

## The Billionaire's Twins Play Matchmaker Book Two: Chapter Nine



"All right kids, orderly fashion please," the teacher announced. "Remember this is a public place so we are going to conduct ourselves like responsible young men and women. Keep close to your buddy. Now we are heading to the Educational wing first."

Alexis slipped her arms into those of her brothers. Luckily their class had an odd number of students and they made a natural group of three. They had waited anxiously for this day. Finally they would get answers directly from their father.

"Those goons are following us," Theo commented tapping on his sister's arm in their secret language which she relayed before answering.

'Is the one from the diner here?'

'No. He must be watching mom again.' Theo didn't know why but it made him anxious.

'It's fine. I don't think he intends to hurt her.'

'I think you're giving him too much credit.'

'Maybe.' Alexis was fully willing to accept the fact she was giving their father some credit he hadn't earned.

She only had a brief conversation with him but it was enough to give her an impression of the man and he didn't feel like one of their aunt's usual henchmen. In fact he seemed fairly personable and it was hard to think of him strictly as a villain. But it was just a feeling.

They headed into the exhibit with their attention divided. Listening to the keepers they also kept an eye on their shadows. Time slowly ticked down to their confrontation. Sean read off the various information cards for Alexis's benefit though she found it difficult to focus.

'Guys, I think someone is taking pictures of us.' Theo tapped.

'Really? Who?'

'Some weird guy with a beard.'

'Can you be more specific?' Sean asked.

'Four o'clock. Cargo pants. Leather jacket. Big camera.'

'Looks like a professional camera. Could be a photographer...or...'

'A reporter,' Alexis supplied after considering her brother's comments.

'Why would he be taking pictures of us?'

'Us? Or just me?'

'Good question. We're so close together it's hard to tell.'

'There's a touch pool around here, right? When we get there let's split up and see who he's focused on.'

'Right.'

When they finally reached the touch pool Sean and Theo left Alexis petting a spotted ray. Each circled the pool in a different direction pretending to be enthralled by the urchins and rays. After several minutes they returned to their sister each tapping the same message.

'He's only taking pictures of you, sis.'

To their surprise their sister wasn't the least bit shocked as if she suspected as much. Her next answer made both almost fall over.

'Then he must have been sent by our grandfather.'

'Seriously?' they both tapped.

'Has to be. If it was our father he would be taking pictures of all of us. If it's just me then I'm the only one he knows about because I was the only one on stage.'

'So what? We're chopped liver because we don't play piano?'

'That's what you are concerned about?'

'It's getting close to lunch guys, focus. We have to shake our new tail.'

'So let's use the goon squad,' Sean suggested. 'We wanted to get rid of them too anyway.'

'Right. Here's what we'll do...'

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Jake sighed trying to seem interested in the aquarium full of fish and aquatic animals. His focus was on the trio of kids wandering with their classmates. It was remarkable how close the siblings seemed to be. The brothers walked on either side of their sister keeping her safe and out of harm's way. If either of them were bored with their mission they certainly didn't give any sign.

When he and his partner parked at the school Jake had thought it would be another boring day until the school bus pulled up. Suddenly it was a flurry of activity as the teacher, their aides and other chaperones wrangled the class. Luckily they had parked at an angle that gave them a proper view to see their targets board the bus with everyone else.

Sensing their day was going to get a whole lot more interesting they followed the bus to the aquarium and followed the group of boisterous kids at a discreet distance. Jake glanced at his partner who seemed to be taking particular interest in some of the exhibits. Apparently he had never been to the aquarium and was enjoying the experience. As long as they did their job and the kids returned safely to the school it didn't matter if they were a little distracted.

Jake shook his head looking to their targets to see one of the brothers had disappeared. He jerked to attention scanning the crowd but didn't see the boy. Jake's gaze returned to the other two. They didn't seem overly concerned with their brother's absence as they touched one of the hands-on models. The pair chatted comfortably about the model as if unaware of their missing sibling.

"Watch it, jerk!" a voice suddenly declared. "And why are you taking pictures of kids anyway? You some sort of pervert? Perv alert! Perv alert!"

