

## Chapter 63

### Consequences

Bella knew she'd done the right thing by Ava, but there was no way that she could keep such an enormous secret from her boss. She had the sense to wait until Noah had cleared Ava's belongings out of the club and successfully absconded with the girl before she picked up the phone.

The longer she waited to tell Xavier that Ava was no longer inside of the club, the worse the consequences would be for all of them.

The line rang for longer than it should have. Bella momentarily entertained the thought of simply leaving Xavier a voice message, explaining everything that had happened. Then, she could clear her conscience without having to witness the male's imminent meltdown for just a bit longer.

As with most wistful thoughts that were too good to be true, the hope dissipated when Xavier picked up on the seventh or eighth ring.

"Xavier Michaels." His voice was low and staticky over the line as if the connection was only seconds from dropping.

"Mr. Michaels, this is Bella Sutton speaking," she said and squeezed her eyes shut, rubbing away the dull headache that was already forming behind her eyes in anticipation of the conversation that was to come.

"Yes, Bella, what is it?" She heard grumbling and rustling in the background as if he were in the middle of something when she called. Hopefully, Xavier was in polite company and couldn't explode on her the way she knew he was going to want to.

"I have some news that I know that you're going to find troubling, but I want to assure you that I have everything in hand."

The line went silent for so long that she thought that the call had dropped. When she pulled back to check, Xavier's voice picked back up. "I take it that it has something to do with Ava?"

"As opposed to the dozens of others who are under your employ?"

"Quit stalling, Sutton. I know that whatever this is involves Ava. It always does." He sounded as tired as she about that particular statement.

"Right, well, she's gone."

The cursing started immediately, low and frustrated, rather than the furious litany that she had anticipated, "I thought that your new security measures were supposed to keep shit like this from happening, Bella. What happened, did she run again? Fucking hell, I'm not going to be able to get back to Rochester quickly, so you need to send someone after her. Now."

"Mr. Michaels, let me finish. Ava is gone because I let her go."

"You did what?" And there was the fury creeping into his tone, clear as day across their fuzzy connection.

"Per his request, I amended her contract with Mr. Thomas to allow him to move her into a private residence of his for the remaining duration of her contract with you. She will still be fulfilling her duties to you and your Pack; she just won't be doing it here."

"And why in the hell would you approve something like that, Bella. Especially without consulting me first."

"With all due respect, sir, I didn't trust your judgment on the matter." Bella held her breath as her statement settled between them like lead, the crackling of the phone connection the only sound on the line for just a hair too long. "Excuse me?"

Bella licked her suddenly dry lips, but she was determined to plant her feet on this matter. Xavier wouldn't like it, but she wasn't going to budge on this - he needed to hear what she had to say. She only wished that it hadn't fallen upon her shoulders to deliver this particular reality check.

"Mr. Michaels, this arrangement you've created isn't working. Ava isn't happy here, and despite our best efforts, she's not particularly safe within the club, either." "And who's fault is that?"

"Yours, to be frank. I understand that the history between the two of you is difficult. Still, I fail to see how any of this is an adequate means of punishment anymore." "I'm not keeping her there to be punished, not anymore. I placed her there because so that she'd be safe and out of sight."

"The past few weeks have proven that her position in the club is no longer serving either of those purposes."

"Because you let her out." He spat.

"Because she's not a house pet," Bella spat back. "You approved her contract with Mr. Thomas...eventually. You know that he's her only client

and that she'd be spending most of her time with him, anyway. This isn't so different." "Except that it *\*is\** different, Ms. Sutton. Ava's supposed to be entertaining clients within the purview of the club, not living in their fucking houses."

Bella swallowed, "Well, I've met with Mr. Thomas and deemed this new arrangement adequate. I think that a change of scenery will benefit Ava's overall wellbeing."

"I don't pay you to think when it comes to her, Sutton. I pay you to do what I tell you to do. Give me a reason why I shouldn't replace you the first minute I'm able to."

"Because I'm the only reason Ava's still here," Bella's own temper was piqued enough for social graces to fall by the wayside. She'd tried being polite, but Xavier Michaels was as pigheaded as ever, and now it was time for him to hear some hard truths.

"You're blind and a fool, Xavier Michaels. All the more because you've seen what Ava's been through within this club. And, yes, I have work to do to make my establishment a safer place, but you're the one who put her in this position. These are your colleagues who have been making her miserable for months. You set Ava up with a ridiculous task, and now you're upset because she's meeting it."

Bella's voice began to rise in pitch as she continued, "She doesn't deserve to be here. You can take as long as you need to convince yourself of that, but it doesn't change the fact that Ava knows that she doesn't belong in this place and that she's done nothing to pay for. No amount of padding will make this situation any easier for her, Mr. Michaels. And, if you keep pushing her, Ava will find a way to escape you...one way or the other."

Silence stretched again as he contemplated her words, "Has she said anything to you? Is she feeling..."

Bella let out a harsh laugh, "Miserable? Depressed? Anxious, scared, bitter? No, actually. For the first time since I've known her, she's *\*happy\**, Xavier. Without you." She allowed her contempt to seep into her voice, "You have been the common denominator in the chaos that follows, Ava Davis. Her life is better for not having you in it. So, let her go. She can still fulfill the terms of your asinine little game, but let her do it on her terms, for once." "Fuck. Tell me how you really feel."

"I plan to. And I've wanted to for a very long time. In fact, I think that you'd fare better if you allowed more people to tell you what they think, and you actually *\*listened\**, Mr. Michaels. You are not infallible, but you are young enough to change."

"So, I've been told." The line went silent again. "Shit. What are the terms you came up with?"

Bella let out a massive sigh of relief at the resignation in his tone, "I know the address of the place they're staying in, but I'm not to tell you. She has the phone and watch I gave her, so I'll be able to maintain contact with her. She'll remain there until your contract runs out, and then Ava Davis isn't our business anymore."

"She'll always be my business...." Bella thought she heard him say, but his voice was pitched too low for her to be sure. Unsettled by the thought, she chose to ignore it.

"Oh, and one other person will have Ava's new address."

"Who?" His voice was louder now and noticeably annoyed.

"Her brother."

"Aiden is in town? And he's with Ava?" His surprise was evident even over the unstable line.

"Yes, he arrived only recently. Apparently, his rotation up North has ended."

"Grave Crown is releasing soldiers. Now?" Again, Bella got the distinct impression that he wasn't speaking to her.

"Thank you for relaying this information to me, Bella. Please, be sure to keep me posted on any new developments. And I mean anything."

A stiff breeze could have tipped her over in her current stunned state. She'd had every expectation of this call going far, far worse. "Of course."

"And Bella..." Xavier's voice momentarily hardened. "Don't you ever pull some shit like this again. Not with Ava, not with anything. I need to know who I can trust, and whether you meant well or not, I will not tolerate my people going behind my back. Understood?"

"Loud and clear."

With that, the line finally cut out. Bella sat back in her chair and wondered what the fuck had just happened.