

## Chapter 29

### A Mysterious Guest

Layla had once told Ava that the best way to survive a hostile environment was to blend in. The goal wasn't to be one of the enemy, but if you convinced them you were one and the same, you were golden.

It was one of the first lessons Ava had learned in the dungeon, and it had proven to be the most valuable. Don't stand out. Don't be special. Don't be a hero.

If Madison's little pity party were to be believed, Ava hadn't been doing a very good job of adhering to at least two of the three philosophies, despite her best efforts.

If she was lucky, that was about to change.

Ava slowly breathed in and out three times to steady her nerves. And when that didn't work, she tried it again. Finally, she decided to hell with it, and pushed open the door to the court's staffroom.

She'd never been in the room before today, but Ava hadn't realized until last night what a mistake that had been. She'd been so caught up in the whirlwind drama that was her life, that she had forgotten that anyone who cared to, could look at her actions and come up with their own narrative.

Apparently, the narrative they'd settled on was that she was Xavier Michael's puppet. Even though Ava spent a good chunk of her time wishing they had never met and actively trying to forget his face...his constant insistence on interfering in her affairs had linked them together as a unit in the public eye.

While Ava maintained that she couldn't care less what these people thought of her, she did *\*not\** want that particular notion running rampant.

So, here she was, stepping into the unfamiliar room. Like everything having to do with Bella's court, the room was beautiful, if a little ostentatious. Black lacquered tables lined two walls, with gold-framed mirrors denoting almost two-dozen single-person stations.

Several sets of tufted leather couches faced one another, creating cozy talking spaces around polished Lucite coffee tables. Crystal chandeliers twinkled glistening light off of the shimmery plum-colored wallpaper.

Conversation came to a halt, as about a dozen girls Ava faintly recognized stopped mid-sentence to stare at the outsider intruding on their space. Ava couldn't even blame them. She hadn't been purposely rude, but she hadn't exactly been friendly, either.

She'd been working as an escort here for nearly a full month and living here for longer. And yet, after all of that time, she could only say that she confidently knew about three of these female's names. And two had been the girls responsible for her horrendous makeover.

It figured that those two would be the first to break the silence, turning to each other and giggling as Ava moved further into the room.

Ava gave a friendly smile and made her way to an empty seat. She didn't see any nametags, so she sat down and kept her eyes trained on the mirror. For the first time in a long while, she didn't fear looking at her own reflection. That fact made her smile come more easily.

She scanned the desk and saw a jar of clean brushes. Taking one, she began copying the others around the room who were using their free time to primp and preen themselves. Ava began running the brush through her long, thick hair. She started to relax as the repetitive motion soothed her frazzled nerves.

She almost jumped when a body dropped down in the seat beside her. She was tall and slender, with long black hair, and warm brown eyes. She had a delicate beauty mark on her cheek, right underneath her left eye.

"The boys have their own room," the female said in greeting.

Ava simply stared for a moment. She hadn't expected anyone to actually speak to her during this experiment.

"That's usually the first question newbies ask when they come here." She offered, "I'm Brenda Nguyen. Bren for short." Bren smiled and reached out a hand.

Ava took the offered palm and shook it. "Ava."

"I called you a newbie," Brenda smiled and continued, "But I guess I'm new here, too. I've only been at the club for about...two weeks I think?"

She giggled, "Gosh, I can't believe how hard it is to keep track, already! Between this and my college courses, the days all just kind of blur together. How about you?"

"Um...I've worked here almost five months." Ava couldn't believe it had been that long. Ava had to admit that the girl had successfully piqued her curiosity, "You're in college?"

Bren smiled wide in pride, "Yes, ma'am! I just started my Sophomore year. I come from a Gamma family, but my parents had a lot, and I mean a lot of kids. By the time college had rolled around for me, my parents couldn't afford more than the first year."

She shrugged. "I decided that working at the Green Light Club would help me pay for tuition while I attended online. Plus, room and board here is way cheaper than on campus!"

