

## Chapter 31

### Generosity

‘Only a kiss’, he'd said. For some reason, the thought of kissing Noah Thomas rocked Ava off balance. Given what the male was paying her to do, and how much he was paying her to do it, a simple kiss shouldn't be this unnerving to her. Even so, there was something about Noah that unsettled her, like a preternatural sense that read him and gave her goosebumps. The way he looked at her now, with utter gentleness and just a hint of lust...he moved her in a way she hadn't expected and wasn't ready for.

She balked, stepping out of his intoxicating ozone. "Is that a part of our deal."

He shook his head once, firmly, "Nothing that you don't want will be included in our deal, Ava. Like I said, I'm looking for a partner, not a slave."

"Sounds like you want a lady, then, Mr. Thomas. Not a whore."

"Ava," his deep voice was sharp as obsidian. It was the first time she'd piqued his temper, but she knew from the tiny peek that the well ran deep than it first appeared.

"It's not my place to dictate how you refer to yourself, but when you speak of yourself, you do it with respect."

Ava's jaw dropped open for a split second, thrown by the conviction in his words. "You don't know me."

She knew that, at this point, she was fronting, putting up arbitrary walls to distance herself from the flurry of butterflies growing in her belly. His stare gave no quarter, and Ava knew he was reading her like an open letter.

"I know I don't make bad investments," he strode toward her again, closing the distance she'd put between them, both physically and...in other ways. "I've spent less than twenty minutes in your presence, and I know, without a doubt, that you're an investment worth making."

Ava's eyes shuttered closed, the fight leaving her all at once. When she felt Noah's lips press into hers she responded immediately, parting her lips to invite him in further.

His kiss felt how dark chocolate tasted; sweet and smooth enough to lull you into a blissful stupor, but with just enough kick to keep you aware, yearning for more. It was chaste and sensual, and over much too soon. Ava's eyes felt heavy as she blinked them open, her lips cold and bereft. When she peered up at him through her lashes, she found his eyes lingering on her own gaze, not her lips.

"Thank you, Ava."

Ava licked her lips, stalling for time while she regathered her wits about her. "Have a good night, Mr. Thomas."

He smiled his dazzling smile again, sending her thoughts into another mystified jumble, "That's Noah from now on."

He checked his watch and headed for the door, squeezing her hand one last time.

"I look forward to getting to know you better, Ava Davis."

And with that, he was gone.

Ava stood in the middle of the empty suite, stupefied.

"Down the rabbit hole, indeed." She wasn't merely speaking to an empty room, but the dozens of conflicting emotions fluttering throughout her mind. Ava didn't know Noah Thomas. Everything about him appeared sincere, from his insistence on honesty, to the way he seemed to respect her more than she respected herself.

His presence warmed her even as it caused her to shy away. Trusting him would be foolish, just another invitation to hurt. He was a client just like all the rest, and she needed to remember that.

Ava swiped the check off of the couch and marched out of the door, doggedly ignoring the longing voice calling out to her, recounting the multitude of ways that Noah Thomas had already proven that he was, in fact, nothing like the others. Ava shut her bedroom door with a sigh of relief and kicked off her heels. When she flicked on the light, she froze. Turning, Ava looked to see her bedroom lock in working order. She sniffed the air, but as per usual, scents were difficult to track within the club; there were too many people, too many Wolves and humans comingling - perfuming, and sweating, and sanitizing...still.

Someone had been in her room.

Nothing looked ransacked or overtly out of place, but as she scanned around the room, she picked up on minute differences that she hadn't even realized she'd memorized - the jar of makeup brushes on her vanity were arranged differently as if someone had picked it up and set it back down, a shirt that had been on her bed had been knocked to the ground...any one

of these things would be easily overlooked, but together painted an upsetting picture.

Mia hummed in agitation, confirming in her extrasensory way, that, indeed, someone had invaded their territory while Ava was away.

