

## Chapter 1

### The Dungeon

**\*\*Three years later...\*\* "Ava Davis!"**

The gruff yell of a guard yelling her name startled Ava from her fraught sleep. Momentarily caught in the fuzzy in-between state of dreaming and the waking world, Ava felt the blissfully numb for the precious few seconds before reality caught back up to her.

All too quickly, the dark stone walls surrounding her came back into focus, the stale smell of under-washed Wolves caused her nostrils to flare. As she shifted on her rock-hard cot, the aching in her back wrenched reluctant groans from her perpetually parched throat. Thirsty. Hungry. Sore and tired. Ava's breath caught as the misery of her reality weighed on her like a boulder crushing her chest.

And yet, tonight was nothing special. She'd woken up in a similar state, or worse, every night for the past three years. Ever since everyone she'd ever known and loved had turned their backs on her and left her to rot, alone and forgotten. Then, she recalled her dream. \*For the love of the moon\*, Ava's thoughts were as wretched as the rest of her felt. \*Even in my dreams, I can't get any goddamn peace.\*

"Davis, I said move!" The guard banged her cell door with a baton. "Catherine Maddison! You, too."

A sharp pain knifed through Ava's torso as she made to stand. Biting back another groan, she only took a moment to put pressure on her bruised ribs, determined to catch her breath and compose herself before making her way to the door. The ache that throbbed across her midsection was bone-deep, but Ava gritted her teeth and didn't make a sound.

Over the past three years, Ava had learned how this place operated, what was important to survive. Her name and status, none of that mattered in this depressing little hellhole. In fact, they'd only put a target on her back when she'd first gotten here. It hadn't taken her too long to realize that pride wouldn't get her far among the prisoners. It had taken her even less time to realize that her pride would get her even less so with the guards. Everyone was a prisoner here, whether they'd been sentenced here or not, and Ava represented the very system that had ruined all their lives.

There would be no solace here, no rescue. That had been her first lesson, but it wouldn't be her last.

She hadn't been imprisoned long the first time she was drug from her bunk. Rough hands yanked her across the cold concrete floor and, before her lupin eyes could adjust to the dark, a boot caught her in the stomach.

"Like that, Beta bitch?" The voice that taunted her was deep for a female and raspy. "Who's top dog, now?"

Gritting her teeth against the pain, Ava grabbed her attacker's foot and yanked hard, throwing them off-balance. As the shadowy figure crashed to the ground, Ava was on them. She rolled to her knees and leapt upon the assailant's chest with reflexes honed by years of combat training.

"Still me." Ava sneered.

Ava pulled back her fist and smashed it into the attacker's face one, two, three times before another hand grabbed her wrist.

"Ooh, she's feisty!" Another voice barked.

Shit. It was dark and she'd assumed the person attacking her was alone, a stupid rookie mistake.

The unknown assailant behind her twisted her arm, wrenching her shoulder until it popped. Ava gasped, her body going rigid and allowing the attacker to drag her off of the first goon who was currently writhing in pain, hand clasped to a pulverized nose.

Ava felt a final flash of satisfaction before she was shoved to the ground. Suddenly, a couple of attackers seemed to multiply as half a dozen aggressive shadows surrounded her.

"What do you want from me?" She gasped, her voice laced with anger and pain.

A hot, wet glob pelted her in the face. "You still think you're better than us. You're about to learn your place."

Then a foot slammed into her dislocated shoulder, grinding the abused joint into the stone floor below.

Ava screamed and, as if her pained cry was a cue for the mob, the pelting began in earnest and didn't let up.

Ava reflexively curled in on herself, raising her one working hand over her head trying desperately, futilely to protect herself. Whenever she kicked, there was someone there to hold her down. Whenever she opened her mouth to scream, an arm was there to snake its way around her throat, cutting off her cries for help.

There were just too many of them and she'd never been taught to fight alone. She was supposed to have her Pack for backup, that's how every Wolf was raised. The lone wolf seldom survives. Now, Ava was the lone wolf against a rabid mob. Ava knew that if it weren't for the silver shackles keeping all of their Wolves at bay, she'd be dead. And no one would care.

Ava learned the value of silence that night and it had served her well these past three agonizingly slow years. After she'd been jumped, she'd gone to a guard and was sent to her cot without supper for the inconvenience. Even though it was nearly impossible to avoid physical altercations in the prison, the gang beatings ended after that night. Ava suspected that had more to do with Layla than any of the guards, though.

"Davis. I will not ask nicely again." \*Damn\*. She'd tarried too long, and the guard had circled back around to her cell. The broad female stormed up to Ava, grasping her by a bruised wrist and pulled her out of the cell. In the hallway, she was shoved to the back of a line of girls being paraded out of the main living area. "Was the other night not enough to teach you to toe the line?"

Ava choked back the tears that immediately rushed to the surface at the crass reminder of three nights ago, by far the hardest lesson the dungeon had given to Ava.

\*Right\*, Ava thought. \*You don't need a mob for things to get deadly down here.\*

Ava was flat on her back, reeling from the sudden severance of her connection to Mia, her Wolf. Different from the usual suppression caused by their silver shackles, Mia was...gone.

She heard a choked gasp and looked over to see Layla, \*sweet Layla\*, gasping for air that couldn't quite make it past the gaping slash across her throat.

"\*No\*," Ava fought down her pain and confusion, crawling to kneel beside the dying girl. How did this happen? Who'd hurt Layla? She was the kindest soul Ava had ever met in her life, the only prisoner who never caused or attracted trouble. She'd taken Ava under her wing and saved her from herself countless times over the years. This was...unfathomable. "Layla, I'm so sorry," she sobbed. "Please hold on."

Through her own blood and tears, Layla's lips twitched up into a smile. She whispered something Ava couldn't quite catch right before the light faded from her warm brown eyes.

"Layla -" A baton came down on Ava's back as she was dragged away, sobbing not just for the loss of another friend, but for the soul who never deserved to be here and would never get the chance to leave.

Ava knew she'd have to do it for her, somehow. It was Layla's last wish, even if Ava couldn't hear her, she knew what Layla had reminded her with her last breath. \*California.\*

"We have enough."

Ava looked up to find herself in a holding room with a dozen other females. An unfamiliar female walked down the line of women, examining them closely. When she came to Ava at the end of the line, the female grimaced at Ava's smattering of deep purple bruises. "They'll do," she nodded.

With a shove, the guard behind her prompted her to follow the line of girls out of a set of metal doors Ava hadn't seen since she'd been brought here.

A gentle breeze caressed her feverish skin, halting Ava in her tracks. Looking up, she nearly cried at the sight of the moon cradled by a sea of stars overhead. They were outside! For the first time in three years, Ava could see the sky. By the sobbing gasps around her, Ava knew she wasn't the only one feeling a weight lifted from their shoulders.

"Enough! Get them inside before we're seen." The clipped command was the last thing Ava heard before a back was thrown over her head. Cries from the girls were muffled by the sound of an engine revving to life. Ava was hefted bodily into the air, ribs screaming, and thrown into what could only be the back of a van. Her protests joined the other women's as metal

doors slammed shut and their new cage began to move. After three years, Ava was finally leaving the dungeon. Only, she had a sinking feeling she was going to wish she'd stayed.