

## CHAPTER 11

11 Ava: The Novel Grind The new beginning I crave begins in a quaint town by the name of Cedarwood, just outside of Spokane, Washington. It isn't that I made a conscious choice to stay here, exactly. I sensed shifters at the train station in Spokane and panicked. A rideshare app and a destination chosen at random brought me to Cedarwood. Specifically, to an adorable bookshop cafe on a picturesque little street in the middle of their commercial district. @ Seriously, the entire street gives me a modern Victorian vibe, and families all walk because there is literally no parking anywhere. I guess people come here for the charm. Two weeks later, I'm still at the shop, only now I'm working there. As an added perk, I even get an apartment in the above floor. It was used as storage for a few years by my new boss, and I have a lot of cleaning to do yet, but it's mine, and I love it, even if there are boxes everywhere. I still don't know how all the luck managed to swing my way, but I'm not going to complain. I haven't seen a 1/7 11 Ava: The Novel Grind single shifter since I came here, and from what I hear, the Aspen Pack treats humans well in their territory. There's a huge part of me that's terrified they will come banging on my door, demanding to know why I haven't informed them of my presence, but—well, that's a problem for future Ava. I'm hoping that I smell human enough to not be bothered. Mrs. Elkins enters the store, the bell above the door announcing her arrival. I look up from the book I'm shelving, a smile already forming on my lips. There's something about her presence that puts me at ease. There might even be a tiny part of my mind that thinks she's married to Santa Claus. "Good morning, Ava," she greets me warmly, her rheumy eyes crinkling at the corners. "How are you doing today? Settling in alright?" I nod, my smile widening. "I'm doing well, Mrs. Elkins. Thank you again for the job and the apartment. I can't tell you how much I appreciate it." Mrs. Elkins laughs, a melodious sound that fills the space. "Oh, Ava, you don't have to thank me every day, 14:39 217 11 Ava: The Novel Grind you know." My cheeks warm. "I know, I just... I'm so grateful." She steps closer, resting her hand over mine. Her touch is comforting, almost maternal. "The Novel Grind is a haven, Ava. It's a place for those who feel they don't quite fit anywhere else in this world." Tears prick my eyes and I blink them back, fluttering my lashes in a desperate attempt to hide how hard her words hit me. If only she knew just how much of an outsider I really am. "I want you to find your happiness here," she continues, gesturing to the countless books surrounding us. "Among the thousands of realities written in these pages. There are worlds of possibilities waiting for you, Ava." I glance around, taking in the shelves upon shelves of books. Each one holds a different story, a different life. Maybe, just maybe, I can find my own story here too. "Thank you, Mrs. Elkins, *wW.W.ñ(o)VèLW(o)Rm.còm*

Updates...

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"I say softly, my voice thick with emotion. "I think I will." I rub my breastbone, feeling that now—familiar burn flare. Nothing eases the pain, but I've developed a habit of scrubbing at my 14:40 377 11 Ava: The Novel Grind sternum in hopes of easing it. She smiles at me, a knowing twinkle in her eye. "I have no doubt about that, my dear. No doubt at all. Now, tell me, is Carlos treating you well? Not hazing my new employee, is he?" I choke back a laugh, wiping the tears from my eyes in a discreet motion hidden behind adjusting my glasses. Carlos is my new co-worker. He's a few years older than me, kind and funny, and looks in my eyes when we talk. He treats me like an equal, and it's an amazing feeling. "He's has been treating me very well," I say, my voice filled with genuine warmth. "He's even helped me prepare to sign up for night classes this summer, since I probably won't have a car yet. We've been working out the logistics of it." Mrs. Elkins' eyes widen with delight. "Night classes? Oh, Ava, that's wonderful! What are you thinking of studying?" Her enthusiasm has me ducking my head, a little embarrassed. I don't admit that I've dropped out of everything at my old college. I had to have all my 11 Ava The Novel Grind transcripts mailed to a post office box in White Peak that Lisa set up for me, and she forwarded me everything I needed to start over here, in hopes that the transfer couldn't be traced. Neither of us are really sure how it works behind the scenes. "I've always been interested in literature." My fingers trace the spine of the book I just shelved. "I thought, maybe I could take some English courses, maybe even creative writing." Mrs. Elkins nods, her smile growing. "I think that's a fantastic idea. You know, I've seen the way you handle the books, Ava. It's like you have a special connection with them. I think you'd excel in any literary field." My heart swells at her words, a sense of belonging settling in my chest. "Thank you, Mrs. Elkins. That means a lot to me." She pats my hand once more before stepping back. "Now, I think I smell some fresh coffee brewing. Why don't you join me for a cup before these books?" you finish up up with I set the rest of the books on a nearby table. "I'd love that." 14:40 5/7 11 Ava The Novel Grind The smell of coffee is stronger on this end of the cafe, and I sit at the window bar with Mrs. Elkins, enjoying the view of the town's clock tower and the mountains in the distance, still snow-capped. It is odd to have so few trees on the horizon, but it's almost a relief. Too many things happen in the shadows of the trees, where a pack can pretend they see nothing. Carlos slides two steaming mugs in front of us, a playful grin on his face. "One vanilla latte for the lovely Ava, and a cappuccino for the ever-graceful Martha," he announces with a wink of his dark eyes. Mrs. Elkins chuckles, her eyes twinkling with amusement. "Oh, Carlos, you're too much." He places a hand over his heart, feigning hurt. "You wound me, Martha. I'm just the right amount of much." I can't help but laugh at their banter, the sound bubbling out of me with an ease I've never known before. It's like a weight has been lifted off my shoulders, allowing me to breathe freely for the first time in my life. As I take a sip of my latte, savoring the smooth, 14:40 – AT 11 Ava: The Novel Grind Nikku Vlogz Mud Ride with car creamy texture, my phone vibrates on the counter. I glance down to see a text from Lisa's burner number, and a smile tugs at my lips. [LISA BURNER: Miss you, babe! Hope you're settling in okay. Remember, you've got this! Love you! [LISA BURNER: (GIF of two cartoon bears hugging.)] 66 Sweet Ava deserves all the good things. Comment 5 Π Post your first comment!

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