

## CHAPTER 76

76 Ava: Saved Lucas' scent hits me after I've already tried to murder him. An unmistakable blend of the outdoors, of amber and campfire smoke, of something so uniquely mate that it draws me in even through the pain of our past. It's him. He's here. The knife clatters from my trembling hand as every muscle in my body goes lax with relief. I'd been so tense, coiled tight like a spring ready to snap, terrified of losing my life tonight. But now Lucas is here. He came for me. "Lucas," I breathe out, hope and prayer all in one, the sound barely more than a whisper. My entire body crumples, overworked in its stress. He's really here. I'm not dreaming. He's not a hallucination. This is real. Real. My mate. My savior. 10:07 76 Ava: Saved Strong arms wrap around me, drawing me in against an embrace both hard and warm, filled with assurance and yearning. His hands hold me as if I'm some tender, precious thing, going from my back, up to the back of my head, brushing gently against my hair. He's dropping kisses over the top of my head, against my eyebrows, then my eyes, whispering my name in a ragged chant before crushing me to him once again. "Ava. Ava. Sweet Ava. You're safe now. Shh, it's okay. I've got you, Ava. You're safe now." His voice rumbles, vibrating his chest against my cheek. One hand cradles my head, the other runs soothing lines down my back." I want to respond. I want to ask him why he's here. To thank him for coming. To tell him how terrified I was. To explain everything. But only a choked sob comes out as all the emotions of the last few days takes over, gripping my body in a cold-fingered grip of horror and distress. Tears pour down my face, soaking into the fabric of his shirt as I cling to him, as if letting him go means I can never see freedom again. Lucas just holds me closer. "It's alright, sweetheart. Let it out. I'm here now. No one's going to hurt you again." 121 76 Ava Saved "Sir, we need to move," a shifter I didn't notice murmurs from behind him. I want to look at him, but Lucas holds my head firmly against his chest, rubbing me in that soothing rhythm as I try with desperate gasps and sobs to gather some semblance of control. "What do you need to bring with you?" Lucas asks, and I shake my head. Nothing. There's nothing here worth keeping. "Okay. I'm going to carry you, Ava. We need to go fast, before anyone notices you're gone." I nod, a short, choppy movement of my head, blowing out a shuddering breath, then filling my lungs again. Another breath out. He shifts his arms, sliding one under my legs and lifting me as though I weigh no more than a sack of potatoes. I'm too exhausted to feign modesty, or worry if I'm too heavy. I just lean against him, trying to breathe in a way that sounds less... wet. 76 Ava Saved "Let's go," he says, but he's talking over his shoulder, so I close my eyes and relax against him. As he carries me out of the room, I fight the urge to think about the past—his rejection, my complicated feelings for Clayton, or the tangled web that brought me here. I just want to be a boneless lump in Lucas' arms, soaking in his presence and the promise of freedom. [BWWw.nOvEl@oRm.cOm](#)

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ut then a nagging thought tugs at my consciousness, and I jerk slightly in his hold. "Wait," I murmur, struggling to find my voice. "I think there's a tracker in my phone." Lucas doesn't hesitate. He fishes the burner phone out of my pocket and hands it to one of the shifters accompanying us. Without blinking, the strange shifter crushes the device in his hand, destroying any potential tracking device. Next, he produces a small canister and sprays me down with a fine mist. The scent is earthy and familiar, very neutral-seeming. "This will help conceal your scent for a while," he explains, before handing me a small pill. "And swallow this. It's a long-lasting scent diffuser that will make it harder for anyone to track 76 Ava: Saved you by scent." I obey without question, trusting Lucas and his team implicitly. The pill leaves a bitter taste in my mouth, but I welcome the added protection it provides. It occurs to me that I had so much suspicion when Clayton came to my rescue, but with Lucas—despite our history—I can feel so comfortable. Comfortable enough to allow myself to be drugged. Mate bonds are crazy like that, I guess. With the precautions taken, things move at a clipped pace. Lucas leads the way, his strides purposeful and determined, and the strange shifter with the scent diffusing drugs is right behind him. Four more appear out of the shadows as we leave the house. The woods envelop us, the darkness broken only by the occasional beam of moonlight filtering through the canopy above. The humid summer air is heavy with the scent of earth and foliage. Our footsteps are muffled by the soft ground, but the snapping of twigs and rustling of leaves/betray our passage. I can't smell a single one of them, I realize. These scent diffusers are amazing. 15:08 — .' 5/8 <76 Ava: Saved We move as quickly as stealth allows, weaving through the trees and underbrush. Lucas never falters, his grip on me secure and unwavering. I press my face against his chest, focusing on the steady rhythm of his heartbeat and the reassuring strength of his arms. I should probably tell him I can walk, but my entire body protests at the thought. Time seems to blur as we navigate the labyrinth of the forest, putting as much distance as possible between us and the Blackwood territory. The only sounds are their controlled breathing and the whisper of the wind through the branches. "Where are we going?" I ask, after what feels like hours. Lucas' breathing has never faltered, even while carrying me all this while. "White Peak," he answers, his words soft. "We have cars. From there, you'll be taken straight to Westwood. I have to stay here—" there's agony on his face as he says this, a spasm in his jaw, "—because we have business with Blackwood. But your safety came first." I nod. I've learned enough to understand that this is war. 76 Ava: Saved I'm not sure how it will all turn out, but I'm just grateful to be out of there. "Okay. Can I use your phone?" He looks confused, but slows down to grab it out of his pocket and hand it to me, unlocking it before he does. So. I immediately open his messaging app, trying not to read any of his message previews. That would be rude, after all. But I'm startled to see Clayton's name on one of the more recent conversations. Fighting the urge to snoop, I type a message to Lisa, explaining whose phone it is and where they're taking me. It takes only a second for her to respond. [LISA: I'll meet you in Granite City.] 1 1108 — <76 Ava: Saved 66 On a scale of 1-10, how excruciating was this wait...? Comment 15 R Post your first comment! Vote 12 Lenaleia

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