

Chapter 53

Trust

Ava watched the clock on her bathroom vanity tick, tick ever closer to the time that Noah was meant to pick her up. And, still, she stayed rooted in her spot, sunk nose deep in her bathtub as the previously scalding water became increasingly lukewarm.

She was undoubtedly stalling, but she didn't know where the source of her reticence came from. Her first date with Noah had been...amazing from start to finish. Not much had happened after they'd finished their ice cream, but he'd taken her back to the club and, unlike last time, he didn't ask for a kiss.

He'd wanted one, she was pretty sure. Spending as much as she did living in a building that was perpetually filled with horny men, Ava had gotten fairly good at recognizing when someone was interested in her. What she wasn't used to was no one simply acting on their desires without checking with her first.

No, going out with Noah wasn't the problem. If anything, Ava was a little too eager to see him again. Maybe that was her problem. No matter how many amazing dates they went on, or how much he inadvertently filled that chasm in her, that unrelenting want for companionship, their relationship was fake.

Ava was only going to get herself hurt if she didn't reel in her bleeding heart.

A knock sounded at Ava's door, and she took that as a sign that her pity pool party was over. Sitting up in the tub, she opened her mouth and sucked in a breath for the first time in nearly two minutes. Wiping the water from her face, Ava rose and stepped from the tub, grabbed her robe, and made her way to her door.

She was pleasantly surprised to find Bella on the other side. As busy as Bella was with overhauling the club's safety and security procedures, they hadn't seen as much of one another over the past couple of weeks.

Ava was about to say as much when the mistress looked her up and down and frowned, "Shouldn't you be dressed by now?"

Emphatically yes. Noah would be here in under forty minutes. "It turns out that surprise dates freak me out." She said with a shrug.

Unlike their last date, this one hadn't been planned beforehand. Ava had been in the middle of her regular weightlifting routine when Jared had found her and delivered a handwritten note from Noah, telling her to be ready by five and to wear something comfortable.

She'd almost immediately gotten lost in her feelings and had retreated to the solace of her bathtub where she'd lingered for far too long.

Ava moved aside and Bella stepped into the room, taking a seat on the bench at the foot of her bed. "What's wrong? Did you not enjoy yourself the other night?"

"I actually did! We had a great time," Ava moved to her dresser and began rifling through the newly stocked drawers.

Bella's eyebrows rose slightly, "You've been busy."

Ava picked up a pair of jeans and held them in front of her, "That was Noah. He took me shopping, and apparently, he's not one for restraint."

She'd expected Bella to chuckle, or at least crack an amused grin. Instead, a pensive frown turned the older female's scarlet lips upside down, "So, you've gotten to know one another well? And you don't sense any...red flags from him?" Ava paused in her rummaging at Bella's leading line of

questioning, "Why? Should I?" She turned to the female who was all at once her employer, babysitter, and friend. "Bella, if you think I may be in danger, I'd really like to know." Bella sighed and stood from where she'd been perched at the edge of her seat. She stepped over to Ava and placed comforting hands on her shoulders, "I'm sorry for worrying you. I'm just trying to do my due diligence, this time. I don't know this

Ava shrugged, "Well, honestly, I don't know anything about him either." She looked down at the pillow soft sweater that was now in her hands, her thumbs running back and forth over the fabric, "Except that he's nice. And cares about what I think...and listens to what I say, actually listens."

She sighs, once again lost in the troublesome thoughts that had been swirling around in her head for the last few days, "And he's spontaneous, and funny. Thoughtful..."

Ava hadn't realized that a tear had slipped down her cheek until Bella brushed it away with her thumb.

"He sounds like a dream client, Ava. So, why are you crying?"

"Because, good things don't happen to me, Bella."

A dream client. Bella couldn't have summed it up any more succinctly. Ava couldn't shake the feeling that she had fallen into a dream, and years of hard experience wouldn't allow her to trust that.

"I don't get to feel good very often, and whenever I do..." Ava's voice broke as she tried not to get sucked into memories of loved ones she no longer had access to, whether they were still here or not. The list was...too long. "It's just a lot worse after it's been nice, you know?"

Bella rubbed Ava's shoulders soothingly, considering her words. Then, as if she'd suddenly come to an internal resolution, Bella's eyes cleared, as she gave Ava an encouraging smile. "Then focus on the positive parts and try to live in the here- and-now, okay? Don't let fear steal your joy, Ava."

Bella leaned in and gave Ava a hug that she leaned into, relishing the warmth. With that, the proprietress left Ava to finish getting ready.

Pacified by Bella's reassuring words, Ava quickly finished getting ready. She'd settled on the sweater and jeans she'd picked out to begin with, enjoying the cream-colored sweater's puffy long sleeves and how it tapered in the front enough to tuck neatly into her tastefully distressed jeans.

She finished the look with a pair of strappy, nude ballet flats and a ponytail. Ava didn't even attempt to try and figure out the mounds of

products Bren had left for her, instead opting for her own much simpler makeup routine.

When the guard finally arrived to escort her downstairs, she was feeling much more grounded. Bella was right; Ava didn't need to play out each interaction before it happened. She'd be doing herself a disservice to taint the potential happy moments of her life with doubts and fears.

When Ava greeted Noah, it was with a hug. He too was dressed casually - at least Noah's version of casually. He wore another dark t-shirt, this time paired with black denim and boots. Ava was pleased to see that he'd topped the outfit off with the overcoat she'd picked out for him.

Ava tugged on his lapel, "You really do like it!"

He smiled his brilliant smile and laid a hand on her lower back, "When it's good, it's good."

The last vestiges of lingering doubt faded from Ava's mind as she smiled back, "Yeah. It is."

Ava thought she'd die right there in the front seat of Noah's fancy little sports car, as he pulled up to tonight's final destination. Her jaw dropped open, as she slapped him on the arm.

"Shut. Up! A carnival? I haven't been to one of these since I was, like, ten!" Ava was practically bouncing in her seat with glee as Noah parked, "Seriously, who are you? It's like you look into my mind and pick out every cheesy thing I've ever wanted to do."

Noah laughed, "Cheesy? Carnivals are classic. Besides, you strike me as the kind of girl who appreciates the simple things in life."

Ava let her head fall back into the seat as she sighed, dramatically, "I fucking love simple."

Noah bit his lip as he smiled at her, his obsidian eyes peering at her through his long dark lashes, "I love your potty mouth."

For once, Ava didn't give herself time to think, she just acted based on what felt right in the moment. Before she could second guess herself, her lips were pressed against Noah's. He made a sound deep in his throat before his hand came up to grip Ava's ponytail.

He gave it a tug, just sharp enough to cause her to tilt her head back and gasp. As soon as her lips opened, he pulled her closer, deepening their kiss. Ava moaned, letting herself get lost in the way his tongue danced along her own. Noah pulled back, his heavy breaths mingling with her own, "I meant what I said before, Ava. I'm not interested in doing anything that you're not interested in."

Ava stared into his black mirror eyes and saw the heat of her own want and need reflected back at her. Even more than his lust, she saw the truth of his words - Noah wasn't willing to go any further than she was.

And that fact only made her want him more.

"I know," she breathed. "I trust you."