

CHAPTER 88

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88 Ava: By Her Side After the awkward experience of a catheter removal, a few hobbling walks to the bathroom, a round of pain medication, and an unappetizing dinner of salty yet tasteless beef broth brought to my room from the cafeteria (which was little more than hot water and bouillon—but I digress), I fall asleep, with no word from Lucas, watching the light wane from my window. When my eyes flutter open again, the room is dark, with the faint hint of moonlight relieving the shadows. There's the steady beeping of monitors and the muffled sound of activity in the hall, but otherwise, my room is silent and still. My heart's racing, but I didn't have a nightmare. Something prickles against my skin, an awareness of someone in the room. Lucas is asleep in the recliner beside my bed. His features are relaxed, the usual intensity gone from his expression in rest. I study him in the low light, taking in the dark stubble along his jaw, the way his dark lashes fan across his cheekbones.

88 Ava: By Her Side Despite everything that's happened between us, his presence is a comfort and a balm to my heart, broken time and time again by the people who should love me the most. Here he is, keeping vigil by my bedside. The gesture speaks volumes, and I can't help but dream of a future with my fated mate. A future I'd given up after that night at the Gala. As if sensing my gaze, Lucas stirs, his eyes fluttering open. For a heartbeat, our eyes lock, and the world seems to narrow to just the two of us. He smiles immediately, the kind where your eyes crinkle up and get small because your cheeks are lifted higher than the sky. My heart thumps hard. It's his fangirl. "Hey," he says in that just-woke-up, groggy voice that should be a sin to have with a face that lovely. "Hey," I respond, smooth as f@cking butter. Okay. I really need to get my hands on some romance novels. I bet the heroines in those know how to react when a hot man has his eyes on her. "I heard you had a good day." He straightens in his 88 Ava: By Her Side chair, stretching out his arms, then his back. I watch every movement like a stalker. I can see his muscles rippling below the shirt hugging his torso. Why are shifter men so built? It's unfair, honestly. "I did," I say, pulling my eyes away with some reluctance when I see the satisfaction in his eyes. He's happy to know I'm attracted to him, but I'm not ready to bring that dynamic into this equation. There's so much to talk through, so much to deal with. And—I'm just not ready. I want to be ready. But I know I'm not. There's too many secrets. I need Selene. "I need to call my friend again," I say, changing the subject from my health. No one wants to think about their possible future mate getting a catheter taken out. Gross. "I'm sure she's worried about me." "Lisa? Yes. She's quite the friend. My phone has blown up with more questions than I have answers to. She should be arriving in a couple more days." 新 88 Ava By Her Side "Arriving? Already?" Lucas laughs, a soft sound as his eyes soften. "She's very motivated to see you, from w

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hat I can tell. In her words, you 'really freaked her out.'" Hah. Yeah. I can see that. The corner of my lip twitches. "She's a great person." "I'm a little scared to have her visit." "She won't do any damage." I pause. "Physically." "Not physically, but..." I tilt my head, thinking. "Have any single friends?" His eyes shutter immediately. "Why?" His word comes out strained, as though he's doing his best to be calm and polite and recognize that he has no right to lord his possessiveness over me. "Well, Lisa is a bit of a... butterfly?" I'm not really sure how to explain her, "Everyone tends to follow her around." Lucas' bunched shoulders relax, and he crosses his legs, casual as can be, as if he hadn't been fighting some base urges just seconds before. "Oh, I see. I'd 13 73 88 Ava By Her Side hope my men are capable of controlling themselves around a human." I nod. "I'd hope so, too. She makes killer cookies." "They're doomed."a His absolute deadpan delivery has me laughing so hard my abdomen aches. "Ow!" I groan through peals of laughter, holding up a hand when Lucas stands. "I'm fine. It just—ow. f@ck. Okay. Ow. Shit. Haha. Oh, man. I'm sorry. That was really funny to me for some reason." "Because of cookies?" he asks, confused. "No, just—oh, never mind." Wiping tears from my eyes, I readjust myself until I'm comfortable again. "It was just funny, thinking of Lisa being the downfall of your pack, seducing all your men with a plate full of chocolate chip cookies. That's all." "I see." His quirked brow says he doesn't see at all, but that's okay. I don't need him to. I sigh, leaning against my pillows. "When does she fly in?" "Her plane arrives Wednesday at 9:07 a.m.," he reports, 88 Ava: By Her Side the information memorized. "I've already set her up in a nearby hotel, and have a car ready for her if she needs one. She will be treated as an honored guest during her stay, and if she wishes to stay long-term..." Here his words go hesitant. "Well, we can help her with a transfer to the university in the city if she needs it," he finally finishes, looking off to the side. There's a faint blush on his cheeks. He's embarrassed. Is it from the actions he's taken to take care of her, or is it because he's worried he went too far assuming I'm going to stay here? Either way, I smile. "Thank you, Lucas. It really means a lot." "Of course, Ava." He does meet my gaze now, the blush fading and his eyes direct and calm. "I told you before. I'll do anything. I want you to understand how much I regret my actions before. I won't ever let you hurt again." Comment

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