

Chapter 66

The Lakehouse

Ava's jaw dropped open as they rounded the final bend in the long, winding, private driveway, revealing a large A-frame cabin sitting along the bank of a pristine lake. The home was nothing if not majestic, comprised as it was of thick stacked timber logs that ended in a gorgeous cobblestone foundation. Several sets of floor-to-ceiling windows made up the front and back faces of the building.

And, best of all, it was surrounded by thick woodlands, making it as private as possible.

"Welcome to Shady Oak," Noah said. "The town, not the house. Although, I think the lake might be called Shady Oak, too, but don't quote me on that."

Ava turned to him, not bothering to hide how stunned she was, "Is this where you live?"

In the admittedly short amount of time that they'd known one another, Ava and Noah had only ever met at the club or in public venues. If pressed for an answer, she'd have guessed that he either had an apartment in Rochester or a home in one of the ritzy neighboring suburbs.

They'd only left the club a little over two hours ago, though, so while it seemed unlikely, it wasn't **impossible** that Noah had lived in this woodland paradise the entire time. Although, to be clear, the idea of him commuting so far just to see her was insane. But on the other hand, if he'd bought this house just to stash her in, that would also be insane.

‘Please be a rental’, she thought.

Noah laughed at her dumbfounded expression, "Not usually. It's what we of the lifestyle call a summer home."

Ava rolled her eyes, "Rich people."

Noah smiled, "Wealthy people, love."

Her eyebrows rose, "Do you have a boat? All wealthy people have boats."

"I thought you said you couldn't swim," he said.

"The boat does the swimming for you, Noah...."

He laughed and nodded, "Yes, Ava, there is a boat."

"Sick!" She hopped out of the car, grabbing a couple of her bags from the back seat, and bounded up onto the massive wraparound porch. The imposing set of double doors that led to the front entryway were nearly twice as tall as she was. Instead of a keyhole, the door had a numbered keypad attached to the handle. Noah reached around her and entered in a sequence of digits. The keypad glowed blue, and the lock opened with a snick.

"042864. Does that mean something?" Ava asked.

"Hmm?" He said from where he'd bent down to grab a couple more bags.
"Oh, yeah, It's my mother's birthday."

"Oh! That's sweet," Ava struggled to pay attention as they walked into the foyer.

The house was as big on the inside as it looked on the outside. Most of the main room rose up two stories to beautiful, beamed ceilings high above, while the rest of the upper floor was hidden behind two lofted mezzanines

of to either side. The giant windows sent natural light spilling into the space from both ends.

"You don't talk about her much. Are the two of you close?"

Noah followed her in setting her bags down by one of the overstuffed sectionals that made up the living area. "We're all the other really has, so yeah. By process of elimination, we'd have to be."

"Will I get to meet her?" Ava asked, running her hands across everything. The home's interior largely consisted of contemporary luxury, sprinkled throughout with a hint of the rugged accouterments befitting of a forest lodge. Noah grimaced, "Probably. If all goes well. I wouldn't be smiling about it, though, if I were you."

"Hmm, you know, for someone who needed a girlfriend to save face with his family, our relationship is pretty low-key."

"Trust me, my mother knows **all** about you, A." Noah made his way over to the open-plan kitchen that sat toward the back of the main floor. "And, as for my father, he's dead."

Ava's face dropped as she followed, "Oh, I'm sorry to hear that."

"Don't be," he said, gesturing for her to sit. "He chose not to be a part of my life a long time ago."

Noah proceeded to take out a huge slab of sliced bacon, along with a skillet the size of a toddler. Washing his hands in the large copper farmhouse sink, he set to work fixing a breakfast fit for a Pharaoh. "Was this around the time you left your Pack?"

Noah's brow furrowed as he turned to look at her, "What makes you think I left my Pack?"

Ava shrugged, fiddling with the carved pepper shaker, "You've never mentioned which Pack you're from, is all. That usually means a bad break." Her eyebrows flicked upward. "At least it does in my experience." Noah blinked for a few moments before speaking, "I keep forgetting that you trained to be Pack Elite."

