

Chapter 114

The Ties That Bind

"You dropped this."

Ava began to roll her eyes before she'd even fully registered the envelope being waved in front of her face. When she did, she knocked it aside with a flippant wave of her hand. "No, I'm pretty sure I left that exactly where it belongs, thanks."

"Fine. Have it your way," Aiden huffed, clearly unimpressed with the particular hill she'd chosen to die on. "I'll put it away for you since you're too damn stubborn to do it yourself."

Ava came to a stop in the small conference room where they'd been stashed from the time they'd arrived the night before up until Ava had been summoned to the stage so that the Pack could have their big come-to-Jesus moment.

"I don't need it," she said as she began furiously shoving together her few belongings. "More to the point, I don't want it. It's blood money. Little better than a bribe."

"Don't be ridiculous, Ava," Aiden intercepted her, stilling her single-minded packing with a gentle hand on her arm. "This money belongs to you, Ava. What else are you going to do with it, give it back to them?"

"You can have it, for all I care."

"I don't need your money, Ava. I did my time for the Pack and earned their coin." Aiden opened her bag and slid the envelope inside. "You did, too. And now they owe you."

Ava bit back a frustrated sob, dashing away the tears pooling up behind her eyes before they could fall. She didn't know why she was crying. She just couldn't shake this...deep sense of dissatisfaction, which only made her feel shitty and ungrateful.

"It's not what I want," she whispered.

"Then what is it that you do want?" he asked.

At a loss for words, Ava cast a look around the room, looking desperately for a lifeline - something, anything to help her make sense of the muddled mass of emotions that had her feeling so utterly disappointed.

A live feed had been set up on the conference room's mounted monitor so that she could watch the trial for herself. Ava had dreamed of this day, literally woken up night after night, shaking underneath the overwhelming weight of unfulfillment.

Before the ever-present drive to survive had superseded all other wants and needs down in the dungeon, her fantasies of one day being exonerated had fueled Ava during the early days of her imprisonment.

Back then, she didn't have a face to pin to her perpetrator, so it had been Xavier who'd taken on that role. Over and over, some great revelation would be unveiled, and he, along with the hundred leering, furious faces surrounding her would all melt away into masks of shocked contrition.

Now that the moment had finally come, Ava found the entire ordeal all too...irrelevant. And that alone was enough to make her feel sour. But that was how it always went, wasn't it? In all of the movies she'd seen, the end results never seemed to live up to what you'd built them up to be in your head.

And that, at the core of it, was what bothered Ava the most about the trial and sentencing of Victor Brown. Ava had decided a while ago that revenge wasn't the answer. She hadn't realized that justice wasn't, either.

Not to be mistaken, she was glad that the monster was behind bars where he was meant to be. But instead of feeling as if a dark chapter in her life had finally come to a close, she was only left with the uncanny feeling that the final few pages had been ripped out before she could read them.

Just then, a knock sounded at the door. Aiden walked over to pull the door open, only to go tense before crowding the entrance before she could see who was on the other side.

"Whatever you think you're doing here, get it out of your head," he said, his voice low and edged in an icy threat. "We're already on our way out." "Aiden, please...."

The voice on the other side of the door made Ava's heart clench. Hard. She hadn't realized until that moment that she'd forgotten the sound of her father's voice - after all, Ava hadn't actually heard either of her parents speak since the day before she'd been arrested. She couldn't even remember what their last exchange had been.

It was probably something fleeting and irrelevant like reminding her to clean her room or asking her to take the trash out when she came home that night; the kind of thing that wasn't meant for long-term remembering

but somehow always managed to be someone's final words. Goddess, that was bleak.

The night of her trial and imprisonment, neither of her parents had spoken a word save to drive home the final nail in her coffin. Suddenly, Ava could identify the source of her bereavement, the missing link that still tied her to the myriad of tainted memories Red Moon represented.

"Let them in, Aiden."

"Are you sure?"

Her brother looked at her over his shoulder, his body still firmly planted between herself and the emotional minefield standing on the other side. Ava was fully aware that the conversation that was about to happen would be painful and unpleasant. But she also knew that sometimes bones needed to be broken and reset before they could properly heal. "Yes," she said. "This conversation's been a long time coming."

Aiden looked at her dubiously, clearly unconvinced that anything remotely productive was about to occur. She didn't blame him. At the moment, she was a ball of nerves and errant emotions. Ava had no intention of using this time to blow up at her parents - more than anything, all she wanted to do was listen. She didn't know these people. Three years ago, her perception of her parents had irrevocably shifted.

And now, the nervous, diminutive couple shuffling through the conference room doors failed to spark any kind of familial spark within her. They weren't her parents. They were Garrett and Marie, strangers she needed to confront before she could peaceably forget them.

Marie broke first, letting out a strangled sob, her face crumpling in on itself like a paper bag, "Oh, Ava!"

The female stepped toward her as she stretched her arms out wide, beckoning Ava to come meet her in the middle. Unfortunately for her, that was something Ava was only willing to do in a metaphorical sense.

Ava took a step back as Marie advanced, prompting her to stop in her tracks, a wounded expression crossing her face. Garrett came up behind Marie and placed a steadying hand on her shoulder. To Ava's astonishment, he looked offended.

"Ava Elaine Davis," he scolded. "Your mother and I have waited a very long time to speak with you. A modicum of courtesy will go a long way to making this more palatable for all of us." Ava's eyebrows shot up in disbelief, "I'm sorry?!"

Garrett gave her a curt nod, "Thank you. Now, since you've been exonerated, there are a number of things we'd like to discuss with you."

He walked past them, ushering Marie along with him and willfully ignoring Ava and Aiden's looks of utter bewilderment. He pulled out a chair for his wife and seated himself, and just...waited. After sharing a look laden with reluctance, they followed suit, taking seats opposite the couple.

"What is it that you wanted to talk about?" Ava asked.

She shifted uncomfortably in her seat, feeling the weight of Marie's tear-filled stare. The female's grey eyes studiously took in her every feature as if taking note of every change and transformation Ava had accumulated over the last three years and committing them to memory. She resisted the urge to fix her hair or sit up straighter.

For his part, even though Garrett's eyes were on her, she felt as if he was looking straight through her. That was something Ava inherited from him. In every physical aspect, she mirrored Marie, from her red hair and grey eyes to her slight build. But, Ava's penchant for living in her mind, even amidst a conversation, was all Garrett.

That was the extent of the comparisons she could make about the couple. The years had only been marginally kinder to them than they had been to her. They looked smaller, in spirit if not size, and infinitely sadder. "I've already secured you a position working in one of the libraries."

Ava blinked slowly, "The library?"

Garrett's words clipped over hers as he continued, "It's nothing glamorous, but it will keep you busy, and it's respectable work. You'll be able to begin regaining the Pack's trust in a safe, neutral environment." Ava sat back and waved her hands for him to slow down, "Wait, wait, wait. What are we talking about here?"

He sighed impatiently, "Your reintegration, of course. You'll need to be prepared before you come back home to Red Moon."