

## Chapter 39

### I Hate You

Ava awoke to find herself in a strange room. The shiny black lacquered ceiling panels assured her that she was still in the club, but the absence of a diaphanous bed canopy told her that she was not, in fact, in her own room.

Ava blinked into the morning light streaming in through the bedroom window and made to sit up. She sighed and seized up, a hand going to her throat. Goddess, that hurt.

Actually, everything hurt. Every muscle in Ava's body seemed to be screaming at her to give it up already and go back to sleep! She paused, taking stock of her various - numerous- aches and pains.

Her shoulder blades were sore from where she'd laid pressed against the tub's porcelain floor for too long. She grimaced - so was her back. Her

wrists were on fire, and she'd bet her breakfast that she was sporting some gnarly bruises around her wrists, and she moved a foot - yep!, around her ankles, too.

Her jaw felt tight and stiff from how it had sat ajar for so long around the gag. Everything else felt internal, like the pressure she felt in her lungs, and the burning sensation that snaked its way up her esophagus and throat, like the world's worst case of acid reflux.

Ava felt like she'd just gone a round with a bullet train. Or a few hours in the clutches of a psychotic sex cult. Same difference really.

Criminy, she didn't even want to look at water right now, but damn if she wasn't thirsty.

"You're awake." Like a specter, Xavier appeared in the bedroom's open doorway. Ava nearly whimpered when he held out a glass of water. "Drink up."

She took it eagerly, nodding her thanks and immediately wincing when the movement disturbed what Ava knew had to be the mother of all bruises around her neck.

"Yeah, you probably shouldn't go headbanging for a while. One wrong move and might just fall off."

Ava snorted and winced again.

"Sorry," Xavier raised a palm in apology before sitting down heavily in the chair he'd pulled over to be closer to her bedside.

She sipped gingerly at the glass, the cool liquid sliding down her throat like a snow drift on broken glass. Xavier reached out a hand toward her forehead, causing Ava to rear back despite the pummeling pain that rang throughout her neck, shoulders, and back. Ava squeezed her eyes shut and released a slow, pained breath out of her nose.

For goddess' sake, even her nostrils were raw.

"I'm sorry," he said again. "I wanted to check to see if your fever had broken."

The pain ebbed and Ava reopened her eyes. She was shocked to see that Xavier had moved back, keeping his distance after clearly making her uncomfortable.

In fact, what was...all of this? Xavier sat as far away from Ava as his chair would allow. His arms were folded in front of him, and there were visible bags underneath his eyes. Ava couldn't recall ever seeing Xavier look so

tired. And since they'd reentered one another's lives, she'd never seen him so...well behaved.

Up until he'd reached for her, she'd nearly completely forgotten the ocean of bad blood between them. And it had probably been the longest stretch of time Xavier had gone before doing something to make her remember it. But even that had been a gentle gesture. One meant to nurture her; not punish or pursue her.

Ava looked down into her glass and saw her haggard reflection staring back. She couldn't handle another one of his tricks, not today. Not after last night.

Ava's breathing became more ragged. The longer she thought about it, and the more she thought about it...Ava squeezed her eyes shut against the headache building behind her eyes. "Where's my money?" When she finally spoke, her voice was husky. She definitely felt worse than she sounded.

"Ava," Xavier sounded pained.

"What," she cut him off. "After that bullshit, the least you can do is make sure I get my cut."

He began to shake his head. What? Was he disappointed in her again?

"Stop it, Xavier. Don't look at me like you don't recognize me. You're the one who put me here. Last night never would have happened if you'd just let me go!"

Ava's words cracked like a whip of truth, stunning Xavier into silence.

"You think that you can come here and nurse me back to health like some stray?" Her voice grew unsteady with anger, "You don't get a cookie for cleaning up your own mess, Xavier."

Every breath she took felt like reopening old wounds, but that was exactly what Ava was in the mood for right now. "I wish it hadn't been you who saved me. From the bathtub...from the tree."

Xavier's eyebrows drew together, but she continued, "I wish I'd never met you. I should have listened to my father and trained to be a fighter like my brother. I'd have been in the training camps, living my life a region away from you. Living my life, Xavier!"

He swallowed, "Ava, I- "

"It took me a year to realize that you weren't coming. Did you realize that? I would sit alone in a dark cell, too afraid of being beaten again to sleep. And I'd pray. I'd pray that you would realize your mistake, that you would choose to believe me no matter what anyone else thought. I just knew that you'd do the right thing and come save me. Because that was who you

were. You were the one who stuck up for others, no matter what it cost you because that's what you valued as a leader."

Ava sniffed back the unbidden tears threatening to overtake her. She didn't want to cry. Not now. "So you don't get to come in three years too late and try to sweep the pieces you made of me under the rug. I almost died last night, Xavier. And I cried. Because I didn't."

It was Xavier's turn to squeeze his eyes shut. It was his turn to look inside and face himself.

"Is that hard for you to hear, Xavier? That I wished that those perverted fuckers had been better at their own game? Why does that hurt you?" She jabbed a finger in his direction, the bruises circling her wrist standing out like a black mirror. "I'll tell you why. Because then my blood would be on your hands, and you would have to live knowing that it would be for fucking nothing. You've pushed your weight around, threatening me, assaulting me, all for the sake of your goddamn punishments, when you know my 'debt to the Red Moon Pack' is a bold-faced lie. You can take your sympathy and your kindness, and I hope you choke on it. I don't want anything to do with it, and I don't want anything to do with you. Because I hate you."

Ava panted, her breaths sawing in and out of her, but this time the pain felt good. She felt even better than she had after her first real talk with Bella. Maybe even better than that scant, fleeting moment with Liam.

There was something intrinsically invigorating about facing down your tormenter and speaking your peace. For Ava, this went even deeper. She felt as if she were finally, finally letting go of those lingering expectations she'd had of Xavier. Despite her best efforts to put up walls around her heart to block out the echoes of the boy he used to be, every time he turned around a thought of a new, twisted way to hurt her, the teenaged girl inside of her who hadn't gotten the chance to grow, cried.

Even greater than the hurt, fear, and anger she felt toward the male Xavier had become, was the crushing devastation that was her disappointment. Xavier was an idol who had let her down time and time again. But unlike anger that only grew hotter, disappointment grew deeper, tunnelling away at the memories of happiness that were meant to carry you through life's hardships.

But Xavier was her hardship. His actions, both passive and persistent, had shaken her mind, her body, and her faith. Had shredded her confidence and sense of self-worth. And, any other day, Ava would have internalized that - chosen to feel that pain or bury it even deeper.

But if the events of last night had taught her anything, it was that there were worse things in the world than Xavier Michaels. He wasn't her Alpha, and he wasn't her bogeyman. He was just someone she'd let have far too much say over her life.

If the life he was forcing her to live was worse than death, then what was the point of playing along?

Xavier ran a silent hand through his hair, unsure of what to say next.

That was fine. As far as Ava was concerned, there was only one thing left to say.

"I fucking hate you, Xavier Michaels."