

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



"Be seated," the bailiff instructed after Judge Matthews took his seat.

"Let's see," the judge said, "Custody hearing. Mister Emerson Carlisle versus Miss Avalynn (Carlisle) Carter."

The judge looked up from his paperwork. On one side of the room sat Emerson Carlisle, respectable and successful businessman on the other a petite young woman and three ten-year-olds. The woman looked haunted and nervous but the trio behind her was ready for battle. They didn't spare the opposing party a single glance sitting up straight waiting for it to begin.

Usually custody battles were between Human Services and the parents if they proved incompetent. Sometimes it was a battle between family members, most often the parents. Generally one would expect a father to be on his daughter's side to support her through these hearings rather than being the opposing party.

Ava took a deep breath trying to calm her racing heart. They had prepared two weeks for this hearing. Tracy insisted on a number of odd requests but Ava put her full trust in her friend and complied with everything asked of her. Now she was truly thankful for the new wardrobe. Though she was still thin, she didn't look shabby. Despite her worry she had been sleeping better and eating regular meals under Silas's and Duncan's careful watch.

"Mister Carlisle you claim your daughter is an incompetent mother and that her children are in danger if they stay with her," Judge Matthews said. "Present your case."

Emerson's lawyer stood casting a glance at Ava. She met his gaze reluctantly and saw something she could almost classify as pity. Though she couldn't remember his name she did recall he had been her father's counsel for decades. He was as familiar with her and her sister as any uncle or aunt, perhaps more so given her actual relatives lived on the other side of the country.

Ava wondered if he tried to dissuade her father from this course of action. Even if he did she doubted he held his opinion for long. Her father wouldn't hesitate to trade him for another lawyer if he refused to comply. Loyalty was cheap after all.

"Yes, your honor. It is our belief that it is dangerous for the children to remain in Miss Carlisle's care. They will be much better off under their grandfather's care who has the means to insure a privileged life."

"Objection," Tracy stood, "since when does privilege equate to happiness or good? My client has raised three kids on her own without assistance. They have never missed a single medical appointment. They have all suggested and approved shots and boosters. They also maintain straight A's in school. Exactly where is my client's abilities as a mother lacking?"

"She has been living under an assumed name..."

"You mean a legally changed name," Tracy corrected. "For less than a hundred dollars anyone can do it."

Her father's lawyer stared hard at Tracy clearly annoyed by her interruptions but there also seemed a note of approval. It was almost as if he was glad she was refuting him so readily. Lawyers didn't like to lose but maybe he didn't really want to win this time. Or maybe Ava was reading too much into his look.

"Get on with it!" Emerson grumbled.

His harsh tone made Ava flinch. There was no mercy in his demeanor and though she avoided meeting his gaze she felt it boring into her. Why? Didn't he have a shred of sympathy and love for his daughter? Did she really mean nothing to him?

"What a grouch," Theo muttered glaring at his grandfather. Neither he nor his brother had any difficulty meeting his gaze or throwing their own daggers in his direction. "Keep your eyes off our sister, pervert."

Emerson stiffened at Theo's bold accusation drawing the attention of the judge as well as everyone else in the courtroom. He felt his face warm under the scrutiny of the recorder, bailiff, judge and lawyers. There was no denying he had been looking at his granddaughter. She looked just like her mother and she would look like a doll when she played for his associates just like Ava used to.

"Young man that is not appropriate language in the courtroom," Judge Matthews gently admonished.

"Then tell him to turn around and stop leering over here," Theo retorted. "He keeps looking at Lexi like she's a piece of meat. It's creepy."

The judge cleared his throat hiding a smile. It was good to see brothers so eager to protect their sister. Sibling rivalry wasn't uncommon especially in homes with limited resources but the triplets maintained close bonds. They were truly a united front.

"Young lady, Miss Alexis, are you uncomfortable?" the judge asked.

"Lexi...and I'm fine. The geezer can look all he wants. He'll get nothing from me."

Emerson leapt to his feet sputtering with rage, "How dare you talk to me like that!"

"And who are you?" Alexis asked. "Mom raised us for ten years and you haven't so much as sent a postcard let alone support. The only reason you're even interested in us now is because you think I'll be your personal trained monkey. But you can forget it. I won't be playing anything for you."

"Order!" the judge rapped his gavel. "Mister Carlisle, sit down and refrain from engaging with the defense. Kids if you feel uncomfortable please let me know. Counsel continue."

Emerson's lawyer cleared his throat and took a breath before continuing, "Your honor, Miss Carlisle has undoubtedly done the best she could but a small, cramped apartment surrounded by drug dealers is hardly an appropriate setting for three impressionable children."

"So it's a crime to be poor now?" Tracy argued. "There are hundreds of thousands of kids living in households below the poverty line. Their parents struggle to put food on the table, shoes on their feet and clothes on their backs. There are days they go hungry save for their school lunch. Is your client going to take all of them under his roof as well? My client has used every available means at her disposal to provide for her children."

