

Chapter 26

Conversation with Dylan

"Mail call!" Ava opened at her door to find Bella holding out a nondescript envelope with her name scrawled across it in neat script.

A took the envelope and stepped aside, letting the madame into her room. She'd been in the middle of her daily workout. It had only been a week or two since she'd started her new routine, but Ava was already starting to see progress. Every couple of days, she found that she had the stamina to push herself a little farther, and the curvature of her bones were gradually being replaced by a lightly defined padding of muscle.

A steady stream of calorie dense foods - curtesy of Bella - had done the trick of leveling her up from 'gaunt' to 'thin'. The hallow frailty left by years of neglect were slowly but surely being wiped away, leaving Ava feeling amazing. She'd told herself not to think about it, but another reason Ava attributed to her good mood was the fact that she hadn't seen Xavier

in a while. Ever since she'd left him standing alone with his toxic pride, the male had been out of sight, if not completely out of mind.

"You should open it," Bella nodded toward the envelope in Ava's hand. "I must admit I'm a bit curious. It's not often that a client sends mail to me directly, instead of the club's mail room."

Her own curiosity peaked; Ava opened the thin packet and pulled out what was inside. She gasped at the check for ten-thousand dollars she held in her hand. It was addressed to her, signed by Liam Smith, and the note line simply read 'tip'. "How do I send this back?" She asked.

Bella's eyes went wide, and she snatched the check from Ava's limp fingers, "You don't, silly girl. I thought you understood how this worked."

Ava rolled her eyes as the proprietress tucked the note away to be cached later, "I was already paid for the evening, though. If we're honest, I hardly deserved that..."

She'd spent less than five minutes at the party she'd been assigned to serve, where she'd poured a grand total of a single glass of wine. Ava was at a loss at the overabundant generosity, "I certainly didn't do anything to deserve a ten- thousand-dollar tip!"

Of course, Ava knew what had probably prompted the generosity, but it still shook her that a single tender moment could mean so much to

someone. Except...when she thought about it, that shared commiseration was priceless to her. Just like the friendship that continued to grow between herself and Bella, in spite of Ava's reticence to create another bond that could be broken.

"Gift horses and mouths, and all of that." Bella waved away Ava's reservations. "If Mr. Smith says you earned it, then you did. And no one can take that from you."

Ava smiled before continuing the burpee routine Bella had interrupted. Bella scrunched up her face and took a seat on the plush velvet settee across from where Ava exercised. She pulled out a laptop from her briefcase and got to work, the two operating in companionable silence.

This had become something of a routine in itself - the two females enjoying one another's company, sometimes without speaking for long stretches of time.

Ava was pretty sure that Bella had only taken a liking to her because of an innate urge the older female had to nurture broken things. So, it amazed her every time her presence was enough to make the glamorous mistress stay.

Ava wondered if friendship had always been this nice. Her previous friendships had been so intense - those people had been her entire world.

Whether it was the intensity of youth or the prison, every interaction had felt as if it could be the last.

She'd been so caught up in doing and saying the right things, that she'd been completely caught off guard when those final moments had actually come.

This, with Bella, felt...easy. She hoped that it was nice for Bella, too.

As it often did when Ava lost herself to the past, her mind turned to Xavier. He exemplified her theory that she'd been so caught up in having the perfect relationship, that she wasn't sure if she'd ever actually shared a single meaningful with the boy she'd claimed as her best friend.

If they had, surely they wouldn't want to hurt each other every time they were in the same room together.

Now that that train of thought had started, it itched at the back of Ava's mind until she couldn't hold the question back anymore, "Bella, do you happen to know where Xavier's been?"

She tried to play the question off as nonchalant, but Bella looked up from her computer with a raised eyebrow, "On a business trip in New York City. He'll be gone for a while yet. Why?" Ava quickly shook her head and fell into a series of lunges, "No reason. Just wondering."

She told herself that she didn't like not knowing where he was because that meant he'd be able to randomly appear when she least expected it. While that rang true, there was an undercurrent of something unnamable that added to her discomfort. She had absolutely no interest in investigating the feeling any further.

