

## CHAPTER 50

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50 Ava: The Grey Girl “Good morning,” Clayton says with a smile, and I step back to let him into the apartment. He pauses for just a moment when he sees Selene, and I wait for the questions—but he doesn’t ask any. He’s polite like that. Honestly, outside of my paranoia and not wanting to rely on him, he seems like a pretty great guy. Clayton strides into the kitchen like he owns it—which, I mean, he does—while I stand around feeling awkward and out of place in this fancy apartment. He seems so at home here, like he belongs. “Everything okay with the phone?” he calls out from the kitchen. “You didn’t text me this morning.” “Oh, uh, no issues,” I reply, glancing down at the sleek new device on the end table. “I just woke up a little while ago and haven’t set it up yet.” There’s a brief pause, and then the sound of a pot clattering onto the stove. “Have you eaten?” I shake my head, even though he can’t see me. “No, 15:01 = 1/8 50 Ava: The Grey Girl not yet.” “Well, go relax then. I’ll whip up some breakfast.” Before I can protest, he emerges from the kitchen, those intense green eyes fixing me with a look that brooks no argument. Grasping my shoulders, he turns me towards the plush couch and gives me a gentle nudge in that direction. “Go on, I’ve got this.” I open my mouth to argue, but one glance at his resolute expression has me snapping it shut again. Instead, I just nod and make my way over to the couch, sinking into the soft cushions with a sigh. Selene, ever my loyal companion, leans against me as she focuses on her show, resting her head on my lap. I absently run my fingers through her soft fur, trying to ignore the sounds of Clayton pattering around in the kitchen. 1 It’s weird, having someone else cook for me. Take care of me. I’m so used to being the one doing all the work, all the cooking and cleaning. Having someone else step into that role makes me feel uncomfortable. Lazy. But at the 50 Ava: The Grey Girl relieved to have someone else shoulder that burden for a change. To be taken care of, instead of being the one doing all the taking care. It’s just breakfast, but he just came in and took over, like- Like an alpha who thinks he’s my mate. I shake my head, trying to dislodge those thoughts. I can’t afford to get too comfortable here, too used to having Clayton around. This isn’t permanent, no matter how much he might want it to be. The sizzle of bacon on a hot pan has my ears perking up—Selene’s, too—and the smell reaches my nose a few seconds later. My stomach gives an involuntary rumble. Okay, maybe I can let him take care of me for just a little while longer. It’s not a sin to get a little comfortable, right? Since I can’t leave, anyway? \*\*\* Breakfast with Clayton is comfortable. He doesn’t try to touch me

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. No more ki\*sese on the forehead. He’s just there, polite and friendly, making 15:01 ‘ 38 50 Ava: The Grey Girl sure I’m taken care of. Selene seems to approve, because she’s zoned into her show instead of watching his every move. Of course, she doesn’t have anything against Clayton in the first place. She doesn’t like the idea of being trapped here, but she has nothing against him. It’s not like the snide remarks she throws in about Lucas every time he comes up.. Not wanting to think about him, I focus on my cup of creamer with a splash of coffee, adding another spoon of o sugar. I can see Clayton giving my drink a little side-eye, but I’m used to it. I don’t like coffee without a lot of flavor to mask its real taste. Clayton waves me back to the couch to enjoy myself just as his phone rings. I try to settle into my role as a couch potato, but my ears can’t help picking up his side of the conversation. The sickeningly sweet confection is pure comfort, and I sip at it, letting the sugary taste linger on my tongue as I try to ignore the snippets of Clayton’s conversation filtering through my ears. His deep, 15.01 50 Ava: The Grey Girl rumbling voice is hard to tune out, even with the mindless chatter of the television providing background noise. “...situation with Blackwood is escalating...” The words send a shiver down my spine, and I clutch my mug a little tighter, the warmth seeping into my palms. “...Westwood’s sent his demands, but they’re refusing...” My heart sinks as the implications of his words start to sink in. Blackwood and Westwood? Is a war coming after all? “...Grey girl seems to be at the center of it all...” The mug almost slips from my fingers, and I barely manage to catch it before the scalding liquid spills all over my lap. My breath catches in my throat as I process those last words. The Grey girl. Me? Panic starts to claw its way up my chest, constricting my lungs. Are they looking for me? Have they found me? Is that why Clayton has me holed up here, under the guise of protection? 15:01 50 Ava: The Grey Girl My gaze darts towards the hallway, half-expecting to see a squad of enforcers bursting through the door to drag me back to that miserable existence. Back to the pack that never wanted me, the family that treated me like a burden. Of course, they don’t come. Clayton doesn’t know my last name; he has no idea that I’m the girl he’s talking about. Right? Because if he did, he would have to send me back to my pack. Selene must sense my distress because she licks my face, her warm body pressing against my leg in a silent show of support. I run my fingers through her soft fur, drawing strength from her presence as Clayton’s voice rumbles on. “...need to deal with it as soon as you do, no matter what...” Deal with who? The packs? Me? War? The questions swirl through my mind like a whirlwind, threatening to overwhelm me, Dart of mo wants to confront Clauton and demand 15.01 68 50 Ava: The Grey Girl answers, but I don’t want to tip my hand. I don’t think he knows who I am. I have no idea how he’ll act once he finds out, either. So I just need to make sure he never has a clue. I watch as Clayton ends his call, his brow furrowed in a way that makes the lines on his forehead stand out more. He runs a hand over his face, and I can almost feel the stress radiating off him. Doing my best to act casual, I guzzle the rest of my coffee and head into the kitchen, pretending I just needed to put my cup away. Clayton’s already getting ready to wash the dishes. “Hey,” I say, and I can’t keep the worry out of my voice. Clayton looks up. “What’s wrong, Ava?” “Do I need to worry about this war between the packs?” I ask, deciding to stick with blunt and practical As my approach

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