

Chapter 116

Keep Calm And Carry On

"It will be a long process, but it's important to get started as quickly as possible. We want to show that you're willing to be a positive, active member of the Pack," Garrett continued as Ava looked on in stunned silence. "And, of course, we'd love to have you back home until you get back on your feet," Marie interjected. "Aiden's old room is yours for as long as you need it."

"Aiden's room?"

"Stop."

Aiden's stern tone cut through the rapidly growing din, "These are a lot of plans you're making for someone you haven't even spoken to in nearly four years. How about we dial it back."

"Aiden, please don't be reductive. Your sister was just released from prison- "

"Actually, I wasn't just released," Ava said. "I've been out for about six months now."

A tense silence stretched between them before Marie cut the quiet with another sob, "Six months? And you never reached out?"

"Like you reached out to me?"

"Ava," Garrett warned, but it was her turn to cut him off.

"Forgive me for addressing the elephant in the room, but this is getting a little ridiculous," she spat. "The last time you saw me, I was being dragged off to prison for a crime I didn't commit. With your blessing." Marie began to openly weep while Garrett gave a deep, long-suffering sigh.

"You had a trial and were found guilty, Ava," he said. "What would you have us do?"

"Stand up for me!"

Ava surprised herself with her own shout, but now that Pandora's box had been opened, there was no shoving the hurricane of emotions back in.

"You were my parents! You know damn well that I didn't fucking murder my best friends."

"Ava, please," Marie croaked. "You have to believe that neither of us wanted to believe that it could be true, but our hands were tied! It was our duty to allow justice to run its course- "

"Justice, Marie. What happened to me wasn't justice; it was another assassination disguised as Pack Law by the actual culprit so he could walk. And you let that happen."

In a flash, Garrett pushed to his feet, sending the seat beneath him skidding away, "Enough!" He growled, "We did our duty and have suffered for it the same as you have. You will not shame us for it. We've borne the brunt of enough grief on your account."

"Unlike you, I did nothing wrong!" Ava snarled back, pushing to her own feet.

As she stared her father down, she felt Mia rise, hackles raised and on the defense, summoned by the rising hostility in the room. Through Mia, Ava could sense her father's Wolf automatically respond as well, both ready to

fight. Both confused why they are threatening and being threatened by one of their own; not a fellow Wolf, but someone of the same blood.

That was enough to cause Ava to wonder the same. This wasn't what she had wanted when she'd told Aiden to let them in. Whatever this was, it wasn't going to give her the closure she desperately wanted.

Ava backed down first, allowing Mia to slip back beneath the surface as she took a step back, sucking in a few clarifying breaths. After a few moments, Garrett backed down, too, and so did Aiden, who had automatically jumped up, ready to defend her or break up a fight, she didn't know.

Garrett stepped back as well, breathing heavily, "All we want is our lives back. Is that too much to ask?"

Without another word, Garrett turned and stormed out of the conference room, slamming the door shut behind him. He left confused silence in his wake as Ava struggled to process what had just happened. Even Marie had fallen silent. Gone were her body-wracking sobs, replaced by a solemn thousand-yard stare.

"Your father is hanging on by a thread," she whispered. "After the trial, both of our roles were greatly reduced, but as the former Alpha's Beta, the reality was much worse for him. Xavier refused to associate with him, August no longer trusted him...his place on the Council became all but

customary. And the social ramifications.... It hasn't been easy on any of us."

"Arguably, it's been worse on one of you than the others," Aiden snapped. "This is pathetic. This isn't suffering. It's a mild inconvenience. Your daughter spent years in prison, and you're complaining about...what? Neighborhood gossip? Not getting invited to the Richards' block party?"

Ava placed a hand on his arm, "Don't. It's fine. I wanted to hear them out, and I've gotten all that I needed to hear."

Marie's brow lowered, and for the first time, something other than self-pity filled her eyes; anger. "We had to keep on living, Ava. We trusted that justice would run its course, and it has. You're free!"

