

Secrets: Vol. 31 - Chapter One

“Oh god, what am I even doing here? I don’t belong here!”

Jen took Ava by the shoulders and gave her a shake. “Remember Monday? Standing on Luke’s front porch and hearing every awful word that fell out of his big dumb mouth?”

Ava remembered. It hurt, but she remembered.

She’d gone to Luke’s on Monday because he’d found a cat on his front porch and hadn’t a clue as to what to do with it. Inches from the screen door, she stopped dead at the words that drifted out to her.

“Since when do you have the hots for my sister’s friend?”

“I wouldn’t say I have the hots for her, but there’s no denying that she’s one sexy piece of ass, Luke.”

“Dr. Doolittle? Sexy?”

He sounded so incredulous and Ava felt her heart sink.

“Hell, yes, sexy!” At that moment, she could have planted one on Pete’s lips for that manly comment. “I’d give my left nut to see that curvy ass of hers in the buff. It’s all heart-shaped and... just so damned squeezable.”

Luke, the idiot, dug himself in deeper. “Are we talking about the same woman here?”

Pete just plowed on, oblivious that Luke wasn’t buying a word he was saying. “And those magnificent tits. Just right, ya know? All soft and bouncy and round. I swear to Christ I don’t think she owns a single bra.”

“How can you tell what her ass or her tits look like when every piece of clothing she owns is big and baggy and ugly as sin?”

Her shoulders slumped. That confirmed her worst fears. Luke would never see her as a woman. Only ever as the plain tomboy, animal lover friend of his sister, Jen.

Great.

“You don’t need to have x-ray vision, Luke. Ava Sweet isn’t all fluff and makeup, true, but, she’s real and everything a man could want in a woman. She has natural beauty. The kind most

women envy. And I'd bet money that beneath those baggy clothes is one helluva woman just waiting for a man to sink his teeth in."

"But, again, I ask you, how the hell can you even tell? She's all bulky cotton material! And that hair. I don't think I've ever seen it out of that nasty ass ponytail she wears day in and day out."

Can you blame her?"

"What do mean?"

"She probably dresses like that to deter her boss and every other man she comes across."

"What does her boss have to do with it?"

Yeah, that's what she'd like to know.

"I've been to the clinic where she works and I've seen the good doc giving her the once over. If she came to work looking all... girly, he'd be on her quicker than a cat to cream."

"You've been to her clinic?"

"Yep."

"What the hell for? You don't even own a pet."

"Jesus, Luke, for such a ladies man you can be real dense sometimes."

Enough was enough, Ava decided. Time to retrieve the cat and give Luke a piece of her mind in the process.

Without waiting to hear anymore of Luke's cutting remarks, Ava swung the screen wide and strode right in. Both men turned to her with twin-horrified expressions on their handsome faces. Ava didn't waver. She asked where the cat was and Luke showed her to the backyard. The poor cat was on the brink of starvation. Judging by the bowl of food on the porch, Luke had apparently been trying to fatten the poor thing up. But one look and Ava knew the neglected animal would need to be looked over by her boss, Dr. Ryan.

She moved slowly towards the scared orange tabby and picked her up, nearly crying when she felt the animal's ribs. She made soft, reassuring sounds to her and went back into the house. But she didn't head for the front door. Instead, she sat the cat gently on the floor, walked right up to Pete, and kissed him.

On the mouth.

Tongue and all.

Pete reached out and placed his palms on her head, holding her still while he plunged and ate at her mouth. She pulled back finally, breathless and shocked that she'd done something so brazen. Shocked that Pete had let her.

“Friday night, seven o'clock. You and me.” Ava demanded, not bothering to play the shy schoolgirl. She just wasn't cut out for it.

For a minute, Pete just stared at her, as if trying to figure her angle and then he whispered, “Anything you want, darlin'.”

She nodded briskly and then went to Luke. His gaze was a mixture of anger and surprise. Ava was pleased. She smiled at him and his eyes narrowed. Then she brought her knee to his groin. Hard. Luke's smile disappeared as he fell to the floor, cursing.

