

## CHAPTER 168

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168 Ava: Riot It isn't impossible, but it might kill her before we get any results. Her answer isn't quite hesitant, but not firm, either. "You're not telling me something It is hard to explain. Selene stands and shakes herself. The only thing we can do is try. But it is a great risk. We should talk to Vanessa before trying, I think, if you wish to have her renounce her pack. As a healer, she might be able to help us through the roughest part. That makes sense, only- Selene and I share a startled glance as the chaotic noises from outside crescendo into a cacophony of snarls and shouts. Terror seizes my throat, memories of the party flashing through my mind, but I push past it. We rush to the window, and my heart nearly stops at the sight below. It's a full-on brawl. Wolves. Shifters in their human form. They're all locked together, dozens of Blackwood wolves overwhelming the few guards at the lodge. Ava, we need to go. Selene's voice is sharp in my mind, urging me into action. We race downstairs, my pulse pounding in my ears. There are no bodyguards to stop me; they're in the fray. f@ck. I'm going to end up with twenty of them after Lucas hears 17- 17 abean chit Marra winch rises above the din, his face a mut of forty as he grapples with a narling wolf. Telore I can respond, movement catches my eye. A Blackwood. Someone I vaguely recognize. He launches at me, his body twisting and contorting as he shifts in midair. But Selene is faster. She meets the wolf head-on, and her snarl sends ice through my bones as she knocks him down. I guess her body isn't very domestic dog, after all. Chaos erupts around me. Claws and teeth flash past, barely missing me as I dodge and weave, my bodyguards struggling to form a protective wall between me and the battling wolves. Snippets of conversation reach my ears, painting a grim picture. "-f@ck all of you-" never going to submit- A howl pierces the air, deep and powerful. Clayton. Relief mingles with dread in my gut. He's on his way, but how far is he? Focus, Ava. Selene's voice is a lifeline, anchoring me to the present. I have no idea where she is. I can sense her in this mess somewhere. Steeling myself, I dive into the fray, determined to help subdue the riot. Shouts of "traitor" and "bitch" assail me from all sides, the Blackwood wolves' hatred palpable in the air. 100 Avi Rest And then, a face from my nightmares. Todd Mason's mother, her eyes wild with grief and rage as she lunges for me. "Murderer!" she shrieks, as guilt and terror freeze me for a second too long. Her hands close around my throat, squeezing, choking off my air. Panic explodes through me, but my body reacts on instinct. A twist, a shove, and she's off me, my hands moving to flip her to the ground. But something goes wrong. The angle is off, the momentum too much. Her head slams against the parking stop with a sickening crack. She goes still. Too still. Oh God. What have I done? The world spins around me, the sounds of battle fading to a dull roar in my ears. I stumble back, my heart hammering against my ribs as I stare at the motionless body before me. Ava. Selene's voice, distant and muffled. Ava, breathe. But I can't. The air won't come, my lungs seizing in my chest as the reality of what just happened crashes over me. I killed her. I killed Todd Mason's mother. Just like I killed him. Ava! Get it together! Her mental voice helps me avoid another wolf before one of my bodyguards yanks him to the ground. Ava! Selene's voice slices through the haze of shock threatening to consume me. On your left! 17.08. 377 I read on pure instinct, pivoting to face the oncoming threat. Another Blackwood wolf, eyes blazing with hatred, lunges at me. My body moves before my mind can fully process the danger, muscle memory from countless training sessions taking over. 1 sidestep the attack, grasping the wolf's foreleg as he passes. With a sharp twist, I use his own momentum against him, sending him crashing to the ground. He lands with a heavy thud, lying still. For a moment, I stare at his limp form, my heart pounding against my ribs. Is he dead? Did I just kill another one? But then I see the faint rise and fall of his chest, and relief floods through ПЕP Unconscious. Just unconscious. I try to harden my heart, to push aside the guilt and horror of what I've done. It's easier this time, knowing he's not dead by my hand. But the weight of Todd Mason's mother's lifeless body still presses down on me, a suffocating reminder of the blood on my hands. A piercing howl cuts through the chaos, and I whip around to see Clayton's massive wolf form bounding into the fray, flanked by several other wolves. Their arrival shifts the tide of the battle, the Blackwood wolves faltering in the face of this new threat. But even as the fight rages on around me, something catches my eye. A shadow in the distance, flickering at the edge of my vision. I squint, trying to make out what it is, but the darkness and the swirling mass of bodies make it impossible to

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Selene, I call out in my mind, my voice tinged with urgency. Do you see that? Yes. Her response is immediate, laced with a mix of curiosity and wariness. I don't know what it is, but we need to check it out. 4/7 108 Ava Ta I nod, even though she can't see me. Let's go. Together, we break away from the battle, darting toward the mysterious shadow. My heart pounds in my ears as we draw closer, adrenaline surging through my veins. What if it's a trap? What if it's another enemy, lying in wait? But something compels me forward, a gut instinct that I can't ignore. Selene runs at my side, her presence a reassuring constant in the midst of the chaos. As we approach the shadow, it begins to take shape, solidifying into a figure. A person, hunched over and stumbling, as if injured. My breath catches in my throat as a sudden, impossible thought occurs to me. Could it be...? Careful, Ava, Selene warns, her voice tense in my mind. It could be a trick. I know she's right, but I can't stop myself from calling out, my voice trembling with a desperate hope. "Lisa?" The figure staggers, then slowly turns to face us. And in that moment, the world seems to tilt on its axis, reality and nightmare blurring together. It is Lisa. But not the Lisa I know, not the vibrant, laughing best friend I remember. This Lisa is pale and gaunt, her eyes haunted and ringed with dark circles. Her clothes are torn and stained, her hair a tangled mess. And there, on her neck, two angry red puncture wounds. 17:39 577 "Oh my God, I breathe, horror and relief warring within me. "Lisa, what happened to you?" She takes a shaky step toward me, her legs threatening to give out beneath her. I rush forward, catching her just before she collapses. "Ava," she whispers, her voice hoarse and broken. "I escaped. I don't know how, but I did. We have to go, before he finds me. Before he finds us." But her voice doesn't sound quite right. Lisa's form dissolves beneath my fingers, dissipating into shadows. that leave nothing but an icy chill against my skin. A gasp tears from my throat as I stumble back, my mind reeling. It's not real, Ava. Selene's voice echoes through my mind, urgent and tense. It's an illusion. Before I can even begin to process her words, a figure emerges from behind a nearby tree. My heart leaps into my throat as I whirl to face them, my body tensing for another fight. But the person who steps into view is unlike anyone I've ever seen. Inhuman beauty radiates from every inch of his being, from the golden hair that catches the light to the piercing blue eyes that seem to shift to a crimson hue as they move. My fists clench, trying to quell the shaking from a burst of fear. "Who are you?" I demand, forcing bravado I don't feel. The stranger holds up his hands in a placating gesture, a small smile playing at the corners of his mouth. "Easy there," he says, his voice smooth as silk. "I'm not here to hurt anyone." "What have you done with Lisa?" The words burst from me, raw and desperate. Comentano 8