

Chapter 64

Letting Go

Xavier had barely begun to fully process the first call he'd just finished with Bella before his phone began ringing again. When he looked down at the screen, it read as a private number, but given the fact that he was currently trekking through the backwoods of West Virginia, it was a wonder he was getting service at all.

He was reticent to pick up the phone after the call he'd just had. His emotions were too ragged for Xavier to hold a normal conversation right now, his nerves too raw. Bella's words had been a hard pill to swallow, especially coming right on the heels of his own mother's similar admonishment.

Xavier had fucked up. He knew that now, and if he were ever fucking honest with himself, he knew that he'd been fumbling the situation with Ava for a long time. He thought he'd had his reasons for keeping her in

the club and having her earn her way out, but the plan was less than airtight.

He was ashamed to admit it now, but he'd thought that the experience would scare her a little, let her know that her misdeeds hadn't been forgiven. Xavier hadn't taken into consideration the fact that Ava could actually end up being hurt while at the club. Sex work could be a dangerous business, he knew, but he'd never truly considered it sex work - had never intended for Ava to end up in any compromising situations.

He should have put a stop to it all after he'd caught wind of her that night with Jade's crew. Like so many others, the rising politicians got their rocks off by humiliating weaker women, and he'd been surprised to find Ava playing along. He knew the situation wasn't right, but later when he'd confronted Ava, she'd been so... fiery, so passionate, and angry.

He'd recognized that attitude and associated it with his old friend. From then, he'd decided that meant that she was thriving, and her experiences at the club were helping her to heal. If she were riled up enough, she'd snap back to the girl he'd known, instead of remaining that bruised broken thing, he'd first seen in the club.

He was a damned fool.

Ava was healing, alright, but in spite of him, not because of him. How everyone saw it except for him, Xavier didn't know. He was embarrassed

and ashamed, but at the end of it all, he didn't know how to go about rectifying his many mistakes. After hearing Bella's scolding, he figured that listening to someone who'd actually earned Ava's confidence was a place to start.

He brought his phone to his ear, the damned line already cutting in and out, "Xavier Michaels."

"Xavier," he didn't recognize the voice on the line, but it immediately made his hackles raise. "This is Noah Thomas." "Ah..."

Xavier's nerves became razor sharp with the realization of who was at the other end of the line. Even Alex was on edge, sensing through their connection, the presence of a rival male encroaching on their territory. With great effort, Xavier pushed those instincts down, fully aware that his past inability to handle his emotions had only made his situation with Ava worse.

"I take it you've heard of me." The other male's tone was droll, as if this conversation were as unpleasant for him as it was for Xavier. He doubted it.

"Lately, it feels like I haven't heard of much else." Xavier did his best to match Noah's tone, carefully measuring each word so as not to be the one who escalated this talk into a confrontation.

"I bet. Listen, I'm calling in regard to Ava Davis."

"I figured."

"Heh, yeah. I would have preferred to have this conversation in person, believe me. It goes against everything I believe in to not do this face-to-face."

"Yeah, I get you." And he did. It was in most Wolves' nature to meet issues head on. Doing anything less felt cowardly, even if the situation called for a less direct approach. "Mind getting around to what 'this' is?" "Stating my intentions toward Ava." Noah voice was firm, leaving no room for argument. That didn't mean that he wasn't going to get one.

"Right. You have designs on courting my mate." Xavier cursed internally. That wasn't information he'd said out loud to anyone but Ava, and he shouldn't have showed his hand to this unknown male. Again, he'd let his emotions cloud his judgement. Xavier was beginning to wonder if he'd ever really learned anything from his father at all.

Noah's harsh bark of laughter was anything but amused, "If that's what you want to call it, sure. Although, from what I hear, you're not really mate material. Are you, Xavier?"

"Now, Noah. I thought we were keeping things civil."

"I plan to, Michaels. As long as you don't interfere." The other male said, "Ava's turning a new chapter in her life, and it's one that you have no place in."

