

CHAPTER 77

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77 Ava: Running The haunting howls of wolves echo through the night, sending fear deep into my soul. I shudder. The strange shifter with the drugs curses under his breath. “They’re on the hunt,” he says, his voice low and urgent. Lucas’ arms tighten as he runs. It’s not the most comfortable, with all the jostling, but he manages to run while holding me as though my extra burden doesn’t affect him at all. How long has it been? Hours? That he’s maintained his pace without faltering. I can’t help but admire it, even as I worry. “It’s going to be okay,” he murmurs, his tone cold with determination. We pick up the pace, the shadows of the forest seeming to press in around us as we hurry along. The howls grow louder, closer, sending icy tendrils of fear slithering through my veins. 377 < 77 Ava: Running “How much farther?” I ask, my voice a hushed whisper. Lucas’ subordinate’s response is grim. “Too far to be comfortable.” There are a few grunts of agreement among the other wolves. “We should have shifted. We would be there by now.” Lucas just growls. “Not an option.” The weight of his words settles over me, and I realize with a pang that he knows—he knows I can’t shift. I swallow hard. How long has he known? It isn’t as though it was a secret in our pack. But it still hurts. The howls grow louder still, echoing through the trees, the sound itself nipping at our heels. Anxiety spikes my pulse and I cling to Lucas, drawing strength from his solid presence. Suddenly, a rustling sound comes from our left, and Lucas’ head whips around. He signals to the others, and they fan out, forming a protective circle around us. Tension crackles in the air, thick and palpable, as we wait. The forest seems to hold its breath with us. 13.08 217 < 77 Ava: Running partners in this agonizing moment. Then, a figure emerges from the shadows—a massive wolf, its eyes glowing like embers in the darkness. It snarls, baring wicked fangs, I tense. But Lucas doesn’t flinch. With a fluid motion, he sets me down and steps forward, planting himself between the wolf and me. “Stand down,” he growls, his voice laced with an unmistakable command. The wolf hesitates, its hackles raised, but something in Lucas’ unwavering presence seems to give it pause. For a long, tense moment, they regard each other, locked in a silent battle of wills. Then, slowly, the wolf’s snarl fades, and it lowers its head in a grudging show of submission. Lucas doesn’t spare it a second glance. He turns back to me, his expression softening ever so slightly as he scoops me up once more. “Just a rogue,” he says, like that’s nothing. “I can run,” I say, pushing at his arms until he lets me down. “I can’t shift, but I can run. I’m fine. We’ll 13:08 3/7 77 Ava: Running probably make better time if you aren’t holding me.” His face says that he wants to protest, but he thinks better of it. “Fine. Let’s go. Stay close, Ava. Vester will stay on your other side. We’ll keep you safe.” Another howl. I nod. “Okay.” Vester grimaces. “They still haven’t caught our trail, but they’re getting closer. We’re still five miles out.” Lucas grabs at my hand, squeezing it in reassurance. My lips quirk

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o a small smile as I squeeze back. I can do this. I have to. As we start running, the ache in my feet from the ill-fitting sneakers is a distant concern. My heart pounds, but not from exertion—not yet. Terror still grips me, its icy tendrils constricting my lungs with every rasping breath. But each footfall on the forest floor kindles a tiny spark of hope within me. Freedom. The word echoes through my mind with every stride, fueling my legs to push harder, faster. The men around me struggle to keep pace, their harsh pants filling the air. But I’m just getting started. 10.08 77 Ava Running “Pace yourself,” Lucas warns, his brow furrowed with concern. I shake my head, unable to spare the breath for a reply. Selene’s words ring in my ears, a silent chorus urging me onward. Don’t run. She’d made it sound like it would be extraordinary if I did. And it is. I can feel it now, a thrumming beneath my skin, like electricity crackling through my veins. “You need to shift,” I say, knowing deep inside that I’m right. “We’ll be faster if you do.” Lucas’ stride falters, and he grips my arm, pulling me -to an abrupt halt. His eyes bore into mine, a kaleidoscope of emotions swirling in their golden depths—disbelief, confusion, worry. For a long moment, we’re frozen, the world around us fading into a blur of shadows and silence. It’s just us, our ragged breaths intermingling in the scant space between us. Then, finally, he nods. 11.08 5/7 77 Ava: Running A flurry of movement erupts around us as the men shed their clothes, tossing them haphazardly to the forest floor. I gather the discarded garments, stuffing them into a backpack one of them had carried, my fingers trembling with a heady mixture of adrenaline and exhilaration. When the last of them has shifted, a chorus of growls and snarls greets me, their wolf forms rippling with coiled power. Lucas meets my gaze once more, his eyes shining with a newfound intensity that sends a thrill through me. He believes me. I run my fingers over his dark fur. He’s a magnificent beast, twice as large as the others, with fur like midnight and those golden eyes that are as familiar in his wolf form as they are in his human one. With a sharp nod, I turn and begin to run once more, my body buzzing with an energy I’ve never felt before. The wolves lope easily at my side, their strides effortlessly matching my pace. And then, something changes. It’s like a dam breaking, a torrent of raw power 07 < 77 Ava: Running surging through me. My steps grow lighter, faster, the ground beneath my feet passing at a rate that should have been impossible. My eyes are sharper, as though it can see everything at once. The thrumming in my veins intensifies, every cell in my body vibrating with a primal force I can’t begin to comprehend. I’m still human- But I’m also something more. A breathless laugh escapes me as I pour on the speed, reveling in this strange exhilaration. The wolves streak alongside me, their bodies little more than flickering shadows in my periphery. For the first time in my life, I feel truly alive—more than human. And I’m just getting started. Comment View All > Post your first comment! Vote 12 Fando