

## Chapter 79

Sam

Looking at the rhinestone-studded, leopard-printed rectangle, it was insane to think how much damage such an innocuous item had caused. Sam had been glued to the thing, spending hours on end scrolling through it as if it held the secrets of the universe.

If Xavier was lucky, it would hold the secrets to her death. How had she gotten herself caught up in a conspiracy that had ultimately torn their lives apart? Why had his closest friends been the ones targeted?

When he pressed the phone's power button, he hadn't really expected it to turn on, so it was a fortunate turn when the screen dutifully sparked to life. The home screen sprung up, making Xavier's chest constrict. Staring back at him was a photo he didn't remember taking on a day he didn't specifically remember spending with anyone else on the screen.

His own face sported a rare full-toothed smile that he usually reserved for the girls' pictures. He had an arm flung around Sam, who, in turn, had an arm wrapped around Sophia. Ava must have been the one taking the photo since she wasn't in it, and he remembered her being front-and-center in most of their photos, always camera-ready and most often the photo-ops instigator.

"What do you think you'll find?" Dylan asked, rifling through the rest of Victor's correspondences.

Xavier shook his head, "I thought I'd find some sort of explanation for what happened, but the letters took care of that. If Victor put a hit out on my sister and pinned Ava for it, I want to know how Sam got involved at all." "You think she might've been in on it?" Dylan asked.

"I'm reserving judgment," Xavier sighed. "I've learned my lesson about condemning people without irrefutable proof."

Dylan may have replied, but whatever he might have said was lost on Xavier as Sam's photo gallery opened and he began to scroll through. Most of the pictures were various selfies and pictures of random, inconsequential things that had caught Sam's eye, like most people's phones. However, the further he scrolled, the more he noticed a curious pattern.

There were no pictures of Ava.

If he had been any other person looking through this photo gallery, he might not have noticed, but he grew up with these females and knew full damn well that they were together more often than not. The fact that there were countless photos taken of any combination of Sophia, Samantha, and himself together completely without Ava's presence was not only unlikely, it was impossible.

The closer he looked, the more he noticed the bit of elbow here or the hint of red hair creeping in from just out of frame. Ava was in these pictures; he even remembered when some of them were taken. But Sam had cropped her out of every single one.

Xavier closed the gallery and opened up Sam's messaging app. Just as he remembered, there saved as her final conversation was the exchange between Sam and Ava.

Ava: Sam, you made me look like a damn fool. We need to talk.

And then later on, just before the murders, Sam replied.

Sam: I'm here. Where are you?

This exchange had helped send Ava to prison, but even back then, it had seemed circumstantial. Now, looking at it with the eyes and life experience of an adult, the conversation looked straight-up incomplete.

Xavier backed out of the thread and scrolled through the rest of the conversations but found nothing. Including the entire text thread between Sam and Sophia, which definitely should have been present. Exiting the messenger, Xavier opened up the phone's file directory, navigating through the data storage files until he came across a folder for a social media app that Sam didn't have installed.

When it opened, the folder held an archived message stored inside.

Sam: You have a big fucking mouth, Sophia. Now Ava's pissed.

Sophia: What do you care? All you do is talk shit behind her back anyway...

Sophia: I'm tired of you making things weird. If you like my brother, then say so.

...

Sam: I'm not having this conversation over the phone.

Sophia: Then meet me in the grove tonight. Usual time. We'll talk.

Sam: What are you going out there for?

Sophia: I'm meeting a guy I've been talking to.

Sam: What???

Sophia: Just meet me after.

It felt as if a load of bricks had settled in the pit of Xavier's stomach. Nothing he'd just read made any sense to him. As far as he'd known, his sister hadn't been seeing anyone, and he couldn't begin to unpack Sophia's claims that Sam had liked him. Sure, she'd been around, but Sam had always been around.

His mind drifted back to the night when Ava had confessed her attraction to him not too long before the night of the murders. He'd laughed off her claim, and the Pack had seen his apparent rejection as motive for her attack. In reality, he'd just been a teenaged boy who hadn't known how to process the fact that his beautiful best friend had just admitted to liking him.

