Chapter 86

Rogue Or Rebel

Ava had been confused when Noah's mother had dropped by their home and begun asking incredibly invasive questions and spouting vague rhetoric with very little context or payoff. She'd been perplexed when all but kicked his mother out of the house instead of allowing her to make a point.

But now, hours after he'd gotten into his car and disappeared without a word, Ava was downright pissed. As it was, there were too many unknown variables for her to piece together what the hell was going on between the two of them, much less whatever part Neia Thomas wanted her to play.

Ava wanted desperately to believe the best of Noah and that he, in turn, wanted what was best for her. Nothing else made sense to her. She didn't have to be here because Noah didn't have to pick her up from the club in the first place. Ava had been upfront with him from the beginning that she

didn't have anything to offer him but herself, so what could his mother see in her that was worth poaching?

Who's to say that whatever it is, it's bad? She reassured herself that she was overexaggerating, panicking for nothing. After all, all Neia had said was that she was looking for people who shared similar negative experiences with the Alliance. That could be for anything! A support group, a protest...hell, even if Neia was rounding up applicants to join her on a class-action lawsuit, that wouldn't be so bad.

So, why then had Noah seemed so upset about his mother's words? What was so important that he'd leave her alone, without a second thought, for the last three hours?

The sound of crunching gravel signaled Noah's return, but Ava didn't immediately move from where she sat in the living room. Left to her own devices, she'd turned the tv on for company, but it had done a piss poor job of drowning out the thoughts of suspicion swirling around her head.

Ava heard the door to the living room open and close, and then Noah was standing before her. Even hours later, he still looked agitated. Instead of taking a seat on the couch next to her, he perched on the edge of the coffee table in front of her. "A," he said. "I think we should talk."

She raised her eyebrows at his declaration but didn't speak. Ava wanted answers, not a fight that would ultimately get them nowhere, so Noah had

to be the one who set the tone for this particular conversation. After all, he was the only one between them who knew what was actually going on.

"What my mother said," he started. "I don't want you to worry about that. Okay? She was out of line. She shouldn't have brought up any of that shit between you and your Pack."

Ava took a few moments to gather her thoughts into some semblance of order before leaning forward to put herself in Noah's space. "I don't care about what your mother said, Noah. I don't care about whatever she has going on, and I can look past the fact that she's apparently interested in exploiting my trauma for undisclosed reasons."

A lump suddenly formed in Ava's throat that she had to fight her way past before continuing, "What I can't stomach is the fact that whatever's going on, you don't trust me with it. So, what am I supposed to think, Noah?"

Noah squeezed his eyes shut like he was fighting off a headache. "You're not supposed to think anything about it, Ava. This has nothing to do with you."

"What has nothing to do with me? I'm assuming that it's not angel investment, so whatever it is has to be really damn important for you to travel as much as you do."

"You know what, A? I don't understand what's so different now from yesterday. You never cared what I did before? You didn't ask where I went or what I did before, so why do you care now?"

Ava sat back, feeling affronted, "Really, Noah? Up until today, I was here to do a job. How you spent your time was none of my fucking business."

It was Noah's turn to look deeply offended, "Is that what you think this is? That I'm just keeping you here for - what, A? Fun? The hell of it? I'm not Xavier Michaels."

"No, you're not. Which is why I'm still here and haven't taken that stupid check and run," she said, her voice hoarse from withheld emotion. "Because I trust you, and I don't do that often. But, now you're bringing up the Alliance, and I'm realizing that I don't even really know you, Noah."

"How is that any different from before?"

"I didn't think you were rogue before, Noah!" Ava yelled.

Silence swallowed the oxygen in the room, leaving behind two husks staring at one another, desperately searching for a lifeline.

Noah abruptly stood up and paced away, looking like he was going through response after response in his head only to find most of his

thoughts unsuitable. Ava sat quietly and let him think because she needed time to do the same. There was suddenly so much between them - a puddle that could be barely anything at all or deceptively deep.

Finally, Noah turned to her, looking as defeated as someone so naturally self-assured could.

"First thing's first, I want you to know that we haven't hurt anyone."

