

CHAPTER 46

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6 Ava: Living Arrangements?! 46 Ava: Living Arrangements?! I eye Ivy warily as she smiles at me, that warm expression not quite reaching her sharp gaze. “Clayton sent me to ensure you settle into your new lodgings comfortably. He personally chose the apartment himself and hopes it will suit you.” I fight the frown that wants to curl my lips down. “That’s very kind of him, but I don’t need a place to stay. I’d prefer to just return home, if it’s all the same.” Ivy’s smile doesn’t falter, but there’s a calculating glint in her eyes now. “And where is home for you, Ava? No one has managed to get even that basic information out of you yet.” I hesitate, my heart giving a hard thump against my ribs. Telling this woman anything about my past or my origins feels unwise, and thinking that way makes me feel guilty. After all, everyone in this pack has treated me so kindly, even during my most embarrassing moments. Pressing my lips together, I refuse as politely as I can. “I just want to return home. I appreciate the offer, but 46 Ava: Living Arrangements?! you all have done too much for me as it is.” Ivy watches me closely. “I see,” she murmurs. “Well, I’ll let Clayton know that you refused.” She sounds a little too satisfied. I watch Ivy closely as she takes my hands in hers, searching her face for any hint of deception. There’s something almost too sincere in the way she looks at me. The gentle curve of her lips doesn’t match the hardness of her eyes. “Take care of yourself, Ava,” she says softly, giving my hands a gentle squeeze before releasing them. “Thank you.” I’m not really sure how else to respond. She acts so concerned, and yet she’s met me for all of two minutes. Ivy turns and crosses the room, plucking a pen from the small table beside the door. She scribbles something on the pad of paper there before tearing off the sheet and placing it in my hands. “That’s my number. In case you need anything at all, don’t hesitate to call me.” With that, she’s gone, the door clicking shut quietly behind her. 14:50 28 46 Ava: Living Arrangements?! I let out a slow breath, glancing at the paper with her looping handwriting scrawled across it. Selene’s growl echoes in my mind. She sounds too cunning by far, pup. Watch yourself around that one. I frown, picking up the paper and staring at the number as if it might reveal Ivy’s true intentions. You think she’s up to something? I don’t dare speak out loud; I’m sure Ivy would hear me. I think she’s scared you will take over the control she has in the pack. As the alpha’s sister, she must be pretty high-ranking. That would make sense. I shiver. I have no interest in being part of any pack’s internal politics. She’s probably just misunderstanding Clayton’s kindness. Selene makes a soft sound of dissent in my head. Do not mistake a man’s intentions with random kindness, Ava. It will only cause harm for both of you. *** I’m surprised when Clayton strides into the room. his 14:50 3/8 46 Ava: Living Arrangements?! presence instantly commanding my attention. His expression is unreadable as he approaches my bedside, but then he leans down and brushes a soft ki*s against my cheek. “Ava,” he murmurs in greeting, the deep rumble of his voice sending an involuntary shiver down my spine. The easy affection has me off balance. Since I’m not in heat anymore, I’d assumed he would treat me like he did when we first met. “Alpha Clayton,” I reply, proud of how steady my voice sounds despite my inner panic. Clayton takes a seat in the chair beside my bed, his piercing gaze fixed on me with an intensity that makes me want to squirm. “I hear you refused the apartment I chose for you.” My cheeks flush at his blunt statement. “I told your sister I didn’t need it.” His face is still inscrutable. “And why is that?” There’s an edge to his tone that I can’t quite read. Protectiveness? Irritation? I grip the thin hospital blanket tightly in my fists, steeling myself. “I have a life to get back to,” I say simply, holding his 4.8 46 Ava: Living Arrangements?! stare. “A job, an apartment. I appreciate your generosity, but I don’t need charity.” His eyes narrow slightly at my words. “It wasn’t charity, Ava. It was an offer to take care of you, to provide for you as is my duty and privilege as your...” He hesitates, then rephrases. “After what transpired between us.” I feel heat bloom in my cheeks at the reference to the passion of the past week. I shake my head. “I told you, I don’t want or need anything more from your pack. You’ve done enough. I should be apologizing for being so much trouble.” Clayton leans forward, resting his arms on his knees. “Tell me about this life you’re so eager to return to,” he says at last. “What’s so important that you’d turn down the protection and care of my pack?” I bristle at his prodding, my defenses rising. “Why does it matter?” I challenge. “It’s my life. I don’t need to justify myself to you.” His jaw tightens infinitesimally, a muscle ticking there. “As the alpha who claimed you, even temporarily, it’s my responsibility to ensure your safety and wellbeing. 14:59 5/3wŴw.N00(e)CŴ0rM.cóm

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6 Ava: Living Arrangements?! And as a true omega, I don’t feel comfortable not being able to keep an eye on you until things settle down. Your identity will draw trouble.” I open my mouth to protest that he doesn’t owe me anything, that what happened was a mistake, but Selene’s voice stops me. Don’t be a fool, Ava. He’s the alpha. You don’t want to provoke his wolf by refusing his care so blatantly. You’ve already violated pack law by not announcing your presence when you moved here. I press my lips together, considering. As much as it grates, Selene is right—Clayton is the alpha, and openly defying him could be dangerous. He was polite and kind at our first meeting, but things have changed. I’m not sure what he wants from me. I’d expected him to let me go; I hadn’t expected him to try to keep me here, in an apartment of his choosing. “I’m just trying to live my own life,” I say at last, aiming for a more diplomatic tone. “Away from the politics and expectations of other packs. I don’t want to get tangled up in anything else right now.” Clayton’s expression softens ever so slightly at my 14:59 46 Ava: Living Arrangements?! words. “I understand your need for independence,” he says quietly. “But you must know that no shifter can survive outside of a pack. You saw the rogues who kidnapped you; they were feral.” I drop my gaze, heat flooding my cheeks again. He’s right, of course. Wolves need their packs. It’s just that I’m not a normal wolf. I can’t tell him that, though. I don’t need him trying to save me from whatever dangers being even more abnormal might bring. I just want to go home and drink coffee with Mrs. Elkins and spend my days at the Novel Grind, living quietly. Why is it so hard? “You’ll be able to move in tomorrow,” Clayton says, and I jerk my head up in surprise. “I haven’t agreed—” “Ava.” Clayton reaches out to grab my hand, squeezing it gently. He looks conflicted. “I am not one to keep a woman in my pack against her will, but with your identity, I can’t let you go. You won’t tell anyone what pack you’re from...” 7/8 “I-” 46 Ava: Living Arrangements?! “It’s fine, Ava. I’m not going to pester you for the information. But as an alpha, I can’t just overlook the situation. You are in Aspen territory. I’m sorry, but you don’t have a choice in this matter. Not until we get things figured out.” Ask him if the apartment allows dogs, Selene says. Comment 12 View All > Post your first comment! Vote Fandom Swipe left to continue > Send Gift*w w (w).ñOvêLwοr:m.cOm*

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