

The Alpha's Caged Mate

Prologue

"Murderer..." *"Liar..."*

"Traitor!"

Each vile word spat at Ava stung like the cut of a blade, digging deep and slicing her up from the inside out. These weren't strangers hurling profane slurs at her and glaring at her with such intense hatred in their glowing eyes; these were the people who'd watched her grow up, taught her what it meant to be a Wolf.

Now, they bared their fangs at her in rage, the shadow of their inner Wolves threatening to rise to the surface, to come tear Ava apart. These had been her people once, but tonight it was clear they were her enemies. "Burn, you *fucking* traitor!"

A rock sailed out of the darkness and caught Ava across the forehead. Ava hissed in a yelp of pain and dropped to her knees.

"On your knees where you belong, rogue bitch!" The crowd erupted in a round of raucous cheers seeing the girl felled.

The guards holding the lead to her shackles continued on, forcing Ava to stumble back to her feet or risk being dragged through the mud. Determined to maintain her dignity in spite of her rising sense of panic, Ava blinked the warm trickle of blood out of her eye and quickly got her feet under her.

She was a rising Beta of the Red Moon Pack, whether they liked it or not. She refused to show such weakness in front of her subordinates.

Ava bit back a heaving breath.

She felt the oppressive weight of his gaze land on her, once again.

****Xavier****. Alpha. Best friend. Potential lover. Now, potential executioner.

He'd meant the world to Ava her entire life. Before he'd grown into a powerful male, before he'd inherited the title of Alpha of the Red Moon Pack, he'd been Xavi. He'd been hers. Along with Sophia and Samantha, he'd been her closest companion and confidante.

Now, everything had changed. ***Everything***.

Ava's guard finally came to a stop in the middle of a familiar clearing. A small stream ran through it and coupled with the break in the forest canopy, the spot made for a peaceful place to stargaze.

She and her friends came here often. And although they hadn't visited the glade in some time, Samantha and Sophia's scents permeated the clearing, only overpowered by the overwhelming scent of their blood. There were no bodies to be seen, but she knew this was where they had died.

The dread building in her chest increased as she caught another scent on the wind. Inexplicably, she smelled her own violet-tinged musk intermingled with theirs. Faint enough to distinguish from her current presence in the area, but strong enough to suggest she'd been in the glade recently. Ava started to sweat. If she could scent herself her, the other Wolves had, as well.

Now, the tree line was crowded with representatives of their community, come to witness the trial and punishment of a so-called murderer. Standing in the center of the clearing were two figures whose shadows cut imposing silhouettes against the night.

The first was Xavier. Beside him, standing tall and proud, was his father, August, who telegraphed absolutely nothing despite having just lost a daughter. "Let her burn!"

"Make the filthy rogue whore pay!"

The jeers continued as Ava was brought to a stop before the former and current Alphas. Ava watched the males closely, eagerly looking for any sign that might tip her on to their intentions.

August began making a move forward, but a soft growl from Xavier made him pause. The exchange was nearly imperceivable, but Ava still caught the tiny nod August gave to Xavier, acquiescing the reigns in Xavier's first real act as Alpha. Stepping forward, Xavier raised a hand toward the crowd that was practically vibrating with furious energy. "Peace, Wolves! By the end of the night, I promise you justice will be served."

Ava swallowed heavily as the surrounding Wolves cheered and settled, ready for the bloodshed to begin. Xavier nodded, satisfied that Pack had immediately responded to his command. "Then, let the tribunal begin."

He strode up to where Ava stood shackled. She wanted him to say that he didn't believe the lies, that he knew her better than she knew herself - just like she knew him. He didn't. Instead, he took her in, from the mussed pajamas she'd been wearing when she'd been dragged into custody, to the fresh, seeping wound on her forehead. This close, he let Ava see the uncertainty and regret written all over his handsome face.

