

CHAPTER 129

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129 Ava: Getting Ready “Holy shit.” Staring at my reflection in Lisa’s full-length mirror, the transformation is amazing. Lisa’s jeans hug my curves like they were made for me, accentuating the newfound definition of my legs. I twist, admiring how my butt looks. Damn. Jericho’s torture sessions are paying off. Lisa grins at me from her perch on the bed, surrounded by a sea of discarded tops. “See? I told you we’re basically the same size now.” I run my hands over my hips, marveling at the fit. “I’ve always been too big for your clothes. This is wild.” Ever since I took over the meals and grocery shopping, the one luxury I’d ever been able to afford was eating a little extra. It translated to a smidgen of extra padding and a little tummy flub. Running from the pack burned off the rest of it. “Well, get used to it, babe. We’re going to be trading clothes all the time now.” Lisa tosses a silky black top at me. “Try this one with it.” I catch the top and slip it over my head, shimmying a 17:50 1/9 129 Ava: Getting Rody little to get it past my chest. The fabric dr@pes just right, skimming my body in all the perfect places. I stare at myself, hardly recognizing the girl in the mirror. “Damn, Ava. You look hot,” Lisa says, coming to stand beside me. She bumps her hip against mine. “Lucas will go wild if he sees you in this. Maybe we should dress you in a potato sack when we leave so he doesn’t come flying back to bring you home.” My cheeks warm at the mention of Lucas. “I’m not dressing up for him,” I mutter, fiddling with the hem of the top. Lisa rolls her eyes. “Yes, yes, I know. It isn’t like he’s here. But you’re going to end up sending him a picture, aren’t you? Just—wait until later. So he doesn’t crash the party.” I glance down at the black top and jeans. Sending a selfie hadn’t even crossed my mind, but maybe she has a point. “Black looks good on everyone. It’s a classic.” “Uh—huh. Keep telling yourself that.” Lisa winks at me before turning to rifle through her jewelry box. “Here, these will complete the look.” 279 120 Ava: Gotting Ready She hands me a pair of silver hoop earrings and a delicate pendant necklace. I put them on, letting the pendant nestle just above my cleavage. The final touch to my transformation. I hardly recognize myself as I take in the full effect. The girl staring back at me looks confident, s@xy, ready to take on the world. A far cry from the timid, uncertain Ava I’ve been lately. “Selene, what do you think?” I do a little twirl. “How do I look?” My husky lifts her head from where she’s lounging on Lisa’s rug. Like a fierce she-wolf, she says, her tone warm with approval. “Alright, your turn,” I say to Lisa, moving to flop onto the bed. “Let’s see what scandalous outfit you’re going to torture Kellan with tonight.” Lisa laughs and starts pawing through her closet. “Kellan isn’t even on my radar. He’s way too testosterone-filled for me. Oh! I have just the thing. He won’t be able to take his eyes off me. Not that I want him to look.” Of course she doesn’t. 17:50 39 129 Ava: Getting Ready I watch her pull out dress after dress, a rainbow of colors and sequins. This is nice, the two of us getting ready. No drama, no life-or-death stakes. Just two best friends primping for a party. For a moment, I can almost forget about the tangle of complications waiting for me outside this room. The mysterious text, Sister Miriam’s cryptic words, my missing family, my newfound powers, the unresolved tension with Lucas and Clayton. In here, it’s just me and Lisa, giggling over clothes and gossip. “Okay, I think this is the one.” Lisa emerges from the closet, holding up a slinky red number. “Thoughts?” It’s far more revealing than anything I can pull off, and I whistle. “Kellan’s the one we’re going to have to worry about. He’s not going to let us go anywhere looking like this.” “As if he has a choice.” “We don’t need his permission,” I agree, laughing. “Exactly.” She winks before shimmying into the dress. It clings to her like a second skin, the neckline plunging dangerously low. “Watch out world Lion Dandall is on the prowl!” I tanna 17:50 — 129 Ava: Getting Ready as she comes to join me in front of the mirror. We stand there shoulder to shoulder, taking in our reflections. Me in my sleek black ensemble, her in her va-va-voom red dress. We look good. Powerful. Ready to take on anything. And maybe a little overdressed. Lisa’s eyes meet mine in the mirror, and we both laugh. “Okay, let’s try this again.” Lisa dives back into her closet. “You’re fine, but we can try a simple crop top instead. Me, I have to change from head to toe. Give me a second.” A white crop top sails through the air, landing in my hands with a soft thump. On Lisa’s orders, I switch it out with the black shirt. Pulling it over my head, I adjust the hem as it settles just above my belly button. The fabric is soft and stretchy. Comfortable. But it’s a little awkward to feel so much skin exposed. Lisa, meanwhile, changes into a pair of dark jeans that hang off her hip bones, pairing the casual look with a burgundy off-the-shoulder blouse. She looks effortlessly chic, her dark hair falling in soft waves, 129 Ava: Getting Ready courtesy of a curling iron earlier. Satisfied, Lisa sits me down to finish my makeup, fiddling with some eyeliner as my eyes twitch incessantly. A quick braid for my hair, and I’m done. Lisa dabs on some lip

