

Chapter 54

Found You

Noah held her gaze and swallowed hard, visibly affected by Ava's confession. If he was surprised, then she was reeling. She could hardly believe she'd uttered those words. I trust you.

It sounded preposterous, even to her own ears. Ava didn't know this man. He didn't know her. And here she was making admissions she didn't recall ever making to...anyone before, even when she'd felt it. For Ava, admitting to putting her trust into someone felt surreal. Dangerous.

She almost wished she'd said that she was in love with him instead. Somehow, the frivolity of a confession of love felt less mortifying. At least she wouldn't really have meant it. As it was, her ill-advised words had inadvertently created a connection between them. Something like and unwanted expectation.

If he told her to piss off, then she couldn't even blame him. She knew what this was, and he'd always been clear about the parameters of their arrangement. It was her who'd gone and muddied the waters almost immediately. "Good. I trust you, too."

Ava froze, on the brink of scrambling for a way to backtrack the last thirty seconds. Noah's hand reached up to brush one of her bangs back into place, at the same time ensuring that he had an unobstructed view as he gazed into her eyes. "We sound insane," he said, every one of his dazzling teeth on display as he smiled down at her. "We've spent a total of, what, twenty-four hours in one another's presence. Maybe? But I feel it, too, Ava."

Ava didn't have the proper words to express how he made her feel in that moment. She didn't know if the words even existed to adequately summarize the feeling of having such an enormous burden lifted from her spirit even as it weighed so heavily on her chest.

But maybe that feeling would never completely go away - that unwavering sense of waiting for the other shoe to drop. Perhaps that was simply her cross to bear from a lifetime of coping with one crushing blow after another.

That didn't mean that Ava should be doomed to questioning every decent thing that happened to her until she eventually died bitter and alone. She hadn't been delivered out of concrete cell only to be trapped in a prison of her own making. And that was ultimately Ava's decision to make.

So, she did. Once and for all, she chose not to question what joy she was afforded. Whether the good times lasted ultimately wasn't up to her, but choosing happiness was.

And happiness was what she so desperately wanted.

"You can kiss me again."

Noah's lips kicked up in a sly grin, "Can I?"

Ava nodded, peering at him through heavily lidded eyes, "Yeah. You can kiss me whenever you want."

And he did. Noah's lips slid back over hers and they sunk into one another, passing slow, languid kisses back in forth. When she tugged at his bottom lip with her teeth, he obligingly opened up and let her inside, allowing her to explore him as he had done to her. Noah growled deep in his chest, causing Ava to shiver.

Noah's lips finally left her own to trail whisper soft kisses down the column of Ava's throat. He paused right over the spot her pulse thudded rapidly beneath her skin. Noah growled and nipped at the fluttering heartbeat as if it were his prey. Ava shuddered with a moan, her head dropping back to give him more access. She nearly whimpered at the

touch of his tongue as he slowly lapped at the spot, soothing the sting his teeth had left.

Ava felt each stroke of his tongue in her core, driving her closer and closer to madness with every pass. She was about to open her mouth to ask him to...she didn't know what. To take his ministrations further, lower. Before she could, the shrieking laughter of children erupted outside, as a herd of toddlers ran past their, thankfully, tinted windows.

They pulled back, their chests heaving, each fighting the urge to fall back into the warmth of the other's embrace.

After a few charged moments, they caught their breaths, their foreheads resting against one another.

"Damn," Noah finally said. "You were so excited for the carnival, A. We can't miss it."

Ava groaned, "Can't we?"

"No," he laughed. "We can't. You were excited for a reason."

Her eyes lingered on his lips, "Hell yeah, I was."

"Ava..."

"Fine!" Ava sighed dramatically and grabbed the door handle, getting out of the car, "If you'd rather look at clowns than hump in a parking lot, that's on you."

She stood up to find a young family just passing by, looking absolutely affronted at the flushed girl stumbling out a foggy vehicle. Noah's laugh was deep and loud as Ava winced and waved at the parents who were quickly ushering away their small child.

"I told you. The mouth on you, Ava."

Rolling her eyes, a furiously blushing Ava started quickly walking toward the carnival entrance, "Yeah, so I've been told."

Noah was still chuckling to himself when he reached her side and caught her hand in his own, twining their fingers together as they made their way inside.

The carnival was everything Ava remembered it to be and more. And travelling to this very fairground was one of Ava's fondest childhood memories. Unlike the majority of her recollections from her youth, Ava's carnival excursions weren't shadowed by the memories of her lost friends.

