

CHAPTER 15

Waking up with a dog is both better and worse than waking to an alarm. Selene starts with a cute little nose bumping against my hand. Then a head burrowing beneath it. Then her entire body on mine, as her dog breath—which smelled particularly fishy—assaults my nose. She finishes it off with a low, mournful howl, and I open my eyes with a groan. “I’m up. I’m up. Come on, Selene. You couldn’t let me sleep for fifteen more minutes?” Her huff sounds a lot like you slept for six hours, you’ll be fine to me, but I rub her ears and roll out of bed anyway, only to screech a few seconds later when something sharp tries to murder my foot. “Shit! Ow, ow, ow. f@ck. Oh, my God. I’m dying. Holy shit.” I fall back onto the bed and check the bottom of my foot. Only a little bleeding where something sharp broke the skin, and a nice big scratch. I grab my glasses and peered at the floor, shocked to see a purple crystal there. 14:41 1/7 15 Ava Settling in (1) Selene must have gotten into something overnight, because that was not there last night. I shoot her a dark look. “This is the thanks I get for giving you a home?” My sweet little husky just tilts her head, staring at me like I’m stupid, and I sigh, tossing the crystal onto my night stand. For a second, I feel a tingle on my fingertips, but when I grab it again and hold it in my palm, there’s nothing. Weird. But that ever-present aching pain in my chest seems subdued, almost as if there’s some sort of barrier between it and my body. I’ve heard of crystals having magical properties, but Dad always said it was human nonsense. Huh. Maybe not. There’s some gold encasing one tip of the long crystal, as if it is meant to hang off a chain. I spin the crystal around, lifting it to the light to admire its colors. “Pretty. Think I should get a chain for this?” I ask, as if a husky would care if I carry something around my neck. 14:41 217 15 Ava: Settling In (1) But then my eye catches the clock and I rush Selene out the door, telling her to find a place to potty as I get dressed in record time. She’s at my door again by the time I dash outside, finishing the messy bun I’d corralled my hair into. I’ve been pondering cutting and dyeing it to help hide my identity, but I figure if someone finds me, it’s probably not from being blonde. I thud down the stairs on the side of The Novel Grind’s building, and a sign on the door has my pace slowing, before I stop, staring slack-jawed at the message on the door. Ava, you are hereby banned from the premises for the next 48 hours. This is to facilitate bonding with your new dog and to rest from your workaholic tendencies. Don’t worry, we’ve got everything covered. HAVE FUN! -Mrs. Elkins and Carlos Selene yips, and I swear she sounds amused. I’ve learned in these past few days that I can’t stop attributing human emotions to her mannerisms. I think it’s a side effect of being raised with wolf shifters. They do have their human emotions when shifted into their wolf form, and it’s hard for me to 14:41 3/7 15 Ava: Settling in (1) disconnect from that. Carlos opens the door and pokes his head out, grinning at me like a madman. He starts talking as soon as my mouth opens, holding up a hand to stop my torrent of mild outrage. “Don’t even think about it, Ava. Martha agrees. You’re banned. Go home, relax, get to know your new roommate. You haven’t had a day off since she hired you.” I must look like a fish as my mouth opens and closes as all my arguments dissipate in the face of his loony smile and reasonable words. Something cold nudges my hand, and I glance down to see Selene with her ears back and her eyes twice as large as normal. Or maybe it’s just in my head. I sigh. “Fine. But I’m going to hate every second of my forced rest.” His grin, if possible, grew wider. “We figured. Martha said it’s paid time off, for—um, I think she called it

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maternity leave.” I open my mouth, then close it again. Yup, I’m for sure a fish face. “Oh. that’s...” 14:41 4/7 15 Ava. Settling in (1) “Crazy, I know. Like you gave birth or something. But Mrs. Martha says fur babies are still babies, so get out.” He winks before slamming the door in my face. The door doesn’t actually slam, of course. It has a built-in soft close, because banging doors doesn’t fit a bookstore cafe’s ambience. It’s just the overall sentiment of the moment. A high-pitched vocal melody pulls me out of my daze and I look at Selene, then the door again. “I guess we can just... go home?” Because what else am I going to do? I could go hiking, but I don’t know the area. With my luck, I’d get lost in the middle of miles of evergreens, with no access to any of the local rivers, and get eaten by a hungry bear. Does Washington even have bears? I should google this. It occurs to me in that moment that I have no life outside of The Novel Grind. It isn’t like I’m unfamiliar with that fact. It’s just that I never had to worry about it. I’ve been in Cedarwood for only a few weeks, and working at The Novel Grind the whole time, working open to close to rack up as much money as I can. I have tuition to pay at a new college, and it’s expensive, because I’m out of state. Speaking of which, I’m going 14:41 5/7 15 Ava: Settling In (1) to need a new license. But if I get a new license, will that make it easier to find me? Running away seemed so simple when I thought of just taking my money and starting somewhere new. But with college, and now a driver’s license, I’m beginning to realize that it might be impossible without some sort of shady connection. Like to Lisa’s people, who make fake IDs- And, again, if I do that, will my college credits even stack? Will I put myself in some sort of shady-person quagmire that affects my future because I didn’t do everything on the up and up? My head’s already spinning, and it only stops when sharp pain blossoms in the tip of my right finger. I blink at Selene. “Did you just nip me?” She tilts her head, flicking one ear back. “I’m not sensing any remorse from you, you know that?” Not a muscle moves, but I have the vague sense of a human-like shrug emanating from her. Stupid shifter anthropomorphism. Dogs are dogs. Dogs aren’t shifters. Dogs feel dog feelings. I have to stop that. 14:41 617 15 Ava: Settling in (1) “Come on, Selene. Let’s go home. Maybe you can get an extra bowl of kibble while I tackle some of these boxes.” There we go. A solid plan for the day. Something that doesn’t throw me down a spiral of questions I have no answers for. Avoiding my future won’t work forever, but I’m grateful to do it for now. Comment 4 View All > R Post your first comment!

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