Ava ignored most of the touched items, beelining for the spot under her bed where she kept a shoebox hidden away amongst a small horde of similar boxes. Inside, was the dingy pair of slip-on shoes she'd been wearing when she had been taken from the dungeon. While the rest of her prison uniform had been disposed of, she'd insisted on keeping her shoes.

She'd worn them as a member of the housekeeping staff, and when she'd finally scrounged enough tip money, the first thing she'd bought for herself in over three years had been a cheap pair of sneakers. Since then, the prison flats had remained in that sneaker box, collecting the thousands of dollars' worth of tips that would get her out of there.

Ava cradled the shoebox to her chest. The slip-ons were disgusting, and warranted a good incineration, for sure. But Ava was inexplicably attached to them. The shoes represented where she'd been and where she was going. In fact, her fixation with the shoes had spawned a sort of obsession in Ava. During her time at the club, Ava was meticulously frugal, for the most part. While she didn't spend a lot on makeup or clothes like the other court members, she did splurge on shoes. She'd built up quite the little collection of discount sneakers and luxury heels; each pair signifying

another step away from bondage. All neatly tucked away underneath her bed.

Ava let out a shuttering sigh of relief as she counted and recounted her money, realizing it was all still there. No doubt whomever had snuck into her room had been looking to see how Ava was fairing with all of her eighth-floor assignments. Luckily, they'd either forgotten to check under the bed, or the horde of boxes had seemed like too much trouble to rifle through.

This posed a serious problem, though. Her bedroom was even less secure than she'd thought. Before Ava could think, she was out the door and rushing up the stairs and knocking on Bella's office door.

Bella opened right away, even though it was well past midnight, just like Ava knew she would.

"Don't you ever sleep?" She said in way of greeting.

"Hello to you, too." Bella let her inside, gesturing for Ava to take a seat in one of the overstuffed white suede chairs sitting across from her desk.

"I fucked up, and now I don't know what to do."

Bella's eyebrow rose in question, but she remained silent, allowing Ava to finish.

"I'd thought that hanging out in the prep room would make the others...I don't know, trust me more? Get used to me? But then, I got called to the eighth floor in front of everyone. When I got back to my room, someone had gone through my things."

Ava placed the entirety of her savings on Bella's intricately cherrywood desk, "All of my tips were still there, but I can't keep them in my room anymore."

Without so much as a blink, Bella gathered up the stack of cash and placed it in a monogrammed envelope she pulled from a desk drawer. "The unfortunate breaking and entering aside, I'm glad that you trusted me enough to come to me with this." She held up the envelope, "I know how much this means to you, Ava."

Bella got up and strode to a large neo-classical painting in a gilded frame. Swinging the frame open revealed a hidden safe that Bella placed the money into. "I'll deposit this into your account tomorrow."

"My account?" Ava asked, "I don't have an account of my own."

Bella turned to her with a puzzled look on her lovely face, "Of course you do. Alpha Michaels had one opened for you under an alias. Where do you think I've been putting your payments?"

Ava's mouth opened and closed wordlessly. Ava had assumed there was some sort of communal account that Bella divided accordingly. She hadn't known...

"He didn't tell me." She stated and handed Bella the check from Noah.

Bella's eyebrows rose, "Ava, where did you get this?" This was the closest she'd heard the female come to being genuinely floored.

"Oh, yeah." For some reason she was embarrassed, like she'd been caught doing something naughty. "My client. From earlier tonight."

Bella stared at her blankly, "I didn't set you up with anyone tonight."

"Jared found me," Ava waved off the memory. "The disaster in the prep room, remember?"

She almost jumped when Bella cupped her shoulders, "How are you, Ava?" The female's voice was thick with worry, "Are...did you- "



"No, no!" Ava frantically waved both hands, blushing furiously, "He was a perfect gentleman, and all that.

Bella gave her a dubious look, but released the harried grip on Ava's shoulders, "Then what on earth did he want for fifty thousand dollars, and why didn't I hear about it?"

Ava shrugged, "He didn't want much of anything at all, actually." She said, "He needed a fake girlfriend, and he gave me fifty grand for my retainer."