

## Chapter 74

### Drive

"AVA ELAINE, GET YOUR ASS UP!"

Ava jerked awake to the very sudden sound of loud rock music being turned ALLLL the way up. Unfortunately, this was not the first time Ava had been woken up in such a manner, but it was the first time it had happened in about a decade. Pushing the comforter from over her head, Ava rolled out of bed and stormed over to her bedroom door, throwing it open with what she felt was a justified amount of force. There, on the other side looking aggravatingly pleased with himself, was her brother.

"Aiden!" She screamed over the blaring grunge rock her brother had preferred in his youth. "Have you lost your mind?"

"Just my patience, little sister!" Taking out a small remote control, Aiden pressed a button causing the music to lower significantly. He swung an

arm around her shoulder and began to walk, dragging her along with him. "I'm sick to death of seeing you mope over a male. Especially one who leaves as often as Noah does. He'll probably be back, Ava. He always comes back!"

Ava dug her heels in, skidding to a halt so abrupt that her six-foot-three brother was momentarily dragged backward. "Oh, fuck you! I'm not upset because Noah's gone."

"Then why are you upset? It feels like I haven't seen you in days," he said.

"I saw you at dinner!"

"The night before last, Ava. You didn't leave that room all yesterday, and if I'm being honest, I'm bored."

Ava reeled back, "Excuse me?"

Aiden took her by the shoulders and stared directly into her eyes, "I spent five years living in a cabin in the woods. My only goal when I got out was finding you and making sure you were safe."

He began to shake her back and forth, "I've done that, and now I need to be amused. Real bad. Couldn't Mr. Moneybags have stashed you somewhere interesting?"

"Aiden!"

He rolled his eyes, "I'm joking! Sort of. I mean, the irony of leaving one cabin in the woods to go live in another, albeit much larger, cabin in some forsaken woods is...astounding. But I'm joking. Mostly."

Ava laughed at Aiden's pained expression. "Sounds rough, but I don't know how to help you," she shrugged. "I don't know what people do for fun."

His pained expression deepened, "What does that even mean, Ava?"

"I've spent a lot of time indoors over the last three years, and most of it was spent doing decidedly unfun things."

Aiden fell back onto the couch, and Ava followed him down, getting comfortable against the deep cushions, "What about the club? I thought you said you had free time there?"

"I did, but I never left the building until I met Noah. Other than that, I just...hung around, usually with Bren. We did a lot of Pilates, and that was fun! For me."

Her brother sighed, "Goddess, absolutely not, Ava Davis. I was a soldier, and I know exercise isn't fun."

"We could watch a movie? The only other thing I really do to amuse myself is shop for shoes online, and I recognize that that's probably best left as a solo activity."

He gave her a long droll stare, "What about running? When was the last time you went running?"

Ava's face fell, "With Mia? A while. She doesn't come out much, remember?"

Aiden squeezed his eyes shut, "Ah, shit. I'm sorry, I forgot."

Ava put a hand on his shoulder, "Don't worry about it. I'm not surprised you forgot, since you and Laith are the only ones she speaks to. Even more than me, really."

Unfortunate as it was, it was the truth. Mia rarely surfaced now that Ava no longer found herself in frequent immediate danger. Mostly, she slept. The rare exceptions were whenever Aiden was near, and Laith reached out to her. But after it became apparent how much it took out of her, Laith had begun to refrain from seeking her out.

"Damn, I've made you sad again. I used to be better at taking your mind off of things," Aiden said.

Ava gave him a soft smile, "We're just out of practice, is all."

They sat in silence for a long while until Aiden finally piped up, "If you want to talk, a drive through the countryside makes for a mighty scenic backdrop."

She was about to decline by reflex alone when Mia gave her a mental nudge. Suddenly, Ava recalled what she'd told her Wolf all those weeks ago. He's your brother. He won't hurt you.

"You know, that actually sounds great." She said, "You'll have to do all the work, though. I can't drive."

Aiden's eyebrows flew up, "At all?"

