

## CHAPTER 25

25 Ava: A Familiar Scent Selene growls, pacing as she sniffs every corner of the room. Her hackles are stiff. Even though she's just a dog right now, it's still intimidating. That bastard was here, Selene confirms, after sniffing around the bedroom. He won't harm you. Her lip curls back into a soft snarl. I can smell his regret with every step he took. I collapse, my legs too weak to hold me up. That refreshed, revitalized feeling is gone. Only fear remains. "What am I going to do? I can't stay here. If he found me, that means Dad can find me." Perhaps. Selene stretches with a large yawn. I would not worry yet, cub. You are not as defenseless as you once were, and you cannot run forever. "But—" You cannot run forever, Selene repeats forcefully, and I fall silent, struggling against the panic fluttering against my ribcage. One day, you might have to fight 14-46 – 177 25 Ava: A Familiar Scent back. Fight back? I'd never imagined fighting back. How can a wolfless defect fight back? You are not wolfless, she reminds me, settling on the couch after a few circles. You are strong. You have me. We will not return to your pack. "What will we do?" I ask helplessly. Selene yawns again. Live, she says simply. Just as you have been. Do not borrow trouble before it finds you. \*\*\* I sigh and fall onto the couch cushions, trying to let Selene's words wash over me. Live. Just live. It sounds so simple when she says it like that. Selene lifts her head, those piercing blue eyes fixing me with an intent stare. You cannot keep going as you have been, though. Your body is soft. Weak. You must strengthen it. A frown tugs at my lips. "What do you mean?" She pushes my arm with her cold, wet nose. Exercise. 14:46 — 217 25 Ava: A Familiar Scent Train your body as you would your mind. You cannot rely solely on me to protect you forever. I blink at her. I'm not completely soft. I've had to learn to run. But to Selene, I'm soft. I guess that makes sense. I'm nothing compared to shifters. She wants me to get fit. To toughen up, build muscle, increase my stamina. A tremor of trepidation runs through me, but I can't deny the logic in her words. If Todd—or anyone from my pack—comes for me again, I need to be able to defend myself. My only chance at true freedom is becoming strong enough to fight back if necessary. With a slow nod, I steel my resolve. "Okay. What do I need to do?" The next morning, I approach Mrs. Elkins with a request to leave work early three days a week. I spin a vague story about a class I've decided to take, not daring to reveal the real reason. Mrs. Elkins's brow furrows in concern, but she doesn't pry. "Of course, dear. As long as you can have your work done before you leave, I don't mind at all." 14:46 3/7 25 Ava: A Familiar Scent Relief washes over me. "Thank you, Mrs. Elkins. I really appreciate your understanding." She gives me one of her warm, grandmotherly smiles. "Not a problem, Ava. Just take care of yourself, alright?" I force a smile in return, her kindness lancing through my chest. If only she knew... That evening, Selene leads me through a series of basic calisthenics in the privacy of my small living room- push-ups, sit-ups, air squats, a hundred each. My muscles strain and burn with the unaccustomed exertion, but I grit my teeth and push through the discomfort. This becomes our new routine. Three nights a week, after leaving work early, I meet with a self-defense instructor named Kyle that Selene somehow dug up. He's an older packless wolf, his lined face and calloused hands speaking of a hard life. But his pale blue eyes hold a kindness that puts me at ease from the start. To Kyle, Selene is just an ordinary husky tagging along with her owner. He doesn't seem to notice

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anything 25 Ava: A Familiar Scent amiss, which is probably for the best. I'm not sure I could explain the truth even if I wanted to. The training is grueling. Kyle runs me through basic strikes, blocks, grapples and takedowns, pushing me to my limits. I leave each session bruised, my body screaming in protest. But I persevere, following Selene's firm encouragement. Because with each passing week, I can feel myself growing stronger. My endurance increasing, my movements becoming more fluid and precise. I'm toughening up, preparing myself for whatever challenges may still lie ahead. No longer will I be a helpless victim waiting for someone else to save me. A few nights a week, I come home to the scent of Lucas in my apartment, but I have yet to catch sight of him. I'm not sure how to feel about that, so I try not to think about it too much. I changed the locks, but he still makes it in. More shifters have been appearing in town, stopping by The Novel Grind. I can hear them talking about war between the Blackwood and Westwood packs. I want 577 25 Ava: A Familiar Scent to know more, but I don't know how to dig up the information. It isn't like I can just check this sort of news on the internet—werewolves tend to lie low with their pack information. I haven't heard any more talk about me, though. I'm not sure what that means, and I'm too scared to find out. I should probably reach out to the pack alpha here, but I don't know how he feels about my family or my pack. I can't risk him wanting to hand me over. So I just—live. Like Selene said. I go to my class. I work at The Novel Grind. I train. I'm not at ease, though Selene doesn't seem too concerned. I can't help looking over my shoulder more often these days. But aside from Lucas' presence in my room, his scent all over my things, there's nothing different around me. Until now. I put on a fake smile, looking at the person in front of me like I don't recognize them. "Hello. What would you like to order today? We are currently

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