

Amy Lee tended to make an impression whenever she entered a room.

“What’s up, bitches!” she exclaimed as she entered this one—the reception and bar area of Souper Trouper—on a Tuesday evening in late April.

Amy was not a conventionally attractive woman. She was at least 40 pounds overweight, with slightly crooked teeth, an oddly shaped nose and eyes a bit too far apart. But she was abundantly self-confident, which had a huge impact on how people saw her. Everything about Amy’s style—how she walked, how she talked, how she dressed, the way she’d spontaneously break into song (with a fantastic voice)—was all about expression and freedom and fun. Everyone could tell she felt sexy, and she brought them all along with her on that.

The bitches she was addressing, seated around a small, circular, high table not far from the entrance, were Laura Johnson, Yvonne Smede and Desdemona “Mona” Knox.

“We put our name in,” Laura informed Amy. “They said it’d be about ten minutes.”

“But that was about fifteen minutes ago,” added Yvonne.

“Okay, whatevs,” Amy replied. “We’ve got our drinks, so we’re all good, right?” She quickly eyed up Laura’s gin and tonic, Yvonne’s glass of white wine, and Mona’s Diet Coke.

“Except for me!” she added with a grin. “Better fix that. B.R.B. ladies!” And she scurried off to the bar.

The four women were all members of the Lab Team, with Laura overseeing the other three. Laura was an adventurer, curious about almost everything, but rather quiet and unassuming. She had a fundamentally innocent approach to the world, implicitly trusting of every person, place and situation. Yet she was largely indifferent about matters moral, and about her fellow humans generally. She enjoyed light socializing, but tended not to feel much love, or even much like, for others.

So she’d surprised herself several years ago by becoming good friends with a couple of people, and especially these particular ones—the brash, bombastic Amy and the cynical, shy-but-sharp-tongued Yvonne. Laura’s promotion to management a few years later had changed her official duties, but had affected her professional interactions with the other two very little, and their personal relationships not at all.

Mona smiled weakly at Yvonne and Laura as she sipped on her soda through a straw. They both smiled back at her. All three women’s minds

were racing, trying to think of something to say, but they were all failing.

After a minute, Amy rescued them by returning. "Okay, let's get this party started," she said, pulling up a stool and setting her Negroni down on the table. "So, any hubbies joining us? Laura, where's Mike?"

"He was working until noon, so he's been sleeping. But he said he might try to come later."

"Bill should be here soon," offered Yvonne. "He texted me like an hour ago saying he was heading out."

Amy's gaze turned to Mona. "How 'bout you, Mona-My-Sharona? What's your husband's name again? Is it Don?"

"Oh, Don definitely won't be joining us," Mona replied, a bit startled. "We separated a few months ago."

"Oh, that's right!" Amy said, chuckling and smacking herself on the forehead. "Oops."

Laura asked Mona, "How have you been doing?"

"Good," said Mona, and the others silently kept their attention on her for several seconds, expecting her to say more. But she didn't.

Mona did not usually join these after-work gatherings, but this time she'd decided to give it a try after some energetic prodding from Amy. Mona didn't particularly enjoy being out in public, or drinking, or even conversation. But she nursed a small hope that she might be able to penetrate the "triumvirate" (her private pet name for them), or at least gain some insight into their inner workings, or at the very least, endear herself to them a little. Mona had always suspected that the other members of the team believed her to be quite boring and a bit stupid. And she was right (and so were they).

"Laura, party of five!" called out a cheerful voice suddenly, and the Lab Team women turned to see the beaming face of Oleanna Arrandami, who was standing at the host station holding a stack of menus. They all stood and headed that way.

"One of our party hasn't arrived yet," Laura informed Oleanna.

"Not a problem," she replied with a smile. "I'll seat the four of you now, and when your fifth arrives I will bring them right to you!"

Oleanna then led the others swiftly through the labyrinthine main dining room, making three left turns and two right turns (not in that order), stopping at a relatively small round table with five place settings.

"Here you are, ladies," she said, gesturing at the table with genuine pleasure.

Amy said “Why thank you, ma’am!” and the other three said nothing as they all took their seats.

“I’m your server this evening,” said Oleanna, handing out the menus. “My name is Oleanna and I aim to please. I’ll check on you frequently, unless you ask me not to, in which case I won’t. But in between checks, if there is anything you need or want, anything whatsoever, you flag me down. And if you don’t see me, flag down another staff member and tell them to find me A.S.A.P.”

Correctly sensing that her guests had no requests to make of her at the moment, Oleanna then took her leave of them.

And Oleanna’s guests sensed correctly that she meant every word she said and that all of her enthusiasm was completely sincere. Her heart soared when she provided diners with excellent service and saw what pleasure they took from the experience. It had always been Oleanna’s dream to one day wait tables in a top-tier L.A. restaurant. At eighteen she’d moved here from Oklahoma to pursue that dream, and every day she pursued it relentlessly. Of course, she wasn’t there yet, and struggled to make ends meet working as a server in less prestigious places like Souper Trouper. So she supported herself by taking temporary jobs acting in movies and television shows.