

Chapter 58

Family Ties

"So, where were you for all of that time?" Ava sat across from her brother in the empty little diner he'd brought her to. It had taken some Grade A cajoling in order for Ava to convince Bella to let her out of the club so soon after she'd been recognized.

She had only agreed to let her go as long as Ava consented to staying within a mile radius of the club. And so, here they were sitting in a shoddy little diner that served eight-dollar cups of coffee and fifteen-dollar pancakes, just because it had the novelty of being located downtown.

Right out front, one of the club's guards sat outside in a nondescript SUV, waiting for their meeting to conclude. They'd only just gotten there, but Ava wanted to cut right to the chase.

To his credit, Aiden didn't seem at all put off by her straightforwardness. He just nodded in understanding, warming his hands on his dreadfully overpriced coffee.

"I was the same place I'd been since graduating from the Academy," he said frankly. "On assignment up north. Way up north."

Ava leaned in, "They placed you in Grave Crown?"

Again, Aiden nodded. Ava found herself fascinated in spite of the serious tone their meeting had started off on. She didn't know much about the Grave Crown Pack. No one did, and that was exactly how they liked it. Who 'they' was, Ava couldn't even say. Out of all of the Alliance meetings and conventions she'd tagged along to, she'd never seen so much as an emissary sent to represent their region.

As far as she knew, Grave Crown hadn't actively participated in the Alliance in decades. It was a wonder why the Council bothered to put up with them, much less send out soldiers from the loyal Alphadoms to protect their borders. "What was it like?" She whispered, as if word of her curiosity would somehow make its way back to the mysterious Grave Crown Alpha himself.

Aiden took a beat to gather his thoughts, probably parsing through what he could and couldn't say about his time in the Alliance's dark zone.

Finally, his gaze settled on Ava's. "Secretive. Remote. In all of the years I spent up in Maine, I never actually got to see Grave Crown's stronghold."

Ava's eyes widened, "Not once? Then what were you doing there? And for so long?"

Aiden shook his head and took a sip of his coffee, "That's just how it is to be assigned up there. We were stationed along the Canadian border, monitoring for militant activity."

"Was there any?"

"Oh, absolutely. You wouldn't believe how fraught it is in the Great North. For a country that already pushed out its entire human population, the Canadian Wolves are constantly testing the US borders for entry points."

"Why?" Ava shuddered, unsettled by that new information.

He shrugged, "Looking to expand? Though, goddess knows why they'd need it." He shivered and hugged his coffee closer. "Although, after experiencing winter in the Maine wilderness, I can only imagine what it's like even further up. I'd want to make my way south, too, I suppose."

Aiden continued, "Anyway, it's so remote up there that communication with the rest of the world is difficult at best. When you stopped responding to my letters, I had no other way of figuring out where you'd gone."

"But what about mom and dad? Why didn't they tell you? And why didn't you ever come back, for that matter?"

Aiden leaned forward and stabbed emphatically at the table, "That's the thing, Ava. No one ever once mentioned anything going down in Red Moon, much less that you were caught up in the middle of it. Not even now! I've spent the past month travelling around the territory looking for you, but no one would tell me where you'd gone. Just that you'd left."

She frowned, "Not even our parents?"

He sat back and shook his head, mirroring her disappointment. Funny. Ava hadn't thought she harbored any lingering familial expectations from her parents, but pretending she'd just up and vanished? It struck a new blow. "You know, I'd heard about a murder in Red Moon after I'd come back. But everyone I spoke to was fuzzy on the details, and no one knew anything about the supposed killer."

"So they covered it up. They locked me away and swept everything under the rug. No wonder I haven't been spotted before now. That's something, I guess." She grabbed a napkin and began to systematically tear it to

shreds. Aiden watched her for a minute before reaching a cautious hand across the table to rest atop her mindless fidgeting, "I'm so sorry that happened to you, Ava. I can't imagine everything you've gone through since I left."

She swallowed hard, and when she finally spoke, her voice cracked. "But why were you gone so long? Not that you could have done anything to change what happened, but..."

"Another one of Grave Moon's rules. Soldiers are required to complete a mandatory five-year stint, no matter where they're stationed, right? The thing is, Grave Moon doesn't just allow people to in and out of their territory. Ever. So that five- year station was consecutive for me."