Jake immediately turned to the voice to see the missing brother circling a man who indeed had a camera pointed in the direction of the siblings. Laughing the boy ducked back into the crowd leaving the man facing a rather stunned throng of kids and adults whose trip was suddenly disrupted. The man seemed frozen as if not sure how to explain himself. While he hesitated Jake and his partner moved in.

They appeared like security guards so the crowd did not bat an eye as they quietly gripped the man's shoulders and escorted him away. Once out of sight of the crowd the pair became less friendly. Jake snatched the man's camera while his partner kept the man under control. Not only did the digital camera have pictures of kids but they were all of the young girl they themselves were tasked with protecting.

"What is this?" Jake demanded.

"That's none of your business," the man said. "You have no right to detain me. I'll call the police."

"Assuming you still have your fingers," Jake retorted causing the man to fall silent. "So let's try this again..."

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Silas stood at the edge of the penguin enclosure looking at the small birds that were quite comfortable in the New York fall chill. Beside him Thomas held a case with the ransom money. To keep a low profile both were dressed casually though they certainly didn't fit in with the crowd. As it was close to lunch most visitors had moved on to the café.

Thomas glanced at his friend. In all these years he couldn't recall a time Silas looked so angry or on edge. They still hadn't been able to track where the email came from. At the risk of revealing too much Thomas had employed the lead of the IT department to look into it but the only result was that the email's IP was from inside the building meaning either someone in the company had sent it or someone had infiltrated the network.

Even now IT was checking the network's firewall trying to find how a hacker might have breached it. Thomas expected a full report once they returned to the office. For now they had to wait blindly for their solicitor to show themselves.

"We meet again, Mister Prescott."

They tensed at the voice sharing dubious looks before turning around. Seated on a rock no more than ten feet away was the young girl they had unknowingly met in the hospital, the same young girl who had shined on stage, the young girl whose blind eyes sparkled with amusement at their silence.

Alexis leaned back drawing a knee to her chest and hugged the leg as she waited for them to come out of their stupor. In truth she also had to catch her breath. Losing the camera man and their shadows had been easier than slipping away from their chaperones. In the end Theo had to make up another distraction.

"...How long have you known?" Silas finally found his voice. Was it wrong to want his daughter to call him dad?

"That you are our biological father? Since I was five," she shrugged making him suck in his breath. "I didn't know it was you at the hospital until the director said your name though."

Silas fought a nervous twitch as his hands became clammy. He hadn't forgotten that first meeting either. Despite his ignorance at the time it had been the first conversation he had with one of his children. Her meeting had been impressive with her resilience and quick wit then and he still was.

"Mom never told us about you," Alexis continued. "She doesn't know we know. She thinks we were asleep when she and Aunt Tracy talked about you. We put the rest together on our own."

Silas forced him to swallow back his disappointment. So Ava never told them about where they came from. But his children were smart and learned it on their own.

"We also know she wasn't born Lynn Carter if that's your next question," Alexis confirmed his suspicions. "We know all about the Carlisle family. To be honest we find them disgusting. They'll get their karmic payback soon enough."

Silas's brow furrowed at that. It seemed she was referring to something specific almost as if they planned the downfall themselves. But that was impossible they were only ten...then again...just who sent him the email?

"Sean is very good with computers," Alexis benignly smiled. "He and Theo are both very observant. For future reference if you plan on having someone followed you should choose less conspicuous vehicles. Shiny, black SUVs tend to stick out in the slums."

Thomas struggled to hold back a laugh. He had authorized the security teams to use the company's fleet vehicles. Naturally they chose SUVs because it allowed them to take extra equipment. No one had voiced concerns that the vehicles might be too noticeable parked on a street alongside older, broken down cars.

Silas glared at him as Thomas had been in charge organizing the team. How could such a detail be overlooked? Didn't he insist the team keep low profiles?

"If it's any consolation...mom hasn't noticed yet," Alexis added.

"...You-you haven't told her?" Silas asked.

"That you've found us? No. Of course not. She would totally freak out thinking you're about to dump us all in the Hudson and erase us."