That afternoon was supposed to be an awkward moment that they could laugh about when they were older. Instead, he'd only managed to condemn Ava before his sister and Sam had ever been murdered.

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"Xavier," Dylan said, pulling him from his musings. "Wasn't Liam looking for evidence pointing to the recent attacks in his territory?"

"Yeah," he said, taking the letter the other male offered him. It appeared that over the years, they'd gotten sloppy. Unlike the last one, this one was post-dated on the back as if it had gone through a secretary before reaching Victor. "This is dated a little over a year ago," he said.

Dylan nodded, "Around the same time Liam said the attacks along his border took place."

A steady stream of apprehension flowed through Xavier's veins, weighing him down with every new piece of information they uncovered.

You Worthless Lying Sack of Filth,

I should have known better than to get back into bed with a snake like you, Victor. You tell me why I just lost half a team of men along the Jersey Border. You expect me to believe you didn't tip off Silver Moon? If this is some half-ass intimidation tactic, forget about it. I have enough intel to bury you twice over.

If it's not, then you're still out of luck. You're cursed, Victor - not born to lead, so I advise you to let your delusions of grandeur go. This is my last message to you. Don't contact me again, and we'll both agree to keep our knowledge to ourselves.

- M. B.

"Along the Delaware border," Xavier asked.

"Has to be, right?" Dylan said, "It sounds like Victor was trying to put together another attack, but Liam's people crossed them before they could get to New York."

After a moment's contemplation, Xavier took out his own phone, snapped a picture of the letter, and sent it to Liam.

I think we found that Intel you were looking for.

The screen registered when Liam opened the message a few moments later, but it was a long while before he finally replied.

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Thank you.

Dylan sighed heavily as he took out his phone and began taking photos of everything they'd found, "I'm not gonna lie, when you asked me to help you clear Ava's name, I wasn't expecting...this. I don't know what it was I thought we'd find. But it wasn't this."

"Me neither," Xavier admitted. "I don't even know what I'm going to do with this much information. Calling Victor out directly feels like the wrong move."

"You know what my question is?" Dylan paused and gestured at the overabundance of documentation. "What possessed him to keep any of this in the first place? This all should have been ashes years ago."

Xavier grimaced, "Leverage, that's why. If Victor's going down, he won't go alone, and that's fine by me. I'm dying to know who this M.B. motherfucker is. Victor may have called the hit, but he pulled the trigger, and I want him to pay for it." Dylan finished gathering up all of the missives and other pieces of evidence, placing them all back to how they'd found them inside of the safe. Xavier had passed from anger and straight into the pins-and-needles embrace of detachment. He snapped a few final



photos of the family tree and journal before placing all of the books back onto the shelf, hiding the safe once more.

"How about we get out of here. First cold one's on me," Dylan said, rubbing a hand over his face. "Hell, I'm treating tonight. Period." "Sounds like a plan," Xavier said. "But first, I want to make one last stop."

Even though he'd never personally seen Sam's room before, from what he'd seen of the photos in her phone, it hadn't changed at all in the years since her death. Some part of him was grateful for that. Although Victor had purged all evidence of Sam's existence from the rest of the house, she still lived on in this room.

It was a toss-up whether or not that was a good thing. His father had cleared out Sophia's room shortly after having his wife admitted. All Xavier had to remember his sister by was a few spare trinkets and photos that had survived the purge. Walking around the room, the intensely feminine décor all but screamed that a teenaged girl had lived here. Xavier wondered how the room would have changed if Sam had gotten the chance to grow up. Or Sophia. Or Ava, who arguably ended up growing up far too quickly, but as far as he knew, had yet to have the opportunity to own a space of her own.

Xavier didn't have to look very hard to find Sam's journal. It was tucked away in her bedside drawer, where it had sat abandoned since before she'd died. At first, he wasn't sure that the painful walk down memory lane had been worth it. But as he flipped to the book's later entries, it became clear

that even if it didn't shed light on his investigation into her death, the contents were nonetheless enlightening.

"There was trouble in paradise," Xavier muttered. "And it started long before anyone died."