

CHAPTER 54

Music drifts through the kitchen, courtesy of my phone, as I chop garlic, enjoying the sharp aroma. Cooking has always been a comfort to me, a way to lose myself in the simple tasks and let my mind wander. As I toss minced garlic into the pan heating over the stove, I can't help but feel a sense of peace settle over me, if only momentarily." I've set up the phone Clayton gave me, and texted him and Ivy to let them know it was working. Neither responded, which is fine by me. I set up the burner phone, too, and texted Lisa with updates. She did respond, and her spam of emojis have lightened the load on my heart. I texted Mrs. Elkins, letting her know I'm safe and begging her not to talk to anyone about me. Mrs. Elkins assured me my job is safe whenever I can come home, which is even more of a relief. My little paradise is waiting for me, which makes it so much easier to be stuck here right now. A knock at the door startles me from my reverie. I glance at the clock, wondering who could be here at 117 < 54 Ava: Dinner With Ivy this hour. Wiping my hands on a towel, I make my way to the door, peering through the peephole. It's Ivy. I take a deep breath, steeling myself for whatever interaction awaits me. There's something about Ivy that always puts me on edge, a subtle undercurrent of something that I can't quite place. Still, I paste on a polite smile and open the door.. "Ivy, hi," I greet her, trying to keep my tone casual. "Ava," she says, her smile bright but somehow not quite reaching her eyes. "I hope I'm not interrupting anything." "Not at all," I assure her, stepping aside to let her in. "I was just making dinner." As she enters, I notice the bottle of wine in her hand and the shopping bag slung over her arm. My brow furrows slightly, but I say nothing, waiting for her to explain. "I took the liberty of picking up a few things for you," Ivy says, holding out the wine and the bag. "A little something to help you settle in." 12:34 0 2/7 C 54 Ava: Dinner With Ivy I accept the items, feeling a bit awkward. "You didn't have to do that," I murmur, even as I eye the clothes curiously. "Nonsense," Ivy waves a dismissive hand. "It's the least I could do. You're practically family now, after all." There it is again, that undercurrent of something. I can't quite put my finger on it, but it makes me uneasy. Still, I force a smile and nod. "Thank you, Ivy," I say, meaning it despite my reservations. "That's really kind of you." She beams at me, and for a moment, I wonder if I'm reading too much into things. Maybe I'm just being paranoid. The Moon Goddess knows I'm plenty paranoid these days. You are, but it's understandable, Selene says, yawning from her spot on the couch. She's still binge-watching her mind-numbing wolf shifter show. Remembering that I'm in the middle of cooking, I set the bag and wine on the counter. "Why don't you make yourself comfortable?" I gesture towards the living area. "Dinner should be ready soon." Timi rotorna mu amila and cinka aronofully onto the 12:34 317 54 Ava: Dinner With Ivy couch, crossing her legs and leaning back. Selene sniffs her in greeting, and Ivy reaches out to pat her head in a ginger sort of way, almost like she's worried about being tainted by a dog. The image makes me snort. Inside my head, of course. I wouldn't do that where she can hear me. I busy myself in the kitchen, trying to ignore the way her gaze seems to follow me as I move about. Soon enough, the food is plated, and I carry our dishes. to the table. "Here we are," I say, setting a plate in front of Ivy before taking my own seat. "I hope you like pasta primavera." "It smells d@w(w).(n)@reIV@rm.(c)(o)m

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elicious," Ivy assures me, already reaching for her fork. We eat in silence for a few minutes, the only sounds the soft clink of cutlery against plates. Finally, Ivy breaks the quiet. "So, Ava," she begins, her tone light and conversational. "Tell me a little about yourself. Your family, where you're from—all the fun details." I tense slightly at the mention of family, my grip tightening on my fork. "There's not much to tell," I deflect, keeping my tone carefully neutral. "My family... 12:34 417 < 54 Ava: Dinner With Ivy they're not really around anymore." Ivy's expression softens, her eyes warm with what seems like genuine sympathy. "I'm sorry," she murmurs. "I didn't mean to pry into painful memories." I shake my head, offering her a reassuring smile. "It's alright, you didn't know." There's a brief silence, and then Ivy speaks again, her voice tinged with a melancholy I haven't heard from her before. "Clayton and I lost our parents when we were young, too," she confides, her gaze dropping to the table. "It's not an easy thing to go through."" Before I can respond, she reaches across the table, her hand covering mine in a gentle squeeze. I blink, surprised by the unexpected gesture of comfort. "Thank you for telling me," I murmur, holding her gaze. For the first time since meeting her, I feel like I'm seeing the real Ivy—not the polished one that seems to be weighing my every move. She offers me a small, grateful smile, giving my hand one last squeeze/before withdrawing hers. "Clayton is a strong alpha because he was forced to be. We could have lost everything after they died, but 12:04 5/7 < 54 Ava: Dinner With Ivy. Clayton managed to unite everyone behind him. It was a bloody period of history in our pack, but a necessary one to get him to where he stands now." I shove a bite into my mouth, wondering where this is going. It sounds like an ominous warning after the brief show of empathy. Ivy props her chin on her palm, staring at me for a second. "Clayton's never been interested in any she-wolf as a mate all this time. He's worried about bringing children into the world and leaving them behind early, just like our parents did." A flash of memory comes unbidden, and I can hear Clayton's voice growling in my ear, telling me in explicit words how much he wants to breed me, and how much he's going to enjoy doing so. Choking on pasta is not something I'd recommend. Panic crosses Ivy's face, and she leans forward to smack my back as I struggle to breathe. Once the primavera blockade clears, I take a long drink of the red wine she brought over, coughing again at the alcohol. I'm not used to drinking. "Are you okay, Ava?" Ivy asks, hovering over me with 12:14 87 < 54 Ava: Dinner With Ivy her hands out in an awkward manner, as if she's not sure what to do with them. I nod, waving her back to her seat as I cough a little more into a napkin. "I'm fine. Sorry. It just went down the wrong pipe."

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