

CHAPTER 96

96 Ava: Life in Westwood (I) Lucas still calls me every night, but Lisa had helped encourage me to text him yesterday, asking for space, at least until he returns to Westwood. I'm sure he gets hourly reports from all my guards, but at least I don't have to worry about playing nice when I'm starting to feel resentful and frustrated, despite knowing I should be grateful for being saved. I'm grateful to him for a lot. Having guards around should be a small price for all of this. It's just hard. "Welcome home!" Lisa exclaims as she flings open the door to her new apartment. When Lisa said that Lucas had settled her into an apartment, I'd expected something... I don't know. Normal? This is far from normal. The luxurious living room has been decorated in some sort of eclectic, artistic mix of boho wall decor and minimalist furniture, leaving bright, wide open spaces with bright splashes of color and texture on the walls. 13:30 1/8 C 96 Ava. Life in Westwood (1) Floor-to-ceiling windows flood the space with natural light, framed by curtains I'm afraid to even touch. How can curtains look so expensive? A sleek kitchen gleams in the corner, all stainless steel appliances and marble countertops, with white cabinets that are going to be a terrible experience to keep clean. It's like the entire apartment was made with maid service in mind. "Wow," I breathe, running my fingers along the back of the luxurious leather couch. "Lucas really went all out, didn't he?" But they don't hear me, because—well, they're still arguing. Lisa's voice rises, competing with the clatter of her -heels against the hardwood as she storms after Kellan. "We don't need a guard dog watching our every move in here. What, you think someone's going to scale fifteen stories and bust through the window?" I tune out Kellan's gruff response, focusing instead on the sprawling cityscape beyond the glass. Skyscrapers pierce the sky, glinting in the afternoon sun. Cars crawl along the streets below, tiny and insignificant 248 96 Ava Life in Westwood (1) from this height. People crowd the streets. It's busy. It's a world away from Cedarwood. From the Novel Grind and its cozy charm. From the little apartment I'd made my own. From Selene. My chest tightens at the thought of her. It's been so long since I've heard her voice in my head, felt her presence curled around my mind like a contented cat. I keep reaching for her, hoping to brush against the familiar warmth of her consciousness, but there's only silence. A void where she should be. My wounds had healed at such a rate that I'd truly expected to hear Selene in my head any day now, assuming it was a side effect of our bond. I'd hoped it meant Selene was getting closer, that she'd found a way to reach me despite the distance. But as the hours tick by with no sign of her, doubt begins to creep in, insidious and cold. What if something happened to her? What if she's hurt, or worse? The thought makes my stomach twist, bile rising in my throat. I can't lose her. She's a part of me now. 15:30 < 96 Ava: Life in Westwood (1) Her absence leaves me feeling only half myself. I press my forehead against the cool glass, squeezing my eyes shut as if I can will her into existence through sheer desperation. Please, Selene, I beg silently. Please be okay. I need you. But there's no answer, just the muted sounds of the city and Lisa's ongoing argument with Kellan. "-don't care if he's the alpha, Lucas doesn't get to dictate every aspect of our lives!" Lisa's voice cracks like a whip, jolting me out of my spiraling thoughts. "Ava's been through enough. She deserves some goddamn privacy." Kellan's sigh is heavy, weighted with the responsibility -he carries. "Lisa, I understand your frustration. But Ava's safety is our top priority. We can't take any chances. Not all the Blackwoods are accounted for, and there's a good chance they'll be looking for her." The mention of my former pack has me shuddering. Thinking of Mom and Dad makes me want to vomit, but it's the memories of Todd's attack that flash behind my eyelids. The phantom pain of his claws. 978 96 Ava Life in Westwood (1) raking across my skin, the way his teeth dug into my neck and shoulders. I never wanted to think about that odious little shit again, but his nightmares live in my head, rent-free. Old taunts. So many times he'd spent kicking me when I was already curled up on the floor, hands over my head, waiting for the torment of my pack members to end. Of the day I'd resolved to leave my pack. Of his nasty dick shoved into my mouth- Shit. I work at my jaw, fighting against the wave of nausea. No, never again. I'm not that scared, helpless girl anymore

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. I survived. I fought back. And I won't let anyone make me feel powerless again, not even the man who claims to be -my mate. Kellan had mentioned that Lisa and I begin training tomorrow. Self-defense and more. I'm looking forward to it in a way that makes me almost want to shy away from the newly bloodthirsty urge in my soul—the one that wants to slaughter anyone who looks at me the wrong way. Almost dying will change a lot of things, I guess. 13:30 5/8 96 Ava: Life in Westwood (1) Slowly, I turn from the window, my gaze settling on Lisa and Kellan as they face off in the middle of the living room. Lisa's cheeks are flushed, her eyes bright with indignation, while Kellan looks like he's aged a decade in the span of their conversation. "I appreciate your concern," I say quietly, my voice steady despite the emotions churning in my gut. "But Lisa's right. I need space to breathe, Kellan. I can't live my life constantly looking over my shoulder." Kellan's brow furrows, his mouth opening as if to argue, but I hold up a hand to stop him. "I'm not saying I don't want protection. I know the risks, and I'm grateful for everything you and Lucas have done to keep me safe. But there has to be a balance. I can't heal if I'm suffocating under the weight of my own security detail." Lisa nods emphatically, her hand coming to rest on my shoulder in a show of solidarity. "Exactly. We're not saying no guards at all. Just not in the apartment. Give us some room to exist without being watched." Kellan drags a hand down his face, his shoulders sagging in defeat. "Fine," he grumbles. "No guards inside the apartment. But I'm posting them in the 13:30 - < 96 Ava Life in Westwood (1) hallway and the lobby. And you're not to leave without an escort, understand?" It's not perfect, but it's a start. A small victory in the battle for my autonomy. I nod, relief loosening the knot in my chest. "Understood. Thank you, Kellan." He grunts in acknowledgment, already turning to leave. "I'll be back in the morning. Get some rest, both of you." And then he's gone, the door clicking shut behind him with a finality that feels strangely anticlimactic. Lisa lets out a whoosh of breath, her hand falling from my shoulder as she turns to face me. "Well, that was fun," she deadpans, a wry smile tugging at the corner of her mouth. "Nothing like a good -old-fashioned pissing contest to welcome you home." I snort, shaking my head. "Home. Right." My gaze drifts back to the window, to the unfamiliar skyline and the aching absence of Selene's presence. "Feels more like just another prison." It's unfair to feel that way. I know it is. But I feel like I haven't been able to breathe in forever. Lisa's expression softens her eyes shining with 13: 778 96 Ava: Life in Westwood (1) understanding. "I know, Ave. But at least you're out of that house, right? We'll make it work. It won't be so bad here. I can already tell." She loops her arm through mine, tugging me towards the kitchen. "Now come on, I'm starving. Let's see what kind of gourmet shit Lucas stocked this place

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