

## CHAPTER 126

126 Ava: A Subtle Switch 126 Ava: A Subtle Switch “Ava, I don’t think this is a good idea.” Lucas’ voice is strained, and despite not knowing him well, I can imagine him pacing, his hands clenched in frustration. “It doesn’t matter, because I’m going.” Thankful he can’t see me, I cringe a little at how childish I sound. Standing up to myself is new, and every time I do, I feel like a rebellious teenager. I never had a rebellious teenage stage, but I imagine this is how they sound. It reminds me of Jessa’s whining, anyway. She always complained that Mom and Dad were ruining her life with their strict rules and demands that she stop dating whatever boy was the flavor of her week, saying she needed to be mindful of her future mate pairing. Obviously she’d grown out of it at some point. Maybe it’s my turn to sound like one. “Ava...” “No.” I cut him off before he can start his arguments. Much like Kellan, he likes to throw logical connections in there that confuse me on how to respond without 13:49 126 Ava: A Subtle Switch sounding like an irresponsible brat, and I don’t like that. “I’ve been playing by your rules this entire time, and I’m tired of it. You have guards on us. Kellan’s around. He sleeps in our apartment. I have to beg for even an hour away from him. This life is unsustainable, and I refuse to live like this anymore. Either tell me I’m your prisoner, or give me some freedom.” While I’m not discounting my safety, I have a feeling that my family is nowhere near Westwood. The most logical thought process to have is that Alpha Renard would want to gain power to fight back, right? That’s not going to happen in Westwood. You must still be on guard, Selene whispers. I know. But the danger isn’t imminent. Lucas sighs through the speaker, and I feel a little of the tension in my shoulders ease. He doesn’t sound angry, just exhausted. “I’m sorry, Ava. I never meant for you to feel like this.” The words it’s fine want to come to my lips, but I can sense Lisa’s dagger stare into the side of my face. Lucas is on speaker, in case I lose my nerve and need Lisa to step in. 126 Ava: A Subtle Switch When I glance at her, she mouths don’t you DARE apologize, jabbing her finger between the phone and me. Kellan’s in the kitchen, probably listening to every word as he organizes the food he had delivered. Some pasta or something. It smells great. “We just need to change things,” I say instead of apologizing, hating how guilty that makes me feel. Apologizing to smooth things over is how my entire life has worked. “I’ll make it work,” he says, and some of my tension eases when I realize he isn’t upset that I haven’t apologized. “I want you to be happy, Ava.” Lisa looks smug as she gives me a thumbs up. I’m about to say I’m already happy, but shut my mouth before the words come out. I’m not happy. Yet another thing I need to unlearn; speaking untruths in hopes that it will help avoid bad feelings. “I appreciate that,” I say instead, remembering the phrases Lisa forced me to memorize a few days ago. All things to say in/awkward moments instead of apologizing or downplaying my feelings. I appreciate 13:50 3/10 126 Ava: A Subtle Switch that, I’m sorry you feel that way, I’ll take that into consideration. Lucas is silent for a few beats. “I miss you, Ava.” My heart skips when I hear the sadness in his words. Lisa arches her brows at me, but I have no idea what she means by the expression. “I miss you, too.” It’s true. I do. There’s a huge part of me that craves his proximity, that wants him to come back so we can be as close as physically possible. Even when I’m not thinking of him, there’s a part of me attuned to his existence, even far away. A place in my chest that wants to be filled by our bond. “Should I come back?” His overeager response has Lisa slapping both hands over her mouth, her eyes dancing. “No. You have work to do.” Also, if he’s here, none of the shifters will see me as anything other than his mate. I don’t want that. I need to make progress with these wolves without him around. It’s funny how the sound of silence can change depending on the atmosphere. I’m no longer tense, and there’s even a faint smile curving my lips. Lisa’s bouncing in place, no doubt 13:50 4/10. 126 Ava: A Subtle Switch ready to explode with things she wants to say. “There’s nothing more important to me than you, Ava. Your happiness. Your smile. Everything about you.” Lisa’s practically flailing, so I grab my phone and take it off speakerphone, giving her a stern look before fleeing to my room. She doesn’t need to hear any more. “You’re the alpha, Lucas. You have responsibilities.” “I’d throw them all away for you.” I can tell by the sound of his voice that he’s smiling. “My wolf would love that.” Selene would not, but I don’t need to tell him that. “I’m doing fine here. I’m getting stronger. Amara’s great.” Even though I’m not sure she likes me very much. “Lisa’s doing good, too. They say she’s doing great for a human.” “That’s great to hear.” There’s a creak, and I find myself wondering if he’s in his office chair, swaying from side to side. That’s kind of what it sounds like. “Thank you for not fighting me about the party, Lucas.” I’m not sure if thanking him for doing what Lisa calls the right thing is what I should be doing, but it feels 13:50 5/10 126 Ava: A Subtle Switch right. Then again, as Lisa also says, my normal meter is broken. So maybe I shouldn’t go off my feelings. “You shouldn’t be thanking me, Ava,” he says, sounding a little frustrated. There’s an odd sound in the background, like a motor of some sort. “You need to tell me what you’re feeling. I know you don’t like the guards, and I’m not going to compromise on that. But I want you to be happy. I’ll do anything for yo

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u. I’ll prove that to you as many times as you need.” What is this feeling in my belly? It’s like butterflies and something more. Something beyond the bond. “I know.” Some sort of anxious feeling flutters through me, and I pace, grinning like a loon. “I mean, I think I get it. It’s going to take me time.” “Take as much time as you need, angel. I’m here for the long haul.” He grunts, and another weird sound comes through the phone, it sounds wet. “Lucas, are you okay?” “I’m fine. Just working and dropped something.” 13:50 6/10. 126 Ava: A Subtle Switch “Oh. You must be busy.” “Of course not. I’m never too busy for you. The entire world can wait while I answer your calls.” I think I know that feeling now. It’s excitement. We’re flirting, aren’t we? I think we are. “Even if I call in the middle of the night?” “Even then.” “What if I call while you’re in a business meeting?” “Then, too.” “And when you’re with another woman?” “There’s never another woman, Ava. Even if you believe nothing else, you should believe that.” The laugh that comes out of me is soft and breathy. “Okay. I’ll try to remember that.” “Are you... Ava, are you jealous? There are no female shifters anywhere around me, I promise you.” “I’m not jealous. I don’t know anyone to be jealous of” 13:50 7/10 < 126 Ava: A Subtle Switch Maybe I should ask him more questions about himself. About his work. About his day. He asks me, every time we’re on the phone. It occurs to me that I’ve been demanding a lot from a man when I don’t give him much in return. Well, there was the day you were discharged, Selene mutters in my head, still upset we did it with her in the room, pretending to sleep. Hush. “You can be jealous. I’ll just have to make it up to you whenever you are.” The way his voice drops low sends a thrill straight to all the womanly parts of me that want his undivided attention. Somehow, this innocent flirtation has stepped over a line I didn’t realize was there. Abort, abort. Not experienced enough for this. So I laugh awkwardly. “I think Kellan is done getting our dinner ready. I’ll talk to you later, Lucas.” “I’ll miss you every second we’re apart, Ava.” Still with that husky voice. 13:50 \* 8/10 < 126 Ava: A Subtle Switch “I’ll miss you too.” Somehow, I feel like something’s switched inside of me today. Like he’s entered a little deeper into the heart I’ve kept guarded. “Ava?” “Yes?” “When I get back, I’m going to hug you. And ki\*s you. And maybe a hell of a lot more. So prepare yourself.”

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