

CHAPTER 72

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2 Clayton: Her Identity CLAYTON The hospital holds too many memories, and my wolf snarls and whines as it tries in desperation to sniff out any hint of Ava's scent when we arrive. There's nothing, of course. Just the smell of the injured, the sickly, and disinfectant. Ivy's room is in our family wing on the top floor, and I head straight there, unable to even look at the button for floor 12. Ava's floor. Mate, my wolf whines, and I wonder how much worse this would be if we had a fated connection instead of a chosen one. Lucas' single-minded determination has never made more sense to me than now, as we've spent over a week searching for any hint of the men who took Ava. Someone had covered their tracks. Every airline, every taxi company, every rideshare, every car rental—their systems were hacked and wiped, so we can't even C 72 Clayton: Her Identity ascertain how she left. Air? Car? Even the trains were messed up for a while as they had to go through tickets by hand to verify passengers. There are no security cameras we can rely on. Everything in the city was wiped. Everything. I can't imagine what level of influence is needed to take down all of these things in a major city. It's beyond any single pack in the Northwestern Territories. Was she taken by someone outside of them? But who, and why? There are no answers to be found. I settle into a chair beside Ivy's bedside. The natural healing abilities of every wolf are varied in strength, and Ivy's are so low that she heals almost at the rate of a normal human. Thanks to the medication in her veins, she sleeps in peace. All of her tests are coming back with positive signs of recovery. If I could find the bastards who did this to her, it 210 72 Clayton: Her Identity would be even better. I cradle Ava's phone in my palm, running my thumb over the smooth surface. The screen remains dark and lifeless. My jaw clenches as I stare at the pitiful list of contacts—just my number and Ivy's. As an alpha, I should have pushed harder, gotten the information I needed. It was obvious in Ava's evasiveness and refusal to divulge personal details, the way she dodged questions about her family, that she was running from something. I let it slide because I was too focused on her heat, and then on keeping her here without scaring her off. Now, I don't even know her last name, and she's missing. Taken from beneath my nose in a place she should have been safe—the very heart of my pack lands. My wolf whines, sensing my turmoil, and I force myself to take a deep breath, reining in the torrent of emotions. The burner phone she'd left behind is our only lead, our sole connection to Ava's past. She must have bought it when she was shopping with Rowan. Smart 13.02 310 72 Clayton: Her Identity girl. Too bad she was smart enough to lock it, too. We have no one capable of hacking into it or the high-level skills required to overcome everything the abductors had wrought in their wake. A mistake I won't repeat. My grip tightens around the phone. The pack's technology will rise. No more relying on outside resources when our security is at stake. I need to hire more experienced IT personnel, individuals with the skills to navigate the digital landscape. Humans have them in droves, but few are willing to work with the shifters, even in our cautious alliance- as if the last remaining bastion of humanity's supremacy will be enough to save them from the takeover they imagine. Meanwhile, very few packs think of dominating this world, knowing the humans existence betters all of our lives. Without their numbers, their talents, and their sheer work force, our societies would regress at an alarming rate. There is no good thing to come from a world without humans. 72 Clayton: Her Identity A soft knock on the door breaks me from my reverie, and I look up to see Rowan's concerned gaze. My beta has been a steadfast pillar of support throughout this ordeal, his calm demeanor a balm to my frayed nerves. "Any news?" he asks, stepping into the room. I shake my head, forcing the words past the lump in my throat. "Not yet. I'm still waiting for the results from the burner phone." Rowan's brow furrows. "You sent it out last week. Why don't they know yet?" I shrug. I can't admit that most of the technical jargon is over my head. I'm not even sure they're making it the priority they said they would. "Westwood is attacking tonight. He's forwarded all the evidence they've gathered against Blackwood. They brought in an Unregistered last night." Shit. I'd forgotten all about that situation. "Send some of ours to Westwood in case they need reinforcements." "It'll be too late by the time they arrive," Rowan cautions. 210 72 Clayton: Her Identity I shake my head. "It doesn't matter. Knowing Xavier, he's already helping. Blackwood doesn't have a fighting chance at head-on combat, but Lucas will need manpower after they take over the territory, keeping the peace until the Council decides what to do with it." "Understood." Rowan types something on his phone, quickly sending out whatever orders will get the job done. I squeeze the bridge of my nose in frustration, feeling a headache settle behind my eyes. "Still nothing on the security cameras?" "Nothing," he confirms, just as his phone beeps. Where are you, are you, Ava? Who were you running from? "Lucas? We have a lead..." The cautious note in Rowan's words should have warned me. I vault out of my chair, snatching his phone, my gaze fixed on the image before me. There she is, unmistakable with her dark blonde hair and striking blue eyes. They've haunted my dreams since the day she disappeared. Ava, alive and well,

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aptured on anmaro walking through an unfamiliar airtort 610 < 72 Clayton: Her Identity: terminal. The date stamp confirms my worst fears—the very day she vanished from the Aspen Pack lands. My breath catches in my throat as I take in the details, my blood running cold when I recognize the man beside her. Phoenix Grey has his hand on the small of her back, guiding her through the crowds. Why? I force myself to study the image again, committing every detail to memory. "Where was this taken?" I growl, my voice a low rumble as I struggle to contain the wolf clawing at my insides, desperate to give chase. Mate! They have our mate! War! Rowan's expression is grim. "White Peak International Airport. They must have flown her out immediately after taking her from the city." They. The Blackwood Pack. Again, why? Why target my mate? 72 Clayton: Her Identity Pieces start falling into place, each one more damning than the last. Ava's reluctance to share details about herself, her refusal to contact anyone in her family or any friends. The memory of her scent the day I met her flashes. through my mind once more—fear, distress, and something else. Something I couldn't quite place at the time, but now recognize as desperation. She was trying to run. Once she realized we were shifters, too, she felt panic instead of reassurance. A sudden, horrifying thought occurs to me, and I feel as though the ground has fallen away beneath my feet. "Rowan," I rasp, my voice barely above a whisper. "What was the name of Lucas' mate?" —"Ava Grey, sir." He sounds strangled as he gives the words he knows I won't want to hear. Ava Grey. Phoenix Grey's younger sister. Phoenix, who's standing next to my Ava. The world tilts on its axis as the implications sink in. Ava Grey, daughter of Alexander Grey, the beta of the 13.02- R 10 72 Clayton: Her Identity Blackwood Pack. The same Ava that Lucas has been searching for, his fated mate torn from his grasp by unknown forces. My mate is Lucas Westwood's fated mate. The realization is like a physical blow, stealing the breath from my lungs. How is this possible? Unbidden, memories of our time together flash through my mind—the searing heat of her touch, the softness of her lips, the way her body molded perfectly against mine. Moments I treasured, now tainted by the knowledge that she belongs to another. Lucas. My ally, my friend. Bile rises in my throat as guilt and shame war within me. I've betrayed him in the most fundamental way, even if it was unintentional. The bond I want with Ava, though chosen, is real.... Yet she is not mine. Rowan's voice cuts through the maelstrom of emotions swirling within me. "Sir, what are your orders? Do we still send our men to Blackwood?" I force myself to take a steadying breath, tamping 13 10 72 Clayton: Her Identity down the turmoil raging inside me. Now is not the time for personal struggles—Ava's safety is paramount. "Yes," I say, and my voice is rougher than intended. "We must be there for our allies. I'll go in person." 66 Clayton, you break my heart.

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