"Because you know so much about us." Xavier had already committed to keeping his distance, but this male was making it difficult for him to keep to his convictions. "I've known Ava my entire life. The goddess, herself, decreed that we were made for one another. I know Ava better than anyone else could ever hope to."

"Really? Or do you know the child she used to be? Whether you like it or not, Ava's not the person you used to know, and haven't done much to get to know the person she's become. And, at this point, you don't deserve to. So, male-to-male, I'm respectfully requesting that you readjust your priorities, and stay out of our way."

Xavier gripped his phone so tightly that he felt the screen give way with a snap.

"If any part of you cares for Ava, as you claim," Noah's voice was sincere, but far from pleading. "You'll leave her in the hands of someone who will treat her with the care and respect that she deserves."

A hundred responses scrolled through Xavier's mind, and every single one proved everyone right about him - his mother, Bella, this male, and Ava

herself had all deemed him unworthy to wield the goddess' blessing, and he had no choice but to agree.

He'd mishandled and mistreated his mate and she'd moved on. There was no cosmic rule preventing her from doing so, and it was ludicrous to think she'd wait around for him to set himself straight.

Xavier had fucked up, and it was time for him to phone it in. Not for himself, but for Ava. For the first time, he needed to put her first. And if letting her go was the best way to do it, that was for him to come to terms with alone. "Then you do it, Thomas." Only years of discipline kept Xavier's voice from shaking under the weight of his words and what they meant. "You treat her well, and you keep her safe. Because, if you don't It'll be you and me." "I'll hold you to it." Noah said, and the line went dead.

Xavier stood rooted in place, staring at his newly cracked screen, but seeing nothing.

"Michaels! You good?"

Xavier looked up to see Liam standing a ways ahead of him on the trail they'd spent the morning cutting through the dense forest. Machetes in hand he, along with Liam and Dylan, had been slowly making their way toward the area where Liam's intel had spotted a potentially hostile presence.

"Yeah," he muttered. "All good, here."

Xavier picked up his pace, meeting them at the furthest point they'd cut away. It was getting hot as hell, even nearing the end of September. At this rate, by the time they reached their point of interest, they'd be too worn out to do anything about it.

"Who peed on your Oreos?" Dylan quipped.

Liam raised an eyebrow at him, and Xavier didn't bother to respond.

"What?" Dylan asked, wiping his brow. "No one really likes Cheerios, but Oreos? You'd have to be a fuckin' monster to turn down a good Oreo."

Liam shook his head back and forth, "Never change, Miller."

Dylan flipped him off, but Xavier was too preoccupied to pay much attention to the banter. Until now, he'd found himself actually enjoying their company. It had reminded him of the days they'd spent at symposium after symposium learning the ins and outs of how to run a Pack, and how to best appease the Council and the rest of Alliance while doing it.

The three of them had been close then. Things had changed fairly drastically after the attack on Red Moon. Xavier had changed fairly

drastically, though, to be fair. Shortly after he'd become Alpha, Liam had taken on his own mantel, and they'd lost touch almost completely.

Dark Moon's close proximity to Red Moon meant that Dylan remained within Xavier's orbit, but the other male's lack of respect for his station had begun to grate on Xavier. If only he'd realized then, that what he was feeling was jealousy over his friend's freedom.

If Xavier had learned anything over the last few weeks, there was more than one side to every story, and it would behoove him to allow others the grace to speak their own truth for themselves. So, for once, he didn't begrudge Dylan his lifestyle, or hold Liam's distance against him.

Instead, Xavier had allowed himself to enjoy his friends' company, and he'd felt lighter for it.

"Oh, shit."

Liam and Xavier raced forward catching up to Dylan who'd forged ahead. They all paused, dreading the scene they'd uncovered.

"Damn," Liam breathed. "So, it is real..."

"It appears so," said Xavier. "The rogues are back."