

CHAPTER 157

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157 Ava: Everything's Changed The alpha lodge is different. It's been cleaned and scrubbed and actually looks rather nice. I don't think any of the furniture is original. "We took the liberty of re-arranging the place," Vester says, and I realize he and Vanessa are on opposite sides of our little group. Interesting. Glancing around again, I smile at Vester. "It looks great. Doesn't look anything like it did before." Vanessa trails behind Selene, who seems to be following her nose somewhere. I watch them go, but then my gaze is drawn to the sheer opulence of this place. It's like a mansion out of an old movie, with high ceilings and rich wood paneling. The entryway opens into a huge ballroom-style space. Ornate chandeliers hang from the ceiling, casting a warm glow. I can remember Alpha Renard holding court here, all his lackeys gathered around and hanging on his every word. The thought makes me shudder. I wander from room to room, marveling at the transformation. It's hard to believe this is the same dark, oppressive place I remember. Upstairs, I peek into bedrooms with plush carpets and four-poster beds. There must be at least six rooms up here. It's like a luxury hotel. It also smells like new construction. Interesting. 157 Ava Everything's Changed As I make my way back downstairs, I realize it's gone quiet. Too quiet. Selene? No answer, and she's nowhere to be found. "Hey Ava." Vester's voice startles me and I spin around. "I've gotta head out, take care of some pack stuff. You good here with Clayton?" "Oh. Yeah, of course." I try to sound nonchalant, but my heart picks up speed at the thought of being alone with Clayton, and the uncomfortable conversation I still need to have with him. "No. problem." Soon, it's just me and Clayton standing awkwardly in the giant foyer. I clear my throat. "I'm honestly surprised you're still here. Figured you'd have to go back to Aspen." He shrugs. "The Council assigned me here almost from the beginning." That's news to me. I thought he was here to help as a friend. It makes sense, though. "The Council assigned you here?" Clayton nods, stuffing his hands in his pockets. "Yeah. They wanted an unbiased alpha to oversee things during the takeover. Keep things civil, avoid more senseless loss of life." "It seems to be taking a long time," I observe, wandering over to study an abstract painting on the wall. Clayton sighs. "A modern pack takeover like this, it's almost. unprecedented. The Council wants it done right. Less barbaric 13-14 157 Ava. Everything Changed than the old ways. But that takes time. It used to be that an alpha would take over and kill those who don't change their allegiance, but..." "It's a different era," I finish, turning to face him with genuine. curiosity. "How's it going so far? Have many Blackwood wolves. switched allegiance?" A shadow crosses Clayton's handsome face. "Most of the females. have pledged to Westwood or Silvermoon. A number have already relocated. But the males..." He shakes his head. "It's a different. story. Very few have come over willingly. Some have gone rogue. Others are still here, fighting the Council for Blackwood's independence. Because of that, you'll have guards at all times." That's nothing new. I'm pretty sure Lucas had some on the plane with us, even though I didn't see them. "Ava." Clayton's voice is gentle. His ocean scent washes over me as he takes a step closer, but he doesn't touch me. "We're going to find Lisa. And I promise you, your family will never hurt you again. I won't allow it." Tears prick my eyes at the fierce protectiveness in his tone. Clayton's determination to keep people safe is something I've experienced before-and maybe it's a little over the top. But I know he means it. "I know." Uncomfortable with the detour switch lanes. "How's y?" emotional territory,

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I Clayton's lips quirk into a smile. "Ivy's doing great. Completely 1ST Avoc Everything is Changed healed, though she's been worried about you." I wonder if Ivy's truly worried about me or just saying the right. things. Our interactions had always been tinged with an odd. undertone I could never quite decipher. One moment warm and friendly, the next strangely cool. The mixed signals left me unsettled. Guilt twists in my gut for thinking that way about Clayton's sister, especially after she was injured because of my family. "That's kind of her. Please tell her hello from me." The words feel hollow, a generic platitude to fill the air. Silence descends, thick and uncomfortable. I avoid Clayton's gaze, studying the intricate patterns in the hardwood floor. Awkward conversations over relationships are not in my wheelhouse. I'm not sure how to bring anything up, but I don't really want to have Clayton misunderstanding anything else between us. Clayton clears his throat, breaking the awkward peace. "So, how are you and Lucas doing?" My heart jumps, startled half out of its lifespan. Is he reading my damn mind now? Steeling myself, I meet Clayton's eyes. "We're doing great, actually. Really great." It's the truth, but saying it out loud to Clayton makes it sound like a lie. Like I'm trying to convince myself as much as him. Hopefully he believes me. 100 157 Ava Everything's Changed Clayton nods, his expression unreadable. "I'm glad to hear that, Ava. Truly." His voice is low, full of sincerity. Something inside me fractures a little at his words, guilt pouring in. At the way he's hiding his own feelings behind that stoic mask. I'm well aware that he wanted me to be his mate. That he wished for us to choose each other. I know he chose me, and somehow I feel like I've tarnished him with my rollercoaster of emotions. Clayton needs to find someone suited for him, someone who can love him the way he deserves. But it's not my place to say that. I don't want to give a single false hope. I don't want to do anything that might ruin the fragile trust I've built with Lucas. So I just nod, forcing a smile. "Thanks, Clayton. That means a lot." The weight of all the things left unsaid hangs heavy in the air between us. I'm not sure how to navigate this new dynamic, this strange limbo of being friends with someone I'd more or less. mauled during a supernatural heat. I'm saved from having to figure it out by the sound of footsteps echoing in the foyer. Kellan appears, his expression grim. "Clayton, we need to talk. Now." Clayton straightens, instantly shifting into alpha mode. He gives me an apologetic look. "Duty calls. Make yourself at home, Ava. We'll catch up later." With that, he strides off with Kellan, their voices low and urgent. I watch them go in relief, grateful for the interruption. Ava. Selene's voice echoes in my mind, making me jump. You okay? 12 157 Ava Everything's Changed Yeah, I'm fine. I start walking, not really paying attention to where I'm going. Just tired. It's not a lie, exactly. I am tired-bone-deep exhausted in a way that has nothing to do with physical fatigue. Grabbing my phone, I send Lucas a quick text, realizing belatedly that I forgot to call him when we landed. I'm already a terrible... Mate? It sounds a little early to call myself that. I'm not ready to take on a Luna mantle. Girlfriend? It sounds so... human. I'm a terrible something. [AVA: Made it to White Peak safely. At the alpha lodge now. You did great redecorating. Which room is mine?] His response is almost immediate. [LUCAS: Back room to the left. Smells like me. There might be dirty underwear in the laundry basket. Just tell Vester to take care of it.] [AVA: That's disgusting.] [LUCAS: Is it?]