As with most of their time together tended to, their hangout ended when Bella received a phone call with an issue that needed to be addressed in private. Ava followed her out into the hallway where their paths diverged, as Bella waved goodbye and headed off to her office, and Ava went off to find an ice pack to soothe an aching bicep.

As Ava approached the elevator, she spotted several court members queueing outside the doors. Unwilling to find out what their reception of her would consist of Ava cut a sharp about face and opted to take the stairs.

She took her time going down the five or so flights that would take her to the basement. The leery looks she got from the other club workers still persisted and, for the most part, Ava put it from her mind. She had neither the time nor the energy to angst over stranger's opinions. Still, she wasn't keen on the idea of locking herself in a small metal box with people who had it out for her.

"I mean, really, what are the chances of us meeting on the stairs *again*?"

Ava looked up to see Xavier's icy blonde friend entering the stairwell from the floor above her. "Pretty high on my end, Mr. Miller. I live here."

The male grinned as he closed the distance between them, "You remember me!"

Ava was puzzled that he seemed genuinely surprised that she would recall him. Not only had their first meeting only been a few weeks ago, that kiss...wasn't the kind to easily slip the mind.

He leaned back against the landing railing and crossed his arms over his chest. His smile lingered as his gaze caught on her lips, "Goddess, I miss it..."

He trailed off, and Ava unconsciously ran the tip of her tongue over her bottom lip. "What do you miss?"

Dylan reached out and ran his thumb over her lip, retracing the path her tongue had just taken. "This right here," he said with the same seductive flare she remembered from their first stairwell encounter. She'd be lying if she said her body didn't respond. "Everything about you is sweet. What I wouldn't give for another taste..."

He lowered his head toward hers, but Ava turned her face away. "My apologies, Mr. Miller. I have someplace I need to be."

The lie rolled off of her tongue so easily, she almost believed it, even if he didn't. When she turned away from, he let out a playful chuff, and Ava suddenly felt as if she were playing right into his hand.

He caught her lightly by the wrist and spun her around so that it was her back now pressed against the railing while his big body closed her in. He brought her hand up and clasped it under his own, with both of their palms laying flat against his heart.

Ava gasped at the nearness. Beneath her palm, his heart raced - robust, even beats telling her that if they'd unwittingly fallen into some game, he was enjoying himself immensely. He met her eyes with an interest so acute it took her breath away.

In that moment, Ava knew two things for sure - Dylan Miller had a very specific set of skills, and she wasn't immune to them.

The unexpected female voice startled Ava from the trance Dylan's crystalline eyes had trapped her in. She quickly removed herself from where she'd been under him and turned to see Madison, the waitress from suite 803, standing awkwardly on the stairs below them.

Dylan huffed out a sigh, but kept his voice light, "And who might you be?"

Madison stammered under his attention, "Oh, um, Madison, sir. B-but you could call me- "

"Alright, Madison, what can we do for you?"

The human girl blushed bright pink, "I-I was just on my way to wait on a party on the seventh floor."

Ava took her opportunity to leave, "I'll just leave you to it, then." Turning on her heel, she continued her way down the stairs, only for Dylan to jump down the rest of the short flight ahead of her.

He took Ava's hand in his, throwing a wink over his shoulder at the frazzled girl, "Have fun, Madison. Someone as cute as you, I'm sure they'll love you."

Ava rolled her eyes as Madison turned scarlet and began to fidget.

"I-no, you have it wrong. I'm just a cocktail waitress." The girl tried to save face, but Dylan had already turned around tugging Ava's hand to follow him down the stairs.

Ava tugged back, "Far be it from me to interrupt *that* conversation. I'm not headed anywhere interesting, anyway."

Dylan just smiled his playboy smile, "Then please allow me to liven up your trip."

Ava glanced at Madison who has still gaping at Dylan from where she stood on the landing. She didn't want to risk the girl reporting back that she'd rebuffed a high-paying client...

Ava sighed, and walked ahead, pulling a chipper Dylan behind her. As she turned a corner, though, she saw Madison still standing in the stairwell watching the two of them leave with a sour, sour look trained on their joined hands.