

CHAPTER 132

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132 Ava: The Party (III) “So, how are you liking the training?” he asks, sipping at his drink. The scent of beer makes me want to gag, but I try to ignore it. “Amara’s tough, but she’s the best.” I shrug, feeling a little more at ease now that we’re on familiar ground. “It’s hard,” I admit, “but I’m learning a lot. Amara doesn’t go easy on anyone. I appreciate that. It feels like I’m catching up faster that way.” Brendan nods, his expression sympathetic. “Yeah, she can be brutal. But you’re right, it’s worth it in the end. You’ll be a total badass by the time she’s done with you.” I can’t help but smile at that, imagining myself as some kind of warrior princess. It seems ridiculous, given my current state, but it’s a nice thought nonetheless. “I don’t know about that,” I say, shaking my head. “But I’ll settle for being able to defend myself, at least.” Brendan’s smile softens, his eyes growing serious. “That’s a good goal,” he says quietly. “Especially for someone in your position.” 1/9 132 Ava The Party (I) I stiffen at his words, my guard going up again. “What do you mean?” I ask, trying to keep my voice neutral. He hesitates, looking away for a moment before meeting my gaze again. “I just mean… being the Alpha’s mate, you know? It’s a big deal. Sorry if I made you uncomfortable. We heard you’re trying to keep it quiet, but secrets don’t last long in a pack.” “Right.” I shift uneasily, unsure of how much to say. Do I explain that I haven’t chosen to mate with him yet? That our fated connection was already in peril from his rejection? It seems like a bit of an over-share, so I just remain silent. “Everyone’s been curious about the Blackwood who finagled their way into our Alpha’s graces, but you’re pretty nice,” he adds, sounding a little awkward. “They don’t like the Blackwoods, but you don’t act like them.” “What did you expect, then?” My curiosity is genuine. To me, the Blackwood pack was normal. Even in Westwood, I don’t have a lot of interaction with the other shifters. I still don’t fully understand the divide between the two packs, having only heard the story from Phoenix’s point of view. 14:42 2/9 132 Ava: The Party (1) You could try talking to Lucas, Selene mutters, sounding a little sour over the idea. I’m sure he could explain it. But would he? I have the distinct impression that he would try to gloss it over. “Arrogant. A jerk. Pretentious. Kind of like that Jessa chick who was here for a little while, trying to act like she was the beta’s mate when she was just here for college.” He grimaces. “A lot of us fell in love with her because of her looks, but it didn’t last long.” I can’t help the faint smile curving my lips. “Oh, my sister.” “Shit.” Bren jerks away from me, looking horrified. “I forgot she’s your sister. I’m sorry.” “Don’t be. She’s a bitch.” Saying the words out loud is… freeing. Have I ever talked about my family that way? I don’t think I have. Bren still looks cautious, and I laugh. “I’m serious. She’s a complete bitch. Hates me. Never looked at me twice.” 14 3/9 132 Ava: The Party (III) “Really?” his dubious stare has me laughing even harder, garnering the attention of the other wolves. “What are we missing?” Mia asks, sauntering over with a half-empty cup in hand. It doesn’t have that gross, yeasty smell of beer, but something more astringent and nose-tickling. When she sees me looking at her cup, she lifts it with a wink. “The special punch. You should try it.” Kellan’s warning rings in my mind. “Thanks. Maybe later.” “We’re talking about Jessa,” Bren chimes in, still looking horrified. “Oh, that Blackwood bitch? Er, no offense.” Mia offers me a casual, one-shoulder shrug. “We all hate her.” “That’s her sister,” Bren hisses in her ear. Even without super wolf hearing, I can hear him clearly. “Jessa’s a bitch,” Lisa agrees, squeezing her way to my side and sliding her arm through mine. “See? It’s fine,” Mia grouses at Bren, shoving him away. “Since Ava’s here she’s already defected from 14:42 132 Ava: The Party (I) Blackwood. Right, Ava?” “Uh, right.” Defected sounds a little more negative than I’d like, but I can’t really put my finger on why. “We weren’t close.” Lisa interjects then, steering the conversation in a different conversation. “So, who’s the host of the party? I don’t know anyone here except you guys. It seems pretty casual.” “There’s no host.” Bren looks Lisa over with a familiar, appraising look. I’m used to seeing it; a lot of men find Lisa attractive, and her bouncing, bubbly personality draws them in further. By the smile on her face and the way she leans in his direction just a little, Lisa’s more than receptive to his attention. “Obviously, there’s a host. Whose house is this?” “Oh, that. It’s the pack’s party house. We throw parties here every week, and all of us come around to clean it up after. Westwood rules. If we can’t appreciate what we have, the Alpha will take it away.” The invitation on his face and in his words couldn’t be 14:42 5/9 132 Ava: The Party (III) any clearer, and I’m torn between urging Lisa to go enjoy herself, and clinging to her like a lifeline. I shouldn’t do that, though. That would be a bad friend move. She’s been stifled as it is because of the guards around me; I should let her enjoy the freedom she has. So I disentangle my arm from hers with a smile, and she grins back before squeezing between me and Brendan with a slight shake of her head. I watch Lisa and Bren flirt, their bodies angling closer, their smiles flashing brighter with each exchange. A knot tightens in my stomach, an ugly twist of emotions I don’t want to examine too closely. I should be happy for her. Lisa deserves to have fun, to enjoy herself without the burden of my problems weighing her down. Selene is quiet in my mind, and I hope she’s watching her trashy wolf TV instead of judging my thought process. “So, Ava.” Mia’s voice jolts me out of my thoughts. She grabs my arm, her fingers curling around my bicep with a familiarity that catches me off guard. “How did 34:42 6/9 132 Ava: The Party (II) you and the Alpha meet? I’m dying to know.” “Oh, um…” I struggle to focus, my gaze still drawn to Lisa and Bren. They’re standing so close

