

## Chapter Four

"What did you find out?" Silas demanded from his chair behind his desk.

It had been an unsatisfying morning with a fussy Board of Directors and their petty complaints. Making it worse had been his exhaustion. Since the music competition he hadn't been able to sleep. The moment his closed his eyes, visions of the past and present danced through his mind. But now was the moment he had been waiting for. Thomas stood in front of him with a folder at the ready filled with three days of research.

"Alexis, Sean and Theodore Carter," Thomas announced setting down copies of three birth certificates. Silas wisely chose not to question how they were obtained.

Picking up one he read it carefully not realizing he was actually holding his breath. All three were essentially identical aside from the name: Alexis Clara Carter; born January 18; Mother: Lynn Hildegard Carter; Father: (Unknown).

"Father Unknown?" Silas repeated letting out a slow breath. "What does that mean?"

"Well, usually it means a woman slept with so many men she doesn't know who the father is."

Thomas fell silent at Silas's deadly glare. It wasn't often he was on the receiving end but he felt the same pressure from it as others did.

"Alternatively, it could also mean a one-night stand," Thomas said which did nothing to ease his friend's gaze. "It could also mean she didn't want to reveal the father so she intentionally left it blank."

"Didn't want to reveal the father," Silas repeated. "Lynn Carter."

That was not the name he expected but...perhaps it wasn't just the father's name she was trying to hide. Maybe...

"I trust this isn't all you have."

"No. The kids go to Anna Silver, it's a public school on the Lower East Side. We were able to follow them both to and from their home as well as their mother's work from there." Thomas took several photographs from a folder showing exteriors of the school. All and all it was rather plain but well maintained, clean and orderly. "This is their mother."

Thomas laid down more photos of the kids as they walked down the street with a woman. Silas sucked in a breath. It was her. There was no mistaking it. She was ten years older but she was as beautiful as ever. Her mane of dark, brown waves was pulled back in a half-up style and her green eyes sparkled with her smile as she walked with one arm around her daughter, who was a carbon copy of her.

The boys preceded their sister and mother occasionally walking backward as they conversed. At the gate she gave each of her children a hug, fondly planting a kiss on their foreheads before sending them off. They waved to her before each boy took one of their sister's arms and led her to the school entrance.

Their mother watched from the street. Only when they were out of sight did her smile fade and a sad, yearning expression settled on her face. The strain of years of strife turned down the corners of her mouth as she huddled in a worn out, oversized coat faded and frayed from age. It was a stark contrast to the children whose clothes were new, clean and properly fitted. It was obvious she sacrificed her own necessities in favor of providing the best she could for three growing children.

"Did you find out where they are living?" Silas asked as he stared at her despondent image.

"An apartment, also on the Lower East Side...it's not...in the greatest neighborhood," Thomas added carefully.

"And where she works?"

"...She's a waitress."

"What?" Silas looked up from the image giving Thomas a startled expression. Did he just hear that right?

"She works at a diner," Thomas explained setting down several photos.

Silas looked at them reluctantly. Each depicted a small diner that seemed pulled out of the fifties tucked away in a small corner of a dark street. In each Ava stood in her dusty pink uniform, white tights and shoes waiting tables and serving customers. Though she wore a smile something about it was fake, manufactured. The light never reached her eyes the way it did when she was with her children.

"...A waitress..." Silas muttered. How? Why? Who did this to her? She should have been playing for sold out concert halls not bussing tables.

He looked at the birth certificates again. January eighteenth. Was there something special about that date that made him cringe? Then his gaze settled on the year...ten years ago. Ten years.

"If a child is born in January, when would it have been conceived?"

"A normal pregnancy is forty weeks, or about ten months," Thomas said having already prepared for this question, "but according to my research multiples are usually born early. For triplets, eight months is normal."

"That would make it May," Silas quietly stated.

"Correct."

May...Ten years ago...the hotel...but it couldn't be...Ava would never...Silas nearly shook with his pent-up rage. It just wasn't adding up. He had only ever been with one woman and that was a mistake...unless...

"The woman who was in the hotel room, who was she again?"

"Let's see," Thomas opened another folder. This one was much thinner and the information much older. "Natalie Lopez. She was a maid."

"A maid..." Silas rubbed his temple. He was missing something. It was like a puzzle but they were missing the crucial piece that would make the picture clear.

