

CHAPTER 16

16 Ava: Settling In (II) Thunk. That's it. That's the last book, tossed onto a pile of mystery novels. Fifteen boxes are now empty, and while it might appear that my apartment is little more than a haphazard pile of empty boxes and organized book piles, my heart breathes with the room I've created by tackling the monster that is everything Mrs. Elkins stored in this apartment for the last who knows how long. The couch is soft and springy as I flop onto it, taking a well-deserved break. Selene's ears perk up at my sudden display of enthusiasm, but she doesn't move, content to rest by the front door, which happens to be one of the few places in the living room not covered in something. "We did it, Selene! We've tackled the monster and unpacked it all!" Well, everything that was in the living room. The kitchen still has a few boxes, and let's not even talk about the bedroom. But the living room? The living 14:42 1/9 16 Ava: Settling in (11) room is done, and that's what matters. I survey the piles of books scattered around the room, separated by genre. There's a stack of classics, a pile of contemporary fiction, a few biographies, and even a small collection of poetry. The biggest pile by far, though, is near and dear to my heart. Romance. Tantalizing little bodice-rippers with bare male chests whispering to me, enticing me to flip them open and be drawn into a world of magical, mystical, perfect men. I used to read them whenever I had a chance. The White Peak library was full of them, and I was desperate for any happy ever after I could get my hands on. They're a lot less appealing these days. I rub my chest, frustrated by the ache that likes to poke its head out in my weak moments, and snap a quick photo of the piles to send to Mrs. Elkins. [AVA: What should I do with all these books?] Selene seems to realize that I'm done moving for a while and slinks over on her silent paws, jumping beside me. She circles once, twice, then settles down, 2/9 16 Ava: Sottling In (1) her head resting on my thigh. I scratch behind her soft ears as I wait for Mrs. Elkins' response. My phone buzzes. [MRS. ELKINS: Keep them, dear. Start your own library. They've already been up there for a decade gathering dust anyway.] I look at the books with new appreciation. My own library? The thought had never occurred to me. In the Blackwood Pack, books were a luxury. Books were unnecessary, and Mom and Dad weren't interested in feeding my addiction to fantasy worlds and lives that could take me away from my own, at least for a while. But now, surrounded by the musty scent of old pages, the idea doesn't seem so far-fetched. Selene's cold nose snuffles against my hand, and I realize I've stopped petting her. "What do you think, Selene? Should we keep them all?" What a silly question. As if it was ever an option to get rid of them. Who throws away books? @ She lets out a contented sigh, which I choose to interpret as a yes. 14:42 3/0 < 16 Ava Settling in (1) My fingers linger over the spines of the books, their textures as varied as their titles. Some are smooth, others ridged, a few even cracked with age. Each one holds a story, a world waiting to be explored. And now, they're mine. Mine to read, mine to cherish, mine to display. But where? I stand, ignoring Selene's huff of displeasure at being disturbed, and survey the living room with a critical eye. The walls are bare, save for a few generic paintings that came with the apartment. They'll have to go, replaced by shelves. Shelves that will hold my new library. I pace the room, measuring with my steps. The wall opposite the couch could fit a tall bookcase, perfect for the hardcovers. The smaller paperbacks could go on a lower shelf, maybe under the window. And the romance novels? They deserve a special place, perhaps a little nook in the corner where I can curl up and lose myself in their pages again one day. Yes, that could work. But the living room in not the atort inat 14 My hodroom had a 16 Ava: Settling In (II) wall that's practically begging for a bookshelf. I could wake up every morning and see my beloved books, ready and waiting to be read. And maybe, just maybe, I could squeeze a small shelf into the bathroom. For those long soaks in the tub, when I want nothing more than to escape into a good story. The possibilities are endless, limited only by the space I have and the strength of the shelves. But I'm determined. These books have waited long enough to be read, to be loved. They deserve a home, and I'm going to give them one. Selene watches me from her spot on the couch, her blue eyes curious. "What do you think, girl? Should we go shopping for bookshelves tomorrow?" She tilts her head, considering, then lets out a soft bark. I take that as a yes as my mind races down the rabbithole of shopping, of crisp white bookshelves and the colorful book spines that would enliven them up. Maybe I would even do something a little crazy and organize all my books by color. It would be impractical, yes, but fun. 5/9 16 Ava: Settling In (1) And those little dreams dance and twirl through my mind until they stop with a jerk and a dip in my belly as reality sets in. Bookshelves cost money. Money that I don't have in abundance, not with my barista wages. Not with how much I've spent just to establish life here. I sink back onto the couch, my enthusiasm gone. Happy Ava is gone, and regular Ava is back. Selene senses my mood shift and nuzzles my hand in silent comfort. "It's fine. Eating and saving for school is more important than bookshelves. Once I have a car, once I'm settled in classes, things will change." But the thought of the

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se books, these precious stories, languishing in piles on the floor is almost painful. They deserve better. They deserve a proper home. And I think about all those popular DIY videos I've watched while dreaming of building a better life. People turning old crates into rustic shelves, repurposing ladders into quirky bookcases, even building shelves, from scratch with nothing but a few planks of wood and a trusty drill. 14:42 6/9 16 Ava: Settling in (1) "I bet I can do that." I sit up again, staring at my walls. It can't be that hard, can it? I can build them myself, right? Selene's ears perk up at the excitement in my voice. "I just need some wood, a drill, maybe a saw, if I manage to keep from slicing my fingers off..." I trail off, the list of tools growing in my mind. Tools that I also don't have. But the idea has wrapped its sticky tentacles all over my mind's eye, and I can't shake it off. Rough-hewn shelves, crafted by me, holding my books. A labor of love. A step to independence. I pace the living room. I want this so much, my skin is crawling with all the energy boiling inside of me. The pacing helps. "I can ask Carlos if he has any tools I can borrow. Or maybe Mrs. Elkins has a friend who can help me out." The possibilities are spinning in my head, my apartment fading away as I dream of myself wielding electric tools like a badass. But then, like a record scratch, reality intrudes. I've never built anything in my life. I don't know the 14.42 7/9 16 Ava: Settling in (1) first thing about woodworking or carpentry. What if I mess it up? What if I ruin the wood, or worse, hurt myself in the process? What if it looks hideous? What if the weight of the books causes everything to fall after all the hard work I put in? The doubts creep in, insidious and persistent. Who am I kidding? I'm no handyman. I'm a defective shifter who ran away from home. No talents, no skills, nothing. Just an ache in my chest that won't leave, dreams of a man who tore my heart apart, and zero prospects for my future. I sink back onto the couch, deflated once more. Selene whines, and I bury my face into her soft fur, wondering what I need to do in order to change. To turn into a real adult who can stand on her own two feet. You're pathetic, Ava. Get up. You walked away from your asshole family. You're stronger than this. Stop acting like the weak defect they think you are, and grow up. Yeah. It's time to stop wallowing. I take a deep breath and sit up. "No. If I want to build 14:42 8/9 16 Ava Settling in (1) shelves, I will. I can figure this shit out. It can't be that hard."wwW.N0vE0w0rM.com

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