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Updates… their heads bent together as they talk. “It was at the Lunar Gala. A chance meeting.” “The Lunar Gala?” Mia gasps, her grip tightening. “No way! That’s so romantic. You have to tell me everything.” I drag my attention back to her, blinking at the intensity of her interest. “There’s not much to tell,” I hedge, feeling my cheeks heat. “We just… ran into each other.” Well, I ran into his chest—after he pulled me into it. But that’s a detail I don’t need to share. “Uh—huh.” Mia’s eyes narrow, her lips curving into a knowing smirk. “I bet there’s more to the story than that. Come on, spill. I want all the juicy details.” “I…” I flounder, unsure of how much to reveal. The memory of that night is a tangled knot of emotions- the heady rush of attraction, the sting of rejection, the confusion and hurt that followed. 7/9 132 Ava The Party (1) I don’t know how to put it into words, especially not to a virtual stranger. “We, um, danced,” I say finally, the words feeling inadequate. Still, it isn’t like I can say he dry-humped me against a tree. “And talked a little.” Mia’s continued smirk leaves me uncomfortable. “We all know fated mates get a little more intimate than a dance and talking, Ava. It’s okay to share the details. We’re pack, aren’t we?” Are we? Uncomfortable with her intrusive questions, I try to pull my arm out of hers, but her grip only tightens. Mia’s brow furrows, her head tilting to the side. “You’re his mate, aren’t you? I mean, everyone knows that.” I flinch, the word mate hitting me like a slap. “It’s complicated,” I mutter, looking away. “Complicated how?” Mia presses, undeterred. “You either are or you aren’t.” There’s very little in my life that’s prepared me for a moment like this. Not knowing how to extricate myself 14: 8/9 132 Ava: The Party (III) with grace, I yank my arm from Mia’s grip. “I need a refill.” Blurting the words out is awkward and probably makes me look like an idiot, but I escape to the kitchen, far from her prying questions.

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