

The Billionaire's Twins Play Matchmaker Book Two: Chapter Thirty-Two



"Deck the halls with boughs of holly," Theo chanted as they wrapped garland along the base of the stair rail. Duncan suggested decorating the rail itself but the brothers vetoed the idea. For Alexis's safety it was best to leave the rail uncovered and clean.

In addition to garlands there were also various centerpieces made from spruce boughs, ribbons, pine cones, holly and mistletoe. Some decorations were meant to be added to the existing décor while others were seasonal replacements. Duncan discussed how each was used by their grandmother but left the decision of when and how to use them up to Ava and the kids.

In addition to the decorations the butler provided they had a multitude of their own, school craft projects made from popsicle sticks, glitter and paper retrieved from their apartment after their father sent his men to clean it out and cancel the lease. The kids thought their homemade decorations looked rather shabby compared to the others but their mother happily added them without a care and in the end it actually looked rather homey. While they decorated a delivery arrived with a large tree.

They watched the delivery man set up the tree and cut the boughs loose with Duncan's assistance. Once it was up Duncan revealed several boxes containing strings of lights, tinsel and ornaments. Many of the ornaments looked old and Duncan regaled them with stories about each. Though the kids thought the butler was rather stuffy when they first arrived he was actually quite engaging and could be funny.

Yet even more important to the triplets than his personable nature was the fact he always treated their mother with respect. He answered any question and always deferred to her opinion. Whether mandated by their father or not Duncan treated their mother as the lady of the house which earned him the triplets' respect.

What was more they saw a definitely change in their mother just as their father said. She was sleeping well and eating proper meals. As a result she was no longer pale and she had put on weight giving her a much healthier figure. Their mother was relaxed, no longer huddling in the shadows afraid to be tossed aside. She had confidence and always seemed to be smiling. Though the triplets were still on the fence when it came to their father there was no denying his care and love for their mother.

Even now their mother sat on the couch unwrapping ornaments for them to put on the tree. She was laughing and engaged. The clothes she wore were not oversized or old and her mane of brunette hair had taken on a healthy sheen. Though the triplets were far from giving up on their revenge they had to admit their father was right. Their mother's health came first.

"Ah yes, I had nearly forgot Master Silas called to inform you he has made reservations at Le Bernardin," Duncan announced handing Ava a glass of water. "Its dress code is considered business casual so you any of your new outfits would be acceptable."

"What time?" Alexis asked.

"Eight."

"That gives us plenty of time to help you get ready, mom."

"Right," Ava blushed. Though the kids were treating this casually she couldn't help but be apprehensive after all this would be her first date with anyone let alone Silas.

Before she could say more her phone rang. She jerked to attention still not used to having one. On the display she saw Tracy's name pop-up which relieved her. Still hesitating she answered with an unpracticed swipe before putting it to her ear, "Hello?"

"Oh good, you picked up," Tracy said. "Though I was kind of hoping you wouldn't."

"What is that supposed to mean?"

"You're mother is here wanting me to help her see you," Tracy said a little too casually.

Ava bit her lip. While she wondered why her mother would want to see her she belatedly remembered telling her mother to go through Tracy at the party. She never thought her mother would actually do it.

"Is it...is it just her?"

"Looks like she came alone. You want me to tell her to stuff it?"

"No. I'll see her...but not here."

"Absolutely. Where should we go? Somewhere public that won't draw too much attention would be good."

"The diner," Ava said after some thought.

"The diner? Really?"

"Yes."

Though it seemed an odd choice it was a public place but out of the way and they shouldn't draw attention. What was more it was after the lunch rush so it should be quiet. On top of that it was a place Ava was familiar with and would be comfortable in. She also wanted a chance to talk to Gretchen face-to-face. There was a lot the older woman deserved to know.

Ava wanted to bring the kids but thought better of it. Though they would certainly enjoy spending time with Gretchen she didn't want them seeing her mother and she definitely didn't want them to see her breakdown. In many ways facing her mother would be more difficult than her sister.

"Okay the diner. Say forty minutes?"

"Right." Ava hung up wondering if she was making the right choice. What would Silas say?

"Everything all right, mom?" Alexis asked.

"Yeah. I—ah—I'm going to meet Tracy for a coffee."

"Can we come?"

"Not this time."

Alexis cocked her head to the side her sightless eyes boring into her mother. Sean and Theo sensed their mother's sudden change a step behind their sister.

"Mom?"

Ava sighed, "My mother wants to talk. I don't think it will be a good idea for you three to see her right now."

Alexis nodded, "I don't think she deserves our attention. But are you going to be okay?"

"I'll be fine. Tracy will be there and we're meeting at the diner so Gretchen will be there too."

"Good idea," Alexis seconded. Gretchen wouldn't let things get out of hand.

"And you'll have an escort as well," Duncan reminded.

