

Chapter 93

The Grudge

"Sometimes I can't breath at the thought of the shit you've gone through because of me," Xavier said. "It keeps me up at night. Eats me up inside. I'm a coward, Ava, and I failed us both."

Ava shifted from one bare foot to the other, focusing on the pricking sensation of the sticks and pebbles that bore her weight, preferring the physical pain to the floodgate of stabbing emotions that filled her at his confession. She gritted her teeth against the wash of tears threatening to overtake her.

"If you want me to deny that just to make you feel better, I won't do that, Xavier," She said, her voice harsh with suppressed by years' worth of bitter sentiment she didn't have the words to voice. "I don't...I've had to learn to live with a lot. It's only fair that you do the same."

"If that will get me on the path to atonement, I swear to the goddess that I'll do whatever you need from me, Ava."

"I don't need anything from you." Even as she said it, her feet brought her closer to where Xavier sat with his back against an old oak tree. "I had to rebuild who I am because of your actions. It's something that I'm still doing. And I do my best growing when you're not in my life."

Xavier's eyes fell to the forest floor beneath his knees, "Funny. I've been stagnant since the day that I let them drag you from my life, and I've only started moving forward again since you crashed back into it."

Frustrated, she threw the bound stack of papers at him, hitting him squarely in the chest. The fact that she was sure that he let her do it only pissed her off more.

"This isn't about you, Xavier! I don't fucking care to hear about your self-flagellation," she dropped to her knees in front of him, the pain from her skin scraping against the forest floor fueling her ire. "Why haven't you rejected the mating bond and put us both out of our misery?"

Xavier shook his head, "I don't think I could if I wanted to, Ava."

"Why?"

"For the same reason you can't break it off yourself. From what I've heard, the bond leaves you weakened in the best of circumstances. You're not in any condition to take a hit like that."

Ava sat back on her heels, "How would you know? And what do you care either way?"

Xavier snapped his head back, thudding it against the tree trunk behind him. The sharp bite of the bark against his scalp reminded him to keep his calm. "I don't hate you, Ava. Even at my angriest, I've never fucking hated you. I would never do anything that would deliberately hurt you."

Ava's jaw dropped at the au-damn-dacity of this motherfucker. "You sold me to a fucking brothel, you psycho!"

Xavier leaned forward, matching her tone for tone, "Where you were supposed to talk to sad assholes for money! I didn't know you'd attract every dank sonofabitch in Rochester."

Ava's hands flung wide, "It was your brothel! Half of those dank motherfuckers were your friends!"

He held up a finger, "Political acquaintances. To keep the Council happy."

"Is everything you do to keep the Council happy?"

Xavier's laugh was harsh and utterly mirthless, "Until very recently? Yeah, actually. It may come as a surprise, but I don't have the tightest grip on my life, Ava."

She leaned in and sneered, "What, you expect me to believe that the big bad Red Moon Alpha isn't the master of his domain? That you're not the one calling all the shots?" "Yes, Ava."

His reply was so stark, so filled with self-loathing that it finally gave Ava pause.

"I haven't called any shots in Red Moon for a long, long while," he said in a deadly even tone. "I haven't had the stomach for it. And I don't think it's self-aggrandizing to say that's probably because my first act as Alpha sent my best friend, my mate to prison."

All of a sudden, the fight went out of Ava's sails, leaving her breathless and sad. One look at Xavier told her that he felt the same.

She'd spent so much time wondering what could possibly be going on inside of his head to make him treat her the way that he had. She'd never once considered that the answer might make sense to her. While there was no such thing as a good excuse in their situation, Ava couldn't discredit the fact that there might be a rational explanation.

All Ava had wanted for so long was sit down and have an honest conversation with Xavier, to be heard. But now, it was time for her to hear, instead.

"I don't know if my father ever fully thought that you were guilty, and he made it clear that it didn't matter if I did, either. I had to make a decision for the good of the Pack and choosing you meant letting chaos into our community," he continued. "At the time, I thought it made sense to just do what needed to be done, so I did. And my father was right. The Pack was mollified even if my family was left in tatters."

"So, you just...left me?" Ava asked, her voice breaking.

"Yeah. Yeah, I did. I could say that I'd planned to circle back, and I did, but it didn't matter. My mom was so...broken. It was all we could do to keep her alive long enough to put her into a psychiatric facility." He brushed his hair back and slumped against the tree. "I'm sorry, Ava. I wish that I had a better explanation for you, but I don't. I was being pulled in conflicting directions and I had to pick a side."

They sat in sad silence as the both of them considered Xavier's story and the shitty divide they'd found themselves on. She could continue to rail against him and impress on him how much she'd suffered because he hadn't chosen her. And a month or two ago, she would have. But Ava knew too well how unfair the world was, and how unforgiving Pack Law could be.

After all, she'd grown up in it.

Noah and Neia had warned her well enough that she wasn't the first to be screwed over by a broken system, and it wasn't likely that she'd be the last. It was her first time considering that maybe Xavier was just another victim of the system. "What happened to your mom?" She asked. "How is she?"

Xavier looked at her, surprised at the abrupt change in topic. "A whole hell of a lot better, actually. But that wasn't the case for a really long time," he shifted looking uncomfortable. "That's something else that I wanted to discuss with you. If you're up to it."

Ava settled onto the ground, repositioning herself so that her legs were crossed underneath her, "You wanted to talk to me about your mom?"

A quick grin flashed across Xavier's face, "Her condition, actually. And her recovery. Almost immediately after Sophia's death, she became really depressed, despondent. So much so that she had to leave her job. Not six months in, she tried to overdose on her antidepressants."

"Goddess...."

"We moved her into a long-term psychiatric care facility, and she stayed pretty much the same for the last three years. Then, a couple of weeks ago, she looked me dead in the eye and told me to grow the hell up, and she's been right as rain ever since."

"Why doesn't that sound like good news, then?"

"Because, I recently found out that she'd lost her connection to her Wolf after Sophia died."

An electric jolt of surprise sent Ava's mind reeling, "I didn't realize that something like that could just...happen."

"It doesn't just happen. Not outside of cases of extreme physical or emotional trauma." He rubbed a hand across his jaw, debating whether or not to continue his thought. "The loss of that connection tends to drive victims mad." Ava cocked an eyebrow, "Is that why you kept having Jack examine me?"

"I kept having Jack examine you because you kept needing to be examined. But yes, we were worried that losing Mia would have lasting effects on you." Xavier shrugged, "Well, I was worried. Jack was just excited to use you as a Guinee pig." "Goddess, Xavier."

He held up his hands and smiled, "I'm joking. Mostly. Anyway, by talking to my mother, we realized that you probably wouldn't be going insane because your bond with Mia was reinstated." "But how?"

"Because we ran into one another. We realized that the mating bond has some pretty fucking crazy healing abilities. The healthier the bond, the stronger those abilities become." Ava's brow furrowed, "But your parents aren't mated."

Xavier rested his head against the tree and sighed, "Yeah. But my mom is, now. To a new doctor at her care facility."