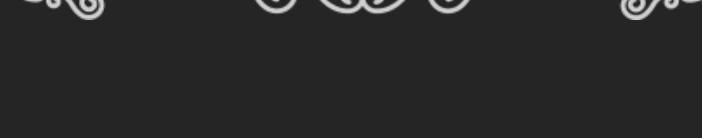


The Billionaire's Twins Play Matchmaker Book Two: Chapter Thirty-Three



Ava breathed a sigh of relief when her mother finally departed. Tracy gave her a brief hug before following Grace out as she had driven the older woman to the diner. Before Tracy left she whispered she would call later to check up on her and that she was proud of her. Perhaps Ava should feel bad about how the conversation had gone but she felt light, as if a weight had been lifted.

"Ma'am."

Ava glanced at her escort who had stood silently the entire time. His brow furrowed and he looked conflicted.

"About what you were talking about...something Mister Prescott doesn't know and would cause him to rampage?"

"Oh. My sister pushed me down the stairs."

"What!"

Ava grimaced. She supposed that should be the natural reaction but honestly she didn't feel much of anything when she thought back to the incident. Perhaps it was too far in the past or maybe she was simply inured to the pain of betrayal after all it wasn't exactly the first time her sister had done such things.

"She pushed you down the stairs...intentionally?"

Ava nodded.

"Why?"

"She wanted to be an only child."

Mike's mouth dropped at the candid response.

"So she pushed me down the stairs, knocked me down in front of the limo, spooked the horse I was riding, gave me severe food poisoning...I don't remember all of them anymore, for better or worse."

"And you haven't told Mister Prescott?"

Ava shook her head, "Could you imagine his reaction if I did?"

Mike grimaced. Knowing Silas's temper he would certainly go on a warpath. But still... "You should tell him."

"Maybe," Ava frowned, "but it won't change anything. It's all in the past. I'd rather focus on the future. Is that wrong?"

"No. It's admirable you want to put the past behind you and move on. That takes real strength."

"Thank you."

"You okay honey?"

Ava turned as Gretchen approached. She smiled and nodded. Amazingly she really did feel all right.

"Good. It looked like it was getting pretty tense over here. Who was that woman anyway?"

"My mother."

Gretchen blinked. She hadn't seen the resemblance especially now with the fresh, flush of life in Ava's cheeks. Glancing at the silent escort Mike merely gave her a nod to confirm.

"Do you have time for a coffee?" Ava asked. "There are a few things I owe you explanations for."

"Honey, you don't owe me anything. From the moment you set foot in this diner I knew you were running from your past. But if you're willing I would like to hear as much of your story as you're willing to tell. Go on, have a seat. I'll grab the coffee."

* * *

"Mister Prescott?"

Silas looked up from his paperwork to see his secretary nervously fidgeting in the doorway. He raised a brow and gave her a curious look.

"I'm not sure if you care but Mister Carlisle is on the line for you. I tried to convince him you weren't interested in speaking to him but he's insisting."

"I'll take the call. Line?"

"Line One." With a sigh of relief she quickly departed thinking she narrowly avoided punishment for wasting his time.

Tapping the speaker button Silas retrieved the call, "What is it you want Emerson?"

"You don't beat around the bush do you?" Emerson's disgruntled voice replied.

"I don't like to waste my time. I have somewhere to be after work so I can't be late. People are waiting for me."

"Those people wouldn't happen to be Ava and my grandchildren would they?"

"My children and my fiancée, yes."

"I'd like to see them."

"You and I both know that is not going to happen."

"Then I'd like to see you, talk face-to-face."

Silas considered the offer. He didn't have any reason to accept but his curiosity was piqued. Emerson Carlisle wasn't likely to take no for an answer. Denying him could lead to issues in the future so hearing him out now might prevent future interference.

"Let me take a look at my schedule for today," Silas finally said. "I'll see if I can't block out some time and I'll have my assistant call you."

"I'll be waiting."

Silas hung up glancing at Thomas. There really wasn't anything pressing so making time wouldn't be difficult. The question was where. Emerson would not want to come to his office and Silas had no reason to go to his. Neither needed the publicity of meeting in a public place since both would be easily recognizable. Having Emerson come to the brownstone was out of the question. Silas had no intention of allowing him anywhere near Ava and the children.

"Call him back. Tell me to meet me at my condo...say five o'clock," Silas finally said.

"Are you sure that's wise? You really don't have any reason to meet with him."

"Call it curiosity. The fact he called at all is strange."

Thomas smirked. Well it wouldn't do any harm to hear the old man out as long as Ava and the kids weren't around.

* * *

"Come right in."

Emerson hesitated as Thomas held open the door. He stepped into the large, luxury condo peering down halls and into rooms he passed as he was led inside.

"They aren't here."

Jerking to attention Emerson turned to see Silas. The younger man had discarded his jacket and tie. With a gesture Silas led him to the living room. There they sat across from each other in matching chairs. The glass coffee table between them was devoid of refreshments. There were no distractions and nothing to interrupt their discussion.

"How are Ava and the children?" Emerson finally asked.

"Happy and healthy," Silas answered. "The last ten years has not been easy for Ava so helping her recover is my top priority."

Emerson nodded. When his men first brought her to see him she had been pale and thin. Her weakness disgusted him. However at the hearing she had put on some much needed weight and she didn't look quite so pallid. Though she had remained silent she didn't cower at his presence.

"So Ava is doing all right?"

"Of course. She's thinking about starting her own business."

"Really?" Emerson looked up incredulous.

"She worked every day for ten years so she doesn't like being idle. I suggested she open her own restaurant since she's familiar with the industry."

