

CHAPTER 20

The bell above the door jingles, signaling another customer's arrival at The Novel Grind. I glance up from where I'm restocking the pastry case and feel a smile tugging at my lips. It's become such a familiar routine these past four months—the steady flow of customers, the aroma of freshly brewed coffee mingling with the scent of old books, the comfortable chatter filling the cozy space. I nod in acknowledgment, my hands continuing their task of arranging the muffins and scones just so. This place has become more than just a job to me; it's a sanctuary, a haven where I can breathe easy and simply exist without the weight of expectations bearing down on me. As I work, my mind wanders to the evening ahead. It's been two weeks since Franklin and his wife, Emily, last had me over for dinner. I'm looking forward to the home-cooked meal and easy conversation, a stark contrast to the strained silences and disapproving glances that used to fill my family dinners back home. A pang of guilt tugs at my heart, but I quickly push it away. 1/7 20 Ava: Paranoia and Secrets (1)

This is my life now, the life I've chosen, and I won't let the ghosts of the past haunt me anymore. "Here you go, dear," Mrs. Elkins says, placing a steaming cup of coffee on the counter in front of me. "Don't forget, you've got that class this afternoon." I nod, gratefully accepting the mug and taking a sip of the rich, robust brew. The summer course I've signed up for—Introduction to Literature—is a small step, but it's a step in the right direction. With my limited savings, I can only afford one class this summer semester, but I'm determined to make the most of it. As the morning rush begins to taper off, I take a moment to simply breathe and appreciate the quiet moments in between. This is my life now, a life of my own making, and for the first time in as long as I can remember, I feel a sense of peace settling over me. I glance up from shelving a stack of paperbacks, my gaze instinctively drawn to the two men seated at one of the corner tables. Their murmured conversation drifts through the quiet hum of the café, and a chill races down my spine as I catch the unmistakable scent of shifters. 217- 20 Ava: Paranoia and Secrets (1) I'm not sure how I didn't notice it before. My knees threaten to buckle, but I force myself to maintain an air of nonchalance, casually sliding books into their designated spots as I strain to eavesdrop. Snippets of their discussion filter through. ...a power-hungry bastard, that's what Blackwood is," one of them grumbles into his coffee cup. "Dragging us all into his feud with that hothead Westwood." I freeze, my fingers tightening around the book in my grasp. Westwood... that's Lucas. The name ignites a flicker of memory, one I swiftly smother before it can fully take shape. That part of my life is over, a closed chapter I've sworn to leave behind. "Can't fathom why our alpha is so hellbent on finding that Blackwood girl," the other man scoffs. "She's more trouble than she's worth." The book slips from my trembling hands, clattering to the floor with a dull thud. I drop into a crouch, my heart thundering in my ears as I hastily gather the scattered pages. That Blackwood girl—they can't be talking about me, can they? But a sickening realization settles in the pit of my stomach. Of course they are. 14 3/7 20 Ava: Paranoia and Secrets (1) Panic claws at my throat, but I force it down, reminding myself to breathe. No one knows www.move1worm.com

Updates...www.move1worm.com

www.move1worm.com

ere I am, not really. I'm safe here, anonymous and unassuming, just another face in the crowd. Straightening, I flash a tight smile at the oblivious shifters and make my way back behind the counter, my hands shaking ever so slightly. *** Class goes by in a blur, the lecturer's voice fading into a dull murmur as my mind drifts. I can't seem to shake the nagging sense of unease that's been clinging to me ever since overhearing those shifters at the cafe. Their words echo in my head, an endless loop of doubt and fear that threatens to unravel the fragile peace I've managed to construct for myself. As the final bell rings, signaling the end of the period, I gather my things on autopilot, my movements mechanical and detached. The hallway is a sea of bodies, students rushing to their next class or spilling out into the sunshine, but I barely register their presence. It's as if I'm encased in a bubble, separate and isolated from the world around me. A light tap on my shoulder shatters the illusion, and I 14:44 WIT 20 Ava. Paranoia and Secrets (1) can't stifle the startled scream that tears from my throat. My textbook thuds as it hits the ground. I whirl around to face my attacker, my heart pounding a frantic rhythm against my ribcage. "Whoa, hey, it's okay!" A man's voice, laced with concern, cuts through the haze of panic clouding my mind. "I didn't mean to scare you." My gaze focuses on the figure before me, and I feel the tension bleed from my body as I take in his unassuming appearance—a slightly rumpled button-down shirt, a warm, disarming smile, and eyes that hold nothing but gentle curiosity. He's human. Of course he is. I'm being ridiculous, letting my fears get the better of me. Exhaling a shaky breath, I force a self-deprecating chuckle, willing my racing heart to slow. "No, no, I'm sorry," I manage, bending to retrieve my fallen books. "You just startled me, that's all." The man crouches down to help, gathering the scattered pages with an easy, unhurried grace. "Well, I definitely didn't mean to do that," he says with a wry 14:45 20 Ava. Paranoia and Secrets (1) grin. "I was just going to ask if you might be interested in grabbing a coffee with me sometime?" The words are like a bucket of ice water, dousing the lingering embers of panic still smoldering within me. My lips part in surprise, and for a beat, I simply stare at him, at a loss for words. Of course, this is a perfectly normal situation—a guy asking a girl out for coffee, nothing more. But after everything I've been through, every instinct within me is screaming at me to politely decline and retreat. Swallowing hard, I offer him a small, regretful smile. "That's really sweet of you," I murmur, "but I'm not really looking to date anyone right now." To his credit, the man doesn't miss a beat. He simply nods, his expression one of understanding rather than disappointment. "No problem at all," he says easily, rising to his feet and offering me a hand up. "I figured I'd just shoot my shot, you know?" I accept his proffered hand, allowing him to pull me upright. "Well, I appreciate the thought," I tell him, and I truly do. It's a stark reminder that, despite the lingering shadows of my past, I'm just a normal girl 14:45 617 20 Ava: Paranoia and Secrets (0) trying to navigate the world like anyone else. With a final, friendly smile, the man gives a little wave and continues on his way, leaving me standing in the hallway with a strange sense of lightness in my chest. Then I check my phone when it buzzes, and it all fades away. Comment Leave the first comment for this chapter. [Vote www.move1worm.com](http://www.move1worm.com)