

Chapter 47

Peace Before Storm

Ava settled into the piping hot tub of water and let out a prolonged sigh. Finally, she let her body relax for what felt like the first time in days. When she'd first considered taking a bath, she'd momentarily balked at the thought of being submerged in water. Then, she felt every single bone in her body creak, causing her to come to the swift conclusion that this was one fear she couldn't afford to cultivate.

She sank below the fruit scented water, allowing the luxurious bath oils to saturate her hair. It was peaceful down there, and warm. Ava took the opportunity to shut her mind off for the moment and just be.

She'd heard somewhere about a thing called exposure therapy - it was pretty much when you face your fears until you replace upsetting memories with more positive ones. The concept felt like an analogy for her life since being released from the dungeon.

It seemed like every time she turned around, there was another mountain to climb, another person to forgive. It was mentally brutal, but ultimately, Ava knew that this would be the key to her happiness one day.

If she sacrificed now - buried her anger and betrayal, and continued to rise above it - eventually, she would reach the other side of the tumultuous pit her life had become. And when that finally happened, Ava had every intention of retaining what was left of her soul, so that she could actually enjoy her life one day.

When Ava rose from the tub, a hand was holding out a mug of tea for her to take.

"I'm glad to see that you're finally relaxing."

Ava jumped, rubbing the water from her eyes until Bella's sculpted face came into startling focus, "What are you doing here?"

Bella pursed her lips and moved the steaming mug closer to her. Ava took the tea with a muttered thanks but didn't take a sip until it had become apparent that Bella had no intention of continuing until she had.

As unsettling as her unexpected arrival was to Ava's frayed nerves, she couldn't pretend as if the warm, lemon and honey weren't a boon to her scratchy throat. "Mm...thank you. Did you use your key to get in?" Bella pursed her lips and glanced at the door, "Hm, yes, for the time being."

Ava looked at her questioningly, urging her to elaborate, "It's become appallingly clear that the Green Light Club is no longer the well-oiled machine I'd assumed it was. We're in desperate need of a hard reboot when it comes to our operating procedures.'

"Like what?" Ava asked.

"First thing's first, I'm having a security company come in as soon as possible. New locks, new cameras, the whole nine yards. And I've had...words with middle management. We shouldn't be having any more incidents involving unauthorized guests."

Ava hummed in affirmation, pleased to see that something decent was coming out of all of this, after all. Bella rose from where she'd been perched on the edge of the tub and made to leave.

She didn't make it out of the bathroom before she paused and turned back to where Ava remained, breathing in the comforting aroma of bath oils and hot tea.

"That was a really good call you made, by the way."

Ava looked up at her over the rim of her mug, "What do you mean?"

Bella gave her a knowing look, "Convincing Xavier to go easy on Madison."

Ava sighed and sunk lower into the tub, "Oh, that. I wasn't sure that I had, to be honest."

Bella crossed her arms over her chest, "Well, you did. He opted to let me handle her disciplinary action instead of taking matters into his own hands. I don't need to tell you how much of a headache that saved me."

Ava's eyebrows rose, "No doubt. I didn't do it to be kind, though. Like you said, it needed to be done. I have enough baggage to contend with. If I can help it, I never want to have to think about Madison again for the rest of my life." Bella gave her a small, conspiratorial smile, "That, at least, can be obliged. As of yesterday, Madison is no longer an employee of the Green Light Club."

Ava let her head fall back onto the lip of the tub. The entire scenario with Madison felt to unfortunate for her to be too elated about the girl's departure. After all, there were just some people who should never be introduced into each other's lives, and apparently she and Madison fell into that category.

The relief she felt was real, though. Ava sincerely hoped that they'd both be able to find some peace in their absence.

"I only wished that the mystery ended with Madison," Bella muttered. Ava's head popped up in surprise.

"What mystery?"

"Oh, just that we know that it was Madison who set you up with the men in Room 701, but we still haven't been able to figure out who gave them Madison's name in the first place."

Ava suddenly felt very cold and exposed in her bath, "Could it have been someone from her school?"

Bella gave a small shrug, "At this point in time, there's just no way to tell. Please remember to keep your guard up and come to me immediately if something ever feels...off."

Ava nodded and Bella finally left, closing the door to Ava's suite behind her. She felt far more uneasy now than she had a few minutes ago, but it was good to have this knowledge going forward.

Ava always ended up feeling as if she were so many steps behind everyone else, constantly reacting to the unending obstacles thrown in her path. Now, at the very least, she knew to be on the lookout. And she would be.

The following week and a half in the Green Light Club had been blissfully uneventful. Ava would go as far as to even say that it was downright boring.

Madison's abrupt departure had been the talk of the prep room for a hot few days, but no one was really surprised. Ava hadn't been the first person on Madison's shit list, even if she had been the human girl's most fervent rivalry. No one else knew about everything that had gone down in Room 701, but by the time Madison was canned, she'd been such a font of negativity among the staff that no one had cared all that much when she was finally gone. In fact, without Madison had seemed to be a driving force for a lot of the pessimistic energy surrounding Ava's reputation. While she hadn't been the only one to share many of her observations about Ava's daily activities, she'd practically been a one-person rumor mill.

Now, not only had the shifty stares come to a stop, but no one looked at Ava for any reason, ever, at all. It was honestly pretty great being able to simply exist alongside the other escorts. The court prep room and the club's gym had become regular hangout spots for her, especially since she wasn't taking clients while her multitude of bruises healed.

And in what was probably the biggest upstart for her, she wasn't hanging out alone. Bren had started taking full advantage of Ava's newfound free time, often accompanying her to the gym and joining her for online shopping sessions. It was always thrilling every time Bren sought her out,

actively wanting to spend time with her. Every other relationship in Ava's life came with some sort of baggage - Bella was Xavier's employee, Dylan was Xavier's friend...and that was pretty much the extent of the people Ava would venture to even consider being her friends.

And Ava hadn't even seen Dylan since before the incident. Before then, the blonde male had seemingly always been popping up out of nowhere to cajole Ava into dragging him along with her around the club. Despite herself, she was actually really beginning to miss his company.

Dylan wasn't the only no-show, either. Xavier had been suspiciously absent since the night she had confronted him in his office. Ava had asked Bella about the mysterious absences, but the only information she'd had was about some emergency conference they'd travelled to New York for, on Alliance business.

This had come as a surprise to Ava, since she hadn't realized Dylan ranked high enough to be involved in the Alliance. After all, during all of those meetings that had taken Xavier away a few weeks ago, the close-lipped male had been glued to her side.

Ava was in the middle of a pop Pilates workout with Bren when she finally saw Jared, the client manager again. She was surprised he'd managed to survive Bella's wrath, but she was glad that the end of yet another livelihood wasn't on her head.

"Miss Davis, there you are!" He smiled brightly. "Looking fantastic, I might add. Your presence is requested on the eighth floor."

He leaned in conspiratorially, "Mr. Thomas has returned."