

Chapter 10

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"Finally you guys are back," Theo whispered as Alexis and Sean slipped back with the group.

Lunch was almost over so they hurriedly gobbled their sandwiches. Despite his impatience he let them knowing it had to be difficult to face their father even with his sister's nerves of steel. They just managed to finish eating before the teachers called them to gather. Lining up with the rest of the class Alexis hooked her arms through those of her brothers allowing them to continue their silent conversation.

'So what was he like? Up tight? A real jerk right?'

'Actually no. He was nice...awkward but nice.'

'How can you say that after what he did to mom?'

'I know...but...I don't think he meant it. It sounds like he's as much a victim as she was.'

'I agree,' Sean seconded. *'He said his friends drugged him to loosen him up by sleeping with a woman. He thought they paid a maid to do it. You should have seen his face. He seemed devastated it turned out to be mom.'*

'You sure he wasn't just acting?'

'No. It wasn't an act.'

Theo didn't argue. If there was one thing he could always count on it was his sister's intuition.

'So what did you do with the photographer's wallet?' Alexis asked.

'I left it on one of the tables. Someone will find it and turn it in.' Theo shrugged. He wasn't really concerned whether the reporter received it or not. The hassle of replacing his credit cards was the least punishment he deserved for interfering.

'Well anyway... We'll have to come up with a plan about our grandfather. We may have to accelerate our time table.' Alexis announced bringing both of her brother's to attention.

Ever since learning the truth about their maternal family the trio had been planning their revenge on everyone who hurt their mother. Silas Prescott had also been on their list which was why Sean had gone to the trouble of infiltrating his company. Now it seemed unnecessary...at least for now. There were plenty of others in need of their comeuppance starting with their aunt.

For her they had already begun. Sean programmed

bots to flood comment sections of any news outlet reporting on her party activities with unflattering critiques. He also created bots to comment on her social media posts with the same feature. Her reputation was already abysmal to start with but their goal was to ruin it completely. It was no secret she flirted with the idea of being an actress but the bad press the triplets continually instigated quickly dried up her offers. That was only the start. The final blow would come later.

The punishment for their grandfather was different. Several years ago the Trent family ran afoul of the DaLairs and was practically wiped off the face of the world. It was an inspiration for the triplets. Their revenge would only be complete once they successfully recreated the event with the Carlises. Time was naturally on their side. They were only ten after all and since no one knew they existed they could work from the shadows without interference from either party.

But it was different now. Their father knew of them and so did their maternal grandfather. They needed to change their strategy if they were going to go through with their plan. For now Alexis was willing to wait to see what their father would do but as for their grandfather...she wasn't so sure.

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"Okay kids we're now entering the *Ocean Voyage* so let's stay together and have fun."

Silas stood back watching as the triplets followed along with their class. Sean and Theo stood on either side of their sister protecting and guiding her through the exhibit. They stopped periodically marveling at the sharks and fish swimming all around them. Sean read every display they passed for Alexis's benefit.

Theo started dancing in place singing *Baby Shark* immediately bringing his siblings to laughter as well as some of their classmates. The trio trailed after their class as if in their own little bubble. It seemed odd to Silas they didn't make more of an effort to socialize with the other kids. Then again the trio had always been together allowing them to form deep bonds others simply couldn't touch. It wasn't any wonder the brothers guarded their sister so closely or that they would make such an impressive united front.

Silas stood watching them with a mixture of pride and concern. How would he convince all three he wanted to be in their lives and that he wanted their mother now more than anything? It was intimidating to be so outnumbered and he lacked

experience with children.

He did not have the advantage of surprise. They already knew who he was to them. Worse they knew what happened ten years ago though there seemed to be some confusion. Alexis said her

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mother had also been drugged in a plot conceived by her aunt. It certainly didn't surprise him to know Marilyn was so devious but to think she would do something so reprehensible to her own sister. And worse his children actually believed he had been a part of the plot. It was enough to make him sick. Alexis seemed willing to listen to his side at least.

Silas hoped his sons were as open-minded as her.