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Updates... gloss, her lips shimmering in the light. It’s only when we’re both satisfied with our reflections that I realize I have a problem. My gaze drops to my feet, bare against the plush carpet. Every pair of shoes I own are either worn out or covered in mud and grass stains from training. “Uh, Lise?” I wiggle my toes. “I don’t think I have shoes that will work with this outfit.” any Lisa glances down at my feet, then at her own. She’s already slipped on a pair of white sneakers, with adorable rose gold trim. “Damn, I’d offer you a pair of mine, but your sasquatch feet would never fit.” I snort. Her feet are so tiny she can buy children’s shoes. “Hey, it’s not my fault you have dainty little fairy feet.” Her laugh is bright and carefree. “Well, unless you want to go barefoot, we might have to get creative Let 129 Ava: Getting Ready me think for a second.” Before I can respond, a knock sounds at the front door. Lisa and I exchange a glance, both of us curious. I head to the door, my heart pounding in my chest. Slowly, I turn the knob, cracking the door open just a sliver. One of the guards stands on the other side, a giant box in his hands. His deadpan face and monotone voice don’t match his words, leaving me a little flummoxed. “Special delivery for you, Miss Grey. From your Prince Charming.” My cheeks flush as I take the box from him. “Thank you,” I mumble, already backing into the apartment. Lisa is at my side in an instant, her eyes wide with curiosity. “Prince Charming? That’s Lucas, right?” I set the box down on the coffee table, my fingers trembling as I lift the lid. Inside, nestled in tissue paper, are three pairs of shoes. A fancy set of heels, the kind I’ve only ever seen in magazines. A pair of cute sneakers, white with silver accents. And simple wedge sandals perfect for a casual night out. 17:50 — 129 Ava: Getting Ready “Holy shit,” Lisa breathes, reaching in to pick up one of the sneakers. “These are amazing.” I nod, unable to speak past the lump in my throat. There’s only one person who could have sent these. It’s definitely Lucas. My heart swells with a mixture of gratitude and longing. Even from hundreds of miles away, he’s looking out for me. Still trying to take care of me in any way he can. And yet I can’t even tell people he’s my mate. It’s feeling a little unfair—for him. Maybe I should be a little kinder. Lisa holds up the sneakers, a grin spreading across her face. “I vote for these. They match mine.” Laughing, I snatch them from her. “Sneakers it is.” Slipping on the shoes, I marvel at how perfectly they fit. It’s like they were made just for me. “Alright, Cinderella,” Lisa says, linking her arm through mine. “Let’s go find our pumpkin carriage.” 17:50 *www.NoVēlWorm.com*

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