morning, and we can talk more then." \*\*\* It takes three days until I'm strong enough to be discharged home. It seems like forever, but Dr. Beaumont assures me- and Lucas-that it's a miracle I'm going home so early. Having multiple giant meals of protein (rare steak being the food of choice) seems to have kick-started 15:32 217 113 Ava: A New Change whatever magical shifter healing ability lies in my body. I'm not only better-I feel stronger and more fit than I was before I ever went unconscious. Lucas, of course, won't stop worrying. The full moon isn't for another month, and Dr. Beaumont and Vanessa seem convinced I will shift at that time. Selene won't answer when I ask her if that's true. And Lucas won't leave so I can talk to Selene. So I'm excited to be discharged, except... "No. You'll be staying at my house." Lucas won't let me go back to Lisa's apartment. "Absolutely not. She's coming back with me." Lisa stands toe-to-toe with Lucas and his alpha presence. Kellan poked his head into the room a few minutes earlier to ask Lisa if she could help pack my things and bring them to Lucas' house, and things just kind of exploded from there. "I'm staying with Lisa." "No, you're not." Lucas runs a hand through his hair, 30 113 Ava A New Change looking frustrated and furious. He alternates death glares toward my best friend with an agitated frown in my direction. "I'll feel better if you're at the alpha lodge. You'll be closer to the hospital, and Vanessa has access in order to provide care. It's safer there." Lisa's ready to blow, but I wave her down. "Are you trying to tell me you set my best friend in an apartment that's unsafe?" "No, of course not-" "The ambulance can get to me at her apartment just fine. They did last time, didn't they?" "Still-" "And even if it makes you feel better, it doesn't make me feel better." Standing up for myself feels good. Better than I thought it would. Even facing Lucas' clear irritation with the situation. "This isn't about you. This is about me." "As my mate-" "My name," I cut in, raising my voice, "is Ava Grey. I am

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my own person, and you are not my alpha. And even if you think I'm your mate, that connection has not been accented or established. And it never will be if you 15:32 113 Ava: A New Change can't respect my wishes." Of course, all those words are from Selene, coaching me as she pretends to sleep in the warmth of the window. Lisa looks smug, and Lucas looks... Hurt. Guilt tries to tug at my heart, whisper doubt in my mind. But I hold strong. Good job, Ava. Selene's words are gentle in my mind. Every word I've said to Lucas is true, of course. But I also desperately need to get away from him. He hasn't left my side except for the occasional bathroom break, and I need space. I need to talk to Selene. I can't do that with him up my ass. "If that's what you really-" "It is," I confirm, interrupting him with more confidence than usual. "Don't make me feel like a prisoner here, Lucas." 15:32 5/7 113 Ava: A New Change He flinches. "I would never. Ava, you are the highest ranking she-wolf in the pack-" "Lucas. I am not your pack." The words hurt me almost as much as they hurt him, I think. It feels like a rejection, but I don't want to soften my words. Selene pointed out that the line needs to be drawn between us; he's been acting as my mate and alpha, without ever checking with me if I'm okay with it. The fated bond is a sacred partnership, but I refuse to be owned by it. Lucas turns away, pacing on the other side of the room. His clenched fists and stiff shoulders spark an old, ingrained fear in my body, but Selene's serene presence helps offset the trained response. My fated mate might be a bit of a barbarian, but he's nothing like my pack. Nothing like my family. He won't hurt me. At least not physically. And it's become very clear that he has no intention of doing anything to irreparably damage whatever our relationship currently is. An if I would lat him Solana conffa lika cha isn't a 15 e fifty-pound husky going up against a two-hundred-plus pound wolf.

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