

Chapter 27

Ivy

A COUPLE HOURS EARLIER

Abbie and I hurry to change into fresh clothes and we both take quick showers in the staff bathrooms before she has to leave to speak with the king about the arrangements for her departure. As she prepares to leave, she squeezes me tightly, her touch conveying a mixture of affection and unease at what we are about to attempt. “Don’t be late,” she whispers, her warm breath brushing against my cheek as she plants a tender kiss.

Since her departure, I have been restless, pacing back and forth in my room. Even when the servant brings up my dinner, I find myself too consumed by nerves to take a single bite. With trembling hands, I rummage through the cupboard, exchanging my light attire for warmer clothing. I also grab a pair of flat shoes, anticipating the possibility of having to run.

Moving toward the door, I cautiously crack it open, ensuring no one is watching, before retrieving the small key from my pocket. I am astonished that Abbie managed to obtain it from Gannon, shaking my head at the risks she has taken. The unease in my stomach grows, causing me to abandon my dinner and make my way down to the kitchen.

As I enter the bustling kitchen, the evening staff pays me no mind, their attention focused on their end-of-day tasks, thankfully this hour is one of the busiest. I swiftly pour myself a glass of water, desperately seeking relief in its coolness. However, to my dismay, the liquid only seems to intensify my nervousness, sending waves of anxiety coursing through me. Realizing I need to relieve myself, I hurriedly make my way to the servant bathroom, wasting precious time before returning to the kitchen.

Thankfully, the kitchen staff have left to enjoy their own meals, leaving me free to slip out through the back door into the laundry room.

Ignoring the towering shelves and giant washers and dryers that surround me, I make a beeline for the back door. With the key in hand, I insert it into the lock and turn it with a mixture of fear and hope.

A sigh of relief escapes me as the door swings open, revealing a world beyond the confines of the castle. Soon I will be free, I just need to get to that bridge.

Stepping outside, I feel the wind pick up slightly, rustling the leaves on the trees surrounding the place, and the sky darkening from the approaching storm, so far the sky remains free from heavy clouds. But I can smell the rain in the air, making everything feel heavier. I slip out, careful to close the door quietly behind me, and seek shelter under the protective canopy of the fruit trees as I try to make my way to the river at the back of the kingdom grounds.

Using them as cover, I race along the row of trees, pausing occasionally to ensure no guards are watching before continuing my mad dash. I maneuver over the hill and through the graveyard, my heart pounding, until I reach the river that slivers along the back of the castle grounds. Peering back at the castle, I don't see guards moving from their posts or sense any issues, and I let out a breath of relief.

Heading west, I start jogging, keeping my body low to avoid detection. With each step, I feel a sense of liberation building within me. I can't believe I am breaking free from the suffocating confines of the castle and from the oppressive bond that has tormented me for far too long now.

The thought of a future filled with endless possibilities brings a smile to my face, even as my tired legs protest. Finally, I am going to be free, free of the castle, my mate, and free of the bond.

No more of the king silently sitting in my room and making the bond wreak havoc, no more of his scent tormenting me. Excitement bubbles in me as I think of my future possibilities. It will be just me and Abbie again, and, of course, her mate. But I can survive anything as long as I have her by my side.

By the time I reach the halfway point, darkness has enveloped the sky completely. Glancing down at the watch Abbie had given me tightly clasped in my hand, I check the time once more. She instructed me to run straight and follow the river, yet there is no sign of a bridge or any roads up ahead.

The storm overhead is moving in, and it seems like I'm attempting the impossible. Is Abbie sure of the directions? Or is it simply further than I thought?

Coming to a halt, I bend over, resting my hands on my knees as I struggle to catch my breath. Nearly half an hour of relentless running has taken its toll on my weary body. The chill of the night air sends shivers down my spine, and as the moon's feeble

light is swallowed by the encroaching clouds, a sense of anxiety settles over me. I don't like the dark, and the shadows creeping nearer from the trees have my anxiety levels rising.

My teeth throb from breathing against the cool wind and the strain of exertion, and my legs scream in protest, but I push myself to continue, knowing this is my only chance at escaping. Determined to find the spot Abbie has described, I strain my eyes, searching for any sign of it in the darkness. Fear gnaws at me as I stand alone in the inky blackness, unable to shift and relying solely on my human senses. The scent of rain hangs heavy in the air, adding to my growing unease as it starts drowning out other scents.

Every noise, every snap of a twig, sends my head spinning in all directions. Slowing my pace slightly, I squint into the distance, straining to make out any sign of the bridge Abbie's mate had mentioned.

It is at that very moment that distant howls reach my ears, carried on the wind from the direction of the castle which sends my heart into a frenzied flutter. He knows.

My heart skips a beat at the sound of the howls, as the guards communicate with each other. They sound from every direction and I know I'm running out of time. The hairs on the back of

my neck standing on end. The howls resonate with a haunting familiarity. A chill runs through my veins as I realize those howls belong to the wolves who guard the castle grounds.

Fear grips me with an iron fist, my mind racing to find a way out of this predicament but the only one I can see is finding that bridge.