

CHAPTER 51

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1 Ava: Clayton's Departure Clayton's shoulders stiffen, and he sighs. "You'll be safe as long as you stay within the pack," he says, his voice tight. My heart skips a beat at his words. "I'm going to have to go out on a quick trip," Clayton continues, and my eyes widen. A trip? Where? And why? The questions are burning on the tip of my tongue, but I bite them back, not wanting to draw attention to myself. Besides, I don't need to know. Instead, I force a small smile and say, "I hope you have a safe trip." Clayton nods, his expression softening as he meets my gaze. "Thank you, Ava." For a moment, I think he's going to say more, but then he seems to think better of it. He takes a step towards me, and my heart rate picks up, my body tensing involuntarily. "Can I have a goodbye ki*s?" he asks, his voice low and 12:31 1/8 rough. I swallow hard, my mouth dry. A part of me wouldn't mind feeling his lips on mine again, knowing the passion that can erupt between us. But a much larger part of me holds me back. So instead of leaning in, I turn my head slightly, offering him my cheek. His lips brush against my skin, warm and soft, and I feel a shiver run down my spine despite myself. As he pulls back, I can't help but notice the flicker of disappointment in his eyes, and I have to fight the urge to apologize. Instead, I force another smile and say, "Be safe." "I will." He taps my nose, his disappointment already hidden. "Set up your phone. Call me when you do." "Okay."

There's no point wondering if it's hacked. I'll just get a new burner as soon as I can. "Ivy will keep an eye on you and check up on you. Try staying inside. Rowan will be by this afternoon, and if you need to go anywhere, you guys can arrange it together." 12:31 2/8 <51 Ava: Clayton's Departure My heart beats a little faster. Without Clayton, it'll probably be easier for me to get another phone.

"Okay," I say again, with a smile. "Thank you." *** The city is huge. Compared to the much smaller human city of White Peak—well, you can't really compare them. They're different worlds. I step out of the car, my heart racing as I take it all in. Skyscrapers tower overhead, their glass facades glinting in the sunlight. The sidewalks are packed with people, all rushing to their destinations, their chatter and laughter mingling with the sound of traffic. It's overwhelming, the sheer size and energy of it all. I'm used to the quiet, the solitude of my little town. Here, everything is bigger, louder, more vibrant. I glance over at Rowan, who's walking beside me, his eyes scanning the crowd. He seems at ease, comfortable in this urban jungle. I envy his confidence. "This way," he says, guiding me towards a large department store. Its windows are filled with 12:31 3/8 51 Ava: Clayton's Departure mannequins dressed in the latest fashions, and I can't help but stare as we pass by. Inside, the store is even more impressive. The floors are polished marble, the ceilings high and adorned with glittering chandeliers. The air is perfumed with the scent of expensive cosmetics and leather goods. I feel out of place in my simple jeans and t-shirt, even with the brand names on their labels—something I'd found excessive, but I'm learning that Clayton doesn't know the meaning of frugal—but Rowan doesn'twww.NoVélWorm.com

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seem to notice. He's too busy keeping an eye on our surroundings, his gaze sharp and alert. We make our way through the aisles, and I steal glances at Rowan. He's different now, more relaxed. and easy-going. During my heat, he had struggled with his own attraction to me, his eyes dark with desire. But now, there's none of that tension between us. He's just Rowan, warm and friendly, a steady presence at my side. If I didn't already know, I never would have suspected him to be the beta of Clayton's pack. I appreciate his company, especially in a place like this. The crowds make me nervous, the constant movement 12:31 4/8 51 Ava: Clayton's Departure and noise setting my nerves on edge. But with Rowan here, I feel safer, more grounded. Shifters are everywhere, mingling with humans. I'd noticed in White Peak and Cedarwood that they never looked twice at me, accepting me as just another human. Now, they glance toward me and scent the air as I pass. Is it the presence of Rowan, or is it me? They can smell your power, Selene says, calm as ever. You no longer smell human. Damn. That's going to make hiding a lot harder. Rather than hiding, it would be more prudent to get stronger so you don't need to hide. Well, she's not wrong. I loiter in the clothing section, running my fingers over the soft fabrics, trying to appear casual. My eyes dart around, searching for the electronics department. It's a challenge, blending in here. The shoppers move with a sense of purpose, their footsteps brisk and their gazes focused. I, on the other hand, feel like a fish out 12:31 5/8 51 Ava Clayton's Departure of water. I've stopped looking at more than one item after looking at the price tag. He seems to sense my unease. "Don't worry about it," he says.

"Clayton said to take care of you." Easy for him to say. I feel like every dollar comes with invisible strings and hopes I don't want to be responsible for. Still, I go through a few more shirts, trying to find some cheap items, wondering how I'm going to distract Rowan so I can buy a burner. Weaving through the racks of clothing, the scent of new fabric mingles with perfumes wafting from the cosmetics counter. I'm honestly surprised so many shifters are in here; it's an assault on my nose, and my sense of smell has never been strong for a shifter. I catch a glimpse of the electronics section, and my heart skips a beat. Rows upon rows of gleaming gadgets, from smartphones to laptops to tablets, all displayed with the same reverence as fine art. I have to get over there. Rowan seems to sense my distraction, his brows furrowing as he follows my gaze. "See something you 12:31 6/8 51 Ava: Clayton's Departure like?" I shake my head quickly, forcing a smile. "Just window shopping." He chuckles, his eyes crinkling at the corners. "Well, don't let me stop you. Go ahead and take a look. I don't think you have a computer in the apartment. Maybe a laptop? Tablet?" My pulse quickens as I nod, trying to appear nonchalant as I break away from him and wander toward the electronics section. My steps are slow, measured, as if I'm just casually browsing. But inside, my mind is racing. As I approach the displays, my eyes are immediately drawn to the smartphones. Sleek, cutting-edge models, each more advanced than the last. My fingers itch to pick one up, to feel the weight of it in my hand. But I can't just grab one and go. That would be too obvious, too suspicious. I need to be smarter than that.www.NoVélWorm.com