

## CHAPTER 59

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59 Ava: Homecoming (I) When I walk downstairs, Phoenix is hanging up the phone. It strikes me how much I've changed when I realize I have no curiosity, no spark to ask who he was talking to. I don't care. It's either related to me in a way that isn't going to be pleasant, or it will have nothing to do with me. That's it. Those are the two options. I have no urge to grow closer to the asshole who shares my genetics, so I don't ask. Instead, I plan. I won't be able to escape right away. I'm not even sure how I can escape. I have no money, no phone, no contact with the outside world. But now that I've been out there? Now that I've been on my own? It doesn't seem as impossible as it did when I lived here. If I just have a chance, I'll take it. "Some of the guys will be coming by to watch over 122 O < 59 Ava: Homecoming (1) you," Phoenix announces, coming by to sniff at me. "Don't start anything. There's plenty in the fridge, so just make something for dinner. Don't forget that Alpha Renard is coming." Hah. So not only have I been dragged home, now I have to make them dinner? No, thank you. I ignore Phoenix to plop down on the worn couch, reaching for the remote. The soft fabric smells like the artificial scent of clean linen. A scent I've grown to despise over the years. Phoenix lingers nearby, his frown deepening as I lazily flip through channels. I can feel the weight of his gaze, disapproval radiating off him in waves. He's struggling, I can tell. Part of him wants to chew me out like the disappointment I am. The other part is trying to play nice, to lull me into a false sense of security for whatever twisted game he's playing. I don't give him the satisfaction of acknowledging either side. My eyes remain glued to the TV as I rapidly cycle through channels, a kaleidoscope of colors and noise filling the living room. 12:38 217 59 Ava: Homecoming (1) Then, a familiar scene catches my eye. A hunky male lead with tousled hair and a roguish grin. The over-the-top soundtrack swelling with orchestral passion as the camera pans over his chiseled torso. It's the same cheesy shifter romance Selene had been obsessed with at the apartment. The ache in my chest sharpens as I take it all in, judging it clinically in my head to try to stop the feelings from overwhelming my heart. Terrible acting. Melodramatic plot. Cringeworthy dialogue. A lump forms in my throat, grief threatening to overwhelm me. On the screen, the alpha hero cups the face of his trembling omega mate, his eyes smoldering with an intensity that could set the screen on fire. "I will never choose her," he growls, his voice a deep rumble that is probably sending thousands of women across the country into a dramatic swoon. "And I will never let you go. I nearly choke on a bitter laugh. If only my life was as simple as worrying that my mate would want another woman. 12:38 317 59 Ava: Homecoming (1) A sharp knock sounds on the door. I try not to tense as Phoenix opens the door, but my body betrays me. The scent of a familiar, nausea-inducing wolf washes over me, thick and musky with undertones of sweat and aggression. My heart pou

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nds against my ribcage as if begging to be let out. Todd Mason steps inside first, his eyes immediately finding me on the couch. A slow, predatory smile stretches across his face as he rakes his gaze over me. I fight back a shudder, memories of his cruel hands on my body making my skin crawl. I can smell the tuna on This breath from here, courtesy of the tuna sandwich for he eats for lunch every day. It's one of my least favorite smells now. I can't even think about tuna without gagging. "Well, well," he rumbles, never taking his eyes off me. "If it isn't little Ava Grey, back where she belongs." The other two shifters flank him, their leering stares just as unsettling. I swallow hard, my mouth dry, as Phoenix turns to face them. "Keep your hands off her unless it's absolutely necessary," he warns, his tone hard. "Alpha Renard will 12:38 2/11 59 Ava: Homecoming (1) be here soon for dinner. I don't need any issues before then." Mason's smile only widens at the threat, and he gives a lazy shrug. "Whatever you say, Phoenix. We'll be perfect little angels." His gaze drifts back to me, and I force myself to meet it head-on, refusing to show fear. A muscle in his jaw ticks, and I know he can smell my discomfort no matter how much I try to hide it. "Don't worry, princess," he drawls, taking a step closer. "We're just here to make sure you don't try to run off again. Can't have our alpha's prize getting loose, now can we?" Phoenix shifts his stance, a low growl rumbling in his chest. "That's enough, Mason. I mean it." But Mason doesn't seem fazed. He holds my stare for a beat longer, his eyes glittering with dark promise, before finally turning away with a scoff. "Yeah, yeah. I got it." He jerks his head at the others. "Let's get settled, boys. Looks like we're in for a fun night of babysitting." They spread out through the living room claiming /7 59 Ava: Homecoming (1) spots on the armchairs and couch like they own the place. I curl my legs beneath me, pressing back against the cushions as if I can somehow disappear into them. Todd, of course, takes the couch. He's on the far side of it, but only a cushion separates us, and his arm is relaxed on the back of it, his fingers close enough to brush against my hair. Phoenix shoots me one last look—a silent warning to behave—before heading out the front door. As soon as he's out of sight, Mason's eyes find me again, that same cruel smile playing at the corners of his mouth. I take a shaky breath, wrapping my arms around myself. This was exactly what I was afraid of—being trapped here, surrounded by people who want to use me, to hurt me. My only solace is the knowledge that Selene is safe. I just have to endure this, for now. "Aren't you supposed to be making dinner?" Todd asks, and I point at the TV, trying my best to ignore how his fingers lightly graze over my shoulder. I can't shift any further away. "I'm watching this," I say, leaving it at that. 12:38 6/7 59 Ava: Homecoming (1) I can see the shifters all glancing at each other, and the faint puzzled look that flashes across Todd's face. They're not used to me being this way. It feels good. Comment

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