

CHAPTER 63

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The next few days are agonizing. There are shifters outside my house every hour of the day. Mom and Dad have disappeared, doing... Honestly, I don't know what they're doing. Phoenix was never around much to begin with, so I'm not surprised that I don't see him. It occurs to me that I haven't seen Jessa even once since I've been home, but, again, not really surprised. It isn't like we were ever close. So I pace in my childhood home, trapped, with no idea what's coming next, building nightmare after nightmare of assumptions in my mind. Sometimes I catch Selene's show on TV and watch that. Other times I watch the news, a habit I've gotten used to since working at The Novel Grind. Mrs. Elkins often had it on in the background. It's amazing how sheltered I was from the human world, even when living in it. I see why Dad never let me watch the news; it's enlightening to see how things are outside of the views of your pack. I always knew they were a little outdated. After being in the Aspen territory, I've learned that my family pack is barely out of the Dark Ages. Now that my eyes have been opened, there are so many details I can pick out that are just wrong. The fact that I had a phone at all was a miracle—of course, I bought it with my own money. Jessa begged Dad for one when she was twenty-one, and he relented. But so many women in the pack don't have a cell phone at all. My dad is sometimes considered a little too lenient on his women. Except for me, of course. There's also the fashion. Married she-wolves don't go out much, and don't have jobs. They're stuck at the mercy of their mates, if their mate has any at all. I never see a man alone with his child. At The Novel Grind, I would often see a father come in with his child, looking for a book or having them read while they do their work. It's a scene I've never seen at home. Occasionally at Beaniverse, yes—but I don't think I ever really noticed it then. It's amazing what a few months of freedom will do for you. I think of Mrs. Elkins, and Carlos, and Franklin. Of Clayton and Ivy. Of Lucas. I wonder if they're still thinking about me. If they're worried. How long they'll stay worried for, and when they'll give up on me. Don't get me wrong... I'm going to escape. I just don't know how quickly I can do it. No matter how much I wrack my brain, I don't know how to get anywhere without money. I suppose I could just run on foot, but I can't shift. They'd catch me within hours. The only way to escape is with a car. Or a bus ticket. Or a plane. Hell, I'd take a boat, if we weren't in the middle of the country. A knock on the door interrupts my pacing, and I frown as the door opens without waiting for a response. Alpha Renard strides in, smiling sweetly, but the look is all wrong—his eyes too calculating, his face too smarmy, his voice like poison to the little happiness I've managed to store within my soul. "Ava, my dear," he croons, reaching out to touch my arm. I fight the urge to recoil. "I trust you're settling back in comfortably?" My throat feels tight, but I manage a nod, keeping my expression neutral. Renard's gaze rakes over me, and I resist the instinct to cover myself, even though I'm fully dressed. There's something predatory in the way he looks at me that makes my skin crawl. There's no desire there, only a sick assumption of possession. "Good,

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ood." He nods, squeezing my arm. "I wanted to discuss a few things with you, now that you've had some time to readjust." I swallow hard, bracing myself for whatever twisted scheme he has in store. "What did you want to discuss?" Renard's smile widens, and he guides me toward the couch, his grip firm enough that I can't pull away without causing a scene. "Please, have a seat. This might take a while." Obediently, I perch on the edge of the cushions, my hands folded in my lap to hide their trembling. Renard settles beside me, entirely too close for my liking, but I force myself to remain still. "You see, Ava," he begins, his tone deceptively gentle, "your situation is unique, to say the least. A woman of your age, unmated and unshifted—it's quite the conundrum. You have no direction, no purpose. These are all things you need to get your mind off your lack of a wolf." He clicks his tongue, his gaze hardening just a bit. "And then there's the matter of your recent dalliances." My heart pounds in my ears, but I keep my expression blank, giving him no reaction to latch onto. Renard studies me for a moment, then continues. "The Aspen Pack is known for their unorthodox views. Their willingness to consort with humans, to let their females run wild—it's no wonder you were drawn to them, in your confused state. And yet look at the lies they give. Their own alpha took advantage of you in your weakened state, instead of protecting you." He leans closer, his breath hot against my cheek. "But you're home now, Ava. Safe, with your family, where you belong." I want to protest, to spit venom back at him, but I bite my tongue. Getting on Renard's bad side would only make things worse for me in the long run. "I know you've been through a lot," he murmurs, his hand settling on my knee. I tense, but don't pull away. "But I want to help you, Ava. I want to guide you back to your rightful place, to help you embrace your true nature." His hand slides higher, inching up my thigh, and I fight back a shudder of revulsion. "You have so much potential, my dear. With the right guidance, you could be an asset to our pack. A true omega, prized and protected—" "I'm not an omega," I interrupt, unable to stay silent any longer. Renard's hand clamps over my mouth, his fingers digging deep into my cheeks and cutting off my words. His eyes blaze with fury, and I shrink back, my heart hammering. "Do not," he hisses, his face mere inches from mine, "lie to me." He releases me, and I gasp for air, cradling my aching face. "No more talk," he growls. "You are a daughter of the Blackwood Pack, and you will do as I say. Am I clear?" Terror clogs my throat, but I force myself to nod, not daring to provoke him further. Renard stares at me for a long moment, then turns on his heel and strides out, slamming the door behind him. His pretense of gentility had lasted for all of ten seconds.

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