

## CHAPTER 133

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133 Ava: The Party (IV) “Ava,” an unfamiliar voice coos, and I cringe at its overly saccharine tone. Turning, I see Chloe sauntering toward me, hips swaying in a way that catches the eye of every male she passes. For a moment, I’m startled by her revealing clothes—a tight, low-cut top that leaves little to the imagination and a skirt so short it barely covers anything at all. Like Lisa, her auburn hair flows in messy waves over her shoulders, but her eyes are slathered in fancy eyeliner and shadows that belong on one of those make-up artists from online videos. Fancy stuff. A little too much for me, but I can appreciate the talent behind it. She reaches me and greets me with an enthusiastic ki\*s on the cheek, her lips lingering just a bit too long for comfort. “You look amazing,” she gushes, her eyes raking over my body in a way that makes me want to squirm. “So much better than your training clothes.” I force a smile, trying to ignore the way her 19 133 Ava: The Party (IV) compliments feel insincere, like she’s just saying what she thinks I want to hear. “Thanks, Chloe.” Her hand reaches out, fingers grazing gently over my breast as she leans in close. “They suit you,” she purrs, and I fight the urge to recoil from her touch. “Don’t they?” The question’s tossed to someone behind her, but I can’t tell who. There are too many wolves around watching us. A whistle from one of the nearby male shifters makes my cheeks burn, and I step back, putting some distance between Chloe and myself. She just laughs, the sound grating on my nerves. “Oh, you’re adorable,” she coos, like I’m some sort of skittish animal she finds amusing. Before I can respond, she’s pressing a cup of pink punch into my hand, not even bothering to ask if I want it. I stare down at the liquid suddenly feeling out of my depth. Is this what life in the Westwood pack will be like? Overly familiar touches, suggestive comments, and a complete lack of personal boundaries? 133 Ava: The Party (IV) It doesn’t feel right. That weird, not-right feeling is back, my stomach churning and my skin prickling with unease. Here, it seems like everyone is in everyone else’s business, touching and flirting and acting like it’s all just normal. Now I see why Selene was amused by that girl staring at me earlier. This isn’t something I enjoy, and won’t ever be something I’m used to. I’m not even sure this is what’s normal here. If I’m reading Chloe right—and I think I am, paranoia be damned—she’s done this all on purpose. To make me feel like I don’t belong. Why? I take a sip of the punch, the sweetness cloying on my tongue. Chloe is still watching me, a smirk playing at the corners of her lips. She knows she’s made me uncomfortable, and she seems to revel in it. I think of Lucas, of the way he looks at me sometimes like I’m the only person in the world. He’s never made me feel like this, objectified and on display. With him, I fool onfe van cherished 133 Ava: The Party (IV) But Lucas isn’t here right now. He’s off dealing with my pack business, so it’s only fair that I navigate these shark-infested waters on my own. I can’t rely on him to protect me from every unwanted advance or inappropriate comment. If I ever accept the position of his mate, I need to be stronger. I can’t be his weakness. Correct, Selene whispers. I take a deep breath, squaring my shoulders as I meet Chloe’s gaze head-on. “Thanks for the drink,” I say, my voice steady despite the nerves fluttering in my stomach. “But I think I’m going to go find Lisa now.” Chloe’s smirk falters, just for a moment, before she plasters it back on. “Of course,” she says, her tone sickly sweet. “I’m just so glad you made it today.” “Thanks for the invite,” I mutter, squeezing by her. I’d escaped into the kitchen to find peace, only to find someone even scarier than Mia. Am I wrong? Is this normal? Because it doesn’t feel very normal at all. No, Selene says shortly. There will always be those ianlous of 14:42 4,0 133 Ava: The Party (IV) Success? What success? I’m in the bottom tier of our training group’s skills. I can’t shift. I’m not even a proper mate. There’s no success here. Just a hot mess of a shifter with way too many secrets. Secrets I can’t even share with the man who’s supposed to be my other half. Don’t let this sour you, Selene murmurs. Just mingle. There will always be jealous wolves, but there are also good ones out there. Right. The entire party isn’t just about *w(w)w.NovèLWORM.có(m)*

Updates... Mia and Chloe. There are plenty of other wolves to get to know. Of course, I’m not outgoing enough to introduce myself to random shifters, so there’s that. And Lisa and Bren are... Hmm. Missing. Which probably means they’re doing something behind closed doors. Or dancing, Selene offers. Right. Or dancing. I cast an inexperienced eye over all 5/9 <133 Ava: The Party (IV) the gyrating, twisting bodies, noticing a quick pattern. Mostly men and woman dancing together, hips plastered against each other. So, less dancing and more like clothed s@x on the dance floor. That looks fun. Shocked by Selene’s wistful words, I almost trip over some unsuspecting male’s foot. “Whoa!” A firm hand grabs my arm, laughing when the pink punch I never wanted spills all over him. Only a quarter inch is left in my cup, and my savior is covered in the pungent smell of juice and alcohol. “You okay, little wolf?” I’m stunned into silence as I take in the gorgeous face peering down at me, his warm brown eyes crinkling with amusement. He’s not someone I recognize from any of my training sessions, but there’s an instant ease about him, a friendliness that puts me somewhat at ease despite the uncomfortable encounter with Chloe. “I’m fine,” I manage to say, my voice coming out a bit more breathless than I’d like. I try to pull away, to put some distance between us, but someone bumps into 133 Ava: The Party (IV) me from behind and I’m launched forward, colliding with his solid chest. Strong arms wrap around me, steadying me, and I can feel the rumble of his laughter. “We’ve got to stop meeting like this,” he jokes, his voice a pleasant baritone. “People will start to talk.” I feel my cheeks heat, and I apologize profusely. “I’m so sorry, I didn’t mean to-” But he’s already spinning me around, his hands gentle but firm on my waist as he leads me onto the dance floor. “No worries, little wolf. I’m Todd, by the way.” The name sends a jolt through me, a sickening lurch in my stomach as my mind flashes to the Todd of Blackwood, the one whose life I’d ended in that bloody, desperate fight in the forest. For a moment, I can’t breathe, can’t think beyond the panic rising in my throat. But then this Todd, the one holding me close as we sway to the music, leans in close, his breath warm against my ear. “But you can call me Teddy. Especially if you need a teddy bear of your own.” It’s so unexpectedly sweet, so at odds with the 7/9 133 Ava: The Party (IV) O memories haunting me, that a startled laugh bubbles up from my chest. “Teddy?” I manage to say, looking up at him with a small smile. “Like the bear?” He grins, the expression transforming his already handsome face into something truly stunning. “Exactly like the bear. Soft, cuddly, always there when you need a hug.” I can’t help but laugh again, some of the tension easing from my shoulders. This Todd is nothing like the monster from my past. This Todd is warm and funny and so very alive. We dance for a while, his hands respectful on my waist, his body a comfortable distance from mine. Nothing like the wolves around us. He keeps up a steady stream of conversation, telling me about his work as a carpenter, his love for his pack, his dreams for the future. I find myself relaxing, even enjoying myself as we move together. It’s nice, this easy camaraderie with someone who doesn’t know my past, who isn’t judging me for my failures or my secrets. With Teddy, I can just be Ava, a girl at a party, dancing with a handsome man. *W(w)w.NovèLWORM.có(m)*

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