"I don't think that's necessary," Ava said. "I can just take a cab. It should be all right."

"Master Silas would not allow that ma'am," Duncan shook his head. "Your health and safety are the most important things to him."

Ava felt her face warm with the thought. That's right. Silas never tried to stop her from going places or seeing people. He only wanted her to take someone so she wasn't alone. If he were here he would insist on going himself. Taking an escort wouldn't bring her the same support and comfort but it was a reminder Silas was always looking after her.

"I think it's a good idea," Alexis agreed. "Mister Peppermint is intimidating. He should be good."

"Mister Peppermint?"

"Mike, is his actual name," Alexis said. She still preferred her nicknames but she didn't think anyone else appreciated them.

"I agree." Duncan nodded. "I'll inform him at once."

He left before Ava could protest. She sighed. It was just as well she supposed but her mind churned with what her mother wanted to discuss.

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Mike glanced in the rearview mirror to study Ava as she looked at the passing scenery. She seemed like a completely different woman than the one he first had been assigned to watch. Back then she had been overworked, thin and pale. It seemed the weight of all the world's troubles were on her shoulders. Now she was rested, with a healthy glow to her cheeks and more weight on her bones. She was relaxed and her smile was no longer forced. It was hard to believe these changes were all because of Silas Prescott.

His first impression of Silas Prescott was of a man hard to please and a boss who settled for nothing less than perfection. Rumors abounded about Prescott's ruthlessness and Mike had plenty of opportunities to see it in action. However Silas was not an unreasonable man and never punished someone who didn't deserve it. Those facts alone made him respectable and Mike had no qualms about working for him.

When Silas first handed down instructions to watch over and guard Ava and the kids Mike wondered why such interest was paid to people far below Silas's usual notice. It wasn't until Jake found out the kids were actually his children that it started to make sense. But Mike still worried how Ava would function around the overbearing Silas. She was a willowy wisp of a woman and Mike thought she would collapse under the weight of Silas's influence.

However, much to his surprise, she blossomed under Silas's care. It was hard to believe the ruthless businessman could be so nurturing but it seemed Ava brought out that side of him. It had been slow in the beginning but now she was gaining confidence to match her natural beauty.

"We're here, ma'am," Mike announced as he parked the sedan in front of the diner.

Ava stirred looking at the little restaurant. Her expression seemed pensive but also relaxed. It was like she was returning home after years of being absent but there was no putting off this meeting. She spied Tracy's car so she knew they were already inside.

Mike stepped out opening her door. With a faint smile she followed his direction to walk a step in front of him while he monitored their surroundings. He opened the diner door for her and followed her inside.

Ava paused breathing the smell of lemon-scented disinfectant, oil and coffee that was ever present inside. It might not be a welcome smell to everyone but it was relaxing and familiar to her.

"Lynn?" Gretchen looked up at the sound of the door. "Honey is that really you?"

"Yes." Ava smiled as the older woman came around the counter and enveloped her in a hug.

Mike made no attempt to interfere knowing the older woman was a friend and meant no harm.

"I've been so worried about you," Gretchen said stepping back to look at her. "You look good, honey."

Ava blushed, "I'm sorry for all the trouble and disappearing like that."

"I'm just glad you're all right," Gretchen glanced at her escort. "You are all right, aren't you?"

"Yes. I'll explain everything later. First I have to see someone."

"Mhmm," Gretchen nodded. "I recognized Tracy so I thought you'd be in. You didn't bring the kids?"

"Not this time. I'll bring them next time. They miss all the free meals you gave them."

"I don't know what you're talking about," Gretchen feigned ignorance. "Tracy's over there."

"Thanks." Ava turned at her gesture and walked down the narrow aisle to the table the kids used to occupy.

There she found Tracy waiting. Tracy stood to greet her hugging her tight in silent support. Taking a breath Ava turned to look at the woman occupying the other seat.

Grace Carlisle was a finely-boned woman of average height. Her thin lips were pressed together and her gaze was small and narrow giving her a rather pinched expression as if she perpetually smelled something disagreeable. In all her life Ava couldn't remember her mother ever having a different expression. It suited her mother's pensive personality but now Ava found it rather sad and wondered if her mother even felt joy.

As always her mother was dressed sensibly in neutral tones. Though the clothing itself was well-made and fashionable it was also forgettable. Nothing stood out or was memorable as if you were meant to forget Grace Carlisle the moment she was out of sight. There was nothing about her mother meant to leave a lasting impression.

"Mother," Ava greeted as Tracy slid back into the booth allowing Ava to sit on the aisle.

"Ava..." Grace hesitated as Mike stood a step behind Ava's seat and turned to gaze upon the rest of the diner vigilant for trouble. "Who's that?"

"My escort and driver," Ava said. "Silas insists on it."

