

Chapter 57

Hard Truth

The ride back to the club was quiet and awfully tense, but Ava could acknowledge that all of the awkwardness probably stemmed from her. On the contrary, Noah didn't give off any particularly strong vibes one way or the other, which only made her more nervous.

Needless to say, she'd never intended for Noah to find out about the stuff with Red Moon. Far beyond the fact that she'd hoped that it wouldn't impact their arrangement, Ava wanted to just be Ava to as many people in her life as she could manage.

For a fleeting date and a half, Noah had just known her as herself. Now, she was Ava the Convict. Ava the Murderer. Just the thought of it was enough to make her feel sick to her stomach.

She turned over the scrap of paper in her hand. She'd clammed up as soon as they'd left the maze, and thankfully, Aiden didn't press her on either of the bombshells that had been dropped on him tonight. He'd simply written his phone number on the back of a flyer and handed it to her, making her promise to call.

The maze, the Red Moon members, her brother suddenly appearing out of thin air...it had all become too much. Ava had silently nodded and walked away without so much as a goodbye. Now, on top of everything else, she was stuck with that gnawing feeling of missing out on a vital opportunity. Just a hug.

This was their one reunion, and she hadn't given her big brother a hug. She felt horrible about it.

"Are you going to call him?" It may have been her paranoia, but Noah's calming voice was beginning to grate on Ava's nerves. Why wouldn't he just come out and say what she knew he was thing already?!

"Of course," her voice was curt and clipped. "He's my brother."

Noah chuffed, "Brothers can be a tricky thing. I don't put too much stock in blood ties."

"You don't know anything about it," she snapped.

"That's fair."

"Then why don't you just ask?!" Her nerves were fraying at the seams, making her sharp. Noah nodded once, "Okay. Ava, did you murder those people?"

She leveled him with a withering glare, "Noah, do you think I murdered those people?"

"I would be surprised if you did. Even so, if other people think that you're an escaped convict, that changes the parameters of our arrangement in a way that I wasn't expecting."

Ava turned away from him, crossing her arms in front of her, "Right. Our arrangement."

He sighed, "A, I just want to talk. I'm not trying to upset you."

His voice was tender enough that Ava felt the tension bunching her insides into knots slowly begin to ebb.

"I didn't kill them. They were my friends."

"But your Pack thinks you're the one who did," he posited gently. When she nodded, and it was clear that her temper had subsided, he continued. "And you went to prison for it."

She nodded silently, still staring out of the window.

"For how long?"

She let out a breath she hadn't realized she'd been holding, "It was supposed to be for life. But the club's owner, Bella Sutton, liberated me and some of the others. I'd been there for three years, by that point." "So that's how you came to be at the club."

Ava nodded, "I'm still technically under house arrest, though. Red Moon's Alpha found me at the club and insisted that I work there to pay off my debt to the Pack." "And how long will that take?"

"He gave me three months to earn five hundred-thousand dollars." Noah snorted, but remained silent, waiting for her to continue. "If I make it, I'll be acquitted or whatever the Pack's equivalent is. The important thing is that I'll finally be free." "That seems..."

"Unlikely?" Ava rolled her eyes, "You could say that."

"Until you met me."

She gave him a tight smile, unsure of where his head was at. "My lucky break!"

He licked his lips, looking uncharacteristically uncomfortable, "I recognize that I'm aiding and abetting your wrongful imprisonment, but given the circumstances, I'm not sure how to feel about it."

Ava laughed, "Feel free to feel good. This...arrangement has been the best thing to happen to me in a while."

A sobering thought made her smile evaporate, "I hope all of this didn't mess it all up."

Noah let out a long, exaggerated breath, "Well, I was planning on taking you out to a dinner party right in the heart of Red Moon territory, but I guess that I can go stag to that one. It'll be a blow to my reputation, but we all have crosses to bear."

Ava snorted, giving him a playful shove.

He laughed before reaching over to grab her hand, "I'm sorry that tonight didn't exactly go as intended."

