

Chapter 51

First Date

Ava accepted the bouquet with trembling fingers. The sizable assortment of bright, fresh flowers was easily the brightest thing in her room, now. She stuck her nose in it and breathed in, an array of scents, ranging from sharp to subtle, filling her nostrils.

Ava felt Mia perk up from her internal slumber, as they were both barraged with memories of running through fields at the peak of springtime. The recollection held the bitter bite of melancholy, but they were sweet all the same. "I'll have to thank him for this. It was a sweet gesture," she breathed.

"You'll never be able to if you don't get going," Bren made a gimme gesture toward the bouquet, placing it in a prime spot on Ava's dresser before shooing her out the door. "Have fun! Don't do anything I wouldn't do!" Ava chuckled as she was led out of the building. She didn't know what made her more nervous, her newfound commitment to a strange

man, or the fact that this would be the first time Ava had left the Green Light Club since the night she'd run away from Xavier.

While it was by no means forbidden, a lot of the court members didn't leave the club very often. Since most of the escorts working in the club were, at some point, wanted criminals, being recognized was always a concern.

The ones who were comfortable in their anonymity, tended to the higher floors more often and were allowed outside with armed escorts. For those who preferred to keep a lower profile, they serviced the lower and public floors that were almost exclusively frequented by human club members. Whenever they needed something, they relied on the club's extensive amenities or the internet to satiate their every whim.

For Ava, no one had specifically told her that she wasn't allowed outside of the club, but she had a feeling that doing so would incur more interference from Xavier, which she preferred to avoid.

Besides, she'd run into enough people that she'd recognized while on the eighth floor, that Ava was wary of wandering too far from the club's lower floors, anyway.

Unlike most, she had the disadvantage of the Green Light Club being located within Red Moon territory. With the Pack only a thirty-minute drive away, she felt that it was in her best interest to tread carefully.

Ava clutched her small handbag closer to her. Inside was her lifeline in case of emergency - a cell phone that Bella had given her after the Room 701 incident. It was one of the first security measures the madame had put into place in order to plug the numerous holes in her ship.

Anyone who didn't have a phone got one, along with smart watches to wear during appointments. From now on, no one would be without easy access to help if they needed it, whether they were in the club or not.

When she'd first scrolled through the phone, she'd noticed that pre-programmed in it, alongside the numbers for Jared and security, was Xavier's phone number. She'd rolled her eyes and kept scrolling. He hadn't reached out to her since the night Madison had been fired. And that was just fine by her.

Ava reached the club lobby where she found Noah standing, primly with his hands folded politely in front of him. She blinked, somehow surprised to find him as shockingly beautiful as the day she'd first met him. From the velvety, warmth of his deeply tanned skin to the nearly perfect symmetry of his sculpted features, Noah Thomas looked as if he'd been created rather than born.

Just like before, he was dressed head-to-toe in black - this time in a suede sports coat, slim-legged trousers, a V-neck t-shirt, and leather Chelsea boots. He made quite the contrast to her much brighter visage, as if she

encapsulated the last few rays of summer, while he embodied the captivating crispness of fall.

As she neared him, she recognized a similar feeling that she hadn't noticed she'd clocked from their first meeting. Being close to Noah felt as if she were entering an entirely different atmosphere. The space around him was his to command, and it made her feel strangely warm and cold at the same time. Like resting near a fire after nearly succumbing to frostbite.

His perfect smile was easy and reached his obsidian eyes when she greeted him, "You look absolutely lovely, Ava. You shouldn't have gone through the trouble."

She felt herself begin to blush as she smiled back. "Nonsense. The flowers alone were worth the trouble," she teased. "They were beautiful, by the way. I really appreciated them."

Noah smiled wider, "Noted. I'll have to remember what flowers were in there for future reference."

Ava waved him off with both hands, "Oh, no! That's not what I meant. I don't expect you to send me flowers. It was just nice, is all!"

He only winked and offered her his arm. She took a breath to steady herself and linked her elbow through his, letting him lead her outside to his waiting car. As she could have expected, the car was gorgeous and

sleek, just like him. When he opened the door to let her inside, it reminded her of Xavier's car with an absurdly large screen in the dashboard, and far fewer buttons than she remembered there being.

Silence stretched between them as he got in and began to drive. Ava began to feel a little antsy. Should she speak first, or wait for him to set the tone? He seemed relaxed, perfectly content in the silence, but Ava still felt as if she should say something.

That was her job, right? To be his companion? That's what he was paying her for. Only, it wasn't until just now that Ava realized that she had no idea what that entailed. She'd never been anyone's girlfriend before. "Ava, relax." He said, amusement tinging his tone.

She let out an audible breath and sank into the supple leather seat, the tension flying from her muscles as if a cord had been cut. He chuckled as she blushed again.

"Sorry," she said. "I get nervous when I don't know what to expect."

"Totally understandable. Did you get a chance to read the contract?"

She nodded. It had been long, going into excruciating detail about every parameter their fake relationship might entail from what sorts of functions he might take her to, to when, how long, and how far he was allowed to travel with her. Ava forced her mind to go blank when she thought about

what had seemed like the longest, most detailed part of the contract - the section that stipulated, in no mistakable terms, each of their sexual hard and soft limits. Ava had filled hers out as part of her escort training, but she'd yet to be in a position where she'd had to read someone else's. Especially someone she had to spend all day looking in the eye.

"Good," he continued. "Then you know that nothing happens that you don't want to. You want sushi instead of steak? It's your pick. Feel like a thriller instead of a romcom? What you say goes."

Ava cracked a smile. She appreciated the effort he was going to just to make sure that she was comfortable, but curiously enough, the potential physical aspect of their arrangement wasn't what she was most concerned about. It was...the *other* stuff. Talking. Relating.

Goddess, what if he'd spent all that money just to realize he didn't like her?

"You're tensing up again."

Ava sighed and decided that the truth had to be easier than wading through the swamp in her head just to come up with an excuse. "I should have told you from the beginning that I don't have any idea how to be someone's girlfriend." She turned to look out the window at the outside world zooming past, "What if you hate me?"

He was silent so long, Ava contemplated just how much it would hurt if she just decided to tuck and roll out of the car. Finally, he made an introspective hum, the deep sound rumbling his chest, "Is there something specific about you to hate?"

She shrugged, "Depends on who you ask."

One corner of his mouth hiked up in a lopsided grin. "The same can be said for pretty much everyone, I think."

The car came to a stop and Noah lightly nudged her with his elbow, prompting her to meet his gaze. "Before you go getting trapped in your head again, I want to point something out." He raised his eyebrows and grimaced, still somehow looking as picturesque as a classical portrait. "I'm not an expert at relationships either. Hence, the need to purchase a girlfriend, in the first place?"

"I thought that was more for convenience," Ava said.

Noah scoffed, "Sure. The convenience of having an actual friend to spend my time with, rather than the...sort of females my mother keeps trying to set me up with."

He said the last part more to himself than anything, but Ava smiled anyway. "Alright," she said, her anxiety mollified for the time being. "Where to, then?"

Noah's eyes took on a mischievous gleam, "I thought we'd go a little old school since we're still getting to know one another."

He gestured to where they'd come to a stop. Ava looked up and burst into surprised laughter.

"Noah Thomas, are we hanging out at the mall?"