

## Chapter 4

### Scent

Ava started to sweat, but this time temperature had nothing to do with it. An iron-hard bicep caged her in, pressing her up against a chest like stone. Her nose filled with the scent of cloves and a male's natural musk, so thick she didn't need Mia's heightened senses to catch wind of it.

It was all too much. Ava hadn't been this close to another, hadn't touched another person since Layla had died and she hadn't felt comfortable doing so for a long, long time before that.

After all, the last man who'd touched her ruined her life and the majority of physical touches that came after were intended to make her bleed, put her squarely in her place. So, this charged interaction...the sheer proximity to any stranger, but particularly this stranger had Ava itching, like she was ready to jump right out of her skin.

When the male's head cocked the side and the very slightest bit of concern started creeping into his unbelievably cocky expression, Ava realized the all-encompassing vibrating wasn't just contained to her battered psyche. She was trembling in real life, and panting too, if she'd correctly interpreted the throbbing ache in her chest.

"You alright, sweets?" His question wasn't exactly unexpected, but it made her jump all the same. "You look a little peaky."

"Let go of me." All pretenses of politeness gone, Ava pulled out of his grasp and charged around him, eager to rid of this man and done with this day. Still shivering, Ava rubbed her hands over her arms as if trying to wipe away the echoes of his touch.

Sure, Ava scoffed, his touch.

Try as she might to stave off the remnants of a past lost to her and sullied by years of bitterness and betrayal, the mental barriers Ava relied on to keep her moving through her pain were breaking down. There'd been too much today, too many sleights, she'd eaten too much from others hell-bent on keeping her low. And now, the abrupt change of some total stranger's want, the unfamiliar feeling of desire, made her gears switch far too quickly.

Suddenly she was barraged with the memories of back when expressing her desires was easy and receiving someone else's affection was simple,

casual, and taken for granted. There were so many moments and emotions she hadn't known to savor, even more moments lost to time that she'd never get back, and worst of all were those tender moments she knew she'd never get the chance to have. Intimacy was lost to her. The realization was crushing. She couldn't imagine her life changing so drastically in a way that would fix that, fix her. For her, physical contact would forever taste like fear laced with regret. And none of this was her fault.

Fuck. She wasn't rubbing away the feeling of the ice man's touch, she was trying to rid herself of Xavier's. Even though they'd never been intimate, every single glancing touch, it felt as if her very cells remembered. Every time he tugged on the bottom of her ponytail or guided her away from a scuffle with a gentle, but strong hand on her back; these nonchalant connections were as impactful as caresses to her.

Every moment since the first one when she'd gone up a tree after a wayward balloon only for the branch beneath her to crack in half; instead of crashing to the ground, she'd crashed on Xavier. He'd taken his broken nose like a champ and said it had been worth it to keep her safe. That was when Ava decided he was the one she wanted and, more importantly, resolved to be the person he wanted to be with.

Whether she'd realized it was happening or not, Ava's entire perception of love and intimacy was based on her relationship with Xavier, how she felt for him and what he meant to her...what he had meant to her.

After so much time and so much loss, it was a shock to Ava that another avenue for her could be blocked off, another door shut in her face. Her friends, her family, the only home she had ever known, even a piece of her soul had all been ripped away from her. Until now she hadn't thought she had anything else to lose, had even come to terms with that fact and started moving forward with whatever she could cobble together out of her life.

Ava now realized that no matter how low she'd been over the last few years, how bruised or beaten, she'd never truly lost hope. Not after she finally came to terms with the fact that no one would call foul in her defense and Xavier and her parents weren't coming to fix their mistake and set her free. Not when she lost the last person who'd seen her for who she was instead of the sins of her station or when she traded one disastrous situation for another.

No, hopelessness was realizing that she was fundamentally broken, that she'd never really outrun the taint of Xavier's betrayal.

A bucket appeared in front of her face.