"Her apartment is clean, pest and vermin free. She makes use of food pantries and subsidized programs to help her meet her children's needs. Not once in any of their appointments has any doctor or nurse noted anything but the kid's excellent health and care. Sure they don't have luxuries but all of their needs are met."

With a sigh Emerson's lawyer hesitated before making his final argument, "Your honor, it has come to our attention that there is drug use in the home. Such an environment is unacceptable for children."

"W-what?" Ava stuttered. Drugs? Were they serious?

"I have here a police report. Acting on an anonymous tip they raided Miss Carlisle's apartment and found several drugs present in rather large quantities," the lawyer offered a paper to the judge. "It is unacceptable for a mother to expose her children to such things."

His gaze slid to Ava seeing she had become ashen, pale and listless with the accusation. He spared her a moment of pity but she didn't see it. How was it even possible? Did her father really...

"It's okay mom," Alexis and her bothers immediately swarmed around her hugging her.

Theo scowled at their self-righteous grandfather now looking rather smug. If he thought he could get away with framing their mother like this he had another thing coming. No amount of money would save him.

"I hope you have more than a piece of paper, Counselor," Tracy said solemnly. "These are serious accusations and I hope you are prepared for the consequences."

Emerson's lawyer hesitated meeting her deadly stare. There was no surprise in her gaze almost as if she expected this situation. Ava had all but broken down but those around her defiantly glared at him. If the boys were a little older he might actually have feared for his life.

"Y-yes. Officer Tyson is here to give his testimony."

A man in civilian clothes stood. After being sworn in he was seated in the witness stand and Emerson's lawyer approached.

"State your name for the court please."

"Tyson Smith."

"And your occupation."

"I'm a sergeant. I am part of the Drug Enforcement Administration of New York."

"And how long have you been a part of the DEA."

"Ten years."

"Have you gone on many raids?"

"Yes. More than I can count."

"Have you raided homes with children present?"

"Unfortunately yes. It's more common than you think. Nothing will keep an addict from their next high."

Ava shuddered as the officer's gaze swept over her. Was he actually accusing her of endangering her children like that? Alexis's grip on her hand tightened in comfort.

"Would you explain to the court how you came to raid Miss Carlisle's apartment?"

"An anonymous tip stated they saw Miss Carlisle buying drugs outside her apartment. They also informed us there were children present. We had a representative for Social Services accompany us as we always do when children as suspected to be present. When we got there no one was home but we did find evidence of drugs and drug use."

"Thank you." Emerson's lawyer nodded returning to his client. Emerson looked particularly pleased.

"Miss Lamont would you like to cross examine the witness?"

Tracy stood up, "Officer Tyson. You said you have taken part in several raids. Safe to say you have seen it all?"

"Well there are always a few surprises but I've seen a fair amount."

"Exactly what drugs were found in Miss Carter's apartment?"

"Marijuana, Ecstasy and Cocaine."

"And that variety didn't seem odd?"

"...Well. A little. Drug addicts tend to be loyal to their particular high. They don't often mix opposing effects, but is has been known to happen."

"And where were the drugs found?"

"Ah...the marijuana was found in the accused bedroom, the Ecstasy in the bathroom and the cocaine was in the kitchen, actually on the kitchen table."

"And you found nothing unusual about this?"

"Objection, your honor," Emerson's lawyer stood. "Counsel is leading the witness."

"I'm asking an officer with ten years experience his thoughts on a raid he conducted. How is that leading, your honor?"

"Overruled. Officer?"

The officer cleared his throat, "Well to be honest. Yes it was odd."

"How so?"

"Well...drug addicts tend to be secretive especially around children. They don't like to show their children that side of themselves. It's like they are ashamed of their actions even though they can't stop themselves. They hide drugs and paraphernalia in places their children aren't likely to go, like in their bedroom. It's unusual to find drugs in the open or public areas of the home."

"So why leave one drug out in the open but hide another?"

"That's the thing. Some addicts do their drugs openly in front of their children and leave it out in the open all the time. In Miss Carter's apartment we found it both ways which never occurs."

"Never?"

"Never in the ten years I have been part of the DEA."

"That is very interesting."

"And that wasn't the only oddity."

"No?"

"The proportions were off."

"What do you mean?"

"Well there was over thirty Ecstasy pills and well over five grams of cocaine but only two joints. That's not typical for a user."

"So the proportion of drugs and placement in the apartment was not typical of what you would normally see. Is that what you are saying?"

"Yes."

"Given the irregularities in the raid what is the likelihood the evidence was planted?"

"Ob-objection, your honor!"

"Withdrawn," Tracy shrugged returning to her seat. She shot Emerson a disgusted look. Though he tried to maintain a superior air her questioning had chipped away at his confidence. "Your honor, I'd like to call my own witness concerning this raid."

Emerson choked back a protest. He stared at her wondering how it was she had prepared for this accusation which was meant to be a surprise.

"Very well. You may step down Officer Tyson. Your witness, Counselor?"

"Doctor Emily Schrodin."