"Ava knows nothing about running a business."

"That's what college courses are for. Her previous employer already suggested as much. There's no reason Ava couldn't do it."

"You honestly think that?" Emerson asked. Try as he might he couldn't picture such a mouse of a woman in a position of management. Her employees would walk all over her.

"Ava's smart, strong and observant. I'm confident she'll be successful whatever she chooses to do. It's my job to support her dreams."

Emerson fidgeted. Ava had always been quiet, a sheep. She never took initiatives or even spoke unless spoken to. Finally he said, "You may be giving her too much credit."

"And you don't give her enough. She raised three kids on her own."

"That's different."

"Is it? Could you have managed half so well without your vast fortune?"

Emerson cleared his throat. This line of conversation was going nowhere and it wasn't what he came all this way to discuss. It seemed Silas was content to let the conversation drag until their limited time was up.

"I came here because I wanted to know the truth. How was it you fathered Ava's children? And why was she raising them alone?"

"Marilynn."

"Marilynn? I don't understand."

"I don't suppose you would," Silas sighed before explaining the events from ten years ago. There was no reason to hide it and he didn't downplay his own part. He added how he first realized the triplets were his to bring them to the present.

To his credit Emerson silently listened to everything he said without interrupting. Silas was certain he would protest Marilynn's alleged involvement but he didn't.

"So you had people watching them," Emerson said after a moment.

"That's right. A team followed when you summoned Ava and Alexis. The kids had already spotted the tails so they used my team to make a quick exit."

"That's how they disappeared that day. The children already spotted their tails?"

"They are very observant," Silas couldn't help but smile, "and very clever."

Thomas stifled a laugh. Since Silas settled in with his family he had found a sense of humor much to Thomas's surprise. Even in front of his greatest rival Silas was relaxed. Was this normal for a man once they started a family?

"So it was Marilynn's doing," Emerson sighed. "I guess I shouldn't be surprised considering."

"Considering what?" Silas raised a brow.

"I'm sure you've seen the article concerning my daughter's illicit affairs...I confronted our family doctor about it. According to him Marilynn's been carrying on these affairs for years. What's more...she's tried to..."

Emerson hesitated. Silas waited in silence.

"When Ava was young she was prone to accidents and injury. She fell down the stairs, was bucked off her horse...at least I thought they were just accidents."

"Are you implying Marilynn has been trying to kill Ava since they were children?" Silas demanded his gaze suddenly going cold and dangerous. "And you claim you knew nothing about it?"

Emerson hung his head, "I have no excuse for not knowing what was happening under my own roof. But I'm far from the only guilty party. Our family doctor, staff, security personnel and even my wife knew what Marilynn was up to and none of them tried to stop it. Ava was such a meek child and they all knew I favored Marilynn so none dared risk their jobs to help Ava. None."

Silas gripped the armrests of his chair until his knuckles turned white. Rage unlike any he felt before bubbled up like a volcano preparing to erupt. If Marilynn presented herself to him now he would probably kill her with his bare hands. Thomas immediately saw and felt the change watching Silas carefully wondering if he should separate the two men.

"I'm dealing with my staff as we speak. Most have been let go," Emerson said. "The worst offenders will be handled personally."

Silas listened barely containing his rage despite Emerson's assurance.

"Then there is Marilynn herself. I have something special planned with her in mind," Emerson added clenching his fists. "But I want to see Ava...and the children."

"Not going to happen," Silas said. He would be a fool to allow an abuser near their target.

"Please...I just...I want to make sure she is okay. I am the children's grandfather. You can't keep me from seeing them."

"I'm their father so I can," Silas stood. "Besides, the children don't want to see you or any of your family."

"Y-you don't know that."

"Oh? Who do you think wrote that article about Marilynn? Who do you think has been spreading unflattering rumors about her all these years?"

Emerson jerked to attention as Silas reached for his coat and slipped it on. Adjusting his collar Silas gave the older man a sardonic smile.

"As I said, my children are exceptionally clever. They are also very protective of their mother and vindictive towards anyone who seeks to harm her. So consider this a warning though you're already on their list."

Emerson grimaced. Silas headed toward the door. He had to prepare for his date with Ava. He refused to be late. As Thomas opened the door Silas paused. It was probably a mistake but for some reason he suddenly felt a little sorry for the old man. After all the work Emerson had put into his business empire it was going to fall apart and there was nothing he could do about it.

"If you really just want to make sure Ava is well, and if you can get a reservation, be at the Le Bernardin. Eight o'clock. But you better not cause a scene. This is a special night for Ava and I won't have it ruined."

With that Silas departed. Whether Emerson followed his advice or not did not matter to him. What mattered was Ava's health and safety. Marilynn would not be allowed anywhere near Ava again.

"So are you going to ask her about...all of this?" Thomas asked as they stepped off the elevator and made their way to the car.

Silas sighed, "If Ava hasn't mentioned it herself then she probably doesn't want to think about it. I don't want to cause her any undue stress. She's been through enough."

"And you're not upset she didn't tell you herself?"

"Trust is not a given, it is earned and I hurt her deeply. That is not something easily forgiven or forgotten."

Silas slid into the backseat and remained silent as Thomas headed back to the brownstone. It would be wrong to say he wasn't disappointed since he thought he and Ava had grown close but he also didn't have a right to complain since he had abandoned her in her time of need.

If anything Emerson's confession highlighted how much further he had yet to go to completely win Ava over. But he had time. He would never stop trying. Knowing Ava's past struggles only meant it was more imperative he do everything he could for her.