Ava startled at the sudden interruption to her shame spiral. She looked up to see the icy stranger keeping step with her, holding out the forgotten cleaning kit he must have retrieved from the floor below. Now, she noticed that the look in his eyes wasn't so frosty, the interest in his eyes still present even though the oppressive possessiveness was gone. It was almost like he could sense the existential crisis his unexpected embrace had wrought,

and that playtime was over. Funny, she didn't know him from Adam, but she got the impression that for him, there was rarely a time worth ending a game.

She stopped when he did, realizing they'd come to room 803. He gestured to the bucket again and smirked as she grabbed it, muttering a quick thanks. He opened the door for her but didn't follow her inside. He threw her a wink, but didn't say anything else before closing the door, although she doubted that she'd be able to hear him if he had.

Ava had assumed this room would need to be turned over like the last one. Instead, the large suite was filled with writhing bodies, pounding bass, laughter, and sighs of pleasure filling the air. She could barely see the room through the haze of cigar smoke, but what she could see impressed her.

The eighth floor was reserved for top-tier guests, the VIPS among an already exclusive clientele.

Ava recognized several of the club's Omega's in various states of undress lounging across the laps of powerful looking males. It was too dim to be sure, but it certainly felt like all of them were looking at Ava as she moved further into the room.

She didn't know whether she should announce herself or just leave since she felt like a dorm mother at a kegger. Before she could do either, one of the working girls nodded to a back corner before returning to her client.

Ava moved over to the spot the Omega indicated and groaned. Someone had clearly had too much fun and gotten sick all over a lacquered credenza. This wasn't the first mess Ava had been called to clean up and, honestly, didn't even crack her Top 10.

The concerning part was the fact that the Omega's weren't supposed to get wasted like this and, in Ava's experience, if a male barfed at a party, he'd better be dying. True to its name, the Green Light Club didn't have very many rules, but the group here wasn't abiding by them.

The mess was nearly gone when a loud crash cut through the party's din.

"Get your hands off of me!" A sharp smack rang out, followed by an enraged growl.

"Bitch, get over here!" Ava looked up to see a hulking male towering over a member of the wait staff, a diminutive female less than half his size. As Ava watched, he flexed the fist gripping her wrist and squeezed. The girl cried out, immediately dropping to her knees.

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and spread the word. The next chapter is just a visit away! "No...please...", Ava's chest started fluttering in rage.

She'd been right, this party wasn't adhering to the club's rules. Ava was under no pretenses, most of the sex workers here were here because they'd been 'repurposed' from Pack prisons, so consent wasn't necessarily vital here, but safety was. Hurt or dead workers meant messes for Bella to clean up, especially when it came to the hired staff. Waitresses were on Bella's payroll, so there was a strict 'no unsolicited touching' rule where it came to them. Clearly this douche hadn't gotten the memo.

"I'm a cocktail waitress, y-you c-can't-," the poor girl stumbled through her tears.

Ava threw her rag into its bucket in frustration. All of these males in here and not a single one stood up in defense of this female. Ava could only imagine what they were all on, but this behavior was shameful. It went against everything Wolves stood for; the strong protected the weak. Not just the ones they found respectable.

The male grabbed his crotch, "Yeah, I got the cock. You got the tail. I'm not seein' the difference." Several of the guests laughed while the distressed waitress turned her head away from him, only for him to grab her jaw with a meaty fist wrenching her face back toward him, "Now, do your job and serve us!" The guests laughed again like they were watching a sitcom instead of an assault.

The fluttering in Ava's chest grew with her agitation, a physical manifestation of her inner struggle. She was the strong, at least she'd been raised to be. Even in prison she'd never tolerated a bully. But now, in a room full of jacked up males, Ava was ashamed it was more than common sense keeping her head down.

The giant thug forced his mouth onto the waitress' before tossing her away. Standing straight, he turned in a circle, arms outstretched and eyes gleaming from the effects of whatever substance he'd taken. "Everyone in this fucking club needs to serve us," he stopped to laugh at his own double entendre before spotting Ava where she crouched on the floor. "Even the maids. Especially the maids!"

He begun stalking toward her.

"How 'bout it, maid? Lemme give you a promotion."