Every year as a kid, she'd come here with her parents and brother, up until her brother had gotten old enough to start preparing for basic training, and Ava had decided that she'd rather hang out with her friends than spend another evening alone with her parents.

Those memories came with their own set of heartaches, but they didn't hold a candle against travelling throughout the carnival with Noah. They spent the next couple of hours enjoying the cacophony of lights and sounds that made up a fall carnival.

Ava was thrilled to find that Noah wasn't a fan of spinning rides, almost tickled to find even the smallest divet in Mr. Perfect's pristine armor. Of course, despite his reticence, he insisted on joining her on the rides anyway, unwilling to dampen her enjoyment of the night in any way.

When they got off the tilt-a-whirl his normally bronze skin looked a little pale, and when she suggested that they take a break from the rides checking out the deep-fried Oreos stand, he looked positively ashen. "Or the arcade?" She offered sheepishly, feeling bad for failing to recognize how unappealing that would probably be.

Noah nodded gratefully as they made their way to the midway, where dozens of games and ground-based attractions glittered in the dying light. For the first time in a long while, Mia bristled within her. Ava froze, immediately concerned. Mia was usually quiet around Noah, and Ava got the impression through her bond that the Wolf found her relationship with Noah more as a break from the chaos than anything. He'd never once

piqued her protective instincts, and for that the Wolf had all but given him her blessing.

Now, the back of Ava's neck itched, as if she were being watched. She turned to scan the surrounding crowd, but nothing immediately stood out to her.

"Hey, you okay?" Noah's hand pressed against her back, and the feeling subsided, leaving Ava feeling antsy, but reasonably mollified.

He rubbed her back as she nodded, "I'm good."

"Then what about we take a crack at this?" He said pointing to a stand that held a milk bottle toss.

"Talk about classic," Ava said. "Are you any good?"

Noah scoffed, "Am I any good?" He handed the kid tending the stand a fiver, "I'll only need one."

Ava rolled her eyes good naturedly as the kid handed him a single ball, which Noah handily lobbed into the pyramid of milk jugs, sending every one toppling to the floor below.

A round of applause erupted from a crowd of onlookers as Noah selected a sparkly plush dinosaur and handed it to Ava. "Oh, you are good!" Ava said and selected her prize.

Noah started to respond, but Ava interrupted him by gesturing for the kid to hand her a ball. When he did, she closed an eye and carefully lined up her shot, just like her older brother had taught her every fall for nearly a decade. When the angle was perfect, Ava chucked the ball, making sure she nudged it enough to make it spin as it left her hand. The ball sailed through the pyramid, knocking the bottles over, only to ricochet off the back wall and fly through the neighboring pyramid before Noah caught it with a hand.

The applause erupted in force, and even the terminally bored-looking game attendant looked impressed.

"Who said anything about trick shots?" Noah said in mock outrage.

"I told you, Thomas. The carnival is my town." The attendant came back with the largest prize they had - a sparkly, iridescent rainbow-colored unicorn the size of a kindergartener. With a shit-eating grin, Ava presented the plush to Noah. He took it eagerly, tucking it under one of his massive biceps like it belonged there. "I know you think you schooled me, but this right here?" He pointed between Ava's toppled bottles and the unicorn, "My favorite thing to happen tonight." Ava cocked an eyebrow, putting a hand on her hip, "Your favorite thing to happen tonight?"

Noah smirked, "My mistake. Second favorite, for sure."

Ava beamed as he leaned in and gave her a kiss on the cheek. "A thorough trouncing deserves a proper reward," he said. "Stay here with our winnings and I'll go grab you those awful cookie things you were looking at?" "Ohh, yes, please!"

Ava shamelessly stared at his broad back as he walked away, mesmerized by how his muscular shoulders shifted under his coat, even in the fading light. When he was out of sight, however, the tingling along Ava's back came back with a vengeance. So hard in fact, she whipped around, convinced a threat was right behind her.

She wasn't wrong.

"Ava Davis. By the goddess, it is you!"

The bottom dropped out of Ava's stomach as she saw the trio - a group of young adults only a year or two older than her. Of course they'd recognize her, as fellow members of the Red Moon Pack.

As she watched, their bewildered expressions fell into ones of aggression, the echoes of their Wolves flickering like an aura.

"TRAITOR!"