

CHAPTER 22

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22 Ava: Paranoia and Secrets (III) 22 Ava: Paranoia and Secrets (III) I try to slip the crystal back into the drawer of my nightstand, but Selene darts forward, her body wriggling between me and the furniture like a furry battering ram. With a huff of frustration, I pull my hand back, the crystal still clutched in my fist. “Selene, down,” I scold, but she remains resolutely in my path, those pale blue eyes fixed on the object in my grasp. Realizing this is a battle I won’t win, I shove the crystal into the pocket of my jeans, ignoring the uneasy weight that seems to settle in my gut at its presence. Selene’s tail wags, and she trots back toward the kitchen, pausing every few steps to glance over her shoulder, as if ensuring I follow. The aroma of the sautéed vegetables greets me as I re-enter the kitchen, and my stomach rumbles in anticipation. But as I move to finish plating the meal, Selene darts underfoot, nearly sending me sprawling. I sidestep her clumsily, shooting her a glare. “What has gotten into you?” I mutter, stirring the 1/6 22 Ava: Paranoia and Secrets (1) contents of the pan with perhaps more force than necessary. Selene whines, her nose pointed toward the front door, and understanding dawns. “All right, all right.” I rush over to open the front door. But Selene remains rooted to the spot, her gaze flickering between me and the door, an insistent whine escaping her. I frown as realization sets in—she wants me to come with her. “You can’t be serious,” I groan, but her resolute stare tells me she’s dead serious. “Fine, but just a quick walk. I’m starving.” With a sigh, I scrape the food onto a plate and shove it into the microwave, resigning myself to eating a lukewarm dinner in favor of appeasing my restless companion. Selene’s tail wags furiously as I clip the leash onto her collar, and she darts out the door the second it’s open wide enough, nearly yanking me off my feet. I stumble after her, the crystal in my pocket seeming to grow heavier with every step. The crisp evening air is a welcome relief after the 2/6 22 Ava: Paranoia and Secrets (III) stuffy confines of the apartment, and I find myself falling into an easy rhythm, my earlier unease fading into the background. Selene trots ahead, her nose twitching as she investigates every nook and cranny, but her path seems guided by some unseen force. I should protest, should insist we turn back before we venture too far from home, but some inexplicable force holds my tongue. Instead, I let Selene lead, trusting in the bond we’ve forged over th

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ese past few months. Half an hour later, I’m feeling extreme regret. We’ve made it to a nearby park, which is essentially a trail going through a small bit of city forest. My food is cold at home, and we have at least a half hour of walking to get back home. I’m hungry and worn out from the day, and I keep looking around like someone’s about to pop out of the shadows to kidnap me. “Selene, we need to go home. I’m starving.” I tug at her leash, but she ignores it. “Selene. Come on. Now!” I tug harder and try to start walking in the opposite direction. She almost yanks me off my feet, and I stumble, barely catching myself before I fall. “You’ve gotta be kidding 14:45. 38 22 Ava: Paranoia and Secrets (III) me.” I sigh. Selene’s not usually one for these kinds of shenanigans. “Okay. Okay! I get it, you aren’t done.” She hasn’t gone potty once. Maybe she needs to walk longer. I follow Selene’s lead as she veers off the trail and into the shadowed treeline, the crunch of fallen leaves and twigs beneath my boots echoing in the stillness. A shiver skitters down my spine. I can’t help but touch the crystal in my pocket, gleaming a little sense of security when I touch it. Moonlight filters through the canopy in dappled streaks, casting an eerie glow over our path. Selene forges ahead, her movements purposeful, almost urgent. I tighten my grip on the leash, my heart thrumming a staccato rhythm against my ribcage. This isn’t like her. Selene has always been a relatively well-behaved companion, her antics limited to the occasional bout of mischief around the apartment. But this? This single-minded determination to lead me deeper into the shadows feels different. Foreboding. A bead of sweat trickles down the nape of my neck as the air seems to thicken around us, the scent of damp 14:45 – < 22 Ava: Paranola and Secrets (III) earth and decaying foliage taking on an almost cloying quality. My pulse quickens, each breath growing shallower as an unfamiliar heat blossoms deep in my abdomen. What is happening to me? Selene pauses, her nose twitching as she scents the air, and I take the opportunity to glance around, trying to get my bearings. But the trees seem to blur together, an endless maze of bark and branches that offers no clear path of escape. A tremor wracks my frame, my fingers clenching spasmodically around the leash as a wave of dizziness washes over me. The world tilts precariously, the shadows lengthening and distorting until they seem to reach out with gnarled tendrils, seeking to ensnare me. I squeeze my eyes shut, fighting against the disorientation, but it does little to quell the roiling in the pit of my stomach. Something is happening- something I can’t begin to comprehend. But every fiber of my being screams that something’s wrong. A low whine from Selene breaks through the haze, and 516 22 Ava: Paranoia and Secrets (III) I force my eyes open, blinking rapidly to clear the spots from my vision. She stands before me, her pale gaze locked on mine, and in that moment, I see a flicker of something—a spark of recognition, of understanding. She knows. The realization is like a punch to the gut, stealing what little breath remains in my lungs. Selene has been trying to tell me all along, and I’ve been too blind, too stubborn to listen. The crystal seems to pulse in my pocket, its weight now a tangible thing, a tether binding me to this moment, this path I’ve been set upon. Selene steps closer, her nose touching mine, cold and wet. Then, a whisper in my mind. Hello, my human. I’m so glad you’re finally listening. Comment View All > R Post your first comment!/ Vote *0 Fandom Swipe left to continue >www.novelworld.com