

## Chapter 60

### What Lies Ahead

"What if I just give you the rest of the money you need? Then you won't have to worry about being tied to the club anymore."

Ava was momentarily at a loss for words. It was already surreal enough having Noah in her bedroom that she could barely think. His large body positively filled up the space to the point of nearly being absurd. She found herself hyper-aware of his every movement as if she were a high schooler sneaking around with her secret dalliances again.

After letting her visit with Aiden slide, Bella had put the kibosh on unnecessary off-premises visits. Ava understood that it was for her safety, but that didn't stop her from fretting at the thought of Noah dropping their contract because of the inconvenience. Imagine her surprise, and terror, when he instead offered to keep their meetings inside of the club.

The only male who'd been in her private room before now had been the still-curiously absent Dylan. And, despite his roguish advances, his presence had never put Ava on edge the way Noah did. "You would do that?" She asked.

"Of course I would, A." He looked at her warmly from where he sat, lounging on the bench at the foot of her bed. "Then you can put this place behind you."

Ava looked away from him, closely considering the decanter of wine she was currently fiddling with. She took her time pouring them each a glass before slowly walking back to take a seat next to him. "And then what?" She handed him his glass and took a long, deep sip of her own, anxiously anticipating his answer.

Noah shrugged and sipped from his glass, "Whatever you want, Ava." His brow furrowed. "What is it that you want to do after all of this is over?"

Again, Ava didn't readily have an answer. There were some parts of her that were convinced that 'this' never would end for her. Even if she successfully fulfilled her terms to Xavier's contract, she'd still be mated to him.

Despite his threats, he didn't seem inclined to renounce their bond, and in her current state, Ava didn't think that Mia was strong enough to do something like that on her own. It took a lot of energy to defy destiny, and

as it was, Mia became physically drained just by coming up to say hello. After their reunion with Aiden and Laith, Ava hadn't felt the Wolf so much as stir for over a day afterward.

Ava hated to admit it, even to herself, but whatever was happening to Mia was getting worse, and she had no idea what she could do to stop it.

In a sense, Mia's growing malady was yet another manifestation of how Ava felt on the inside - no matter how many steps forward she took, some unknown force kept pulling her backward until the thought of freedom seemed less appealing because it was so far away.

"I haven't thought about that in a while. Even before I was sent to prison, I didn't ever really think about what I wanted from life other than...." Ava paused, realizing where she'd unintentionally led the topic. Even if it were relevant, Xavier hadn't ever had a place in her relationship with Noah - she'd made sure of it. But Ava was beginning to realize how futile that was since there were no parts of her life that Xavier hadn't already touched.

"Until?" Noah asked with an eyebrow cocked.

"I'd always thought it would be interesting to join the forces, like Aiden."

Noah's eyebrows rose in surprise, "Yeah?"

Ava smiled sheepishly, "I used to be a pretty good fighter."

"If I remember that carnival correctly, you're being modest again."

She shrugged, feeling herself begin to blush, "It didn't matter, anyway. It was clear pretty early on that I'd be training to be Xavier's second. We were so close in age and such good friends that it's what made sense at the time." Noah made a contemplative noise deep in his chest, "Is that what you wanted?"

"At the time, more than anything."

"And now?"

Ava was silent for a long moment, but Noah just patiently waited for her to parse out the jumble of thoughts racing across her mind.

"I...had a friend, once. Back at the prison," she started quietly, not entirely sure how much she wanted to share - *\*could\** share, right now. "Her name was Layla...she didn't make it out."

Her voice dropped, choked back by the weight of the memories of her friend who had been bright and open amongst the chaos of their life of forced confinement. Instead of cutting off the memories like she normally did, Ava let them come. And when they did, she let herself experience the pain that flooded her like acid because hidden amongst the pain were memories that she cherished.

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"But Layla...she was amazing. One of those people who found the good in everything and everyone. She didn't do anything to be locked away, either. She was just an Omega who'd ended up on some Elite's shitlist, like a hundred others in the dungeon."

Ava didn't bother trying to hide the contempt in her voice and was surprised to find that same deep disdain for the brokenness of their society reflected in Noah's eyes. She continued, "She was always certain that we'd make it out, someday, and when we did, she wanted us to go to California."

"Because it's a free state?" He asked.

Ava nodded, noting the scorn that had entered Noah's voice, "Is that strange?"

"Not at all. It's just a shame that the 'united society' the Alliance has created is still one where people have to flee across the country just to be who they are without fear of persecution based solely on what social class they were born into." "I agree. But I also don't have a home to go back to."

"Then let's make one." He said, wrapping a muscular arm around her waist, "It doesn't have to be permanent. I don't want to hold you to anything, Ava. I'm done with the contracts. But I want to take you away from this place." "Where?" She asked, following him as he slid back to lie on the bed where they stayed, facing one another.

"I have a place in mind. It's far enough away that you won't have to worry about being seen by anyone from your past." Noah's fingers absentmindedly played with the hem of her top, but Ava was keenly aware of every flutter of his skin against her own, "If nothing else, I think it would be a nicer way to wait out the rest of your deal with Xavier."

Ava's breath hitched as she hesitated before bringing her hand up to lie against his chest. Noah's fingers immediately stopped their fiddling, as if he'd suddenly become aware of the intimate turn their conversation had taken. "And that's...something that you'd actually want to do?" She breathed, "Even though you barely know me?"

Noah's hand flattened against her waist, his wide calloused palm warm against her flushing skin. "I want a lot of things," he said, moving his hand stroke along her back and back up to its spot on her waist, sending a shiver

running through every nerve ending he touched. "And seeing you happy, Ava Davis has quickly become one of my top priorities."

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She looked away when looking him in the eye became too hard. "Don't say that," she whispered.

"Why?" Noah asked, pulling her closer. "Whether you believe me or not, I mean it."

Ava shook her head, "That'll only make it worse."

Noah brought his hand up under her chin, tilting her head back until she met his eyes once more. The sincerity she saw there stung even as it warmed her. "It'll make what worse, Ava?"

She swallowed past the lump of emotion forming in her throat. "When you eventually leave," she finally uttered. "Everyone I care about leaves me at some point or another, and usually it's permanent."

Ava licked her lips, her eyes flitting away from his again, "Besides all of that, you have more reason to leave than most."

Noah's brows drew down, "How do you figure?"

"You're \*paying for me\*, Noah? Our time together has an expiration date, and even if it didn't, you actually have a life to go back to. When you leave, I...."

Ava paused, waiting for her roiling emotions to settle before she tried to speak again. "When you leave, I won't have anything left."

Noah was silent for a moment, and that moment stretched into two. Finally, he brought a hand up to cup the back of her head, pulling her close until his lips rested against her forehead. "The fact that you were born without a filter is one of the things I love most about you, right?"

Ava scoffed, "You've mentioned it."

He pulled back far enough that she had to crane her neck to meet his gaze, "But what you're not going to do is tell me how I feel. And what I feel for you, I've never felt for another person, Ava."

Ava's heart began to beat faster as he brought her hand to his lips, planting a tender kiss to her palm, "I don't plan on leaving, Ava, contract be damned."