"Like calls to like," she said, bringing Noah up short once again. She didn't know why she was picking at these scars now of all times, but she wanted to get to know him better.

"I'm not one of the Elite," he finally said, returning to the stove to drop the entire slab of bacon into the steaming pan.

"Not for lack of blood right, though," she said, carefully studying his reaction.

Ava had known that Noah had Alpha blood the moment she'd met him; the strong presence of his Wolf emanated off of him like an aura. But coming from a line of Alphas didn't necessarily qualify you to **be** an Alpha. Before she'd died, Sophia had had just as much blood right to Red Moon's Alphadom as Xavier, but she would have never seen that title because of the simple fact that she was female. She would have been expected to have as many children as she could to ensure that the line passed on to a male heir in the case that Xavier never got the chance to produce one of his own.

Ava's chest tightened at the direction her musings had taken her, but the fact remained that if Noah had Alpha blood, there was a story behind it. One that he'd love for her to tell but understood if he chose not to.

"Eclipse. That's what Pack I hail from." He didn't look at her, just continued cooking breakfast, setting out a line of ingredients for later use.

Ava froze as understanding dawned on her. Eclipse was one of the Allied Packs, and those Alphadoms had been passed down through the same line since the founding of the Alliance. If that was the case, and Noah was Eclipse, that meant... "No shit," she said, her jaw-dropping. "Montgomery Bennett is your father?"

"Was," Noah said, dumping the deliciously aromatic bacon onto a paper-towel-covered plate. "He died about two years ago."

"Well, then why aren't you...." Noah's shoulders tensed just a fraction, prompting Ava to cut herself off. "I'm sorry. I'm being a dick for prying."

He turned to her, his gaze meeting hers, and relaxed, "Don't worry about it. I don't even know why I was keeping it from you. It's just not something I'm used to sharing, you know?"

He made his way to the fridge, getting out a glass bowl full of eggs, "I only met my father once, and I don't know Rhys at all. It's ridiculous that I let strangers have so much power over me and my emotions, so I try to ignore it." Ava shuddered, knowing exactly how he felt, "Who's Rhys?"

"My half-brother. His mother was Montgomery's mate. Mine wasn't," he turned to her and gestured for the salt and pepper shakers.

"So, he's older?" She asked, handing them over.

"Nope," he said, whisking the eggs just enough to incorporate the other ingredients.

"Oh..." Shit, Ava thought. That was a big deal within the Alliance. Their entire social structure hinged on adhering to strict lines of succession. Noah hadn't simply been denied a title; he'd been denied his legacy.

Noah shrugged, "Yeah, but what are you gonna do?" He poured the egg mixture into the simmering skillet and sighed. "Except keep rising above."

A knock sounded at the front door, making Ava jump. "Who's that?"

Noah's lips lifted in a secretive smile, "Go look."

"Is this why you made enough breakfast to feed an army?" Ava got up and went to greet whoever was on the other side of the door. Barring the fact that she was supposed to be in hiding, she highly doubted that Noah would invite Xavier over for brunch.

She opened the door and nearly squealed in delight. Standing on the other side was her brother, but that wasn't what had Ava bouncing on the balls of her feet. In Aiden's arms were the stuffed dinosaur and unicorn toys that she and Noah had won - and then promptly left - at the carnival.

"My prizes!" Ava grabbed them from Aiden's arms, clutching them close. They still smelled like the deep-fried Oreos she'd never gotten.

"Hi, to you, too," Aiden said, stepping inside and closing the door behind him.

"Were they where I said they'd be?" Noah called from the kitchen

"Oh, yeah. The two of you left an impression on the kid manning the booth last night. I showed him the old double-shot trick, and he handed 'em right over."

Ava beamed at her brother until she saw the bag he had slung over his shoulder. "What's that?"

Aiden smiled at her, "Ava...." He brought a hand up and ruffled her hair like he used to do when they were kids. "You didn't think I was going to let you move into the middle of the woods with some dude you met a month ago, did you?" Aiden moved further into the room and dropped his bag next to hers, "I'm moving in, too."