

CHAPTER 56

56 Ava: A Sudden Situation Before I know it, the salesgirl is ushering me into the dressing room with an armload of clothes. I spend what feels like hours trying on outfit after outfit, parading out for Ivy's critical eye. "Hmm, I don't love that one," she says, wrinkling her nose at a slinky black dress. "Next." I obediently retreat back behind the curtain, shimmying out of the dress and into a pair of high-waisted trousers and a silk camisole. When I reemerge, Ivy claps her hands delightedly. "That's the one! You look so chic. We'll take it. Actually, just keep it on. It looks better than what I brought over." This Ivy is so different from the Ivy I've been treated to up to this point, and I'm dizzy with whiplash. The process repeats at what seems like a dozen different stores throughout the afternoon. Shoes, dresses, blouses, skirts, pants... by the time we hit the fourth boutique, I'm fairly certain I've tried on more outfits today than I have in my entire life. 12:35 56 Ava A Sudden Situation My feet are screaming in protest from the endless parade of heels Ivy insists I model. I'm parched from barely having a chance to grab a bottle of water. But Ivy seems to be having the time of her life, reveling in her role as personal shopper and stylist. She flits around me like a deranged fairy godmother, clucking over hemlines and admiring how certain colors bring out my eyes. "You have such a great figure, Ava," she gushes as I self-consciously smooth my hands over my hips in a skintight black pencil skirt. "We simply must get you some things to show it off properly." I force a tight smile, feeling distinctly uncomfortable under her appraising stare. Revealing clothes have never been my thing—I much prefer loose, flowy fabrics that skim over my curves rather than clinging to them. At one point, I try to politely extricate myself, suggesting we take a break to grab a bite to eat. But Ivy merely waves a dismissive hand. "Oh, there's no need. I had the driver pick up some protein bars and smoothies. Here, have one of these." 12.35 56 Ava: A Sudden Situation She tosses me some sort of chalky-looking nutrition bar from her purse. I eye it dubiously but take a small bite, grimacing at the gritty, tasteless lump. So much for lunch. Finally, after what feels like an eternity of shopping torture, Ivy seems satisfied with her haul. We pile back into the sleek sedan, and I sink gratefully into the plush leather seat, massaging my sore arches. "Well?" Ivy prompts expectantly as the driver pulls away from the curb. "What did you think? Wasn't that fun?" I shoot her a sidelong glance, too worn out to muster much enthusiasm. "It was an experience." She laughs lightly, patting my knee in a disturbingly condescending way. "Don't worry, you'll get used to it. Just think of all the other fun things we can do together now!" I bite back a groan as Selene's smug voice echoes in my head. Well, I for one have had a delightful day lounging on the couch and watching my shows. No uncomfortable shoes or pretentious boutiques for me. Ivy chatters away beside me, oblivious to my silent 12:35 3/7 56: Ava: A Sudden Situation exchange with my wolf companion. I'

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ve learned the art of tuning her out while still nodding and making vague affirming noises at regular intervals to keep the conversation flowing. "...and the little place I'm taking you to is simply divine. The chef is an absolute genius. You'll love it." "Mmm," I murmur absently, gazing out the window. The city is behind us, and we're driving through a quiet suburb. Rows of identical houses with perfectly manicured lawns and white picket fences stretch out as far as the eye can see. It's like a postcard image of the American dream. Ivy is still prattling on about the trendy new restaurant she's taking me to, but I've long since tuned her out. That is, until the driver's gruff voice cuts through her ceaseless chatter. "Ma'am, we're being tailed. One car, a blue sedan." I sit up a little straighter, instinctively glancing behind us. Ivy finally falls silent, craning her neck to peer out the rear window with a frown. 12:35 4/7 56 Ava A Sudden Situation "Are you certain?" she demands, a hint of impatience coloring her tone. The driver doesn't respond. Instead, he hits the brakes. hard, the tires of our luxury sedan shrieking in protest. My body lurches violently against the restraints of my seatbelt as the car swerves, the momentum nearly whipping my head to the side. In the front, a sleek blue sedan has pulled across the road, blocking our path entirely. There's a split second where everything seems to move in slow motion—the acrid scent of burnt rubber, Ivy's sharp inhalation of breath, the driver's shouting. Then everything explodes into chaos. Our car spins wildly, the force slamming me against the door with bruising intensity. Ivy, who hadn't bothered to fasten her seatbelt, isn't so lucky. Her head cracks against the window with a sickening thud, and she immediately goes limp, crimson blooming across her temple. Two car accidents in less than two weeks? My luck is shit. "Ivy!" I scream, my voice drowned out by the deafening 12.15 57 56 Ava: A Sudden Situation blare of the car horn as the driver frantically wrestles with the steering wheel. Finally, mercifully, we grind to a bone-jarring halt, the rear of the car brushing up against a cluster of neatly trimmed hedges lining someone's front yard. I'm panting, dazed, my heart thundering a frantic staccato rhythm against my ribcage. The driver is already moving, ripping off his seatbelt and shoving open his door. "Stay in the car!" he barks at me, but little does he know—I can't move. I'm still processing it all. His huge frame uncoils with a lethal grace as he charges toward the blockade. Even from inside, I can see at least three figures emerging from the other vehicle, their movements tightly coordinated. For a fraction of a second, a flicker of hope kindles in my chest. Our driver is easily twice the size of any of those men—if anyone can take them, it'll be him. That hope is swiftly extinguished as one of the figures raises something—a gun? A tranquilizer? I can't tell—and fires. The driver jerks like a puppet with its strings cut, crumpling bonelessly to the asphalt. 67 < 56 Ava: A Sudden Situation

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