

## Chapter 59

### Revelations

Every other weekend was the same. Xavier would meet his father outside of the Dire Lake University of Psychiatric Wellness, and they'd spend two heart wrenching hours, walking on eggshells while they visited his mother, Renata. If they were lucky.

It seemed that they might be today. Her eyes were clear, and her smile came easily. She seemed at least partly interested in what August had to say, as he recounted the boring surface-level information he always brought with him from the Pack.

If her attention seemed to fade in and out of focus as his father droned on, Xavier didn't blame her. After all, what did she care about who had just had a baby, or gotten married, or graduated from whatever, when she couldn't stand to be outside of these walls long enough to enjoy it.

After Sophia had died, the despondency had almost immediately set in. She's become listless and apathetic, wringing joy from nothing and no one. At first, her father had chalked it up to her particular brand of grieving. And then after she'd stopped getting up to go to work, he'd figured that a certain amount of depression was warranted, given the circumstances. Nothing a weekly appointment with a grief counselor couldn't fix.

Then, she'd begun to disassociate. She'd lose track of where she was when she was sitting still or forget the faces and names of people she'd known for decades. Xavier would catch her having conversations with Sophia when there was no one else in the room.

She'd become prone to violence, lashing out at August and Xavier whenever she became confused. And still, his father had insisted on keeping her at home, trying to maintain a semblance of normalcy that their home would never reach again. At first, Xavier had gone along with it, hoping that the familiar setting would be comforting to her. He'd read her all of her favorite books and had learned to cook all of her favorite meals, and for a time, it seemed to be working. For months, simply his presence had been enough to draw her back from whatever dreamscape her mind had become that day.

In a way, helping his mother had helped Xavier with his own pain. At the very least, it had given him something to keep his mind off of the shambles Red Moon had become fresh under his leadership. He'd felt as if he were actually making a difference, doing something to help, while his father

dealt with the Alliance breathing down their necks, and hunting down a rogue threat that had all but vanished into thin air.

It had helped him overcome the gnawing guilt he felt for sentencing his best friend to a life of slow torment, just to save the Pack the trouble of her presence. Whether Ava had committed the heinous crime or not, she'd been his closest friend, and she had deserved more than the fate his father had chosen for her, and he had carried out.

Renata hadn't lasted a full six months before she'd swallowed down her entire bottle of tranquilizers.

Then, his father had been forced to recognize the impossibility of the charade they were perpetrating. There was no way they would be able to explain away another public episode. Another frantic ambulance ride coming from the direction of the Alpha's manor. Another death in the family.

And, so, just like Ava, Renata had become a hazard to their public reputation - just another loose end to be tucked away. August had moved her here, to this sad heap in the middle of the woods where, hopefully, she'd be forgotten, too. It was then, that Xavier had given up; trying to lead, as well as trying to make heads or tails of what had become of his life. If his father could make the hard decisions for the sake of the whole, then he ought to be able to do the same. Even if it had come out that Ava was unequivocally innocent the very next day, August would never allow her back into the fold.

So, he'd let the issue rest because that's what his father would have wanted. Because, clearly, August was twice the Alpha, the male, that Xavier could hope to be.

"You look so sad."

He looked up at his mother's soft voice. As usual, he stayed after his father had left, since his father's visits were much more frequent. Usually, they sat in silence, as Xavier watched her knit, or read. Sometimes when she was too tired to do so, he'd read to her. By the time his father was finished reporting the Pack news, she was never in much of a mood for talking.

He sighed and gave her his best fake smile, "You know how it is, Ma. An Alpha's job is never done..."

"Is that what you are? An Alpha?" She didn't look up from her book.

Xavier's smile went rigid around the edges. She was fading again. He'd have to call the nurse soon. "Yeah, Ma. I have been for a while now."

She huffed out an unamused laugh, "Funny, I thought your father was the one making all of the decisions around here."

Xavier's eyebrows furrowed at the sharp quality that had entered his mother's normally docile tone. "Mom," he nearly got up to reach for the

nurse's call button when she finally looked up at him. When she met his gaze, her honey-colored eyes were clear as day, and cold as stone.

"I'm tired of seeing this shell you've become, Xavier. You're so lost, it breaks my heart."

The words were so unexpected, so biting, that Xavier didn't have a chance to stop the tears that welled up behind his eyes. His throat bobbed as he swallowed back the pressure, his eyes never leaving his mother's. "I'm trying to do what's best for the Pack."

"The Pack isn't one entity, like your father thinks, Xavier. It's a community of individuals who will think what they are going to think, and then move on. Just like people do."

She put her book down and reached for him, cupping his face in her soft, papery hands. "The Pack is not worth your happiness. Don't let the want of control taint your spirit like it did your father's."

A tear slipped unbidden down Xavier's face, followed by another, and another. As the floodgates opened, he could no longer stand looking into his mother's eyes. He ducked his head in an attempt to hide his shame. "It's too late. What I've done is unforgivable. I've lost her."

"Ava."

His breath hitched. Not once in over three years did his mother ever once say Ava's name. "I don't want to upset you," he said carefully.

"Love, this is the first time in a long while that I haven't been upset." She brushed away a lock of hair that had fallen into his face. "But...what she did..."

"Was decided by a biased court, based on public opinion and unbridled emotion."

Xavier didn't know what to say. He had no idea his mother had felt this way. She hadn't been there the night of Ava's trial, but the throes of grief had already had her well within its grasp by then.

"What...why are you bringing this up, now?"

"I spent forty years as a scholar and a historian. What took place that night was a blatant mockery of justice." Her lips lifted in a slight smile as she nodded toward the door, "And it finally sounds as if you're ready to try to set things right." Xavier shook his head, "It's not possible. There was so little evidence to begin with, and practically all of it is gone. Where do I even begin?"

"At the beginning."

It didn't take long for him to catch her meaning, "Victor." She nodded. "You think he had something to do with this?"

"I think he's the best place to start, if you want to find out."

He nodded in agreement, but stayed silent for a few long moments, while he contemplated their conversation.

"What if she never forgives me?"

"She very well may never forgive you, Xavier. And that's her right to make that decision." She pet his hair, soothing him in a way he hadn't felt since his childhood. "But you owe it to her, yourself, and Sophia and Samantha to uncover the truth, so that justice truly can be served."

"And if she did do it?"

She sighed, "Well, then you need to be able to trust yourself to make the decisions that need to be made. That's what being an Alpha truly means, my love."

His mother softened the blow of that harsh truth with a smile, "Until then, do try not to lose faith. If she sees that you're trying to do what's right, then perhaps that will endear her to you."

Her eyes grew disconcertingly distant for a moment before clearing, although she still looked troubled, "The heart can forgive a lot, when given ample opportunity to heal."

He rested his head in his hands and leaned into his mother's comfort, "The things she's gone through, Ma. Her Wolf...all because I was too afraid to stand up for her to begin with." His mother's hand stopped, "Her Wolf?"

Xavier looked up, and cleared his throat, "Yeah. Jack...a healer told me that she'd lost her Wolf temporarily, but there are lasting affects we don't know. And I doubt she'll ever tell me." His mother's hazel eyes filled with wonder, "Her Wolf...you said it came back?"

His brow furrowed in concern, as his mother's eyes filled with tears, "It did. Why?" She shook her head sadly, "It's just a wonder to hear, is all. After all, mine never did."