

CHAPTER 13

13 Ava: Husky (II) Carlos' words bring me out of my little mini-funk, and I nod. "I need to make as much money as I can before the summer semester. I'm going to need money for tuition, books, miscellaneous fees, and then hopefully a car. Between rent and life necessities, I really need the overtime. I'm lucky Mrs. Elkins is even letting me work this much." He nods, wiping down the counter as I replenish napkins in the dispenser. "She's got a way about her. Takes care of us all. Sometimes I wonder if she's even making money off this place. We sell a lot of coffee, but not so many books." He's not wrong; I've thought the same. My shoulders lift in a vague shrug, and I start cleaning off the end tables of newspapers, magazines, and books. "I have no idea, but I can't imagine she would run a business just to lose money." I pause, thinking of the sweet old lady and how she treats every customer who enters her shop like family. "Would she?" "Wouldn't put it past her." Carlos puts together a sinful 14:40 – 176 13 Ava: Husky (1) cup of caramel-toffee mocha with an obscene amount of whipped cream and slides it toward me with a wink. "Here, just how you like it. Go take a break with that dog out there. Have you checked her for a collar?" I nod, taking a sip of the ultra sweet beverage and sighing in bliss. "No collar," I confirm with a shrug. "Huskies are notorious for running away. I'm sure she'll wander her way back home when all the free scratchy scratches are gone." The day passes in a slow, meandering sort of way. People ebb and flow in a familiar pattern, and I'm surrounded by the scent of books and coffee. I don't think I've ever felt peace like I do here, working at the Novel Grind. When business is slow, Carlos regales me with outlandish stories and drama he reads on his social media news feeds. He's been begging me to open up my own profile, but I always decline. I don't want anyone to find me here, in this last bastion of peace on earth. Which, yes, is a cringe level of melodramatic, but it's how I feel down to my very soul. 250 13 Ava: Husky (0) Long after the sun set, it's finally time to close, and the husky is still there, asleep on the sidewalk in front of our door. It takes little time to wipe down the last of the tables, gathering stray cups and napkins and tossing them into the trash. I'm exhausted from the double shift, but it's the kind of tired that burrows deep into your bones and says you've worked hard. Like your body's proud of you for what you've done. Or maybe I'm a little bit of a masochist for thinking that way. Carlos has me flip the sign on the door to 'Closed' as he counts out the register, his fingers flying faster than I would have ever thought possible when going through that much cash. "Is your furry friend is still out there?" I glance out the window and, sure enough, the husky is sitting there, staring at me, with her nose pushed against the glass, her pants leaving a foggy haze against it. Once again I'm struck by those eyes so eerily similar to my own, and I feel a bizarre tug in my chest. I want to take her home, but that doesn't seem intelligent. I live in a tiny apartment above a store. I'm not even sure where she's gone all day to do her 14:40 – 3/6 13 Ava Husky (1) business, because there's no yard near us, just a tiny squar

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e with a well-groomed tree popping out of it in the middle of the sidewalk. "Still there." I toss the rag into the sink and think of the boxes everywhere in my apartment. I've made little headway in trying to clean and organize everything, mainly because I'm taking every shift Mrs. Elkins lets me work. Carlos hums a catchy little jingle as he finishes up with the money. "She's waiting for you." I roll my eyes. "Why would she be waiting for me?" "Maybe because you've been sneaking her treats all day? She probably thinks you're going home together." I can't help but laugh. It's true, She's been scarfing down bits of muffin and croissant whenever I had a chance to toss them her way. What can I say? I have a soft spot for animals. "Well, we can't just leave her out there all night. I guess it's kind of late to say this, but should we call animal control?" Carlos nods, closing the register with a ding. He grabs the deposit bag and looks toward the door thinking. 14:40 4/6 13 Ava: Husky (11) "They're closed. I'm sure she'll be fine overnight with all that fur protecting her. If she's still around in the morning, we can call then. They can check for a microchip and contact her owner." I sigh, looking out at the husky again. She's still staring at me, her nose all squashed against the window. "Yeah, you're right. I just—I don't know. There's something about her." "There's always something. You know how many cats have tried to live in this shop over the years?" Carlos pats the top of my head in a way that reminds me of Phoenix. The Phoenix I knew before. Brotherly. Kind. "You can't adopt every stray that comes along. Come on, let's go." I know he's right. I'm still working on getting my life together. I know almost nothing about the city I live in, and I haven't left my apartment or the store since the day I moved in. I have groceries delivered because I'm not sure how to get there and back without a car. But still, as I look out at the husky, I can't shake the feeling that there's something different about her. Something that whispers deep inside of me that she belongs here, that she's found me for a reason—tha

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