

## Chapter 113

### The Trial

"Nearly four years ago, we gathered, much like we do today, under very dire circumstances the likes of which we had hoped would never darken our doorstep again," Xavier announced, his voice alone commanding the throng to silence. "And so, it is great reticence that I inform you all that Victor Brown, former right-hand of our last Alpha and pillar of our community, is accused of treason against the Red Moon Pack of the highest order for arranging the murders of Sophia Michaels, my sister, and Samantha Brown, his daughter."

"No!"

"Lies! We put that murderer away!"

As he'd feared, the change in the crowd happened quickly as confusion gave way to shock and anger, much like it had right before Ava's trial in the woods. A fact that Victor was quick to catch onto.

"These are lies!" He cried out, only to groan loudly as one of the guards jostled him. "See how they try to silence me? But you know the truth, my own daughter died that night!"

Xavier lifted his hands in an effort to calm the rising sea of tempers. "Settle yourselves," he scolded, allowing just a hint of the derision he felt against the rapidly growing mob slip through. "I would not be raising these allegations without proof."

With that, Xavier gestured to a group of aids who began the process of handing out dossiers detailing in great specificity each piece of evidence they'd found against Victor, from his familial ties to their Alphas to the former Eclipse Alpha's involvement. Absolutely everything that they'd uncovered was now in the hands of every single Pack member in attendance.

This had been a point of contention between himself and his father as they prepared for the trial, but Xavier refused to budge. The lack of clear evidence that they had allowed to condemn Ava was a black mark not only on Xavier's soul but on the Pack as a whole. He refused to lead a Pack of sheep, easily swayed by the loudest voice in the room.

Xavier spent the next hour going through the evidence piece-by-piece, explaining each document, where they'd gotten it, and how it all tied together, meticulously building a clear picture of Victor's deceit. All the

while, the male in question stood in stony silence, growing increasingly ashen with each new offering.

"In conclusion," Xavier finally announced. "Victor Brown enlisted the aid of the former Eclipse Alpha, Montgomery Bennett, in staging a coup against the Michaels family in a failed bid to increase his own already sizable station within the Pack. All by arranging the assassination of my sister and fabricating a rogue threat in order to call my family's ability to lead into question. Is that right, Victor?"

Where an agitated buzz previously filled the courtyard, now there was only tense anticipation as everyone waited with bated breath to hear Victor's rebuttal.

For his part, Victor refused to lash out in an attempt to save what face he could. "You forget that my daughter was killed in this supposed scheme of mine, Alpha," he spat. "Why would any plot of mine include my own daughter's murder?!" The male's voice ended on a broken cry - exactly the opening Xavier had been waiting for, as the confronted male finally began to fray at the seams.

"You tell me, Victor," Xavier said, filling his voice with a deathly calm. "You tell me and everyone here how your plan went so awry that your own child ended up in your sloppy crosshairs. You tell us what you think your mate, goddess rest her souls, of what your selfish greed cost you. Her baby."

A sharp, keening yowl broke out as Victor finally broke, his many sins and devastating mistakes laid bare for all to see. The male fell to his knees, threw back his head, and howled. A horrified hush overtook the crowd, and even Xavier felt Alexandre respond in his chest at the overwhelming wave of tormented anguish brought on by Victor's pain.

When he was finished, the male's head dropped forward, his chin hitting his chest as his body began to wrack with sobs.

"I never meant to....," he cried. "She wasn't supposed to be there.... She wasn't supposed to be there...."

Xavier swallowed past the lump in his throat and focused on keeping his face stonily placid. But, even though he'd known the truth and had some time to come to terms with it all, the blatant senselessness, the untold grief Victor's need for power had caused, was only truly hitting him now.

Xavier had to clench his jaw to fight down the prickling wetness behind his eyes. His sister. His friend. Both gone for nothing. And his mate...left picking up the pieces of a broken life, a ruined childhood. All for nothing.

"Nearly four years ago, I sentenced an innocent girl to the pit for a heinous crime she did not commit," Xavier said. "Now, in light of the new evidence collected as well as the weight of your own public confession, I sentence you, Victor Brown, to the same. A life of imprisonment and permanent ex-communication from the Pack. Take him away."

Unlike Ava's trial, there were no jeers or spat slander; no one threw things or called Victor names as he was dragged away. Xavier didn't think it was fair, but he could understand what was happening. They were...raw. Ashamed. Struggling underneath the cumbersome weight of knowledge, of knowing that you were wrong. So very wrong.

Every hatefully thought that Xavier had battled with over the past few months, he hoped, was flooding the minds of each and every person here's mind. Judging by the bowed heads he saw scattered throughout the audience, as well as the jagged sounds of muffled tears, he was sure that the severity of today's trial was not lost on at least some.

"Red Moon, we've faced a lot of hard truths today, and we have one more to get through before I call this meeting to a close," Xavier announced. "As I've mentioned, nearly four years ago, an innocent girl was sentenced to the pit, a fate enough to make a grown male weep. For three years, she sat in exile. But today, I'd like to extend a full public pardon to her with my deepest, most sincere apologies on behalf of the Red Moon Pack and myself. Ava...."

Ava held her breath as the doors opened, and she walked out, escorted by her brother, onto the makeshift stage. For a tense moment, the crowd didn't know what to do - given the circumstances, applause was clearly not appropriate, but so was guilty silence. She could relate. At the moment, it was a toss-up whether she'd break down or throw up from the sheer fear of being in the presence of these people again.

Xavier spared them all by speaking up again.

"Ava Davis, you are hereby expunged of all previous crimes alleged against you and are once again a fully recognized member of the Red Moon community to come and go as you please, as was your right, to begin with," Xavier reached into the podium and handed her a manila envelope.

Inside, she knew, were her official documents of pardon accompanied by a check totaling half a million dollars.

"On behalf of the Red Moon Pack, I'd like to offer you compensation for the time you spent wrongfully imprisoned. While this does not make up for lost time, our community and I sincerely hope that it will go away in helping you to move forward after this trying time."

Now, the audience applauded as Ava silently took the check. Xavier's gaze flicked toward the microphone, silently asking if she had anything she wanted to say. She very nearly declined, but a niggling voice inside stopped her. This was her chance to address the very people who'd populated her nightmares for years. She shouldn't waste it.

She nodded, and he stepped aside, allowing her room to approach the mic. Feedback from the mic cut through the crowd's relieved applause as Ava brought the microphone down to reach her lips.

She took a few moments to study the crowd before her, her former teachers, classmates, and neighbors. Her eyes traveled everywhere except for where she knew her parents sat ramrod straight at the edge of the assembly.

Her throat bobbed one, two, three times as she rounded up the nerve to speak, but when she did, her voice was clear as a church bell.

"You feel guilty for what happened to me," she said. "Good. Fuck you all."

Without another word, Ava turned on her heel and walked back into the Town Hall, tossing the envelope over her shoulder to thud heavily in the stunned silence she left in her wake.