Behind him, August cleared his throat, low and sharp - a clear reprimand, reminding Xavier of who he was and what they were there for. The admonishment worked as Xavier's expression shuttered taking her friend away and leaving only the austere leader in his place.

"Kneel."

"Xavier- "Ava started to protest.

"*Kneel*." His voice went hard.

"Xavier, please! You know I had nothing to do with S- "

"Your loyalty to this Pack is already in question. Think long and hard on whether or not you also want to openly defy its leader." Ava heard the disguised plea in his words, to not make things harder on herself.

Swallowing, Ava ducked her head in a sign of submission and lowered herself to her knees before Xavier. He gave another satisfied nod and pitched his voice low, "You'll have your chance to speak."

"As we all know," Xavier faced her, but addressed the crowd. "We stand here together in mourning over the loss of two of our own. Ava Davis, you're under suspicion of making treacherous dealings and sundering a hole within the Red Moon Pack that can never be replaced. What say you?"

"I'm innocent!" She looked around to the crowd before settling her entreating gaze back on Xavier, "You all know me - Xavier, **you** know me. Sophia and Samantha were like sisters to me, there's no way I could ever hurt them." Xavier's jaw tightened at the word 'sister' and Ava knew he was thinking about Sophia.

But he composed himself quickly, "Noted." Turning toward a spot in the trees, he called out, "Victor, it was you who brought these allegations up against Ava. Tell us why."

"Alpha!" Victor stormed forward to join them in the center of the clearing. The slight Omega had been August's right-hand for years and was Sam's father. He shook with rage as he considered her, vengeful satisfaction filling his eyes as he took in her shackled, subjugated form. "I'm honored to help bring this filthy traitor the retribution she deserves."

Murmurs of agreement spread throughout the crowd as Victor spun to address them, "This... **beast** murdered our own."

Ava's head began shaking her denial even as he continued to speak. "I did **not-* ****

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"The future of our Pack and she betrayed their trust. She's betrayed *our* trust." He spat, never once looking her in the eye as he spelled out her death sentence.

"Victor, I know that you're hurting- "Ava pled.

"Because she was my daughter!" Victor spun toward her, bellowing.

His cry echoed through the night, his pain sharp as a knife. He took a few breaths to compose himself before turning to face the Pack again. Wrong or not, he'd resonated with them. Members, both male and female were openly weeping in their anger, feeling the open wound Sam and Sophia's deaths had opened in our community.

"Your proof, Omega." Xavier calmly demanded.

This trial was a joke, most of those gathered here had already judged her and found her guilty in their minds. Even so, she couldn't be punished without proper evidence.

"We all scented her on the wind upon our arrival," he started, drawing furious nods from the masses. With a dejected heart, Ava saw Xavier's nostrils flare as he, too, gave a solemn nod. "Beyond that telling truth, my daughter's phone!" Any hope she felt died as Victor pulled a cell phone out of his coat pocket. The bejeweled leopard-print case looked stunningly out of place in this gloomy field.

He pulled up their text thread and began reading aloud. "Sam, you made me look like a damn fool. We need to talk.' Sent from the *accused's* phone number yesterday afternoon. Then, at half past midnight last night my daughter replied, 'I'm here. Where are you?'" His revelation was met with heavy silence.

"That isn't proof!" Ava cried, frustrated tears finally leaking past her defenses, the last vestiges of her façade shredded by the blatant accusation leveled toward her.

Such evidence would never hold up in human court, but this wasn't the human world. Here, Pack Law reigned, and the Pack ran on emotion, instinct.

The tide of public opinion had turned against her and that was enough. "What reason would I have for doing this?"

"She had what you couldn't!" Victor's implication was clear.

It was a bold claim he made, and it painted a torrid picture for the jury. Rumors of Samantha's budding relationship with Xavier had apparently been circulating. Unfortunately, Ava hadn't heard them before she'd made her confession to him. She chanced a glance at Xavier, but his eyes were doggedly trained on Victor. His eyebrows were drawn low, and Ava knew he was thinking about that night, too.