Ava shook her head, "I didn't get to learn how before I was arrested."

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Immediately, her brother stood up. "Change of plans. Get dressed!"

Forty-five minutes later, Ava sat stick-straight, staring apprehensively at the multitude of controls before her. "I don't...Aiden, I don't want to do this."

In response, her brother reached over and stretched her seatbelt across her waist, securing it with a menacing snick. "Ava, teenagers do this all the time." "Yeah, after like, months of training."

He rolls his eyes, "Reading a manual hardly counts as 'training,' for one. And for two, we're in the middle of nowhere, Ava. What are you afraid of? There's nothing to hit!"

She flung out an arm gesturing to the forest surrounding either side of Noah's long driveway. "There's about a thousand things to hit, Aiden!"

"Then don't steer into them!" He yelled back before taking a deep breath. "Listen, Ava. Just relax. Try thinking of driving as something that you get to control."

Despite how much she hated this entire scenario, she had to admit that the idea did sound a little more appealing when he phrased it like that.

Ava rolled her head back and forth, releasing some of the tension there. Taking a deep breath, she placed her hands on the steering wheel - on ten and two, that much she knew. "Alright, fine."

Aiden smiled, "You're already a natural. Okay, now we're just going up and down the driveway. Just remember that the big pedal is 'stop,' and the small one is 'go.'"

Ava cautiously put the car into gear and began inching it forward. With Aiden's oversight, she made her way down the mile-long driveway leading from Noah's house and back up. Over the next half hour, Ava's confidence grew as she learned

to confidently navigate her way around the path's winding curves, and when they reached the end of the driveway, she no longer immediately began to sweat at the thought of turning the car around to make the trip back.

Soon enough, the short repetitive drive became second nature as Ava familiarized herself with the vehicle's primary functions.

"Now that you're comfortable," Aiden softly prompted. "Do you want to talk about what has you so down lately?"

Her hands tightened on the wheel for a moment before she sighed, "I can't get that fortune teller out of my mind."

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"The witch?" He asked, "You never did say what it was like in there."

Ava slid a look over to her brother out the corner of her eyes, "Not that you would've noticed if I had, since you and Bren were so distracted being all chummy."

He rolled his eyes, "Uh-uh, we're talking about you today."

"I don't want to talk about me. Me is...complicated."

"I've gathered as much. But your complications don't usually involve witches."

She nodded, "True enough. She gave me a tarot reading."

"And I'm assuming it wasn't the same kind you can get above that tattoo parlor downtown?" Aiden asked.



"You would assume correctly. It was...amazing, and it gave me some really valuable insight, but...."

"Don't ask questions you're not ready to hear the answer to?"

Ava bit her lip and nodded. "She helped me communicate with Mia, which was really helpful. But the rest of it was confusing. And confronting."

She quieted for a few long moments, processing. "She mentioned Xavier."

Aiden's brows lowered, his comforting mood immediately souring, "And?"

Ava shrugged, "Apparently, there's some unresolved stuff there, but I didn't need a psychic to tell me that. But the cards seemed to imply that my relationship with Noah is distracting me from resolving those issues, or something like that." He turned to her with a fierce expression, "Listen, Ava. You don't owe Xavier Michaels a damn thing. Just because fate decided that you're supposed to be his mate doesn't mean you have to be his puppet."

"But what if fate is telling me that something's changed?" Aiden opened his mouth, but she continued on, "I'm not saying that I'm willing to drop everything and accept the mating bond. I'm just saying that...I know that Xavier's put me through hell, and I won't ever forget the damage he's done."

Ava came to a stop in Noah's driveway and put the car into Park. "Damn it, Aiden, I don't want to be angry anymore. And I feel shitty for admitting that, but it's the truth. I can feel the rage festering inside of me, and it feels like poison to me. I don't want to live that way."

"Ava...." Aiden cautioned.

"No. Make no mistake, I'm doing it for me, not him. But it's time I buried the hatchet with my mate."