"Why would she think that?"

"Why wouldn't she after how you threatened her last time?" Alexis demanded. "I'm sure teaming up with our sadistic aunt to drug and rape our mother was hilarious but there are consequences even for people like you."

"That's not...I was never..." Silas stuttered shaking with shock and rage that anyone, least of all his own children, would think he was capable of such atrocities.

Alexis tilted her head waiting for him to continue. She was being deliberately combative to force some kind of reaction. If he was angered he wouldn't be able to lie so easily. His replies would be more compulsive and without filter but now he seemed to have broken down completely. Though she couldn't see him the break in his voice made it clear she had touched a nerve.

"My friends thought I was too uptight and wanted me to loosen up so they drugged me and put a woman in my bed..." Silas's voice cracked as he confessed the truth. "I thought she was someone my friends paid to sleep with me...I thought she was one of the hotel maids...If I had known...I didn't know it was Ava."

Alexis remained silent absorbing the story noting every time his voice broke. Her brothers often called her a human lie-detector but it was because she learned to pay attention to how people spoke as much as what they said. She didn't sense any deception from the man in front of her. In fact he sounded devastated.

"...I would never hurt Ava...Not Ava...If I had known it was her...If only I had seen her face I..." Silas bowed his head unable to finish the thought. "I heard a rumor her family kicked her out for some scandal but I knew it had to be a mistake. Ava would never...Are you telling me she was drugged that night? By her sister?"

Alexis sensed his gaze was focused on her again. She almost felt sorry for him. The pain and anguish her mother suffered could not be erased nor forgiven. Someone had to pay...but perhaps the man in front of her was as much a victim as her mother. Perhaps he was worthy of a little mercy and some pity.

"Well, what's done is done, I suppose," she said. "It doesn't really matter."

Silas frowned. What did she mean? Of course it mattered. Or...were the kids truly playing judge and jury of their mother's tormentors. Were their plans finished?

"You'll find out eventually so I might as well tell you...Finding out her sister secretly hated her and learning her father's love was fickle to the point of being a lie didn't bother mom as much as you might think. But having her high school crush break her heart really destroyed her," Alexis said.

"...Her high school crush?" Silas muttered under his breath. Did that mean what he thought it meant? Was it possible she had feelings for him? His Ava?

"She doesn't believe in love anymore," Alexis continued. "She knows now that there is no such thing as true love. There is no prince charming coming on a white horse. I think that's the real reason she stopped playing piano. If there is no magic in the world than music serves no purpose."

Silas froze unable to reply. He had always been practical and logical. That was why he immediately noticed Ava. In a dull, colorless world she radiated life. It couldn't be that she lost it. He didn't want to believe it but then he remembered the pictures of her at work: the way her smile never reached her eyes. Had she truly lost that sense of life?

"Anyway," Alexis stood.

"W-wait, please."

"The teachers will start looking for me if I don't get back," Alexis said. "Oh you can keep the money. We didn't really want it. We just needed you to take the meeting seriously."

"W-wait..."

Thomas's phone suddenly rang. Silas glared at him as he checked the number.

"I'd answer if I were you," Alexis said. "It's probably the goon squad wanting to ask you what they should do with the guy who was taking pictures of us."

"Of you?" Silas jerked to attention.

"I think he's a magazine photographer who thought our grandfather would be a bigger payday than the paper...of course that's just a guess. You going to answer or what?"

Silas turned his attention back to Thomas as he answered, "Jake, what is it? What? A man taking pictures of the kids? Where are you? Just outside the Educational building at the aquarium?"

Thomas looked to Silas who was growing more agitated, "Tell them we'll be right there. Alexis..."

Silas looked back toward the girl only to find she had vanished as easily as she appeared. He looked around in disbelief. Besides being blind there was clear she had no difficulty navigating the world. He couldn't help but be impressed.

His children were proving formidable people. Alexis had the attitude and confidence worthy of a CEO. In addition she was smart and Silas was certain even he couldn't compare to her critical thinking. Though he had yet to meet his sons it was clear they were not to be taken lightly. They had spotted his men easily and Alexis just confessed one was exceptional with computers: exceptional enough to infiltrate a top 500 company without a trace.

