

Chapter 52

Noah

Ava couldn't stop giggling as she stared up at the Nordstrom department store Noah had parked them in front of.

He reared back in feigned outrage, "I'll have you know, this is a galleria. And I subscribe to the school of thought, that there's no better way to get to know someone than to take them shopping." "Shopping?" She asked cautiously.

He shrugged, "I thought it'd be nice to treat you."

Ava was already shaking her head before Noah could get his entire sentence out, "I already told you that you don't need to do that kind of stuff for me."

"Ava, need has nothing to do with this. I want to treat you to nice things."

"But, why? Our relationship isn't real."

Noah shook his head slowly, "The romantic one, yes. I already told you that I want us to be friends."

Ava frowned, "Friends don't treat friends to shopping sprees."

His smirk came back, this time edged with a little disdain, "They do in the circles I tend to run in. And for their significant others, they do a hell of a lot more than that."

She sighed, "You're already giving me so much..."

He waved her off with a firm shake of one hand, "That's business, Ava. It doesn't count. Trust me, it's going to take a little more than your daily retainer to keep this ruse going. So, think of this as me maintaining our cover."

He placed one of his strong, steady hands over her much smaller, fidgeting ones. He made sure that she was looking him in the eye before continuing, " Now, do me a favor and just relax and enjoy our date. I promise you don't owe me anything."

They shared a look for few moments before Ava finally nodded, "Alright. Since you insist, I guess I'll allow you to shower me with gifts as you see fit."

Noah chuckled, "Thank you, Ava. I appreciate your sacrifice."

She stuck her tongue out at him and went to unbuckle her seatbelt. By the time she had it undone, Noah had already exited and rounded the car and was opening the door for her. "Milady," he said with a shit-eating grin.

Ava snorted. "Ew."

He held out his hand and she took it, secretly reveling in the way his large, warm hand engulfed hers. Together they walked hand-in-hand into the galleria. Ava had the distinct feeling that she was in some way leaving her old life behind and entering into all-new territory.

She looked at Noah out of the corner of her eye, his inspired profile somehow both playful and brooding. Ava reminded herself that all of his soft sides were edged in steel, as appealing as he was dangerous.

Noah Thomas had layers, and Ava didn't want to be the one to peel them back. Because this - holding a male's hand on her way to an afternoon mall date? Ava hadn't realized how much she'd craved a feeling like this. For once, she wanted something to just be easy.

For the second time that day, Ava spun in a slow circle as a discerning eye carefully scanned her every dip and curve. "Absolutely gorgeous." The male appreciation in Noah's voice was stark as he watched Ava complete her rotation. "Really? Do you think I should get it?"

"It's already as good as gotten."

She looked up to see heat simmering in Noah's gaze. He really did like this dress. Ava couldn't blame him - it was probably the nicest one she'd tried on, so far. It was definitely the sexiest.

They'd been shopping for nearly two hours already, and Ava couldn't believe that she hadn't been bored once. Noah approached shopping like a challenge, especially after finding out how little Ava knew or cared about clothing. He took it upon himself to find pieces that she truly liked, taking pride in discovering her style preferences, especially if she hadn't known them herself.

She hadn't tried on everything they'd picked up, but he'd insisted that she needed a good gown, and that the only way to know a great article of clothing was to try it on. She'd gone through nearly a dozen dresses, all stunning in their own right, but this one obviously stood out.

It was a dark emerald green and made of velvet. The floor-length sheath pooled in the back and the V-shaped neckline dipped nearly as low as it

did in the back. The buttery soft material was substantial and whisper thin at the same time, hugging and flowing off of every one of her body's hills and valleys.

She felt powerful in this dress.

The heat in Noah's eyes made her flush, "Okay, you're turn!"

He lifted an eyebrow, "Today's about you."

Ava shook her head and put her hands on her hips, "No, it's about getting to know one another. And so far, all we've done is focus on me."

"Because all you've willingly purchased is shoes."