Ava's head dropped into her hands only for Noah to catch her chin, drawing her gaze up to meet his own. "I'm serious, Ava. Our operation is completely under the radar. We're not out to make casualties." "Goddess," Ava breathed. "Who is we?"

"That community of like-minded individuals my mother mentioned? There are a lot more of us than you'd think," he moved back to his place on the coffee table and took her hands between his own. "The Alliance is a broken system run by a corrupt governing body that's only ever been out to look out for itself."

Ava shook her head, "The Alliance has its share of issues, yes. But that doesn't change the fact that it's created one of the country's only free states. You can't disrupt that."

"Free for who, Ava? Humans. The Elite. Everyone else is fair game at best or outright exploited to appease the ones in power. I spent my life learning

their world from the outside and making sure that, when the time came, I could do something to tip the scales."

"And what is that?" Ava demanded. "Toppling the Alliance without bloodshed isn't an option, Noah. They won't let it be. You're going to get yourself killed with this shit!"

Noah shook his head, "I told you, the Alliance is the tool, not the real threat. We're only looking to dismantle the Council."

"The Council that has ties to every single Pack? That Council? Noah, nothing goes through them without the Packs knowing."

"Yes," he said, picking up fervor. "Which is why you target the ones who stand to gain the most by having them gone."

Ava's eyes widened with understanding, "The Alphas?"

He nodded, sending Ava's stomach plummeting. She ripped her hands out of his grasp and stood, pacing behind the couch, eager to put space between them. "Fuck, Noah...."

"Ava-"

"Is that why you hired me? To get to Xavier?" Ava let out a harsh, raspy bark. "Fat lot of luck that served you when you realized he hates me."

Noah rose, too, but didn't move to come after you. Instead, he held a beseeching hand out to you, "Come on, now, A. I don't need you to get at Michaels. The male's a giant, walking open wound. Easy enough to handle without the subterfuge."

"Noah!" She rounded on him. "Please. Cut the shit for me. I don't fucking care about the details; I just don't want to be lied to anymore."

Noah's hand dropped, a pained expression clouding his handsome face. "Yeah," he breathed. "I swear to you, my plans changed almost immediately, but that was the initial idea. I was supposed to use you to get close to Michaels, and either recruit him or get him out of the way."

Looking unbearably tired, Noah took Ava's place on the couch, landing on the cushions like the weight of the world had been dropped onto his shoulders. "It wasn't a bad plan. Make our way through the Alphas, starting with the strongest. They'd either help us turn more Council members...."

"Or be out of the picture? I thought you said you weren't hurting anyone."

"I said we haven't, and that's the goal. But this is a revolution, A. And it means a lot to a lot of people."

Slowly, Ava made her way back around the couch to sit next to Noah. Now that he'd completely dropped his front, she felt as if their real conversation had only just begun.

"So, is that the reason for your mom's visit?" She asked.

His obsidian eyes slid shut as he nodded, "I've been...slacking on my end. She wanted to find out why."

"And either...how did you put it? Recruit me or get me out of the way?"

Noah cracked a smile, "Subtlety isn't her strong suit. I left to iron out a few things to get her off my back."

He leaned forward and met her gaze but didn't move to touch her again, "Listen, A. I meant what I said about not wanting or expecting you to have anything to do with this. I'm sorry that I didn't trust you with this information, but I promise you that I'm trying to do what's right."

Ava turned toward him fully and placed a hand on his thigh, "I get that. It's just not a good idea to go up against them. I don't want anything to happen to you."

Noah picked up her hand and brought it to his lips, "Nothing about this has been easy, A. But that doesn't mean that you stand by and let the monsters win."

Ava swallowed hard. She didn't know what to do with this information. A large part of her was deeply uncomfortable with the entire thing, but was that just because she hated the thought of things changing? Or worse, was it part of her decade of training to put the Pack and the Alliance first.

Neia's delivery had been shit, but she hadn't been wrong. Ava was living proof of their government's failures. Bella, Layla, and Bren...every single one of those Wolves Bella pulled out of the sanctioned torture camps the Alliance called prisons, and most of those still trapped behind those bars...those were the people Noah was fighting for. So how could she, with good conscience, deny him the chance to fight for them? "No more lies," she said.

"I can do that," Noah said as he placed your hand against his lips again. "No more lies, A."