

Chapter Seven

"Mister Prescott."

Silas was in a hurry but paused as one of his subordinates rushed to catch up. It had been two days since Thomas was sent to locate the maid and he was beginning to lose patience. Try as he might to keep it contained he felt his control slowly slipping. But he couldn't afford to lose his temper at work. For now he had to keep up appearances that there was nothing out of the ordinary going on.

"Sir...I was wondering if you contacted DaLair about Tomlinson?"

"I have. He assured me they aren't interested Tomlinson Tech."

"Then that should drastically reduce competition for the acquisition."

Silas nodded uninterested in speculating further. While any acquisition could grow his own company into new markets Tomlinson was ultimately a small gain if they succeeded. And he had bigger concerns. When would Thomas hurry up and find the maid? He had to know the truth. Was it Ava in that bedroom? Were the kids really his?

"Mister Prescott."

Silas turned to see Thomas approach. Sidling close Thomas whispered, "She's here."

"Excuse me," Silas dismissed his first solicitor and followed after Thomas without another word.

Thomas led him to his office which had the blinds drawn for privacy. He ushered Silas in where a slightly heavyset woman sat on one of the couches. She wore a gray maid's uniform. Her long, straight black hair was tied behind her head and lay down her back. Fidgeting in her seat she kept glancing at the man standing beside the couch. On the surface he appeared to be there for her convenience should she require anything but he was actually guarding her preventing her from leaving before her interview with their employer.

Silas's brow furrowed. His memory from ten years ago was admittedly fuzzy but he was certain the woman in his bed had wavy brown hair. Or was his mind playing tricks on him because he wanted it to be so? Glancing at Thomas he strode forward making his way to the sitting area. The guard stiffened at attention nodding to him. The maid twisted in her seat to nervously watch his approach.

Silas sat across from her studying his guest. She kept her eyes averted obviously used to being ignored and uncomfortable under scrutiny. Her skin was softly tan and as her name suggested she was of Hispanic descent. None of this mattered to Silas as he quietly compared her to his memory. They were about the right height but that was it. No matter how he looked at her she just didn't match the woman in his memory.

"Miss Lopez," Silas said causing her to inch. "Do you have any idea why you are here?"

"No," she shook her head. She spoke in clear English with no hint of an accent. With that he was safe in assuming she was not a recent immigrant. Possibly even second or third generation citizen if he wanted to guess.

"Ten years ago you worked at the Conrad. Remember it?"

"I worked at many hotels."

This was neither a brag nor evasion. It was the simple truth of any serving or retail position that one's place was constantly at threat. One customer complaint, whether warranted or not, could mean the end of their job and subject them to the dangers of unemployment. People with clear ethnic features were often targets of overly-entitled customers and Natalie was no different so her resume tended to be long. She couldn't say she was never at fault but it wasn't easy meeting expectations of people who set them with no regard to reality and what was impossible.

"I'm only interest in one. Let me refresh your memory," Silas said as Thomas placed a folder in his hand and pulled out a photocopy of the check he had written. "Ten years ago you cashed this. Remember where you got it?"

Natalie swallowed hard saying, "I'm very sorry. My mother was sick. We needed the money. I—I found it in the room...no one seemed to miss it."

"Slow down. You found it in the room?" Silas asked. He was already on the edge of his seat.

"Yes. I was cleaning. And a woman rushed out of the room. She was in tears. I went in after she left and found the check. I held onto it but no one asked for it...and we needed the money. I—I will pay you back."

"That isn't necessary," Silas shook his head. Somehow he wasn't surprised by this news but it left him feeling empty because that meant... "I don't care about the money. I would like to know about the woman. Do you remember anything about her?"

"...I never saw her face clearly," Natalie answered. "She was petite. Brown hair. My mother would say she had the good hair. I think...she was pretty."

"Would you be able to identify her if you saw a picture?"

"...Maybe? I'm not sure. I only saw her for a moment."

"Then what about these?"

Silas spread out four pictures Thomas had prepared. One featured Ava and the other three were random woman with similar features. All were candid street shots. Natalie leaned forward biting her lip. She shook her head as she debated with herself. Finally she separated two photos and studied them more carefully.

"I think...maybe this one?" She selected a photo.

Silas tried to hide his reaction as he saw her pick: Ava. Despite her hesitant choice he couldn't help but take it as confirmation of his suspicions. A hollow pit opened in his stomach. What had he done?

"James will take you back," Silas nally said.

"Thank you." She stood clearly confused and he didn't blame her. It certainly wasn't every day someone simply forgave a \$100,000 debt.

"Oh, Miss Lopez...how is your mother now?" Silas asked.

"She is good."

"Good. James."

The man who had been guarding her politely escorted her out. Silas sat back in his chair trying to control the rapid beating of his heart. Ava...It was Ava all along...The woman he had longed for, searched for...and he had sent her away with his own words.

"I don't know if she could be considered a reliable witness...but at least we know she wasn't the one in the room," Thomas said watching him close.

"...It was Ava..." Silas whispered. "...Dear god, it was Ava all along..."

"It's odd she never tried to contact you," Thomas commented. "It can't be easy raising three kids alone especially when one has complex medical needs."

