

## Chapter 2

### Green Light Club

By the time the truck had rolled to a stop, Ava had successfully navigated the extreme sense of panic and dread that had plagued her for most of the sightless ride and settled into a grim determination to face whatever was coming head-on. If she'd learned anything over the last three years, it was that the adaptable ones survive the longest. To make it in the dungeon she'd figured out how to cage the fighter she'd been born to be and cow herself in effort to not draw unwanted attention. She didn't know what fresh hell these new circumstances would bring, but Ava was ready to re-light her fire, if the opportunity called for it.

Even if Mia was still silent.

Despite the countless morbid scenarios flitting across her mind, the jagged hole in her... inner self where Mia should be, was an ever-present distraction. She didn't know what exactly had been done to her to sever their bond, in fact that entire cursed night was a blur. Even as she focused

on her memories of a couple nights ago, only vague fleeting images flashed across her mind's eye.

There had been a confrontation that had turned violent, as most confrontations usually did in the dungeon. Ava's body was consumed with a pain more deeply profound than any she'd experienced during her time in the dungeon or before. It went beyond physical pain, manifesting in ways Ava simply didn't have the correct vocabulary to properly verbalize. It had been as if her soul had been torn in two, but that didn't feel like a proper explanation, either.

Mia was part of Ava, as all Wolves were a part of their hosts, but she was her own entity as well - the primal beast inside the sentient female. They shared a body and a fate, but both functioned independently of one another, Ava had full rein of their human body and when it came time to hand over the reins and transform, Mia took control of their lupine form.

The relationship between a host and their Wolf is a symbiotic one with each consciousness contributing unique attributes to the other in order to make both forms strong. Ava gave Mia sentience, the ability to cognate above a common wolf's level, making her a fierce strategist, as well as an asset to the Pack both in and out of human form. For Ava, Mia heightened her humanity, giving her increased reflexes, senses, and strength. Mia gave Ava a canine's sixth sense of primal instinct and established the preternatural bonds that shape a Wolf Pack, allowing them to recognize one another's status. In another life, Mia might have recognized her mate in another Wolf, solidifying a bond with their perfect partner, ensuring a life a connection and contentment for them both.

Now, that reality seemed so far outside the realm of impossibility, least of all being the fact that Ava hadn't felt a trace of Mia's latent consciousness in the three days since Layla died. Currently sitting shackled and hooded in the back of a van going the moon knows where, Ava would be lucky if anything other than a gory, prolonged death awaited her whenever the doors finally opened.

When they finally do, Ava braced herself for the worst, her body going taught as a bow string when a calloused hand drags her out of the back of the vehicle. Silently, she tries to gain her bearings, straining to hone her senses, looking for any clue as to where they've been taken. With Mia out of commission, though, all she can hear is the panicked heavy breaths of a dozen terrified women being shuffled out of a murder van.

"Where are we?" Ava chances the question, willing to risk getting hit in order to suss out any useful information about their situation.

"Quiet female. You'll find out soon enough." A guard answered.

Female. Not 'rat,' which is what the dungeon guards called most of the prisoners, or 'beta bitch,' which is what they usually reserved especially for her. And when a hand grasped her arm, prompting her to move, it guided her rather than dragged her wherever she was meant to go.

"You aren't the prison guards." She already knew by the lack of vitriol in the way that they moved, spoke, and comported themselves.

Her suspicions were confirmed when her escort scoffed. "Hardly."

He didn't elaborate and Ava didn't need Mia to know better than to push her luck with him. They might not be the jaded, cruel prison guards she'd known for the past three years, but she didn't know these people or what they were planning to do with her and the other females. Ava watched true crime religiously. Just because they weren't being abused now didn't mean they weren't in store for worse than the dungeon had to offer. So, she'd continue to keep her guard up. Without Mia's superhuman senses, Ava soon loses track of where they're being led. Eventually, the cool night air falls away to the artificial bite of central air conditioning. \*We're in a building with AC\*, Ava warily mused. \*Murderers don't use AC, right?\*

Ava felt her confusion grow as she picked up the distant sound of dance music. Not the kind you'd find on the radio or in a night club, but a more curated international sound better suited to the fancy lounges her dad and the other men in the Pack were fond of visiting in the city.

Finally, the line came to a stop. For a long couple of minutes nothing happened and, despite her shackles, Ava tensed to bolt just as the hood was ripped from her head. She winced at the sudden light, but as the sunspots faded from her eyes and her vision came into focus, Ava's confusion solidified into a hefty lump of apprehension sitting low in her stomach.