"What do you want to do?" Thomas asked.

"Let's see this man who was taking pictures of my children."

Thomas nodded leading the way. Tucked behind a corner of the educational building housing the touch pools they found Jake and Matthew with a nervous man between them. They had confiscated the man's camera and phone which they turned over to Thomas allowing them to view the pictures all of which featured Alexis with at least one of her brothers.

"Who is he?" Silas demanded.

"Well it seems he's misplaced his wallet...but he claims he's Roy Austin, a photographer for the Eagle," Jake answered. "He says he saw the girl play at the music completion and recognized her so he went to the girl's grandfather."

Silas clenched his fists to keep them from shaking. It was just as Alexis predicted. His daughter never ceased to amaze him. He looked to the man nervously staring at him in awe.

"You know who I am?"

"S-Silas Prescott...but why would you care about some girl..." the photographer paled recalling the two boys who had been escorting her. At the time he hadn't thought much of them believing they were just part of the same class. They bore a striking resemblance to the man in front of him but then. "Wait do you mean...she's..."

"Smart man. Just not smart enough," Silas glared at him. "My daughter saw you coming from a mile away...So what happens now?"

"I—I don't want trouble," Roy insisted. Prescott and Carlisle both had ruthless reputations. It was not a good idea to get on the bad side of either. He had taken the chance to go to Carlisle because it seemed safe enough but now he had stepped into something much bigger. Emerson Carlisle's granddaughter was Silas Prescott's daughter which meant a storm was about overtake New York that was sure to turn it on its head.

"And yet here you are...threatening my daughter."

"N-no. That's not. I didn't mean...I didn't know."

"How much does the old man know?"

"I showed him a recording of her performance," Roy admitted. "And I might have mentioned her last name is Carter. But that's it, I swear."

"That's more than enough," Thomas shook his head.

There weren't many articles about the music competition but Thomas had read them and several not only mentioned Alexis by name but also included the name of her school. It would not be difficult to track her from there. Thomas himself had started in the exact same place to find them. The only difference was they didn't seem to know about the boys yet.

"So why are you here?" Silas demanded.

"He didn't believe me. He wanted me to get pictures of her with her mother so I headed to the school. He gave me a couple days I figured I could take my time to get the shots."

Silas held out a hand and Thomas gave him the case they had brought. Without a word he offered it to the photographer. Roy nervously took it wondering what was inside."

"\$500,000," Silas said. "You will disappear for a week. Do that and I'll forget about this. I hear anything about you in that time you make out with Carlisle again, and the offer will be forfeit. I will track you down and I will find you."

"Yes sir. Absolutely," Roy nodded clutching the case. This was more than he expected from Carlisle. Thomas handed him back his camera, its memory card now erased. Then the man fled.

"Boss?" Jake looked to Silas. "You sure it's okay to let him go?"

"He already gave Emerson too much information," Silas sighed. "If the old man isn't stupid he'll follow up with his own people. He's probably already has them looking into it."

Thomas nodded.

"I just need to buy a little time."

"A little is right. I know you wanted to take this slow but..."

Silas grimaced. He intended to sweep Ava off her feet the moment he found her but the situation was far more complicated than he could have imagined. There were children involved, their children, and there was no denying her current situation was in part his fault. If only he hadn't allowed his anger to rule him ten years ago.

"Um, boss..."

"What?" Silas looked at the nervous Jake.

"You said the girl is your daughter."

Silas glanced at Thomas who merely shook his head. There had been no reason to brief the men on such information especially when they needed to control rumors.

"Yes. She is. The boys are mine too."

Jake and Matthew shared shocked looks. This was not the answer they had expected. Suddenly watching the children and keeping them from harm was even more vital.

"Why are you two here?" Thomas asked.

"The kids had a field trip," Jake said. "They were on their way to lunch when we snagged the guy."

"Where," Silas demanded. He couldn't wait any longer. He had to see them.