

Chapter 45

What Do You Want?

"I don't know what it's like to have my life not be my own?" His words were low as he finally moved from the desk to stalk toward Ava. Unlike before, when he'd maintained a semblance of respect by keeping his distance, this time he fully crowded Ava's space.

They truly had entered into a new phase of their relationship, because when he stepped in close, Ava didn't bulk. She stood her ground until they were chest-to-chest, their bodies pressed up against one another. "You think Alpha snap their fingers and get everything they've ever wanted?"

Ava found herself curiously apprehensive, rather than intimidated as Xavier leaned down until his nose brushed hers, "What if it was you I wanted, Ava?"

His breath whispered against hers, and their hearts met each other beat for beat. But this wasn't like earlier. The mating scent that emanated from them was thick, but cold. The air between them didn't heat but was laden with an aching sorrow. Inexplicable, Ava felt that the heavy emotion was coming from Xavier.

Ava didn't know what to do, how to react. The turbulent emotion bleeding through their bond was enough to make her want to weep. Ava knew that this was an element of the mating bond, being able to feel your mate's emotions, but this was the first time she'd felt even a hint of the chaos swirling inside of Xavier. It was a sure sign that, against her best efforts, the bond was growing.

She hadn't known that there was this storm brewing inside of Xavier. For so long, he'd managed to keep his cool façade in place, fooling everyone around him into thinking that he was far more put together than he was. Even when she'd been the only person he'd let his guard down around, his confidence was always offered with a calm collectedness.

Ava wondered if this emotion was new. She wondered if he could feel hers, too. A part of her was afraid of that level of intimacy, but a part of her wanted it. Badly. To truly be on equal footing with him. If they both *understood* one another, then they could begin to truly communicate.

She was seeing Xavier in a new light, for sure, but she couldn't be the only one. She couldn't bridge the ocean between them by herself.

Before she could reach out, he blinked and that channel of connection was gone, as if it had never been there to begin with. Xavier's eyes were shuddered, his iron-thick walls were firmly back in place, and Ava was left feeling curiously bereft, as if she'd unknowingly allowed a once in a lifetime opportunity slip past her.

Xavier pulled back, but only slightly. A physical manifestation of the distance he was placing between them "I could let the human go. Give her a pink slip and send her on her way like some human employer. But, what if I don't want to?" Ava sighed and looked away. The snide edge in his tone told her that the vindictiveness he wielded like a weapon was back in full force. They'd been given a chance to connect on a deeper level - a light in the pit their relationship had become.

Did Ava necessarily want to take a walk through the snake pit that was Xavier's mind? No, but she was willing to if it meant that the toxic push and pull between them could possibly come to an end. She didn't know if even the mystical draw of the mating bond would be enough to mend the rift between them, but dammit, at least she was willing to try!

She'd spent so long believing that vulnerability was a threat and that taking a chance on others was a death sentence. But, while those sentiments still rang achingly true, Ava was learning that no amount of mental and emotional barriers were enough to keep you safe. They were just poisonous wounds you inflict on yourself. And the ones who are trying to care.

Ava crossed her arms in front of herself, "What do you want, Xavier?"

Xavier raised an eyebrow, "In exchange for that hateful little creature's release back into an unsuspecting world?" He shrugged, "Who's to say. What's she worth to you?"

Ava exhaled inwardly and decided that if Xavier wanted to hide and fight the wave of progress, then she was going to meet him blow for blow. If she had to, she'd beat him at his own game. Every. Single. Time. One way or another, he was going to learn that she wasn't one to be messed with, not anymore.

She would have liked for him to take the easy road with her. But if he chose violence, then so could she.

It was her turn to stalk toward him, her unabashed eyes never wavering from the challenge pulsing in his own, "I told you, I don't give a damn about Madison."

When she drew close enough, he leaned down to meet her on her level, "Then what's it to you?"

She raised her chin, "It's what I want."

Tense silence stretched between them as stubborn electricity sparked from glare to glare. All of a sudden, it came to a head when Xavier pulled back, rising to his full height. "Alright, then."

He turned and strode over to the overstuffed leather couch sitting off to one side of the large room. He fell onto it in a casual wide-legged sprawl. He nodded to her, "Get over here and please me."

Ava made sure that he saw her roll her eyes hard, but she did as he bid, walking slowly over to where Xavier sat before climbing onto his lap. Her leggings pulled tight across the spot where their hips met.

She licked her lips, his eyes fixated on the movement. "You finally going to put all of that training to use, Ava?"

Her hand whipped out, taking a hold of his jaw. She wanted to shut him up. Both, because she was angry that she'd found herself back in this position with him, and because of the way his spiteful words were causing her body to react. "It's cute that you think I already haven't."

His eyes darkened with anger and lust, the perfect mirror to the whirlwind he was causing to swirl inside of her.

The worst part was, there was no hint of wood as or violets. No smoldering body heat. She couldn't feel Mia's presence, and she knew Xavier was probably receiving similar radio silence from Alex. This wasn't the mating

bond. This was two people who shared a shitload of history and were sick of the tug of war splitting them into too many different versions of themselves.

Both of them wanted dominance, and both were willing to go to awful extremes to take it.

Ava's eyes drew down to where her hand clenched against his jaw, perhaps a bit too tightly. They lingered on his full lips that she wanted, a little too much.

"If I give you what you want, you're gonna give me what I want?" Her voice was low and husky, and just needy enough to make him shift beneath her as she felt his body respond.

He turned his head and nipped her fingers where they laid against his skin, "You do good, and I'll give you whatever the fuck you want."

She sighed; lost in the narrative they'd somehow created. Ava intentionally shifted her weight, placing the apex of her legs directly above Xavier's growing arousal. She felt her body begin to respond in kind, her core heating with or without the assistance of the mating bond.

Xavier moved his hips, pressing closer to her even as she moved to be closer to him. He breathed out a pained breath and Ava moaned. She began

to close the distance between their lips, her heart beating in anticipation of having his mouth on her own.

But, just before their lips touched, she froze.

Through the fog of her lust, Ava became glaringly aware of the line she was about to cross. In the weeks of their horrible cat and mouse game, Ava had never before been the one to initiate physical contact between Xavier and herself. She'd responded in kind, had kissed him back, had even wanted him to go further. But she'd always been able to hide behind the guise of Xavier's overbearing personality, or the mating bond, to mask her need.

Yet here she was ready and willing to throw her better judgment to wind all for the sake of chasing the high that Xavier Michaels had always presented her.

And that was exactly why she couldn't go through with it. For all that she'd given up on the boy she'd known and had resolved to match the male in front of her, Ava found that Xavier's initial draw had never left.

She'd loved him once. That love had turned into festering resentment, then hate, and then apathy. But as she sat on him because he'd told her to and still ached for his touch, she was hit by the realization that she could fuck around and fall in love again.

And that would be on her.

Ava had already lived that life of pining after this male who didn't - couldn't - reciprocate. If she allowed herself to fall into that trap again, she'd be nothing but a fool.

"No." She said calmly, "I could do this with anyone else, but I can't do it with you, Xavier."