She gestured to herself, "And this dress."

He chuckled, "And that dress. Okay, fine. Let's see what you've learned, so far." He held up a finger. "One item. Ten minutes. Go."

Ava yelped and took off toward the men's section, her two-thousand-dollar dress trailing behind her, "I'm way ahead of you!"

She'd spotted it a while ago, and it had screamed Noah's type. She picked up the pitch-dark trench overcoat and brought it back to him, presenting it proudly.

He nodded in appreciation, "Italian wool and cashmere. Single-breasted..."

Ava grinned wide, "The modern silhouette for the modern male."

"Did you get that off an advert?"

Ava nodded, feeling deeply pleased with herself.

He laughed, "Nice find, Ava. I actually really like it!"

She frowned, "Did you doubt me?"

"You were fairly clueless when we got here," he said with a shrug.

Ava scoffed, "I'm a quick learner."

Noah grinned, "And that's one of the things I've learned about you today. I told you my method works."

"Hmm, well, what does your method tell you about dinner? All of this getting to know one another has me famished."

They strode hand-in-hand through the promenade when Ava suddenly came up short, bringing Noah to a halt.

"I know what I want to eat."

He followed her gaze and frowned, "That's not food."

"No, it's better!" Ava tugged his hand and he followed her without hesitation until they were standing in the line of a handcrafted ice cream parlor.

It was maybe a little childish, and definitely silly, but Ava hadn't had ice cream since before she'd been locked away. Standing in an old-fashioned ice cream parlor felt like being transported directly into the warmest part of her childhood.

For his part, Noah didn't seem too put out by having a cone of hazelnut-fudge for dinner. They ordered their desserts and slid into solid wooden booths.

"So, you have a sweet tooth?" He asked her.

She nodded, liking melted strawberry ice cream from her lips. "What else have you learned during the excursion?"

He held her gaze as he gave his cone a long lick, causing her to involuntarily shiver. "You're not nearly as bad of company as you think you are. You're one of the least financially motivated people I've ever met, even though you're an escort, so there's definitely a story there."

Ava became steadily more interested in her ice cream as he went on, "You're extremely observant. Your supposed lack of interest in clothing probably has more to do with a lack of self-confidence rather than fashion. And I'm pretty sure you have a burgeoning foot fetish."

Ava's head shot up, surprised laughter slipping its way from her lips, "I'm sorry?"

"The shoes. You really like shoes."

She felt herself blush, "Yeah, but not because of a fetish. Probably."

She took another lick of her cone. "Because of the...other stuff. I've been through a lot of stuff, and that eats at you, you know? There wasn't a place for stuff like fashion in my life for a really long time, and then on top of

everything else, it just felt inconsequential. But shoes always look nice. No matter how you look. Or feel."

Noah remained silent, waiting to see if she'd continue. "I'm guessing that it was the opposite for you? Everything about you is so... meticulous."

Respect played across his face as he nodded, "Money talks plenty, but good Italian leather makes people listen."

Ava shook her head, watching her ice cream melt, "It's a fucking shame that people can't take you at your word."

"Oh, they could," Noah's voice grew bitter, and Ava could tell that he had his own baggage from his past to carry. "They just choose not to. That's how they take control over you and keep it."

She nodded, "Believe me, I understand."

Noah held her gaze, an aching understanding passing between them. "I know that you do, Ava." He leaned forward, placing his hand on her own, "That's how I know you're worth liking."

Back in her office at the Green Light Club, Bella Sutton hangs up her phone with a terse click. She had initiated this phone call looking for

answers, but instead she'd only found a host of mysteries, and at this particular point, Bella was in no mood for loose ends.

The goal had been simple - ring a few of her contacts in Eclipse and gather more intel on the Green Light Club's new best paying customer. This was nothing she hadn't done a hundred times before. Only, this time, her contact's intel was... perplexing, if not outright concerning.

As far as the Eclipse elite were concerned, Noah Thomas didn't exist.