The room they were in looked an awful lot like the lounges Ava had thought of before. Dark leather couches accented with emerald velveteen settees and ottomans filled a room that's walls were lined with far too many mirrors, gilded though they were. The ceiling of the room was covered in dormant strobe lights and, of course, more mirrors. Ava's eyes followed the long shiny line of bronze poles to where they stood affixed in immaculately polished black marble floors. Ava's expectations for the upcoming events quickly realigned as she took in the room's more...specific details. Like the bronze chains that hung from the ceiling, some ending in bronze bars, while others led to leather handcuffs. When she spotted a large dark X-shaped structure at one end of the room, Ava's suspicions were all but confirmed. \*A sex club\*.

Within the span of a few hours, Ava had gone from resigning herself to dying early and unacknowledged in a pit to standing in what looked to be a posh bar for the kinkily inclined. Ava was scared, of course she was. On her mental list of worst-case scenarios, being sold to a sex club was surely up there. But, taking in her surroundings, this didn't look like the seedy urban underbelly she'd imagined. This looked like a way out.

Ava was steadily putting together the bones of a plan when a beautiful woman walks through a gilded glass door. Tall with long black hair and cheekbones like steel, this woman had \*presence\*. Her dulled senses prevented Ava from picking up any specific information about the woman, but Ava knew she was a Wolf and that, whatever this establishment was, it was hers.

"Madame Bella, they've arrived," the female from the prison walked stand behind their tall, lavishly dressed hostess.

Lighting a cigarette, Madame Bella slowly walked down the line considering each of the filthy, trembling females, much like her minion had back in the holding room.

"Such. Pretty. Omegas." Each of her words was punctuated by the sharp \*click\* of her six-inch stilettos. When she came to Ava she stopped, taking a drag of her cigarette without breaking eye-contact. "Not an Omega." She raised her hand with the cigarette in summons, "Dorinda, explain this one."

The female from prison, their handler Ava guessed, rushed to Madame Bella's side, "This one's not an Omega, Madame. But, if the guards were to be believed, she \*is\* untouched."

Bella's eyebrow quirks in interest, "In this day and age? Impressive find, Dorinda. Why can't I read her?"

Dorinda swallows silently, "There's something wrong with her Wolf. They didn't elaborate, but her connection was severed, she's effectively human."

Ava refused to flinch at the stark words and held her chin up when the other females had nerve enough to stare at her, appalled. Even now, she was the odd one out.

"\*Human\*," Bella said it the same way one says \*unexpected garbage\*. "And what am I supposed to do with something so weak, Dorinda? Take it back." With a dismissive wave, Bella began to turn away. "But...she's...a \_"

"A what, Dorinda? A virgin?" She cut the other woman off. "Woman, please. Even I'm not so callous to give a defenseless innocent to a rutting Alpha. She'll be torn to shreds before she can pay off the cost of the clean-up crew." Several of the other females begin to weep as Madame Bella rolls her expressionless eyes. "She's useless to me. Take her back."

When the female turned to leave again, Ava knew her chance for survival would walk away with her. "Wait!" She put every bit of authority she'd inherited from her title into her voice. If there was a time for gambling, it was now. "You can't send me back."

Bella paused, eyebrow quirking again, this time, Ava expected, in amusement. "And why, pray tell, is that?"

"The dungeon is a lot of things, but it's not a brothel," Ava gestured to the other girls. "Whatever this deal was, I highly doubt it was on the up-and-up. If you send me back, I might let something slip."

Any amusement abruptly vacated the woman's diamond-hard face. Ava knew she was over-playing her hand, but she felt more in her element

parlaying with this intimidating female than she had in years. "You raise a fair point. Why don't I just dispose of you instead?"

Ava set her jaw, "This is a pretty nice-looking establishment, all things considered. I don't think you like getting your hands dirty."

Bella cocked her head in bemusement, "Darling, if you think I need to sully my hands to get things done, you're not as quick as I was beginning to think you were."

Ava shrugged, effecting an air of nonchalance she didn't feel, "Fair point," she parroted. "I may not be able to make you money in the...traditional sense, but I've got something the others don't."

When Bella didn't cut her off, she gestured to the crying bewildered girls beside her, "I have drive. I want to be here. I'll wait tables or wash your unmentionables, whatever you need me to do, I'm \*willing\*."

The stern female considered Ava again, a new emotion almost like respect reflecting in her gaze. "Why? Cry as they might, they'll earn enough to buy their way out of here within a couple of years. Scrubbing toilets isn't nearly as lucrative. Where's your hope, girl?"

Ava smirked mirthlessly, "That died a long time ago. And have you seen the prison? If you had, scrubbing toilets wouldn't seem so bad."

A quick almost-smile flashed across Bella's lips, gone before Ava was certain it had ever been there at all. "Fine," was all she said before sauntering out of the room, leaving the handlers to see to the shaken girls.

Twenty minutes later, Ava found herself in a closet-sized room, bland and small, but dry and relatively safe. Best of all, it had a tiny window, small enough to ensure she stay in place, but just enough to let her watch the stars. And she did. For the first time in years, Ave prayed directly to the moon until dawn broke.