

CHAPTER 156

156 Ava: In Blackwood Again Landing in White Peak leaves me with a feeling of dread, but this time Selene sits between my knees, resting her head against my thigh during descent. It's enough to take the edge off the panic brewing in the back of my mind. The memories of Phoenix dragging me home. Lucas had done something—I'm not sure what—that has all the flight attendants treating us with kid gloves and allowing Selene in the cabin despite her lack of paperwork showing that she's vaccinated. Explaining vaccinations to Selene had been fun, though. She was never held long enough at Animal Control to get any sort of real vet treatment. Apparently Lycans don't get such menial illnesses and diseases as domestic dogs get. But once we went down that road, we had a small argument over whether her current body is Lycan or dog, and now she isn't talking to me out of the sheer level of offense at my audacity for questioning it. But she's still comforting me, knowing how I feel about returning here. Coming 'home', The last time, Phoenix was by my side. This time, it's Kellan, who's been vibrating with dark energy since he picked me up from my apartment. It's still better than having my brother there, but it doesn't help in keeping my anxiety low. 14. 156 Ava In Blackwood Again His distress over Lisa's absence seems to outweigh my own. Not that it's a contest, especially when he's just found out that she's his fated mate. But it does make me feel guilty. Like I'm the worst friend in the world. Kellan's spending all time when he isn't sleeping to fix his pack and find his mate. Me? I slept with Lucas. Not only that, I enjoyed every second of it, not once thinking about how I could have spent that time trying to find her instead. f@ck. I'm the worst. Not the worst. Horny, but not the worst. Great. Breaking our silence to comment on my s@x life. Kind of hard not to when I'm stuck witnessing it in my head. True. The pressure in my ears intensifies as the plane descends, making me wince and rub at my temples. Selene lifts her head from my thigh, her ice-blue eyes meeting mine. Humans and wolves were not meant to fly in these metal traps, she grumbles telepathically. The air pressure changes are unnatural. A small smile tugs at my lips, amused by her grumpiness. It's not so bad once you get used to it. I'll pass, thanks. She settles her head back down with a huff. The plane touches down with a jolt, and I let out a breath I didn't 21 150 Ava: In Blackwood Again realize I was holding. Despite Selene's comforting presence, my nerves are still frayed at the edges, the prospect of being back in White Peak setting me on edge. Kellan is a silent, brooding presence beside me as we disembark, his jaw clenched tight and his eyes stormy. I can't even begin to imagine the turmoil he must be feeling, the desperation to find his mate warring with the responsibility he feels towards his pack. It makes me realize how much Lucas went through, trying to find me. How much he must have dealt with even when he spent time in Cedarwood, being resolutely ignored... Damn. My soul shrivels a little more. You were at a different place then, Selene murmurs. You shouldn't feel guilty for how you felt in the moment. But it's hard to accept that now, with hindsight. It usually is. I narrow my eyes at her as she walks beside me. You hate Lucas. I'm not sure how unbiased your advice is. Her ears twitch and she looks at me, tongue lolling w@W.NoveWorm.com

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out of her mouth, looking every bit like an amused husky. That's because it isn't unbiased. But I won't get between you and the mate you've chosen. We make our way through the bustling airport, Kellan's hand resting lightly on the small of my back as he guides me through 158 In wood Agri the crowds. Selene trots dutifully at my heels, her ears pricked and alert. Vanessa catches up to us, having been in a different section of the plane, and aside from a quick greeting, she's silent, her eyes unfocused. She must be mind-linking with her mate. As we approach the baggage claim, a familiar scent catches my attention—the salty tang of the ocean mixed with pine. My stomach does a little flip as I spot Clayton and Vester waiting for us, their postures relaxed but their eyes sharp. Vester and Vanessa greet with a restrained hug and chaste cheek kisses that have me wondering if something happened between them. An argument, perhaps? I'll have to ask her later. Vanessa doesn't strike me as the kind of mate who doesn't greet her partner enthusiastically after a long absence. "Ava," Clayton greets me warmly, his green eyes crinkling at the corners as he smiles. "It's good to see you again." "You too," I manage, my voice sounding a bit strained to my own ears. I can feel the heat of his gaze on my neck, lingering on the spot where a mate mark would be. Where his mark almost was. Unbidden, memories of our time together flood my mind—the scorching heat of my skin, the desperate press of his body against mine, the scrape of his teeth against my throat. I remember the all-consuming need, the frenzied desire that had clouded my judgment and driven me into his arms. But as quickly as they come, the memories fade, leaving behind a strange sense of detachment. The urgency, the intensity, it all feels muted now, like looking at a faded photograph. 150 Ava: in Blackwood Again Your connection with Lucas runs soul-deep, Selene murmurs in my mind, her voice gentle. What you felt with Clayton was brought on by heat. It doesn't compare. Not unless you wanted them to. My cheeks heat with a mixture of embarrassment and guilt. She's right, of course. As intoxicating as it had been in the moment, my time with Clayton was a fleeting thing, driven by biology rather than any true emotional bond. But thinking of being together with Lucas in the midst of my heat sends my imagination down roads it really doesn't need to go down right now. "Ava?" Clayton's voice breaks through my reverie, tinged with concern. "Are you alright?" "Fine," I say quickly, forcing a smile. "Just a bit tired from the flight." He nods, his expression understanding. "Of course. We'll get you settled in and let you rest." "Thank you," I murmur, grateful for his tact. "I assume you don't want to stay at your family home—" "I don't." "So you can either take the alpha lodge or we can try to find somewhere else." He hesitates. "I don't know where would be best for you." Anywhere far, far away from here. "The alpha lodge is fine." I've been inside, but I don't have any truly terrible memories there. Clayton glances at Selene. "We didn't prepare anything for her transport. I'm sorry about that." 156 Ava in Blackwood Again "Selene is fine in cars," Kellan interrupts, leaning over the baggage carousel to snatch my suitcase as it comes by. It looks like every other person's luggage, but he must have singled it via scent. WWWW.mOvelworm.com

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