"You mean me forcing you onto rides that made you nauseous, or the part where I publicly owned you at an arcade game," Ava's eyes went wide. "Oh, no! We left our prizes."

"Oh, well, there goes the only evidence to my very public defeat. Plushes or it didn't happen."

Ava sank against the seat and let out a pitiful sound that met somewhere between a laugh and a groan, "Ugh, that sucks!"

Noah let out an affronted groan of his own, "What sucked was that maze. Let's talk about someone who deserves jail time. Whoever designed that thing was a menace."

Ava shot up straight, "I know! It was the worst! How many times did you run into those stupid two-way mirrors? Don't lie."

He tilted his head, eyebrows low. "I can honestly say, not once."

"How?! I must have hit every single one," she rubbed the spot where she was certain a nasty little bruise was growing. Great. Explaining that to Bella was going to be fun. "Well, no one was chasing me, so I was allowed to take my time."

Ava snatched her hand from his, clutching it to her chest, "You took your time? While I was being hounded by maniacs. I got chased through a carnival by a literal angry mob, Noah! Like in some B-List horror movie!"

He gave her a droll stare, "Yes, Ava. I took my time enough that I didn't repeatedly run into walls. I wouldn't have been much help if I'd knocked myself out, now would I?"

She huffed, "I concede. Fair point. Honestly, good on you getting to the end of that maze as quickly as you did. Thanks for the save, by the way. You and Aiden really came through tonight."

"Oh, I don't know. I followed your brother in, so I know that one girl's broken nose wasn't on him."

Ava beamed with pride, "Hell no, it wasn't."

Noah laughed along with her before sobering, "I think that it's really something impressive that you're able to laugh like this after something like what you just went through, Ava."

"I've learned not to sweat the small stuff," she said and shrugged.

"Being chased down in the street by mob justice is 'small stuff' to you?"

Ava only sighed.

"God, Ava." Noah breathed. "I never want to pry because you're experiences are your own to do with what you will." He took her hand in his again, "But I hope you know that you can confide in me if you feel the need." Ava squeezed his hand in her own, "Thank you, Noah. That means a lot to me."

More than he could possibly imagine, in fact. Even if she planned to never take him up on it.

"What happened to your face?!" Bella quickly rose from her desk, rounding it in a flash to march her way over to where Ava stood in the doorway to her office. Ava rolled her eyes, "I ran into a wall."

Bella narrowed her eyes, "Do I need to have a conversation with Mr. Thomas?"

"No!" Ava took Bella by the arm, guiding her to the sofa so that they could sit. "Noah didn't do anything, but something did happen."

Ava licked her lips, "I was spotted."

Bella froze, stunned. "By whom?"

"A few people I knew back in Red Moon. They've been the first people to recognize me since I ran into Xavier."

The normally carefully composed female let out a curse fit for the docks. Ava winced, "I'm sorry to put this on you. I keep bringing you nothing but trouble."

"You didn't create this situation," Bella said. "I'll have a talk with Mr. Thomas. You can't be seen outside of the club again. He'll just have to understand."

"No!" That was the last thing Ava wanted. She'd only just begun getting reacquainted with the outside world and she had every intention of continuing to experience it. And she really wanted to experience it with Noah.

"I-I can't risk Noah backing out of his contract. You know how much I need this money, Bella. Then none of this will even be a problem!" She bit her lip, considering how to continue, "And besides, I'm safe with Noah. And he won't be alone in watching out for me either."

Bella frowned, "Mr. Michaels is away on Pack business. I don't know when he'll be back in the club, much less able to escort you around town. Alongside another male, no less."

Ava scoffed, "Not him. My brother is in town."

Bella's eyebrows shot up, "Your brother?"

Ava nodded, "And I can't be stuck in the club because I really need to meet with him tomorrow."

"For what?"

Ava's hand rested on her pocket where the slip of paper with his number rested.

"To find out where the hell he's been for the last three-and-a-half years."