

CHAPTER 73

73 Ava: Final Countdown There's nothing to pack. The few clothes I have are courtesy of Mom shopping for me, and I have no interest in keeping them when I leave. I'll go with a ripped pair of jeans and a shirt that I took scissors to, cutting off its holey hem until it looks tattered on purpose instead of because it's been washed too many times. The only shoes I have are the heels I wore when they brought me home. Those, I put in a backpack Phoenix gave me from his old school days. Despite a decade of sitting in our attic, it smells like marijuana mixed with the cedar our home is built with. -Big brother was a bit of a rebel, I guess. I have a pair of sneakers that are a half-size too small. I'll have some blisters, but I can buy a new pair somewhere. It'll be easier to run in them than heels. The burner phone stares at me from its position on my desk. I know without a doubt that it has a tracer on it. I still have no idea if the phone Clayton gave me was tampered with; I know I had a level of paranoia 117 73 Ava: Final Countdown that bordered on ridiculous during my stay with the Aspen wolves. But this phone? I'm not paranoid. Phoenix has decided that it's better to wipe my existence from memory than keep me as a hesitant ally. So stupid, to ever think our interests could align. I consider reaching out to Lisa, but I don't want Phoenix or his goons to get to her. What if my desperate attempt to seek solace from Lisa only leads them straight to her doorstep, putting her in harm's way? No way. I can't risk Lisa's safety. She's too precious. I won't be the one to drag her into the darkness that has consumed my life. Phoenix is sneaking me out, ostensibly to the airport, tonight. I have to figure out another plan before then. So far, I've got nothing. If there's a tracker on my phone, there's a good chance that he wants me to make it—at least for a 73 Ava: Final Countdown little while. Or, it's just there as insurance in case I escape whatever ambush he has planned... f@ck, I can't keep my head straight around all the possibilities. Paranoia has me in a chokehold I can't escape, no matter how much I try to think my way through. 1 No money. I can try to steal some, but from who? Mom and Dad are out. Jessa's out. Phoenix isn't here yet. Only the guards outside are near, and they're not about to whip out any wallets for me. I can try overpowering them, but it's a fool's dream to think I could take three of them. My training was in self-defense, not self-offense. Circle upon circle, my thinking can't escape this trap that I'm set to walk into. Lisa's the only way out I can think of, but there has to be something else. Anything else. But there's nothing. By six, I'm desperate. I can hear the sounds of my family returning home, one by one. Dad's heavy, thudding footsteps. Mom's st

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ilettoes clicking against 1/2 73 Ava: Final Countdown the floor. The way Jessa's truck roars into our driveway, like it's trying to announce its presence to the entire f@cking neighborhood. None of them call me down for dinner. None of them give a shit if I eat. The only reason I even cook is because if I don't, there won't be any meal for me from what Mom brings home. They're in the kitchen. Laughter and conversation flows upstairs, the sounds of a happy family. Dad's rumbling voice paired with Jessa's chatter, and Mom's occasional directions called out with a smile. Yeah, when it comes to the four of them, they're perfect. It's only me who's never fit in. I struggle in the silence of my room, listening in to a family who doesn't want me, only missing the person who's intending to kill me tonight. Selene's absence hurts more than ever. The crystal around my neck reminds me of her, and I've developed a habit of fiddling with it. Every time I do, I have to tell myself to stop before I break the chain 73 Ava: Final Countdown An ominous sensation crawls up my spine, making me shudder, my arms jerking a bit with the force of the motion. Despite the early evening hour of 6 pm, the summer sun still blazes bright, casting long shadows across the yard as I stare out the window. A hollow ache settles in my chest. If I die- The thought of leaving without saying goodbye tears at my resolve. What if this is the last time I get to talk to her? The weight of that realization is suffocating. With a trembling exhale, I snatch up the burner phone and begin to type. [AVA: It's me. I just wanted to check in before things get crazy. I love you, bestie bae, my soul twin, my other half of crazy.] The response is almost instantaneous. [LISA: Ave! What's going on? You okay?] A sad smile tugs at my lips at her concern. Lisa has been my rock through everything, and I don't know what I'd do without her steadfast friendship. 73 Ava: Final Countdown [AVA: I'm alright for now. Phoenix is getting me out of here tonight, but I'm not sure what's going to happen after that.] [LISA: Where is he taking you? Should I be worried?] I can picture her brow furrowed, her dark eyes narrowed with worry. Guilt twists in my gut. We're supposed to escape this place together. She's been waiting for me to give her the word. But I can't. [AVA: It's a long story, one I'll explain when I can. I just wanted to say that I love you, and you're the best friend I could ever ask for. No matter what happens, please know that.] The weight of those words settles heavily on my shoulders. This could very well be the last time I get to express how much Lisa means to me. [LISA: Ava, you're scaring me. What's going on? This wasn't our plan?] [AVA: I can't say much. If things go sideways, I might not get the chance to talk to you again for a while. Just be careful, okay? And know that I love you.] 19:01 6/7 <73 Ava: Final Countdown My chest tightens as I hit send, the finality of those words sinking in. There's every possibility that this is my final goodbye. Comment View All > R Post your first comment! Vote 12 Fandom Swipe left to continue > Send Gift <

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