

## Chapter 23

### A Special Guest

Ava collapsed onto her bed the second she stepped back into her suite at the club. After the constant rotation of IV drips the hospital had put her on, she'd not only kicked the worst of her illness, but she felt more rejuvenated than she had in years.

It was amazing what a little electrolytes could do!

Minus the unpleasant surprise visit from Xavier and his latest model of lackey, the hospital stay had begun to feel as pampering as an all-inclusive resort stay - forty-eight-hour vacation from her life.

"You should have stayed a little longer then." Bella said in light admonishment. "The extra rest would do you good, Ava."

Ava sighed. Bella hadn't been thrilled when she'd checked herself out of the hospital and called her for a ride back to the club. She understood her boss' concern, but nice as it her convalescence had been, that was two fewer days for Ava to reach her ridiculous quota and earn her freedom.

"I don't have any time to waste, Bella. No offense, but I do *\*not\** plan on being here any longer than I have to."

Bella sighed her worry but nodded, nonetheless. "I'll have some breakfast sent up to you."

Ava waved off the offer, "Oh, thank you, but I'm fine. I had some toast at the hospital."

"Ava, I'm not going to charge you for some eggs and bacon." She rolled her eyes. "Your physical recovery goes far beyond getting rid of the flu, and I don't plan on letting you leave here without taking a couple extra pounds with you." Ava blinked against the stinging sensation creeping up behind her eyes, "That's...really kind of you Bella. Thank you."

It was Bella's turn to wave her off before turning to head out of the door, "Oh, please, call it an investment on your freedom fund. After all, clients pay extra when there are a few more curves to ogle."

With that, she was gone, leaving behind the faint waft of her Chanel perfume in her wake.

Ava smiled and looked around her suite, from the diaphanous canopy draped across her bed, to the ornate wooden dressers and armoires that were still mostly empty. It was certainly the prettiest cage she'd been in, but Ava was under no delusions that that was anything more than all of this luxury was - a gilded pen, designed to keep her under Xavier's boot.

And yet, Ava felt that glimmer of hope that meant everything to her. She still saw a way out.

A knock on her bedroom door signaled the arrival of her breakfast. When Ava went to greet the busser who'd been tasked with the delivery, however, he refused to meet her eyes. Instead, he shoved the cloche at her and rushed off as quickly as possible.

He wasn't the first to treat her this way since she'd come back from the hospital, either. As Ava had made her way through the halls upon her return, she'd noticed the same shifty glances - people glaring at her out of the corners of their eyes or refusing to meet her gaze altogether.

As embarrassing as that photograph of her had been, she had a hard time believing the constant cold-shoulder treatment she was getting from the denizens of the Green Light Club was simply due to an unfortunate candid.

If anyone should understand what it meant to do what needed to be done in the name of survival, it was the people who worked here. Even the workers here who weren't escorts chose to wait tables here instead of any of the dozens of other bars and clubs within the city.

The way Ava saw it, the judgmental vibes she felt aimed toward her were entirely out of place.

Whatever, she thought as she took the silver dome off the plate and begun to dig into her breakfast. I'm not here to make friends.

Despite her bravado, the rejection still stung. No, making nice with the other court members and staff was the absolute least of her worries, but still...it had been nice being able to blend into the background and not have a target on her back, for once.

Most of the people here didn't know here and couldn't even tell that she was of Beta blood. In her current state, she couldn't say that she held a candle to the beautifully pampered court members, and the wait staff generally didn't covet the court members' jobs, so she couldn't imagine there being much lingering bitterness over her 'promotion'.

Ava picked up the note Bella included with her breakfast that included information about the client she'd be meeting with tonight. She huffed out a relieved breath when she read that she would only be expected to serve

drinks. Apparently, this particular wealthy businessman enjoyed company of an intellectual nature.

She made a mental note to thank Bella the next time she saw her. Ava had no doubt that her supervisor was at the heart of this emotional respite. She frowned at the spindly tendrils of worry that began to darken her positive mood. Ava knew that Xavier couldn't be thrilled about the kind treatment Madame Bella had been showing her. Her stay here was meant to be a punishment, after all.

Ava didn't want Bella going up against Xavier on her behalf. The absolute last thing Ava wanted was to put another person who'd shown her kindness in harm's way.

Like Layla. Like Sophia and Sam.

It wouldn't be the first time that Ava had wondered whether or not she was cursed - death followed her around like a plague. While Ava didn't think Xavier would physically hurt Madame Bella, she knew better than most that there was more than one way to destroy someone. And, for Bella, the Green Light Club was her life's work, and Ava truly believed that it did real good for a lot of people.

If it were to be dismantled simply because its overseer threw her lot in with Ava, the blow would be crushing.

Ava distracted herself from her morose thoughts by engaging in some light exercise. Bella was right that if she wanted to heal her body, it'd take some work. Ava ran through a few sets of lunges, push-ups, and sit ups - nothing too intense since she didn't want to leave her room and brave the wary glares just to visit the club's basement-level gym.

Afterward, she reveled in a piping hot bath before taking on the task of preparing herself for the evening. Ava decided to forgo makeup altogether, this time, instead pinching her cheeks to give them a natural flush and hoping that was enough.

The conditioner she'd taken to using had gone a long way to restoring a glossy shine to her long auburn hair, and the hospital's IVs had taken away her skin's ashy pallor. She looked...better. Her frame was still thinner than she'd like, and she doubted the bags under her eyes would ever fully go away, but Ava was noticeably on the mend.

Ava slipped into a dress Bella had given her, a simple black satin sheath that was pretty enough by itself to look intentionally voluminous, instead of ridiculously baggy. She looked like the waifish ingénue in a Victorian horror film. Ava sighed, "Beats being a clown doll, right?" Her unimpressed reflection didn't reply.

For the third time, Ava made her way back up to the eighth floor and stifled a groan. If she never saw this awful floor again, it'd be too soon.

When she reached the suite door, her hackles raised at the sound of multiple voices coming from inside. Why can't these guys ever party alone?

Bella's note hadn't included a picture, but when Ava stepped into the room, she knew who her client was immediately.

“Oh no,” she gasped, not that Liam Smith.

The leader of the Silver Moon pack sat seated at a small marble card table, casually observing the gathering around him. Ava had never met him in person, but the amiable alliance between the Red Moon and Silver Moon packs meant that she'd seen him in passing a time or two.

Ava wondered how many past acquaintances she'd have to dodge during her time here. The Green Light Club was neutral Alliance territory, so it was a miracle she hadn't run into anyone she actually knew, other than Xavier.

A quick scope of the room made Ava's stomach sink lower. Unlike the other few parties she'd witnessed on the eighth floor, this one was pleasantly tame. The Omega's seemed to be genuinely enjoying themselves, and the air was free of the thick stench of narcotics.

However, several of the males scattered about had visible tattoos denoting them as members of the Red Moon Pack. Ava's pulse quickened at the

prospect of being found out. She looked around, but for once, Xavier was nowhere to be seen. That meant that if any of the males here recognized her, their Alpha wasn't around to command their silence.