Ava pulled a frown, "Ugh. And what do you get out of it."

He lifted a shoulder, "A stacked bank account and indefinite leave if I so choose. There's not much to spend your paycheck on in the middle of the wilderness. And I stopped sending money back home after your letters stopped."

Ava couldn't deny the small twinge of satisfaction she felt at hearing that. No matter what, her brother had been in her corner the whole time. Even if he hadn't known how much he'd needed her.

She flipped her hand over, winding her fingers through his, reveling in a connection she hadn't known she'd been missing like a lost limb. Mia responded almost immediately, sensing the presence of her own brother. Warmth suffused Ava as Mia allowed herself a rare moment in the foreground. She felt Aiden's hand grow warmer as well, as his Wolf, Laith, rose to meet his sister for the first time in years.

Through their blood connection, Ava felt the moment Laith sensed the weakness in Mia. Ava felt her Wolf begin to retreat, as was her instinctive reaction, but Ava stopped her. He's your brother, Mia. He won't hurt you.

Slowly, but surely, Mia responded, opening up to Laith through the ethereal connection that all Wolves shared. As their Wolves' bond solidified, Aiden, too, became aware of Mia's ailment.

His face that had previously been alight with their Wolves' reconnection, now fell. "Ava..."

She shook her head, "I don't know. It was something that happened while I was in prison." She swallowed past the lump in her throat, fighting back her tears. "I lost my connection to her for a while, but she eventually came back after I reconnected with Xavier. Mia's been weak ever since. Anxious, antisocial. She almost never rises to the surface, and when she does, she's so aggressive. I don't know what to do."

He frowned, "Have you spoken about it with anyone?"

"Who? I'm in hiding. I don't have very many people that I can trust, and the ones I remotely do can't help me with this."

Aiden shook his head, "Damn it, Ava. We'll figure this out, just like we'll figure out everything else." Then he stopped, his eyebrows drawing together. "You said that Mia returned after you ran into Xavier. Michaels? Why?" Ava's head fell back. For goddess' sake, of all of the things she'd wanted to talk to him about, this was the one topic she hadn't prepared for.

"Aiden, Xavier is my mate. He's also the bastard who had me locked up."

As it did every time he set foot into the mental institution, Xavier's body went inexplicably cold. He knew that wasn't the proper verbiage he was supposed to use, but 'psychiatric wellness center' didn't capture just how bleak this place was.

It may have just been his own relationship with the place, but he could swear that the campus sat inside its own miniature pocket dimension. One that was tinged gray and reeked of misery.

Xavier's mood didn't brighten any when he rounded the bend and saw his father standing in the hallway. As usual, he was dressed for a boardroom meeting, business as usual. And, this particular day, the glare he leveled at his son was nearly withering enough to kill the bouquet of flowers in Xavier's hands.

"Good morning to you, too, Dad."

"Why did a group of pups just knock on my door, claiming that they saw Ava Davis running around Rochester last night?"

Hearing Ava's name in his father's mouth was enough to make his blood thicken. "It sounds as if it's because they're confused about the proper chain of command."

August sneered at Xavier, keeping his voice barely above a whisper. It rung loud and clear all the same, just as it always had, "They obviously had the right idea coming directly to me."

Xavier bristled, like he usually did whenever his father rubbed it in his face just how many of their people still saw him as their rightful leader, "I have Ava under control. Last night was a fluke, it won't happen again."

"She needs to be in prison." August gestured to the door they stood in front of, "Or do you forget what she's done?"

"No, she needs to be away. Because of what we did, Dad. Don't pretend like you care where she's being stashed as long as she's not Red Moon's problem."

August's eyes went flint hard at Xavier's accusation, "The Pack comes first, Xavier. You'd best let sleeping bears lie, lest you be devoured, son. Now, lets go. We have an appointment to keep."

An appointment. Xavier barely kept his roiling contempt at bay as his father pushed into the room. He choked down his ire, the reality of his past deeds rising like bile. Instead, he plastered on his most placating smile as they entered the hospital suite.

He followed his father, stepping up to give the female sitting at the window a peck on the cheek.

"Hey, Mom. How are you feeling today?"