

## CHAPTER 131

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131 Ava: The Party (II) Breathe, Selene reminds me, her voice cutting through the chaos. You're okay. Just take it one step at a time. I inhale deeply, letting the air fill my lungs before exhaling slowly. Lisa tugs on my arm again, pointing towards the kitchen. "Let's get something to drink," she suggests, already moving in that direction. I follow her through the crowd, keeping my eyes fixed on the back of her head. The kitchen is quieter, the music muffled by the walls and the hum of conversation. A few shifters are gathered around the island, pouring drinks and chatting amongst themselves. Lisa grabs two plastic cups from the stack on the counter, handing one to me before turning to the array of bottles lined up beside the sink. "What do you want?" she asks, her gaze flicking over the labels. "Just water," I remind her, echoing Kellan's earlier instructions. 1/7 131 Ava: The Party (II) She rolls her eyes but reaches for a pitcher of water anyway, filling both of our cups. "You're no fun," she teases, taking a sip from her own. I shrug, lifting my cup to my lips. The water is cold and crisp, soothing my parched throat. I hadn't realized how thirsty I was until now. As I drink, I let my gaze wander around the kitchen, taking in the faces of the shifters gathered there. A few of them look vaguely familiar, but most are strangers. her gaze m One girl catches my eye, her gaze meeting mine over the rim of her cup. She's tall and slender, with long dark hair that falls in waves down her back. There's something about the way she holds herself, the tilt of her chin and the set of her shoulders, that speaks of confidence and power. She smiles at me, a slow, lazy curl of her lips that sends a shiver down my spine. I look away quickly, my cheeks heating. Interesting, Selene murmurs, a hint of amusement in her voice. What? Lask, taking another sip of water to hide my 131 Ava: The Party (II) flush. Nothing, she says, but I can practically hear the smirk in her tone. Just be careful, Ava. Remember who you are. I frown at that, not quite sure what she means. But before I can ask, Lisa grabs my arm again, her eyes bright with excitement. "Come on," she says, tugging me towards the doorway. "I think I see some people from the gym over there. Let's go say hi." I let her pull me back into the throng, my cup clutched tightly in my hand. The music washes over me again, the beat pulsing through my veins. Lisa weaves through the crowd with ease, her steps sure and confident. But as we approach the group of shifters from the gym, their faces breaking into smiles of recognition, I push those thoughts aside. Tonight, I'm just Ava. Not the Alpha's mate, not a pawn in some political game. Just a girl at a party, trying to have a good time. This is the first time I've seen such friendly looks on their faces, and it helps ease some of the tension in my 131 Ava: The Party (II) shoulders. "Hey," one of the girls yells, waving at Lisa. "Come over here! We've been waiting for you!" She has red hair and bright blue eyes. I don't remember her name, but Lisa does, dragging me behind her as she squeals. "Hey, Mia! We barely got the beta to let us out of his sight." "I told you he'd let you." This is one of the male shifters I've seen watching me at the gym. He looks approachable now, even amused, as he slings an arm over Mia's shoulders. He's reasonably attractive when he isn't scowling from the sidelines. "We get crazy, but not too crazy. The alpha would have our asses if we went too far." Lisa nudges me with her elbow. "Sounds like good leadership." "Alpha Westwood's the best," Mia pipes up, with a wink in my direction. "Can't believe he's finally been claimed. Every single she-wolf has been salivating over him since before he came of age." WVW.noV(e)LwOrM.cOm

Updates... "Even the older ones," the male jokes, and several of the shifters laugh with him. 17:51 – 131 Ava: The Party (II) I'm not sure how to respond, so I keep awkwardly quiet as yet another familiar face from the gym- someone else whose name I can't remember—strikes up a casual conversation with Lisa. Sipping at my water, I slip around until my back is to a wall, watching everyone interact with each other. No one seems to notice me or care that I'm there, and I'm grateful for it. Well, almost no one. My gaze is drawn back to the dark-haired girl from before, her eyes still fixed on me. There's something unsettling about the intensity of her stare, the way her lips curve into a knowing smile. Relax, Selene murmurs, her voice a soothing presence in my mind. She's just curious about you. I snort. Just a few moments earlier she'd been amused by the girl's attention. It isn't anything nefarious. Fine. I take a deep breath, trying to calm my nerves. Selene and Lisa have been gently pointing out my paranoia of 17:51 131 Ava: The Party (II) late. They're right; I have to fix this habit. Just because people are staring doesn't mean they're going to corner me in the shadows and beat me. Besides—I've been training. I'm no longer the easy prey of my past. Another shifter from the gym approaches me, his grin wide and friendly. "Hey, you're Ava, right?" he asks, his voice raised to be heard over the music. "I've seen you training with Amara." I nod, forcing a smile onto my face. "Yeah, that's me," I say, surprised by how steady my voice sounds. I recognize him, because he's one of the few who wouldn't stare at me. "You're... Brandon, right?" "Close. It's Brendan, actually. But you can call me Bren." His grin tells me he's not offended, but my cheeks heat with embarrassment. "Sorry." "No worries," he says easily, leaning against the wall beside me. "It's a big pack. Lots of names to remember." I glance up at him, taking in his easy smile and relaxed posture. He seems nice enough, but I'm not sure why 17:51 131 Ava: The Party (1) he's talking to me. Maybe he's trying to make friends, Ava. Selene's tone is dry, a gentle reminder of my paranoid tendencies. WVW.noV(e)Worm.CoM

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