“Pete's right, you can be real dense sometimes, Luke McGiffin.”

Then she'd picked the cat back up and left. Her body vibrating with rage and hurt and even fear. Fear that she'd never be able to get over her infatuation for a man that viewed her as nothing more than an oddity.

It was now Thursday and they had a full day ahead of them. She nodded to her friend, grabbed the few articles of clothing Jen had picked out for her, and grouched, “Fine then, let's do this thing.”

A few minutes later, Ava was looking in the mirror of the tiny dressing room. The woman staring back at her was a stranger. She didn't even recognize herself. Amazing the difference a few scraps of material could make. And that's all they were too, a few very small scraps of material.

She shored up her nerve and swung open the curtain. “Well, what do you think?”

Jen stared, her jaw dropping, eyes bugging out. She stared for so long it made Ava snap out, “If you can't even form a coherent sentence then it must be even more horrid than I thought!” She threw her hands up and started back into the dressing room.

Finally, Jen found her voice.

“My lord in heaven, Ava. You look absolutely gorgeous. I really had no idea.”

That had her stopping and turning. “Gee, thanks, Jen,” Ava said ruefully and planted her hands on her hips.

Jen shook her head and beamed a smile at her. “No, what I mean is, I knew you had a body under all that material, but lordy that skirt looks fabulous on you. Luke is going to swallow his tongue

when he sees you, I can promise you that. I know my brother, Ava. He'll stop, he'll stare, and then he'll pounce." Then Jen's brows drew together in concern. "As a matter of fact. Pete may just do the same thing."

Ava shook her head in denial of that statement, before looking down at the white skirt. She tugged at the hem, willing it to grow another inch. She'd never felt comfortable with her thighs showing. Not even in the dead of summer. It made her feel vulnerable and gangly. Somehow, it just seemed too intimate to have that much flesh on display. She was a throwback to the old spinster days, that's what she was. And she'd never get Luke's attention if she continued acting the maiden.

"We made a deal, Jen," Ava reminded her best bud. "I'm going to get Pete to the nightclub, but you are going to be the one to knock his socks off."

Ava knew that Jen had been enthralled by Pete for a long time. Maybe not as long as she'd been taken with Luke, but long enough. Jen was just too shy to make the first move. Apparently, Pete was too. Ava didn't tell Jen that Pete had a thing for her. She, however, had seen the signs. Anytime Jen and Pete were in the same room together, Pete watched her. Stalked her with his eyes. Jen couldn't stub a toe without Pete taking notice. But she knew Jen too well. If she had any inkling Pete wanted her she would back out. No, Friday night, Ava would get the pair in the same room together and let instincts and pheromones take it from there.

"Well, I know for sure my brother is going to be begging your forgiveness the instant he sets his sights on you in that outfit, Ava."

She turned again and looked into the three-way mirror, seeing her reflection from every possible angle. The white skirt was clingy and short and undoubtedly sexy. Good thing she was in decent shape. All the time she spent going up to the high school, jogging the track before heading to work was now paying off.

The pale pink silk blouse with its scooped neckline and billowy sleeves was just enough enhancement too. Not overblown, but quiet and delicate and feminine. And that was the plan, wasn't it? To look, girly? She'd never attempted that sort of thing. From the time she was big enough to walk, she'd been a tomboy. She had played sports in school, had hung with the guys, and was more comfortable changing her own oil as opposed to watching demurely from the sidelines as some macho mechanic did it for her. And yet, she'd somehow made fast friends with the head of the cheerleading squad, Jen McGiffin.

Ava was a senior in high school when the McGiffin's had moved to town. Jen with her sweet smile and pretty, blond hair had nothing in common with her brother. Where Jen was the good girl who'd gotten straight A's, Luke was the bad boy who'd been held back a grade, putting him in the same classes as his sister, ten months his junior.