But what of Ava? Did Ava also believe he had been a part of her sister's plot? At the very least she must think he was heartless for the way he walked out on her and abandoned her to her fate. How could he convince her it wasn't true? Would she even consider forgiving him?

Alexis mentioned her mother having a crush and her heart had been broken by that same person. She seemed to imply he was the object of her mother's desire. If that was true then that meant... Ava had been in love with him? Could it really be the woman he desired for so long harbored the same feelings for him? Silas cringed as he recalled the last words he said to her.

God, what have I done?

Pain enveloped his chest knowing he hurt her but even he hadn't known she had feelings for him. And her wounds ran deep.

Alexis claimed her mother no longer believed in love and that was the real reason she no longer played music. The very idea Ava refused to play left him feeling empty. He had to find some way to make it up to her and if he was lucky mend her heart to allow him back into it. She was too

important to simply let her be. He had to fix this... somehow...

"Silas?" Thomas prompted watching him closely.

"Jake, you and Matthew keep close eye on my children. Do *not* let anything happen to them."

"Of course," Jake nodded as he and Matthew shared a look. They were still wrapping their head around the fact Silas had children but they would not risk failing to protect them and incur his wrath.

"Thomas, come with me," Silas said giving one more look to the triplets before departing. There was someone he had to see right now.

Reaching the car Silas sat in the passenger seat rubbing his temples. He had to see her, in person, not in pictures. He had waited long enough. Concerned Thomas slid into the driver's seat before prompting, "Back to the office?"

"The diner."

Thomas sucked in a breath. There was only one place he could possibly mean. Without a word Thomas started the car and pulled into traffic. He wasn't certain what would happen when they reached their destination he only hoped Silas wouldn't do anything rash.

Mike sighed as he stretched in his seat. Beside him his partner had nodded off. Watching the diner day in and day out was rather monotonous. Mike expected a woman to have a more varied routine: grocery shopping, trips to the hair and nail salon, but their target only ever seemed to work.

He just couldn't figure her out or why Silas Prescott would be interested in her. She was pretty enough but ordinary. There was nothing extravagant or glamorous about her. She was a hard worker in fact she might work too hard and she was a devoted mother. None of those traits screamed: *Attention!*

Maybe if he talked to her he would learn the answers to his puzzle but he didn't dare go back into the diner and risk being recognized. As a security officer his number one priority was to go unnoticed that way he could move freely even in a crowd.

Glancing at his rearview mirror he noticed a black sedan pull behind them. A second later he recognized the driver just as his phone rang. Smacking his partner to wake him Mike picked up the phone, "Yes sir?"

In the car behind Thomas looked at the SUV saying, "Anything unusual happen?"

"No. Looks like the regular lunch crowd. This place tends to attract a small but loyal clientele."

In today's age of whole foods, vegetarians and diets the diner's dated décor and food options was definitely something of a niche attracting older people who were looking for something nostalgic but also younger people looking for something different. There were several older folks enjoying a quiet meal but also a younger couple indicating that its appeal was broader than one might give it credit for.

"Boss, are we..."

"Maintain your position. We're just following up."

Thomas hung up and studied the diner. He saw several guests but there was no sign of the server.

Beside him Silas suddenly jerked to attention.

Thomas glanced at his friend then turned back to the diner following the other's gaze. Outside beside the restaurant and just visible from their position was a dumpster. As they watched Ava emerged wearing a coat over her uniform as she hauled a large bag of garbage.

With strength belying her small frame Ava flung

the bag into the larger container. Stepping back she hugged herself rubbing her arms as a sudden breeze brought a chill. She grimaced remaining outside a few moments more before retreating inside.

She reappeared inside a few minutes later after discarding her jacket and washing her hands. The moment she appeared at the counter a customer signaled for coffee. Ava grabbed the carafe from its hot plate and refilled the cup with a smile. She repeated this twice before new guests stepped in to take seats at a booth.

Ava brought them a pair of coffee cups filling them as she greeted them and asked if they needed more time only for them to rattle off their order without looking at her. Without missing a beat Ava wrote down the orders repeating it back before departing. Silas scowled at how they dismissed her. They should be the ones vying for her attention.

