

## CHAPTER 52

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52 Ava: Its Personal Why not tell him you need to buy some sensitive things you don't want him around for? Selene asks. It isn't that I hadn't thought of that—but the electronics section is far from someplace that sells menstrual products. "What's wrong?" Rowan asks, and I realize with a start that I'm scowling in his direction. Oops. "Nothing, I just—" I nibble on my thumbnail, trying my best to look a little distraught. "I need some things, but I didn't think you'd be following me the entire time, so..." Rowan smiles in relief, thinking he understands. "It's fine. You can get anything you want. Clayton can afford it. He's obnoxiously loaded." I was worried my acting was too much, but I guess it's not enough. I wrinkle my nose and shift from foot to foot. After a moment, I start rubbing one arm, as if I'm beyond uncomfortable with my request. I was never a very whiny teenager, but I'm trying to 12:12 — 1/7 channel one anyway. "Oh, no, it's not that Personal" it's expensive, but—you know. "Personal... Oh. Oh." Rowan's furrowed brow clears as he looks me over. "It's fine. I have younger sisters." I stare at Rowan in exasperation, giving up my shy act as I settle my hands on my hips. This guy really has no clue. "Well, I don't have any brothers who follow me around when I'm buying stuff for my period," I say, channeling my inner dramatic teenager, instead. We all have one. Somewhere. Right? It's embarrassing, but I have a goal. Rowan clears his throat. "Oh, I see. That would be..." His words trail off, and he looks conflicted. We stand there for a few moments, locked in an uncomfortable silence. I raise an eyebrow, challenging him to just let me have this bit of privacy, holding strong to that young adolescent defiance as Selene hums her approval in my head. He holds my gaze for a beat before letting out a resigned sigh. 12:12 52 Ava: Its Personal I fight from letting triumph show on my face as he looks to the ceiling, mouthing something I can't quite catch. Reaching into his back pocket, Rowan pulls out a sleek black wallet and thumbs through it. He peels off a few bills and hands them to me. "Here, get what you need. I'll wait by the entrance. Let me know if you need more. I'm here to help." I take the cash, relief flooding through me. "Thanks." I feel guilty using a man's money when I have no interest in sticking around the way he wants, but- well, desperate times. He nods once, already turning to leave. "Just don't go far. And be quick about it." As Rowan walks away, I catch the faint sound of his mutterings. Something about the store being well-guarded, so it should be okay. I shake my head, tucking the money into my pocket. At least he's finally giving me some space. With one last glance over my shoulder to make sure he's really leaving me alone, I head toward the personal products section to make it all believable. 12012 52 Ava: Its Personal I quickly grab a few tampons and pads, trying not to linger too long on any one brand or box. It's not like I really need them right now, but the act sells the story. I toss in a couple of shirts from the clearance rack, too -might as well make this little detour worthwhile. With my basket in hand, I make my w

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ay back toward the electronics section, keeping an eye out for Rowan. The coast is clear, so I beeline for the phone accessories. Burner phones are easy enough to find, and I grab one along with a prepaid card to activate it later. My heart is pounding as I make my purchase, the cashier giving me a friendly smile that I return with a tight-lipped one of my own. I have to resist the urge to look over my shoulder, worried that Rowan might reappear at any moment. Once the transaction is complete, I hurry off to the bathroom, clutching the bag close to my body. The restroom is blessedly empty, and I duck into the largest stall, locking it behind me. Selene hums her approval in my mind. Ripping open the packaging for the burner phone and 52 Ava. Its Personal stuffing the plastic and cardboard into the trash makes me feel a little like a shoplifter, even though I already bought the things. I slip the phone itself into my pocket, along with the prepaid card. Are you ready? Selene asks. I take a deep breath, steadying myself. "As ready as I'll ever be." He's waiting by the entrance, just as he said he would be, and I offer him a small wave as I approach. "All set," I announce, keeping my voice light. Rowan nods, falling into step beside me as we exit the store. "We should get groceries next, if you're missing anything you like or need. Clayton wasn't sure what to stock your fridge with." I think back to the copious amounts of fruits, vegetables, meat, and assorted juices. There's bread for sandwiches, and mayo. "It's fine. I can cook with what's already there." "Are you sure? It isn't a problem." "Completely fine, I promise." It's enough to make me feel terrible for thinking of the apartment as a gilded cage Clayton's keeping me in. 52 Ava Its Personal When I really think about it... has he done anything terrible? I can tell he thinks of me as a mate, or mate material. After the week we shared, that's probably reasonable. But he hasn't pushed me too far. He hasn't expected any followup activities. Aside from keeping me in the area—which is reasonable as an alpha—everything's been my suspicion that keeps me guarded against him... Hmm, Selene says in my mind. What do you think? I ask quietly. I have mixed feelings, the same as you. Not super helpful. It is good to get the phone, though. Yeah, I agree. Maybe it's overboard to think they're tracking me, but I'm not going to risk anyone in Cedarwood because of my personal issues.

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