The rebel with the dark hair and leather jacket and fast car. She'd melted the first time she'd seen him. Luke had walked into their school, strode straight up to the most popular girl at Green Valley High, and kissed her. Then he'd asked her out. The popular, Heather, along with every other girl in school, had panted after him like little lost puppies. Ava had stomped off, making

fun of the simpering little fools. But deep down, in the most secret part of her soul, she'd been the same as those girls. She'd just been too afraid to admit it. And where had that gotten her? At a fancy boutique, trying on outfit after outfit in the hopes of gaining the attention of the biggest playboy and rebel that Green Valley, Ohio had ever seen.

Whom was she kidding?

Once again, she covered her face and moaned like a wimp. "I cannot believe I'm doing this, Jen!" she felt Jen's comforting hand on her back, patting and soothing. "I'm not cut out to be a vixen!"

Jen laughed. "Of course you are, hon. Every woman on the face of the earth was born with an inner vixen. She just needs to tap into her. Which is why we're here. It's also why you're going to go get your hair done, a facial, manicure, and pedicure."

When she put it that way, she almost wanted to hide under a rock. Ava had never painted her fingernails. And she'd certainly never had someone kneeling at her feet to apply color to her toes. It would probably tickle. She sighed and knew a new determination she'd never felt before. Tickling or not, she'd get her stupid hair done, her nails would have color and she'd walk into that nightclub ready for battle, armor and all!

"You know what, Jen? You're right. Let's get this over with so I can give Luke a taste of what he's been missing all these damn years."

"Now that's the spirit!" Jen shouted, getting all giddy and excited, as only a former cheerleader could.

And so the day went. First the clothes. Then the hair. Last came the tickling pedi and mani. Ava had been surprised to find out that she'd actually enjoyed herself. At the hair salon, the stylist had suggested they put in a few subtle highlights and trim the split-ends. Ava's hair was healthy and full, but it needed a bit of this and that, Rhonda had explained. By the time, the bouncy woman was done Ava was beyond nervous. But when she saw the finished product, she'd been shocked. Mostly because she wasn't much different. Just... better somehow. Rhonda had uncovered something that Ava had never known was even there. Her hair fairly shone. The cut was perfect with long layers all around her face. No curling needed, Rhonda had instructed. Just a hair dryer and a round brush, which Ava had purchased at the salon. Jen had been thrilled with the look. A good sign, since Jen was a pro when it came to fashion.

Next came the nails. Jen had politely explained that Ava had never colored her nails and to do so now, might be too much. Instead, the nail tech had gone for a French manicure. It seemed to make her hands look softer, more fragile. Ava had never in her life felt soft or fragile. It was a new, and somewhat uncomfortable, feeling. Still, she liked that her nails weren't shouting, "Hey, look at me!" Instead they seemed to quietly whisper, "don't I look pretty?"

Now, Ava was home and resting her feet. She hadn't known beauty could be so damned exhausting. She took a sip from her white wine and stared at all her new clothes. "I cannot believe I actually did it." What was she supposed to do with it all? She'd spent more money than

she'd ever spent on any single car part or workout gear. And for what? For Luke McGiffin. If the man didn't sit up and take notice now, he never would.

"He damn well better be worth the trouble," she muttered.

Tomorrow was Friday. Her big *début*, as it were. She took another sip of her wine and looked again at the white skirt and pink top. She let out a sigh, laid her head back against the soft brown leather of the chair and let her mind drift. She imagined Luke striding up to her on the dance floor. Grabbing her by the shoulders and kissing her. Rough and demanding. Kissing the way a man kissed a woman that he ached for. That he wanted to claim and conquer. And wasn't that a hoot! Ava Sweet, track star, basketball MVP of Green Valley High, wanting to be conquered. The phone rang, startling her out of her wild and impossible dreams.

She reached over and picked up her black cordless. "Hello?"

"Hey."

Ava nearly choked on her wine. "Luke?"

Silence and then, "Yeah, it's me."

His deep, husky drawl nearly did her in. She could always feel that dark timbre clear to her toes, as well as all the places in between. "Uh, hi."

"Hi, Ava."