Bren's smile and non-stop chatter was infectious, forcing Ava to laugh along at her enthusiasm. For her, escorting wasn't just a choice, but a genuinely good option. The beautiful girl would have her pick of clients, and in the end, she'd walk away with a degree that would help her further contribute to her Pack.

"I love your hair color, by the way! I have a lipstick that I think will go really well with your skin tone, too," She dug in her makeup bag and handed Ava a tube of deep red lipstick that had bluish undertones and looked velvety to the touch. Indeed, it would look much better on her than the greasy scarlet stuff the other girls had given her.

Ava shook her head at the gift, "I couldn't..."

Bren waved away her refusal and placed the tube in front of her, "Please, it's too dark on me and way too expensive to waste! Besides, what else are friends for?"

Ava nodded absently, not sure how to navigate the girl's kindness. She was still hesitant to make friends, but...knowing people like Bren existed was heartwarming.

And the change in perspective the girl brought was refreshing, to say the least. It helped her realize that this place wasn't just a refuge from angry and spiteful people, fighting to escape the clutches of an unjust system. "Ava Davis? Is Ava in here?"

Ava turned to see the Jared, the club's client manager. Even though he was responsible for assigning the court to their rooms, Ava had only met him once. The human man had looked Ava up and down before telling Bella she was insane for letting her on.

Apparently, "hungry-looking girls" were "bad for the brand." They'd steered clear of one another since then, with Bella delivering all of Ava's assignments to her personally.

She was surprised that he was calling for her now, but she supposed that was for the best. If she was going to fit in, it wouldn't do for the club manager to be seen making house calls to her.

"There you are!" He scanned his clipboard and rushed his words, as if he were in a hurry, "You've been summoned to Room 801. Don't leave them waiting, please and thank you!"

With that, he turned to address the rest of the room, "Has anyone seen Catherine?!"

She heard a female across the room groan and mutter to a friend, "Of course, it's the eighth floor! I haven't gotten to entertain up there in the six months I've been here, but Ava goes up there ever other day."

Her companion nodded, cutting an unimpressed glance at Ava before turning back to her conversation.

She didn't know what she could possibly say to mollify them, since she had no idea who could have summoned her in the first place. She doubted it was Xavier since he'd never bothered with such formalities before. Maybe it's Liam? Her chest began to warm.

Ava turned to Jared, "Excuse me, do you know who requested me? Or why I was specifically picked?"

Jared rolled his eyes, "Sweetie, that is beyond my pay grade. My job is to make sure you're pretty and punctual," he briefly looked her up and down. "I've done what I can, so if none of you can tell me where Catherine is, I must bid you all adieu!"

With that, he swished out of the room. Ava uncomfortably adjusted herself in her seat. The atmosphere in the communal room had noticeably soured. It was safe to say that her plan to fit in had thoroughly backfired.

"Hey, don't listen to them." Bren whispered, "You're hot, you're nice, and if I were a handsy millionaire, I'd definitely call you up to my swanky VIP room."

She waved the tube of lipstick under Ava's nose, "Especially, if you were wearing this."

Bren wiggled her eyebrows suggestively making Ava laugh. With a begrudging smile, she took the lipstick and swiped it on. Bren let out a low whistle, and Ava had to agree - the color looked good on her.

That lipstick and her favorite satin slip dress were all she wore as she approached Room 801. Taking a deep breath, she knocked and let herself in.

The light was dim, casting shadows of the achingly handsome face of the male seated on the couch. Michelangelo himself probably couldn't have carved a more fetching visage. His stunning features were almost enough to distract Ava from the savage glint in his obsidian eyes.



"I take it, you're Ava Davis?" His voice was like velvet wrapped in barbed wire. It was as if everything about this male was designed to lure in the unexpected, letting them lower their defenses right before he attacked.

As he moved closer, Ava fought the urge to move back. She'd never met this male before, but his strength - the sheer force of his charisma - told her everything she needed to know.

She was standing in the presence of a very powerful Alpha.