

Chapter 96

What's Done In The Dark

Coming to an understanding about his treasonous extracurricular activities wasn't enough to keep at bay the awkward tension permeating the lake house. The air between Ava and Noah had become so charged that when they weren't touching and kissing and losing themselves to shadow that had settled over their home, they hardly spoke at all.

By the time Noah announced a few days later that it was time for him to leave town once again on "business," it was heartbreaking how eager he was to leave and how relieved she was to see him go. What she felt for him was real, and there wasn't a part of her that didn't wholeheartedly believe that he felt the same for her...but this wasn't an odd hobby to embrace or a bad habit to overcome.

Noah's war was all-consuming. Ava had been caught in someone else's crosshairs before, and making sure that didn't happen again was her number one priority right now.

Between sorting out the scope of her boyfriend's crimes and waiting on pins-and-needles for any updates from Xavier on their case against Victor, Ava had been just shy of crawling out of her skin.

Still, she knew her mind must be submerged in muddy waters when the sight of the Green Light Club's sign, blinking even in broad daylight, brought her a strange sense of familiar peace.

"Are you good to take it from here?" Aiden asked as he parked in front of the club.

"You're not coming in?" Ava asked?

He shook his head, "I'm picking someone up."

Ava's eyebrows shot up, "From the club? Who?"

"Don't be nosey! I have a life, too."

"Fine!" Ava threw her hands into the air with a frustrated huff, "Go ahead and keep your secrets. Everybody else does, anyway, so why the fuck not."

"Hey! Don't be like that, A."

His words were lost on her as she stormed into the club and made her way up the stairs.

"Hey! No one but clients and crew is allowed upstairs!"

"Shove it, Eddy!" Ava yelled, throwing the crotchety doorman the bird without missing a step.

When Bella opened the door, Ava fell into the older female's arms, wrapping her friend in the vice-like grip of someone who'd suddenly found their life raft after days of aimless drifting. She'd missed her friend dearly, but even more than needing a shoulder to cry on, Ava needed someone who understood stakes and how to navigate the murky depths of powerful males.

"Ava!" Bella exclaimed as she returned the tight embrace. "What an uncanny surprise! I was just thinking about you."

"I know," Ava said. "Xavier told me."

Bella's beautiful marble-like face didn't show surprise very often, but it looked as striking on her as anything else. "Xavier Michaels?"

Ava laughed at the subtle incredulity in her tone, "Yes," she nodded. "We recently came to a...truce, of sorts. Mostly because he uncovered who from our Pack framed me for murder."

Bella gasped, ushering Ava further into the office and closing the door firmly behind them. "Ava, that's brilliant news! So, your name is cleared then?"

"Not yet," she said, taking a seat. "It turns out the plot went deeper than we thought. Xavier wants the full picture before taking the culprit in."

Bella slowly lowered herself into her seat, sagely nodding along, "That must be frustrating for you, but it's a good call. Playing your hand too early could spook the rest of the players and send them scattering. You could lose everything." "His thoughts exactly."

Bella sighed, "That's always the issue with plots and schemes. Too many moving parts to keep track of. You never really know what's going on at any given time."

Ava broke eye contact but nodded emphatically. "I actually wanted your advice on something else of that nature." "Plots and schemes?"

"In a sense," Ava took a deep breath to steady her nerves and decided to just go all in. "What do you know about the rogues?"

Bella scoffed and sat back in her seat, "A hell of a lot more than I should. The Alpha's should probably think about cleaning up the Council. If it didn't benefit me so much, it'd be downright disturbing how easy it is to get those self-important pricks to talk."

"Cleaning up the Council?" Ava prodded, "You mean like the rogues might want to do?"

Ava felt her resolve begin to wither underneath Bella's pointed stare. "Ava, what is this about? What do you know?"

She shifted uncomfortably in her seat, "Nothing for certain. That's why I'm trying to get more information about...the rogues."

Bella leaned forward and folded her hands on the desk before her, all business-like. "What sort of information?"

