

## Chapter 32

### Warning

"He gave you fifty thousand dollars to pretend to be his girlfriend?" Bella asked slowly.

Ava shook her head, "He gave me fifty thousand dollars as a deposit." She clarified. "I'll be earning ten thousand a day after that."

The frown plastered across Bella's face deepened, "For how long?"

Ava bit her lip, "Unspecified."

"Ava," Bella snapped.

"I forgot to ask!" Ava threw up her hands, "I was...distracted. Should I not have accepted?"

Bella shook her head and sat down heavily in her large, white wingback desk chair, "I should have been notified. I don't like that I wasn't." She muttered, taking out a large black leather binder from one of her desk drawers. "What was his name?"

"Noah Thomas." Ava replied.

Bella began flipping through the binder, scanning each page before closing it shut with a huff, "The name doesn't ring a bell and he's not listed in any of my records. I can't find anyone named Thomas. Not among the families who could swing a ten thousand per day fee, anyway."

Ava sat cautious across from Bella. She'd never seen the proprietress so angry before, "I could really use the money." She said apologetically.

Bella seemed to snap out of whatever inner revery she'd been caught up in, "Ava, I would never deny you an opportunity like this. But I can't help being concerned."

She almost looked helpless as she sat back in her chair, "I know we have some real pieces of work that come through the club, and unfortunately, you've been introduced to more than your share already."

Bella paused and ran a hand through her hair, "Still, for every asshole, there's a card on file to charge for physical and emotion damages. Or an Alpha, or a father to report back to. As rowdy as the Green Light Club can be, my connections make it a safe space for my people." She waved a hand at the binder. "I have no idea who this Noah Thomas is."

"He seemed nice enough," Ava posed.

Bella rolled her eyes, "Those are usually the worst ones." She rethought her hasty exclamation and waved off her previous words, "Look, I don't want to scare you. But I do want you to be careful. No one just gives anyone this kind of money. Not for the services you're describing."

She gestured toward the check, still sitting between them. "Usually a recurring long-term arrangement like this cost just that much for the year. Six months for a full live-in situation. With the works, by the way. The contract I'd have drawn up for this would be seventy pages long."

Ava leaned in, "Sure, I thought about that stuff, too." She paused, "Well, not all of that, but I thought it was too much, too. But I have so much more to gain than I have to lose. I want to take my lucky breaks where I can." That sat in pregnant silence for a moment before Bella looked up, "Just keep me updated, Ava. And, by the goddess, stay vigilant." Ava nodded and rose to leave.

Bella dropped her head into her hands as soon as the door closed behind Ava. She didn't like this. She didn't like anything about this situation at all.

She'd worked too damn hard to establish the Green Light Clubs connections, its chain of operations. For some unknown to come in and completely circumvent her was more than just a mere oversight, it felt like a challenge. And why Ava? Trouble seemed to swarm the poor girl like a virus. She'd already faced so much of their world's ugliness, and she deserved some rest. Try as she might, it seemed that the world just wasn't finished with her yet. Bella's phone rang and she picked up without looking, "Bella Sutton."

"Ms. Sutton," she wasn't at all surprised that it was Xavier Michaels on the other end of the line. "I'd like a report on the club. Where are we at this quarter?"

Bella scrunched up her nose quizzically. There was no way Alpha Michaels had called her at one in the morning to run numbers. In fact, until very recently, her boss hadn't shown much interest in the club at all. Not the way his father had, anyway.

Bella frowned at the resurging memories of August Michaels. The prick was fair enough, but he'd micromanaged Bella for years, constantly cross-examining her budget drafts, insisting on personally vetting all vendors and suppliers for the club...

There had been a particularly bleak period where he'd gotten it into his head to screen every single individual she hired. Her liberation efforts had come to a halt for almost two years while she was forced to supplement her ranks with civilians. When Xavier had taken over, he'd been barely more than a pup himself. Bella had prepared herself for a horned-up man-child harassing her business into the ground. At the very best, she had readied herself for another August. Xavier had been neither. He rarely asked about the business side of the club, seemingly content to use it as a means to gain clout among his peers. As a result, revenue in the VIP suites had gone up as he invited roves of young aristocrats to party after party. Over the years, the parties had ranged from tame to damn-near ruinous, depending on the crowd. And, from what she'd gathered from her staff, Xavier was never at most of them. And when he was in attendance, he never requested the company of any of the court.

His sudden interest in company matters almost certainly had to do with a certain slip of a redhead. "The quarter is doing quite well, Mr. Michaels. In fact, the last month or so has been quite profitable." "Is that so?" He questioned.

"Yes!" She said brightly, "We recently changed meat distributor per the suggestion of our new head chef, Antoine. Clients can't get enough of the new Beef Wellington, and we got an absolute steal on wholesale wagyu beef. Antoine was well worth his price tag!"

"Uh-huh." As she'd expected, he already sounded bored.

"The amount of humans registering for membership has gone up, curiously enough. I believe I'll have to scout a few more human members for my court. That means another trip to New York, I suspect. This bodes well for the human/Wolf climate in the East. As long as relations remain amenable, we'll continue to see pro-"

"And Ava?" He finally interrupted. Bella sighed; he didn't even hold out long enough for her to detail the new cleaning regimen they were trying out.

"Ava's doing well," she started cautiously. "She looks good. Healthy! She's put on some weight; she's trying to make friends..."

Bella made the mistake of letting the silence hang too long.

"And? Did something happen?" He jumped on her hesitation.

Damn. Bella walked a thin rope where it came to Ava and Xavier. The male was her boss and was, therefore, in control of her livelihood. On the other side of things, she saw how much of a mess the girl was around Xavier, and how much weight had been lifted from her shoulders in the days he'd been away.

If she told Xavier about Ava's new client, there'd be hell to pay on both fronts. First, for letting a male so close to Ava without notifying him first,

and then for letting an apparent power player through the cracks of the Green Light Club without her notice.

"Ms. Sutton," His voice was edged in steel. Unfortunately, he didn't need to be her Alpha to issue her a command.

"Ava has a new client."

"Spit it out. What did he want?"

"He's paying her very well for an extended engagement."

"How much?" It wasn't a question.

"Fifty thousand dollars, to start."

"For what?" Xavier exclaimed.

"Just for prolonged companionship. He hired her to pretend to be his paramour."

"What did she do?" He demanded.

Bella hesitated, unsure of what he meant. "I'm sorry?"

"The contract," he sneered. "I want to know exactly what she agreed to do with the sonofabitch."

Bella squeezed her eyes shut and massaged the ache growing in her temple, "There isn't one."

"The fuck does that mean? It's your job to keep this shit on the books. All of Ava's appointments go through you."

"Yes, but somehow this appointment wasn't relayed to me. I plan to set up a meeting and have one drawn up before the deposit check is cashed."

"And what did she do to earn her deposit."

Bella took her hand off her forehead and used it to reach over and pour herself a couple fingers of the decorative brandy bottle she kept on her desk, "I honestly couldn't tell you, sir."

The line went silent long enough that she thought the call had dropped, "Mr. Michaels?"



"Have my room prepared. I'm making arrangements to be back in town by tomorrow."

"I assure you, that's not neces- "she tried to interject.

"I won't repeat myself." And the line went dead.