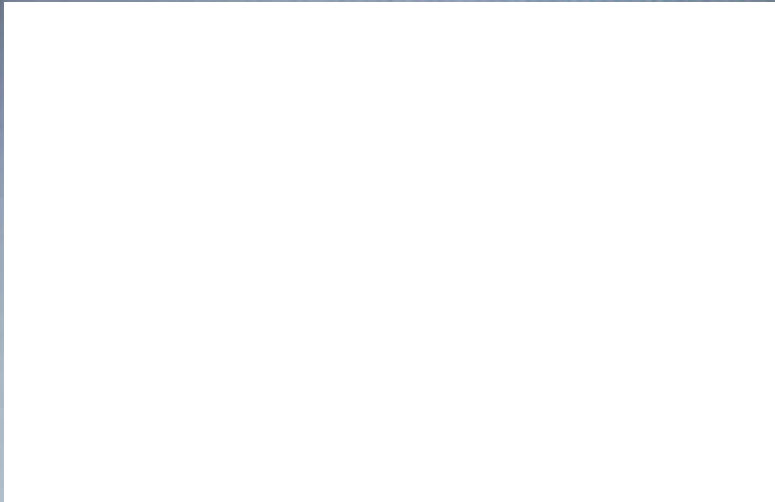
His gaze followed her the next few minutes as she refreshed coffee, cleaned tables and served all the while maintaining a forced smile that had become a natural expression over the years. Those who didn't know her would make the mistake of thinking she was happy but there was

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+50 Points

no warmth in the expression and her gaze remained flat. It was clear she was anything but happy.

Silas frowned. Ten years had taken their toll. A



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decade of struggles raising three children on her own weighed on her shoulders. It shouldn't have been this way. He should have been by her side taking care of her, supporting her, loving her.

He wanted nothing more than to cross the street, sweep her off her feet and carry her out the door. But he hesitated. Did he have the right to do so after abandoning her? Would she accept him?

Would she be happy? Or would she be terrified?

Silas sucked in a breath. If she were angry he would understand. Her anger he could take but not her fear. He recalled again the way she trembled, clutching the blanket to her naked chest as he stood over her enraged by his friends' actions and by what he thought she was. She had to have been terrified of him and the threat he made. It wasn't any wonder she never tried to contact him after the triplets were born or when Alexis was diagnosed with her condition.

Silas leaned back running his hands through his hair. If only he realized it was her that day. If only he asked her to raise her head. He would have recognized her immediately even in his self-righteous rage. Why did he take his anger out on her? She didn't deserve it especially after what Alexis told him.

Silas gritted his teeth. Marilyn Carlisle. She was a crude, disgusting creature. He had never met such an egotistical, wretched person as her in his life. It was hard to believe she was even Ava's sister. The two were complete opposites. But how could she have done that to her own sister? Just thinking about it caused his rage to boil. If it was the last thing he did he would make her pay for inflicting

such harm on Ava. But first...he had to find a way to win Ava's heart and keep her at his side where she belonged.

Somehow...

Silas looked to the diner again watching as she moved from table to table. She was too thin. Even from a distance he saw she was tired. She was pale, too pale. Her hair was dull and stringy though that could also be due to lower quality products. He refused to allow it to continue. But how could he approach her without frightening her?

"Silas?" Thomas prompted after a while. "Did...you want to go in?"

He hesitated. Every fiber of his being screamed Yes! but he couldn't risk frightening her. It wasn't like him to be indecisive. He always knew his path but suddenly he didn't know what to do.

"No," he finally said. "I need...I need a little more time."

Thomas nodded starting the car. He had never seen Silas like this before. But perhaps it was to be expected. The woman he loved and looked for the past ten years had been right under his nose the entire time. What was worse she had been caring for his children without aid or support.

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Silas never showed much interest in children before and now he was a father of three no less. If they were normal kids it would be one thing but they were anything but normal. Thomas hesitated to say it but they were clearly geniuses. They had to be in order to infiltrate the company's security system at ten years old. Silas was definitely in over his head even if he didn't realize it yet.



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