Ava shrugged, "Their goals, their actions up to now, I don't know! If all they want is to depose the Council, and we all know the Council is corrupt, then are they really doing something wrong?"

Suddenly, Bella's eyes narrowed, "Is this about Noah?"

"I-"

"I already know that Mr. Thomas has a long history of bad blood with the Eclipse Pack and the Council."

Ava sat up straight in surprise, "You do?"

"I heard it straight from the horse's mouth. It was a requirement for me to sign you into his care."

"And you didn't think to tell me?"

"Stay on track, Ava. What you're implying is important," Bella said sternly, never breaking eye contact with Ava, even as she squirmed. "Is Noah Thomas planning to overthrow the Council? Is he leading the rogues?"

"I...don't know if those two questions are synonymous, and that's the goddess' honest truth," she admitted, letting her head fall into her hands. "But would it be so bad if it were true? If their mission sets the Alliance right and doesn't hurt anyone, I...I just can't see Noah being a threat."

"Anyone with an agenda is dangerous, Ava. Especially in our world. It just depends who poses the biggest threat," Bella sighed, sounding abysmally tired. "And the Council is a hell of a threat. They won't go down without a fight, and I know that you're not so naïve to think otherwise."

Ava sniffed back the sudden influx of tears threatening to overtake her. She was determined to get through this conversation without falling apart, "Then I don't know what to do, Bella. I can't report him when I don't know the full story. When I don't even know that I disagree with what he's doing."

Bella leaned forward and took Ava's hands between her own, "Then it's up to you to find out. Definitively."

"How do I do that?"

Bella squeezed Ava's hands to make sure she was listening closely, "When you're alone, I want you to call me. I can help you find the information that you need. That we all might need." "And what if we don't find anything?"

The proprietress was silent for a few loaded moments before answering, "Lack of evidence is often its own form of answer. Just be prepared that whatever you might find may force you to choose a side."

Ava sighed and looked away, letting her mind fill with more palatable realities, "Maybe I should listen to my brother. He wants me to choose my own side and just leave the Alliance behind."

"And that's a valid option, especially for someone with your background. Life has been fairly...high risk, low reward for you, hun. And it looks like you've found yourself caught in another toxic little loop." Ava swallowed hard, but her voice was still hoarse with tears when she spoke, "I didn't mean to."

Bella's face finally softened as she poured a glass of whiskey and slid it across the desk to Ava before pouring one for herself, "I'm sure that you didn't. In fact, I'm almost positive that this situation is as far from random as schemes tend to be. Leaving it all behind would probably be best for you. As long as you're able to live with what you've left behind."

The mistress downed her drink in a single swallow, "Whatever that may be."

Ava studied her own glass before doing the same, slamming the empty glass down with a definitive thud, "Fine, I'll do it. I'll gather information on Noah if for no other reason than I don't want the Council to do it first. There would be no justice there; I know that already."

"In that, at least, we agree."

Ava left Bella's office feeling decidedly worn. She'd gotten the help she'd wanted, but she'd been foolish to think that the answers she'd sought would magically make the problem go away. It was painfully clear that this was going to be one of those 'it gets worse before it gets better' situations.

With a sigh, Ava shook herself off and plastered on a smile. There was one last person she hoped to see before she returned to Shady Oak.

Ava knocked on Bren's door a split second before a loud moan echoed through the door, making her jump. In a panic, she checked her watch, but it was the middle of the day, well outside of regular working hours. She blushed, realizing that, since this was Bren's room, it likely wasn't a client she was entertaining.

Before she could slink away and act like she'd never been there, the door opened, and Bren was standing before her looking ruffled, flushed, and giddy as hell. Suddenly, she was the one enveloped in a warm hug that she returned with relish.

"I'm sorry," Ava rushed to apologize. "I didn't realize you had company!"

"Nonsense," Bren said, smiling. "I thought it was stupid to keep hiding anyway."

Ava cocked her head in confusion as Bren swung the door open wide enough for her to see into the room.

"Really, Aiden?" She exclaimed.