"She wouldn't...not after what I said to her," Silas stood pacing to the window overlooking the cityscape. He ran his hand through his hair.

He was a father...a father of three. He had spent ten years looking for the woman of his dreams and she had been under his nose the entire time and, worse, he was the one who banished her. How did he not recognize her? Ava!

"Silas? Silas!" Thomas struggled to get his attention. "What do you want to do?"

"Are our men still watching her?"

"Yeah. I put a unit on her and one on the kids."

"Keep them in place."

"Right."

Silas clenched his hands desperately wanting to punch something but he had no one to blame but himself. This was all his fault.

Ten years ago Avalynn Carlisle simply disappeared. There were rumors and gossip she had been caught in the middle of a scandal but Silas immediately dismissed them. Ava simply wasn't that kind of woman...her sister maybe...but not Ava. Despite all of Marilyn's indiscretions she continued to be Carlisle's cherished daughter. Why then had Ava been disowned? None of it made sense.

It never occurred to him she would change her name and try to make it on her own with three kids. But that is what she had done. She was out there right now, less than a mile from him and he hadn't known it. Ava.

"What was the eye condition Alexis suffers from?"

"...She didn't say. I don't think she was born that way so it's most likely a degenerative condition that worsens over time," Thomas said though that was just a guess. Medical records were private so they wouldn't have access unless Silas claimed his custody rights...at least legally speaking.

"It's a place to start. Look into it. If there is a way to bring back my daughter's sight I want to know about it."

"We don't even have a paternity test in hand...you sure it's wise to claim them?"

"You doubt they are mine?"

"Aside from the fact the boys look just like you...that girl...she's definitely your daughter with that attitude of hers. No, I don't doubt it."

"I need to bring them home...but how? What can I even say to her or them that will make up for what I did?"

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Silas sighed sinking into the chair of his home office and loosened his tie. If he was a drinking man he would certainly have one now. He still couldn't believe it, was afraid to believe it. He nally found Ava. But she wasn't alone. She was a mother of three...and he was the father. It didn't seem possible.

Ten years. He had missed ten years of their lives. Ten years he hadn't been there. Ava raised them alone without support and without financial aid. His hands trembled at the mere thought of her plight. He should have been there to take care of her. He couldn't imagine how scared she must have been and yet she refused to seek his help. She did it all on her own but she deserved better. He would do whatever it took to earn her forgiveness.

His computer chimed alerting him to a new message. Silas raised a brow. Thinking it might be Thomas with news about Alexis's condition he leaned forward to select the message without looking at the sender. The message was short but he leapt to his feet in rage. Grabbing his phone he dialed Thomas's number waiting impatiently for his answer.

"Yeah Si?" Thomas sighed. If he was referring to him by his nickname than it was safe to assume he was alone.

"My condo, now!"

"What..." Thomas's answer was cut off as Silas hung up staring at the message willing it to change. Whoever sent it had a death wish if they thought they could threaten their children and get away with it.

Agonizing minutes passed before Thomas nally arrived. He only lived a few oors but his damp hair suggested he had been in the shower when he had been called. Entering the disturbingly empty condo he called, "Silas?"

"In here."

Thomas followed the sound to the study. There he found Silas on his feet radiating rage he seldom felt from his long time friend. Silas turned a cold, hard gaze on him as if not seeing him for several moments.

"Explain this!"

Thomas inched before approaching. He leaned over the desk and read the message displayed saying, "What the hell is this?"

"That's what I want to know," Silas said. "Who the hell sent this?"

Thomas glanced at the sender. It wasn't a long string of numbers as he might have suspected but the domain name made him pause. He was no expert but if he didn't know better he would say it had been sent from inside the office. Did that mean someone in the company knew about the kids? Did they honestly think they could threaten their boss? Why would they only ask for \$500,000? Gossip papers would pay three times that much for this kind of scoop.

"It looks like it came from the company's email," Thomas nally said. "We've been careful but it's not out of the realm of possibility someone noticed...especially when we brought in Miss Lopez."

Silas sucked in a breath. He had left the matter entirely to Thomas completely trusting his discretion. Had someone else noticed? Were they stalking Ava and the kids even now?

"They are only asking for 500K. Whatever they think they know I don't think they know everything."

Silas slowly relaxed. Perhaps they thought Miss Lopez was a person of interest in which case they wouldn't know anything about Ava. Even if the maid spoke to someone she didn't know Ava's name or anything about the kids. A clever person would assume Silas was looking into the mystery woman and perhaps they might guess the reason why but they didn't have any names and no reason to even suspect Avalynn Carlisle.

"So what do you want to do?" Thomas asked. "Should we ignore it? Call their bluff?"

"...No. I want to meet them and find out what they know. If \$500,000 is all they need to keep silent then it's worth it."

"All right. I'll get the money ready."

Silas nodded. He still couldn't relax completely. Even if this person didn't know about the kids it looks like he was far from the only person who attended the music competition.

Someone else could easily make the connection from Alexis to Ava. Their resemblance was uncanny and their playing too distinct. He had to find some way to protect them.