

CHAPTER 125

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125 Ava: Negotiating the Invitation 125 Ava: Negotiating the Invitation The ominous text halts me in place, and Lisa peers over my shoulder. “A candle?” she asks, confused. Oh, right—I haven’t spoken to her yet about my revelation of Sister Miriam’s words at our parting. Only Selene knows. Catching Lisa’s eye, I give a quick shake of my head and slide the phone into my pocket. Kellan’s in the distance, walking toward us. Lisa, as quick-thinking as ever, grabs onto my arm again and returns to her ruminations about the party. By the time the beta’s near us, his face is thunderclouds and lightning. “No way,” he announces, before Lisa can even say anything. Undeterred, Lisa stands straight, toe-to-toe with him in a way I see far too often. These two will never get along. “I’m not asking, Beta Ashbourne. I’m informing you. Friday will be busy. We’re going to a party.” 125 Ava: Negotiating the Invitation. “Absolutely not.” “Stop treating us like prisoners!” “You aren’t prisoners,” he refutes immediately. “We’re doing our best to keep you safe. A party? That’s not safe.” “That’s not safe,” she mimics, rolling her eyes. “So, what, we’re going to be stuck in my apartment forever? We can’t live at all? Can’t do anything? Because to me, it sounds like you’re saying Westwood is a bunch of weak-ass wolves who can’t protect two little girls in their own territory.” She’s a spitfire, Selene approves, back in my head again. Her marathon must be over. Every word is, of course, calculated to sting at the beta’s pride. Kellan’s jaw sets in a way that I see far too often these days, and he gives up arguing with Lisa to turn to me, instead. “With the situation at Blackwood...” “I agree with Lisa,” interrupting him before he can continue is the best way. While I’m doing better at standing up for myself, I’m not great at arguing when they bring up good points, like how unnecessary a 13:43 125 Ava: Negotiating the Invitation party might be compared to my life. It’s not that I disagree. It’s just that I can’t live like this forever, and things need to change. “You can’t hide me away forever. It’s worse than being home. At least I used to have a job and some freedom there.” Kellan’s flinch and agonized look bring that familiar feel of guilt to my stomach. Don’t, Selene says, her voice in my mind soft and soothing. You are not wrong in the words you speak. Do not walk them back. It’s okay to feel the way you do. If she were with me, I would pet her and hug her with gratitude. But she’s not, so I settle for sending her my intense feelings of love and appreciation through our bond. Kellan groans, running a hand down his face. “Lucas is going to kill me,” he mutters under his breath, but I catch it anyway. Exasperation floods through me. “He has no reason to.” 13.43 – 125 Ava: Negotiating the Invitation “You’re the alpha’s mate,” Kellan sighs. That familiar phrase grates against my nerves like sandpaper.

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“I’m not his mate, Kellan. How many times do I have to say it?” He looks at me, exasperated. “Denial only goes so far, Ava.” Still, that frustrating inability to see me as anything other than my supposed rank. The one they’ve already decided on, despite my own feelings not being clear. I clench my jaw, standing my ground. “No. I’m sick of this. I’m sick of constantly being thought of as his mate instead of being treated like a person. My name is Ava. Not ‘Lucas’s mate. I’m more than just an accessory to him.” The words pour out of me, heated and sharp. I’m so tired of my identity being tied to a man, a bond I never asked for. First, it was my father and my pack, dictating my every move. Now, it’s Lucas and his pack, treating me like I’m fragile, like I’m someone’s possession. Even Clayton’s people had thought of me as his future mate. I just want to be Ava. A me without any other 13:43 125 Ava Negotiating the Invitation consideration. Someone who isn’t judged by the standing of another wolf. Good, Selene says in my mind, her presence a comforting warmth. Stand up for yourself. Her support bolsters me, straightening my spine. I meet Kellan’s gaze head-on, refusing to back down. Finally, Kellan holds up his hands in surrender. “Fine, fine. I’m trusting you to back me up when Lucas loses his mind over this.” “He won’t,” I say firmly. “Because he knows I’m right. He knows I’m more than just his... whatever I am to him.” Even as I say the words, doubt curls in my stomach. Lucas and I are complicated. We’re fated mates with an awkward history. The bond between us is undeniable, a living, breathing thing, and I can’t underestimate it. Like that day at the hospital, it will throw me into his arms in an effort to bring us together. But I’m not going to let it define me. I refuse to let it be the only thing that matters. I learned a little about myself when I lived in 125 Ava: Negotiating the Invitation. Cedarwood, and I’m not throwing those lessons away for any man. No matter how delectable.. Lisa, who’s been uncharacteristically quiet during this exchange, loops her arm through mine. “We’re going to the party,” she says, her tone brooking no argument. “And Ava’s right. She’s her own person. Lucas will just have to deal with it.” Kellan sighs, looking skyward as if praying for patience. “Fine. But we’re taking precautions. Extra security. And you two stick close to me or whoever I assign to you. Got it?” Lisa and I exchange a look. It’s not ideal, but it’s a compromise. A step towards normalcy, towards the freedom I so desperately crave. “Got it,” we say in unison. As we walk to the car, Lisa squeezes my arm. “You okay?” she asks softly. The swirl of emotions has sapped what little energy I had left after training, and my shoulders droop. Even so, I take a deep breath, trying to relax. “I’m good.” Selene hums her approval through our bond, even as my mind drifts from the drama of a single party to the 13-45 125 Ava: Negotiating the Invitation text that I’d received. It has to be Sister Miriam. But how does she know my phone number? It’s a new phone, given to me by Lucas. No one should know to contact me here. I’m sure rumors have flown enough for people to know I’m here, but the phone number is harder to trace... When I slide my phone out to check the text messages again, it’s gone. Erased. Like it never existed. Comment A Leave the first comment for this chapter, Vote 13

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