"And I'm an adult now, free to make my own decisions. I didn't want to leave Red Moon without knowing what I'd be leaving behind. Now I know it's not much."

Marie's ire once away gave way to desperation as she lunged across the table to clutch Ava's hand, "Ava, you can't go. Your family is here; your Pack is here! Everything we've lost, we can rebuild. Everything will go back to how it was!"

Ava gently removed Marie's hand, inexplicably moved when the female completely collapsed, as if all of the fight suddenly left her. Ava licked her

lips hesitantly before rounding the table to gather her mother close as she shook. "You have to be strong," she whispered into her hair. "Things are never going to be the same, but that doesn't mean that they can't still be good."

"You're my babies," she sobbed. "You belong with me."

Slowly, Aiden came around to hug Marie from the other side, "You remember us how we left you."

"I feel as if I haven't lived since you left...."

Ava shared a look with her brother and understood that words weren't going to help Marie. At least not any words they could provide. So, instead, they held her, gently rocking her as she finally released the years of emotions she'd tamped down just to get by. That, Ava could understand.

She didn't know if she could ever bring herself to desire a relationship with the female again, but Ava did sympathize with her. So far, life outside of the dungeon had been a constant series of revelations that everyone had their own baggage filled with shit and sorrow - the world ran on it, was made of it. What counted was how each person dealt with their damage.

Sitting here, comforting a female who couldn't process her present in the absence of a male that couldn't visualize his future, Ava knew that this wouldn't be the end for them. She couldn't stay here, and they wouldn't

leave, but she'd found her connection to her parents in the most unsuspecting place. Misery.

She couldn't respect the way that they'd reacted to her arrest, but she could finally see that - in their way - they were victims in this, too. Forgiveness wouldn't come overnight, but she knew that she couldn't walk away completely. Considering the cast of characters she called friends, Ava couldn't be surprised she felt this way. Apparently, she had an affinity for broken people, and her family was broken. Even though she'd walked in here thinking she couldn't care less, Ava knew that someday somehow, she'd find a way to fix it.

"They weren't like that the last time I saw them."

Aiden gripped the steering wheel in a white-knuckled grip as they sped along the empty highway. Up to then, the car ride back to the lake house had been quiet and sullen. The reunion hadn't been pleasant for either of them. Apparently, even for Aiden, who'd briefly seen their parents since he'd been discharged, the experience had been harrowing.

"Completely unhinged?" She asked.

"For lack of a better term. I can't believe how selfish they've become. It's like they didn't even register what had happened to you."

Ava shrugged and leaned her forehead against the cool window, "You know how flight attendants always say that in case of emergency, you should put your own oxygen mask on first before assisting someone else with theirs?" "Yes?"

"Garrett and Marie didn't put on their mask," she whispered. "They panicked and fumbled and have spent the last three years gasping for air. So I'm not really surprised they completely forgot about mine. But me? I got mine on. And I think that I'm in a position to help them with theirs, now, too."

Aiden nudged her with his elbow, "You know, you're pretty smart for a felon."

She nudged him back, "Ex-felon, thank you very much."

"Seriously, though, I hadn't thought of it that way. It's crazy how you process things, Ava. It's like you see things with a clarity I don't think comes naturally to many other people."

"Yeah, well, there's not much else to do in prison than sit and think," she quipped, turning her face toward the window to hide her burgeoning blush. "Speaking of, I've been doing some thinking since we left Red Moon." "What about?"

Ava hesitated, but ultimately, she knew that this was a chance she wanted to take.

"About California. I can't go."

After a beat, he sighed. "You're sure?"

"Yes, I'm sure," Ava nodded. "I was afraid that I didn't have a purpose here. But, between Noah and our parents, I think that I'm beginning to find one."

"It isn't your job to take care of everyone else, Ava. You know that, right?"

Ava couldn't completely hide her flinch, so instead, she fixed her eyes on the shadowy scenery outside.

"I want to feel useful," she finally murmured. "And I will. Here."