

## Chapter 139

### California Dreaming

"Xavier?" Ava asked, somewhat struggling to process the presumed unlikeliness of Xavier showing up right here, right now, in the midst of what appeared to be the beginning of some sort of uprising. "What are you doing here?" "What do you think I'm doing here?" He scoffed and moved further into the room, closing the door firmly behind him as sounds of shouting and even, she could swear, a few rounds of gunfire rang just outside. "You hit your panic button, didn't you? Here I am."

Ava waved off his glib tone, "Yeah, no, I get that part, thank you. I mean, what are you doing here? In California? I thought you would call my brother to contact the Federation or something. I didn't expect you to come all the way across the country yourself. You have so much going on already."

A loud crash at the door jolted them all into silence as they waited to see if the interruption was a legitimate threat or simply the byproduct of the

fall of an illegal cabal. When the scuffle moved further down the hall, they finally relaxed enough for Xavier to turn to Ava with a small cocksure smirk.

"I did all that, too. Aiden's around here somewhere helping the Federation's team round up and catalog the abducted. And thanks to the witches, things back home have stabilized for the most part, at least where it comes to running the safe houses."

"That's a relief," Ava breathed. "Still, I would never have just expected you to do something like this. I appreciate it, Xavier."

The look he gave her was as inscrutable as the swirl of...feelings that were currently causing various parts of her body to flutter uncontrollably.

"When you're mate is in trouble, you get on a fucking plane."

Her mouth went dry. If it weren't for the bevy of tiny gasps that filled the room, Ava didn't know if she'd have had the willpower to keep herself from showing Xavier just how grateful she was that he'd gotten on that plane.

Planes. Funnily enough, they seemed to be the big catalysts in their relationship, nowadays, ushering in what felt like monumental changes. It took her getting onto that flight to California for their shaky truce to finally mend into a bond that would regrow their friendship over the next

few months. And the fact that Xavier had dropped a war to come and find her....

Ava didn't know what that meant, but it was...seismic. She felt in her blood, her very bones, and in the primordial bond that had linked them together from the very beginning. This wasn't her first falling in love with Xavier, and she hesitated to even give credence to that emotion that always felt so cursed to her.

But, for the first time since she and Xavier had crossed paths in that smoky, dim boudoir nearly a year ago, Ava felt as if she'd found her mate.

As it turned out, the Federation did not, in fact, take matters of international trafficking lightly. Where local law enforcement saw nameless, homeless transients, the Californian Federation saw a direct attack on the very foundation of their government. A fact that Ava found heartening. As she'd learned since coming across the country, there was no perfect government, no mythical utopian blueprint that all aspiring societies could simply pick up and follow.

But at least the Federation cared, whatever their reasons. Ava was beginning to realize that was the true place to start, the foundation that the Alliance had lacked, and the reason why it had ultimately failed. And, as she watched Xavier and her brother work in nearly seamless tandem with the forces sent by the Federation, the seeds of an idea began to grow.

And later, after dozens of criminals had been hauled away and even more rescued combatants were set on their way home, those seeds began to blossom into one of Ava's favorite things. A plan.

"Are you sure you want to go so soon? I know that the kids will really miss you," Elodie said from the place she'd been rooted in for what felt like hours, sat securely by her daughter's side.

Thoroughly exhausted from the entire ordeal, Eliza was fast asleep curled up in her mother's lap. Protectively overseeing both emotionally depleted women was Reyes, who looked as if he couldn't be happier to be so exhausted as he wrapped a comforting arm over Elodie's shoulders.

The sight lifted Ava's heart. It felt as if she'd managed to leave this place better than she had found it, even though she hadn't been a member of Bright Light for very long. Still, being here, getting to know these people beside her, her friends, had been the highlight of her time in California.

If she didn't take another thing from her time here, she knew that what she'd learned at Bright Light would have been enough to make Layla proud. Ava had set out to find something in California, and she'd come back with several somethings. Including a way to move forward.

"Don't worry, I'll be back," Ava reassured her with a smile. "I mean, I have family here. And I'm not just talking about my brother."

Elodie took her hand in her own and gave it a squeeze. "We feel the same, and you're always welcome here." Her voice broke as tears once again filled her eyes, "We can never repay what you've done for us."

"You already have," Ava whispered. "I don't know if I ever got a chance to mention that coming to California was a...very good friend's last wish. She was certain that if we made it out of the Alliance, we'd find something. In my first few months here, I felt like a complete failure. Like I'd let Layla down. And then I met you all. I don't feel that way anymore."

They shared a final round of hugs and parted ways, but it wasn't by any means a goodbye.

"Are you almost finished packing? I brought you a few more things I thought you might need."

Ava took Bren's offerings and set them aside to wrap her friend in a tight embrace, "I'm going to miss you, too."

Bren clutched her close and sniffled, "It just feels like time flew by, you know? And, damn it, I was looking forward to having you around when the baby came!"

"At least you'll have your mom around," Ava laughed, and Bren rolled her eyes.

"Yeah, I know. I meant that I wanted you around to keep me from strangling her."

"Well, if what we discussed goes as planned, I'll be back in time for the birth."

Bren sniffed again dragged Ava back in for another hug, "You had better be. It's a good plan, a really fucking good plan! And I'm really proud of you for even wanting to go through with it."

"Thank you, Bren," Ava sighed, nervous anticipation already beginning to build in the pit of her stomach. "I literally couldn't have done it without you. Those books are, like, insanely dry."

They share a laugh and finally pull apart. "I'll leave you to it, I guess," Bren said, rising to her feet. "I'm meeting Aiden to go check out his exhibit. They just hooked up the water features, and he's sneaking me in for a sneak peek." "Don't do anything I wouldn't do!"

Bren threw her a wink and made her exit, leaving Ava alone, gazing around the room that had been a solace to her for the last five months. When she heard the door open again, at first, she assumed it was Bren back to convince her to pack just one more item that she might need, but the immediate quickening of her pulse told her different

"Are you ready to go?" Xavier asked.

Ava sighed as she turned to consider her bags, two suitcases, and an overnight bag filled to the brim with any and everything a nesting Bren thought Ava would need back east.

"This is the most stuff I've owned since I was...since ever, actually," Ava muttered. "And I just realized that it's all virtually useless where we're going."

Xavier shrugged, "Space is tight at the moment, but it won't always be. If you want one, I'm going to make sure you have a home to come back to, Ava. Whether it's in Red Moon or not. No one deserves it more than you."

"I don't want you to spend the rest of your life apologizing, Xavier. We both have a lot to be sorry about...." Ava paused to lick her lips. "You definitely more than me, but you've done it. You've said sorry, and I believe you." Xavier came to take a seat next to her, his weight dipping the bed just enough that their thighs brushed against each other ever so slightly. Ava's mind immediately zeroed in on the scant connection.

"I've been learning that it's not just about saying the words, Ava. So, if you don't want me to apologize anymore, then I won't," he said and paused before clearing his throat. "But, I've been putting in a lot of work trying to learn how to live up to a new standard. I agree that I've spent too much time beating myself up for shit that I can't change, but I want to change."

Ava's throat went dry as she watched his Adam's apple bob underneath the weight of his consternation. She knew that whatever he was currently working through in his head, the next words that were going to come out of his mouth were as much for him as they were for her.

So she stayed quiet and just listened.