

## CHAPTER 17

17 Ava: Settling In (III) It is that hard. But it's okay, because I learn things along the way. Like the fact that drilling is a lot harder than it looks. That wood isn't always straight. That, speaking of straight, it isn't as easy as you'd think to cut a straight line with a circular saw. Or, well, yes, it will be straight, but it might be a diagonal kind of straight instead of a straight-straight. Oh, and that Ben from the hardware store has a really nice smile, and he's kind of cute, but there isn't the tiniest flutter of excitement inside of me anywhere as he helps me get everything together and even has his brother drive everything home for me at Mrs. Elkins' behest, so I'm pretty sure His Majesty Lucas Westwood, alphahole of the Westwood Pack, has ruined me for romance. But that's something I'd rather not think about, so I don't. Franklin—their parents named them Benjamin and Franklin, and yes, I do think that's funny—screws the 14:42 1/6” 17 Ava Settling In (1) last anchor into the wall and steps back to examine our handiwork. It's mostly his, though. He's spent three hours helping me while Selene watches his every move, and I'm surprised to feel almost comfortable in his presence. He's nice, like his brother, and I'm starting to learn that nice people are really just nice sometimes. We haven't gotten a lot done, both because it takes a lot longer than you'd think and because I can't afford it. Even so, I started with the corner I'd thought of turning into a reading nook and added basic white shelves over industrial pipe-looking brackets. Simple, cheap, and went well with the brick accents inside the apartment. The addition of a few battery-powered fairy lights and an armchair Mrs. Elkins had donated from downstairs had instantly changed it into my new favorite place in the apartment. I even switched out the room-darkening curtains with these new gauzy ones that were on clearance and meant for a kid's room. “There you go,” Franklin says, draping an arm around 14:42 2日 17 Ava Sottling in ( my shoulders and making a grand gesture in the direction of my new library. “It isn't the Beast's library, but it'll have to do for now.” I laugh and push his arm off my shoulder, uncomfortable with the easy familiarity. He doesn't seem to take offense and gathers his tools. “Mrs. Elkins told us to help you out with anything you need to update this space, so just text us if you need anything at all.” “Oh, no, I couldn't. I'm so grateful you took the time to help with these shelves as it is. I think I can manage them myself next time.” He was kind and patient and had explained every step as he did it, which probably added a lot of time to the work he had done. Franklin shakes his head and jerks a thumb down toward the cafe. “Mrs. Elkins and my mom go a ways back, and she watched me and Ben a lot while our mom worked. If she says you're family, then you're family. We take care of our own around here. Besides, we like doing this kind of thing. My girl really loves books, too, so she might even come by with some food. She's a great cook. Loves dogs. You two'd pro©(w)(w).N©ve(1)Ŵor.M.C.m

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bably hit it off.” He pauses and scratches his head, a 3/6 17 Ava: Settling In (III) flush coloring his cheeks. “Sorry. Guess I probably should ask if you'd mind that. We're a fun bunch, but we kinda steamroll people.” I glance at the shelves this stranger helped me put up, all at the behest of one quirky bookstore owner, and look at Selene, who tilts her head when our eyes meet. I never realized that my heart was wrapped up in something tight, because it feels now that its grip is loosening on my heart. Something warm tingles in my chest, shoving at that emptiness inside. I've very much enjoyed my time creating a life here in Cedarwood. The thought of having more company, of meeting new people and forging connections in this little town, fills me with a warmth I haven't felt in so long. “That would be amazing. And please, let me know whenever you two are free to help with the next set of shelves.” Franklin grins and gives me a playful salute. “You got it. We'll be seeing you around, Ava.” With a wink and a smile, he's out the door, tools in hand. The moment the door clicks shut behind him, I let out a squeal of delight and scoop Selene up into my arms, 14:42 416 17 Ava: Settling in (1) burying my face in her soft fur. It's really only the top half of her that I can hold like this, but she tolerates it anyway. She wriggles and licks at my cheek, her tail wagging furiously. “Can you believe this, girl? People actually want to spend time with me! With us!” Laughing, I spin around in a little dance, reveling in the lightness I feel coursing through me. Gone are the weights of expectation and duty that used to shackle me. In their place is a buoyancy, a sense of infinite possibility stretching out before me. With Selene cradled against my chest, I collapse onto the plush armchair, sinking into the cushions with a contented sigh. My gaze drifts around the cozy little nook I've created, the soft curtains billowing ever so slightly in the gentle breeze from the open window. This space, this little slice of tranquility, is the start of it all. A place just for me. A reflection of the life I'm building for myself. A life free from the constraints and harsh judgments of my former existence. A life where I can simply breathe and be, without the weight of others' expectations crushing me. It's really happening. I'm here, and I'm safe. 14:42 5/6 17 Ava Sottling In (III) I nuzzle my cheek against Selene's soft fur, infinitely grateful for her constant companionship. I can't help but marvel at the profound shift my life has taken. What once seemed like an impossible dream—a life free from the shackles of my lineage—is now my reality. And in this moment, I am simply content to be content.

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