

Chapter 8

Escape (Part 1)

The hallway was dead silent as Ava followed Xavier's imposing frame as he strode onward, navigating the VIP floor with ease. Ava wondered if there were just so few high-baller guests checked in tonight or if Xavier and his hedonistic friends had simply booked out the entire floor. Ava teetered toward the latter when Xavier stopped at another door, seemingly at random, and walked right in.

Inside was another suite, nearly twice the size as the last one. They'd walked into a lounge room that, alone, was big enough to host the gathering they'd just left. A supple leather sofa sat in front of an ornate electric fireplace on one wall, while the opposite one held a private elevator finished in dark chrome. Double doors on the far wall led to the bedroom where a massive four-poster bed took up a good portion of the room. Through an open door off the bedroom, Ava caught a glimpse of an enormous claw-foot tub. She scoffed inwardly, thinking about the virtual hole-in-the-wall that doubled as her bedroom.

"I gave you a choice, Ava."

The front door slammed closed, cutting short any further consideration of Ava's subpar living environment. She whirled around, but Xavier was already on her, grabbing her by the waist and dragging her to the bed. She briefly wrenched herself out of his grasp and, in turn, the much bigger Wolf picked her up off of her feet and tossed her into the middle of mattress.

Panic coursed through her veins as she realized she wouldn't be able to get away from him. He was everywhere she tried to go, countering her every move with ease. When she tried to sit up, he straddled her, when she struck out to claw at his face, he trapped her wrists in his large hands pinning them above her head.

Ava braced for whatever he'd do next, but he just sat there, holding her captive while he stared at her with an intensity that made her want to squirm. The longer they stayed that way, the more uncomfortable Ava got, mostly caught between her fear and curiosity. Once again, Xavier was acting irrationally, behaving in ways that were hard for her to predict and harder to defend against.

On top of everything else, the mating bond was back in earnest, riding her hard and making Ava hyperaware of every single point of contact where Xavier's body met her own. Her body began heating up of its own volition,

responding purely to his proximity. The scent of wood ash and violets was nearly suffocating.

Ava bit her lip, and turned her head away, unwilling to throw the first jab. He'd brought her here and he was the one keeping her here. If he had something to say, nothing was stopping him.

"Is this all you've got for me, Ava?" When he finally spoke, his voice was rough. "You used to be better at this. Arguing. Fighting."

Was that what this was? A spar between two old pals. Sure, this mirrored the hundreds of times they'd ended up in similar positions after long hours of combat training. He was no stranger to her sharp tongue and extraverted opinions, had traded barbs with her like he'd been born to do it. Ha! Turns out he had been born to match her wit and ground her temper, just like she'd always stood at his side and kept his confidence. Those times were long gone, though, and they were vastly different people from those kids who'd thought the world of one another and trusted each other implicitly.

"Let me go."

"Let you go?" He scoffed, "What have you done to earn your freedom, Ava? You couldn't even stay put in your fucking cell!"

His voice rose steadily until he was yelling in her face, sparking her own righteous indignation.

"I did my time!" She shouted back, too emotionally drained to handle the pain that would gut her if she pled her innocence again and he didn't believe her.

"How can you look me in the eye and say that to me," His grip on her wrists tightened with bruising force. "You murdered my sister, Ava! There isn't enough fucking time in the world to make up for that."

Xavier's voice broke causing Ava to deflate. Ava was so often caught up in her own turmoil that it rarely occurred to her anymore that Xavier also in pain. He'd lost the ones he was closest to in the world, the same as she had. She just wished he would remember that, too. That there wasn't a world where Ava could be behind their murders.

She sighed and let her eyes fall shut. She was so tired, "You know I didn't, Xavier."

"Do I? I know what I saw, what I felt. And I know you can't be trusted." He tightened his grasp on her wrist even further, drawing out a pained gasp, "What would possess the goddess to chain me to a mate like you?" Ava rolled her eyes, "She must be a funny lady."

Ava tugged at her wrists and adopted her most reasonable tone, "Luckily, for both of us, you can reject the bond and send me on my way. Then we can spend the rest of our lives pretending the other never existed!" Xavier actually laughed and Ava got an unsettling sense of déjà vu; this was

starting to feel unnervingly close to their old back-and-forth. "Believe me when I say the mating won't be a problem. But you're not going anywhere." He sat up on his knees, dragging her with him so that they were sitting upright, face-to-face. "You haven't paid your sins and I haven't found the rogues who helped you commit them, so consider yourself under arrest." She sighed loudly in his face, reverting to her old habit of annoying him with peevish behavior whenever he'd inadvertently hurt her feelings. They'd been alone for all of ten minutes and already this conversation felt so disgustingly... normal, even though absolutely nothing that was being discussed could be considered normal by any stretch; murder, captivity, rejecting the mating bond. That one hurt on a level Ava didn't want to explore. It was only to be expected - hell, she was the one who'd brought it up, but rejecting the mating bond was serious stuff in their culture. Virtually unheard of. She'd never expected to find a mate, but it still stung that she'd never get to enjoy the highest honor their people could experience.

"You know I hate when you do that," he said.

"Do I?"

"Was that your first kiss?"

Ava was thrown by the abrupt change in subject. She hated that she felt herself blush. It most certainly hadn't been her first kiss, but he didn't need to know that. Her experimentation with other boys was pretty much the

only thing Ava had never shared with Xavier, and she sure as hell wasn't planning to start now.

Even so, the question was enough to remind Ava of the steam coursing through her veins and the ache slowly building below. The bond was starting to affect Ava enough for Mia to take notice. She felt restless curiosity coming from the Wolf, but just as she had since Ava had run into Xavier, she refused to come to the surface.

Ava could sense Xavier's wolf, Alex, emerging, seeking out his mate, but Mia refused to reciprocate.

No matter what bullshit lay between Ava and Xavier, their Wolves knew each other, had probably recognized each other as mates well before their hosts had been able to. They'd always been close, seeking one another out in that ethereal connection Wolves solely shared. Alex would absolutely notice the change in Mia's outgoing personality, so she wasn't surprised when Xavier looked at her inquisitively.

Before he could ask, his phone rang. Xavier frowned, but finally backed away from her. "I need to take this, but I won't be far."

He grabbed his discarded suit jacket and headed for the suite's elevator, "Wait here."

Ava sat in stunned silence, unable to fathom that after an hour of hounding her, breathing down her neck, and even outright tormenting her, Xavier would have the nerve to leave her completely unattended. Despite herself, she felt a spark of...certainly not hope, but it didn't make sense for Xavier's unwarranted trust that she'd stay put.

Whether his mistrust of her was justified or not, it was foolish of him to think she'd be willing to stick around. For what? More of his wildly fluctuating mood swings? Was it possible he was under the impression that she felt obligated to stay close to him because of the mating bond? Well, then the joke was on him, since Ava was pretty sure whatever was holding Mia back was also suppressing the effects of the bond for Ava. Xavier might be compelled to stick close to her, but she didn't think she had that problem. And if he came for her...well, she'd just need to get a good head start, then.

Ava walked over to the elevator and pressed the button, admittedly shocked when it started to move. When the doors opened to reveal that the car was empty, she peered inside. Amazingly - ridiculously - it didn't require so much as a room key to operate.

There was nothing holding Ava back if she decided to go.

The underground parking lot, the bones of a plan were already beginning to form in Ava's mind. Ava thought of Layla and the promise she'd made in her heart, the one she'd so often doubted she'd ever be able to keep, and she smiled. Escape.