Thomas watched him with concern. Since the music competition Silas seemed to be obsessed. It was clear the boys bore a striking resemblance to him but that was merely circumstantial.

"I want to talk to Natalie. Find her."

"Silas, are you sure you want to open that up again? It's ancient history."

"I didn't ask for your opinion. Just find her. And I want surveillance, guards, on the kids and their mother at all times. If anything happens to them..."

"All right." Thomas nodded not needing to hear more and moved to gather up the pictures.

"Leave them."

With a sigh Thomas set down the folder and departed for his next assignment. Once he was alone Silas sat in silence staring at the photographs. He picked up one with Lynn standing at the school her face serene. It was a face forever etched in his mind.

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Avalynn Carlisle was the youngest daughter of his father's rival. She was a year behind him in school so he didn't have much contact with her. On top of that her older sister, Marilyn, was annoying and he didn't have a favorable opinion of the family due to its history with his own. But Avalynn was different.

The first time he noticed her was at the All Boroughs Music Competition. It was smaller then. She stepped onto the stage unassuming and shy but when she played she became someone new: confident and alluring. Her face was serene as she played and became lost in the world her music opened.

Silas sat in his family's private booth alongside his mother completely enthralled. From that day on he could think of nothing else and he was desperate to know more about her. Since they were in different years they had no classes in common making it more difficult to meet her. He had no talent for music so there was no point to trying out for the band. The only possible way to meet her was at school functions and dances.

But there his plans were thwarted by his father. Richard Prescott was eager to make connections and set his son up with the daughters of his business associates. Every dance he was forced to escort a new girl for the night. Even so his eyes always looked for Ava and followed her as she wandered the fringes, shyly mingling.

Avalynn had a quieter personality compared to her boisterous sister and lacked confidence in social situations but her unassuming nature only attracted him more. She didn't put on airs or aunt her family name. If anything she almost seemed embarrassed by it. With only minimal makeup she was easily the most beautiful girl in the room. It always amazed him no one else seemed to notice. No one asked her to dance and he was spared from the jealousy of seeing her with another boy.

As the years progressed his hesitation to approach her continued and the opportunity to speak to her evaporated once he graduated. He went on to college and behind but he never forgot her. He made new friends, friends who like to party, drink and sleep around. None of those activities appealed to him. In his mind he quietly planned how to approach Ava once they met again.

His friends called him uptight and a party pooper but he didn't think much of it. After their first year they all came to New York to celebrate and relax. Their constant badgering finally made him agree to go out and drink with them if only to shut them up but he didn't know what they planned. The drink was spiked and once they were sure the drug was in effect they brought him to his hotel room and left him with a girl letting the rest happen naturally.

When Silas woke his head was pounding, his throat was dry and he was completely naked. Groggily he sat up trying to recall what had happened and found his memory locked in a strange fog. Turning he found a naked woman in his bed and connecting the dots became easy despite his unhelpful memory. Rage unlike anything he'd ever known boiled over.

Furious he retreated to the bedroom to wash off the lingering scent of her on him. He dressed fully intending to abandon her as she was but she woke too soon. She sat up holding her head, moaning as if suffering from a hangover but he was in no mood to be gentle.

"I don't know how much they paid you but this should be more than enough to keep your mouth shut. If you try to contact me...If I hear one word about this from anyone...It'll be the last thing anybody will ever hear from you."

She stiffened immediately at the sound of his voice, her head bowed as she clutched the bedspread to her chest in a mock show of modesty. The dark brown waves of her hair hid her face from his view but he didn't want to know her and he didn't want to remember her. Silas tossed a check at her and left. What happened to her afterwards he hadn't thought about since. Why would he care about the fate of some prostitute or maid willing to sell her body for a cheap joke?

But what if it had been Ava? Why would she agree to that? Was she tricked just as he was? Did they force her into complying?

A shiver went down his spine at the thought of how the petite form gripped her head the moment she woke. It was certainly a sign of a splitting headache. If they drugged her nothing would stop him from hunting them down and punishing them all again.

He would know the truth as soon as he met with the maid. And if it turned out it was Ava in his room...his hand grasped a picture of her and the kids...If it was her...He had to find some way to convince her to allow him to into their lives.

"...Ava...Why?"