Ava? What was that about? "What, no Dr. Doolittle this time, Luke?"

"Tomorrow's your night with Pete."

Her heart did a little flip at the way he said Pete's name—as if it left a funny taste in his mouth. Jealousy?

"Yea, tomorrow's our date. Jen took me shopping today for it."

She thought she heard him emit a low growl, just before saying, "Yeah, she told me all about your fun day together." He paused and added, "She mentioned that you bought a few new things."

How much did Jen say? She wasn't supposed to tell him anything, darn it! She should have known. After all, they were brother and sister. And they were as close as twins.

"Actually, yeah, I did buy a few new things," she confirmed, then she teased a little more by adding, "I think Pete is going to really enjoy my outfit tomorrow night."

“Pete seems to like you no matter what you’re wearing,” Luke grumbled. “So, what did you buy for good ol’ Pete?”

Darn, if he didn’t sound jealous! Could it be possible? It’d mean she meant something to him. Something more than Dr. Doolittle anyway. “I bought a mini skirt.” She wouldn’t tell him about the hair and the shoes. Or what she bought to wear under the skirt.

She heard him cough. Hard. As if having a spasm. “Luke? Are you okay?”

A couple more very tense seconds of coughs, and then, “Did you say a skirt?”

She wanted to smack him. “Yes, Luke. It’s this tiny, stretchy thing with a zipper on the side that women wear when they want to look sexy. You may have seen one or two.”

“I know what a skirt is. Quit being so damned sarcastic, damn it. What I’m trying to figure out is why the hell you have one?”

Now that rankled. “You know, it occurs to me that just because you see me as this ugly, sexless, animal-lover type doesn’t mean that every man sees me in the same light. Some men find me attractive. Go figure!”

She wanted to slam the phone down, but then she heard him say, “I never said you were ugly and sexless, Ava.”

“No, you just said that I’m all bulky cotton and have an ugly-ass ponytail.”

Silence.

“Luke?”

“I’m sorry,” Luke muttered. “I shouldn’t have said that, but it took me by surprise to have Pete seeing you that way.”

“What way?”

“He noticed you. Your body, your softness. I thought I’d been the only guy to see that. To see past the clothes and to the woman beneath.”

Oh God, she’d never survive if he kept saying such things. She’d waited years to hear sweet words like that from Luke.

“To be honest, it felt good to have Pete see me as soft and sweet and sexy. Not like an oddity.”

“You were always so standoffish, Ava.” Luke explained, once again in defensive mode. “You acted like you hated being around me. I thought...”

His words trailed off and suddenly Ava was riveted. She wanted to hear the rest of this Thursday night confession. “You thought what? That I wasn’t a woman with a woman’s needs?”

“No. I thought you saw me as some macho badass rebel and I didn’t want you to see me that way. I wanted you to see me. The real me.”

She sighed, wondering if they would ever get past the misconceptions they had of each other. “That makes two of us, Luke.”

“There are two things I want you to know before you go out on your date with Pete tomorrow night.”

“And what might they be?”

“I never meant the Dr. Doolittle comment to be insulting. I love that you care for animals, Ava. It screams sensitivity. You’re a nurturer and that’s something I’ve always admired in you. I don’t think you’re odd either. I think you’re lovable as hell. And I’m damned glad no one else calls you Dr. Doolittle. That’s for me and me alone.” Luke paused and in a much colder tone he added, “If Pete touches you, kisses you, dances too fucking close to you, I’ll beat the shit out of him, Ava. I swear it. He’s my best friend in the world, but I will not be happy if he touches you. Think about that when you’re out on your date with him, baby. Think long and hard. You know me. I don’t issue silly threats. Only promises that I mean to keep.”

Then the line went dead and Ava was left holding a cold piece of plastic, her mouth gaping wide. Had he really just threatened bodily harm to his best friend? And all because of her? What on earth did that mean?
Ava trembled.

She took a long gulp of her wine, draining the glass. She wasn’t cut out for a man like Luke. What had she done?

Oh God, what on earth had she done?

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