Two nights ago, she'd poured out her heart to him, hoping that he could envision the future she saw for them. Then, his gentle dismissal had crushed her even if she refused to let him see it. Now, it was cause for homicide.

She'd been so bold, so confident in herself and comfortable with her and Xavier's relationship. Daughter of the Pack's second-in-command, she wasn't bred to be shy, in fact she was known for being the brash one of their group. It wouldn't have come as a surprise to anyone to find out she'd propositioned their Alpha, not like it would if Samantha had done so. Given the difference between mine and Samantha's ranks, Xavier picking Samantha over her would be a shock to our Pack's hierarchy.

To many, it'd seem like an insult to Ava's rank and honor. Retaliation on her part might be accepted, even expected, but *murder*...

"Your pathetic pride was hurt, and my daughter died for it," Victor continued. "What's more, our beloved princess was caught in your crossfire!"

The mention of Sophia elicited a strong reaction from the crowd, just like he knew it would. Sophia, indeed, had been beloved. She'd been warmth and levity, the kindest friend and fiercest protector. Victor said as much, causing the Pack to erupt in mournful howls, quickly replaced by calls for her head.

"Traitor! Murderer!"

An intense itch erupted underneath the surface of Ava's skin. Mia, her Wolf, threatening to unleash herself to protect Ava from the other Wolves, but trapped inside by the shackles binding her wrists. "Xavier, *please*, you know none of this is true." She supplicated herself to him further, head bowed, neck bared.

Xavier looked at the crowd and began to speak when his father stepped up to him for the first time since the trial had started. The shouts of the crowd masked the words that would doom Ava.

"Think very hard, Xavier," The older male's voice was stern, but calm, with the subtle charisma of a master manipulator. "Look at your people and the pain this girl has caused."

"The evidence was circumstantial, at best, father." Xavier said, though he seemed unsure of himself, especially under his father's scrutiny.

"The good of the Pack comes first, Xavier. Always." He subtly nodded at the raging crowd, hyped up by Victor's angry chants for retribution. "This chaos cannot be allowed to fester within our ranks. It needs to end here."

His voice held a little too much of his previous command and Xavier tensed at the perceived encroachment on his control. August backed up a step and smirked, "But, of course, the decision is up to you...Alpha."

Xavier stood a moment contemplating his father's whispered words and the increasingly hostile crowd calling for Ava's head. The evidence wasn't fool proof, but it was there. It was enough.

He turned to Ava, "The messages, your scent...It's too much, Ava. It's too clear. The Pack has spoken!"

"No!" She screamed as the insults turned to cheers.

Hands roughly dragged Ava to her feet.

"Given what evidence we've gathered and the dishonor you've brought upon this Pack," Xavier's voice boomed across the field like thunder. "As Alpha of the Red Moon Pack, I sentence you, Ava Davis, daughter of the Beta, to life imprisonment."

Ava grew silent. Life imprisonment. The rest of her life would be spent in a glorified dungeon.

Numb, she turned to look at her parents in a final bid for salvation. She didn't know what she'd been expecting.

No one would go against the Alpha's decision. After all, a Beta's first commitment was to the Alpha.

Xavier followed her gaze leveling her shivering parents with a ruthless glare. "Do you object to my judgment and the will of your Pack?"

Tense silence quickly fell, everyone waiting with bated breath to hear the Beta's response, Ava included. Under the Pack's scrutiny, her father's shoulders straightened while her mother's fell, ever-so-slightly. Ava knew then what they'd say. "We do not, Alpha." Her father proclaimed.

There was no containing Ava's sorrow and panic. Heaving sobs ripped from her chest, all semblance of pride completely gone. She'd been damned after all.

As Ava's jailers hauled her out of the clearing past Xavier, he uttered one final nail in her coffin.

"It should've been you."