"He insists on it?"

"He doesn't want me going out alone unprotected," Ava explained. "He doesn't know what father might do to try and take our kids away again."

"A-again? How does he know?"

"He didn't tell you?" Ava asked keeping her voice even. "Of course he didn't. He sued me for custody of my own children and even tried to frame me for drug abuse to prove me an unfit mother."

"He-he wouldn't do that."

"He did. Ask Tracy. She was my lawyer for the hearing," Ava said. "Without her I might have lost."

"I did my part," Tracy shrugged. "Silas proposing to you was definitely a head turner."

Ava's mouth twitched with a smile but she tried to keep her expression neutral. She still didn't know what her mother wanted.

"Wh-where are the children?" Grace hesitantly asked.

"Home. They're decorating for Christmas."

Grace bit her lip. As much as she wanted to be asked to see her grandchildren she was certain and answer would be no. Ava had always been an obedient child but now the aura around her had changed. It was as if Ava had shed her shackles and she would not be easily bound again.

"H-how are they? I mean...there is more than one yes?"

"There are three. Two boys and a girl."

"Oh." Grace looked down at her untouched coffee. Triplets were certainly not common. "What are their names?"

"Alexis, Sean and Theo."

"Was-was it difficult?"

"I didn't have any complications if that is what you want to know," Ava said. "But it certainly wasn't easy taking the bus to the hospital alone. It wasn't easy enduring the labor pains without an epidural because I didn't have insurance at the time and couldn't afford it. If you want know more you can ask Tracy. She was there holding my hand."

Grace shuddered at the thought. She remembered her own pregnancies and couldn't imagine going through that pain without anesthesia.

"Do you know why I chose this diner?" Ava asked. "This is where I worked for ten years as a waitress so I could take care of my three babies."

Her mother blinked looking at their surroundings as if seeing them for the first time.

"I took orders, served food and coffee, cleared the tables, washed dishes, even learned to cook a few things for twelve hours every day. This was the kids' table where they would sit and do their homework while I worked."

If Grace could look paler she certainly did at that announcement. Ava looked at her mother evenly. There was no emotion in her gaze: not anger or sorrow.

"I hope you understand," Grace said after moment, "I couldn't go against your father. I had no choice."

"But to abandon your daughter and act as if she never existed?" Ava finished.

Grace bit her lip.

"Funny. You didn't have any trouble defying father on Marilynn's behalf, approving her birth control knowing she was having sex with her boyfriends and the staff, buying her morning after pills and pregnancy tests."

Grace's eyes widened.

"You honestly thought I didn't know? The whole mansion knew. It was the biggest topic of gossip with the maids. Ironic I was tossed out because of one night when Marilynn's had hundreds."

"That's not...your sister..."

"Is a conceited, obnoxious, spoiled bitch."

Grace gasped at her language but Ava wasn't in the mood to entertain her self-denial any longer.

"Don't defend her in front of me not after all she's done. And you know exactly what I mean."

Grace bowed her head refusing to meet her gaze.

"Kicking me out probably saved my life. It definitely saved my babies. Marilynn would never have allowed them to live. And you know that."

"...Does he know?"

"No. I haven't told Silas...yet." Ava sighed. "He'll go on a rampage once he finds out. But I'm not keeping quiet to protect Marilynn if that's what you think. I don't care what happens to her. I'm doing it to protect my family: Silas and the children. There are some things they don't need to know and you should hope they never learn."

Grace grimaced, "I had nothing..."

"Nothing to do with it? You were our mother. Mothers are supposed to protect their children, discipline them and raise them to be respectable people. They don't look the other way when someone hurts their child. You don't want to take blame for how Marilynn turned out you should at least accept responsibility for failing at the most basic duties as a parent."

Grace bowed her head. Ava didn't know if her mother was overcome by her accusations or if she was actually remorseful. In the end it probably didn't matter. What was done was done.

"I suppose we don't have anything more to discuss," Ava stood.

"Is that it then?" Grace asked. "You are going to turn your back on your family?"

"It's funny you can say that with a straight face," Ava almost smiled. "None of you ever treated me like family. I was an obstacle, a trophy, a trained puppy to entertain your guests...but never family."

"And Silas Prescott is any better?"

"Silas tells me I'm beautiful and strong. He tells me I can do anything I want, that his life is meaningless without me in it. He treats me like I'm special and loved, that I deserve those things because I am me. I don't need to earn them. He is warm and tender, protective and caring."

"He'll abandon you as soon as he gets what he wants. He's as ruthless and dangerous as his father."

"I guess we'll see which of us is right, won't we?" Ava challenged. "But I have a feeling you are going to be disappointed. If you are looking for me to absolve you of your guilt you can forget it. I don't have any forgiveness for you and after today I won't ever think about you. So I guess...this is good-bye."