

Chapter Six

"Have a good night." Gretchen called as they made their way to the door. "Be careful on the way home. If it's too cold I can give you a ride."

It was eight-thirty and though the diner was open another three hours Lynn had reached the end of her shift. Now that the dinner rush was over it would be quiet the rest of the night especially during the fall and winter which were their slowest seasons.

"I think we'll be ne tonight," Lynn assured her.

"Bye Gretchen!" the trio happily waved before heading out into the chilly evening.

"See you tomorrow," Lynn said before following.

Sean and Theo walked on either side of Alexis linked arm in arm while their mother a few steps behind they walked down the street. It was several blocks to reach home, almost forty minutes, but it was shorter and more direct than taking the subway which would take them out of their way.

As they walked Sean began tapping his sister's arm with a message she relayed to Theo on her other side, 'We're being followed. Black SUV. Don't look too hard.'

'No kidding. It sticks out like a sore thumb.' Theo struggled not to laugh. It wouldn't be a good idea to cause their mother needless worry by drawing her attention to it.

"What exactly are they doing?" Alexis asked wanting to get a sense of their movements and patterns.

"They drive up a half block or so. Park and wait for us to pass then they move again."

'Okay. Next time we pass the SUV Theo turn around to talk to mom. See if you can get a look at who's behind the wheel. Make sure you grab the license plate.'

It was slightly frustrating to have to rely on them without contributing but there was nothing for it. Theo let go of her arm and turned to face their mother. He walked backward as they continued down the sidewalk.

"Hey mom they're taking us to the aquarium on Friday. What's your favorite animal there?"

"Let's see," Lynn smiled. "I guess it would have to be the penguins."

"Penguins? Why because they are cute?"

"Well yes they are cute waddling around in their little tuxedos. But they are also monogamous. That's pretty rare when it comes to animals."

"I thought animals pair up all the time."

"Oh they might for a season. The next time they may choose a different partner and when they do pair it's only for the mating part. Most males don't help in baby rearing at all."

"So the animal world is full of dead-beat dads huh." Theo snorted.

"But penguins are different. They stay together and raise their chicks together and the next year they nd each other again."

"Cool." Theo nodded as if satiated and turned around. 'I don't recognize the driver but the other guy is denitely the one from the diner.'

"What the heck do they want from mom?" Sean complained.

Alexis mulled over her own thoughts, 'Just keep an eye on them for now. We'll gure it out at home.'

They talked about their day and interesting class work as they walked knowing how much their mother liked to hear updates. Alexis eventually dropped back to walk with their mother. Lynn hugged her close unaware of their ongoing vigilant watch of their observers. It turned out there were two SUVs. About halfway home the SUVs switched but the pattern remained the same. The boys noted the license plates and men inside waiting to discuss it at home.

Reaching the old, drafty apartment complex the trio was glad to get off the street. Theo collected the mail and they headed upstairs. Though the building had an elevator it hadn't worked in the ten years they'd lived there.

Lynn sighed when they nally reached their apartment on the fth oor. Ushering them inside she shut the door and relocked it also locking the two extra dead bolts before taking off her coat. Her feet ached and she was chilled from the walk but she grinned and bared it. The boys were growing like beans and would need new jackets next year. Their needs came before her comfort.

"I'm going to take a shower."

"Okay mom."

"Yep!"

Taking off her shoes Lynn headed to the bathroom. Even before the water started Sean and Theo headed to the windows peaking between the blinds. Theirs was a corner apartment which gave them a view of two streets.

"Got 'em," Theo announced. "SUV on the corner."

"Just one?" Alexis asked.

"Looks like. The other might be on the other side or they watch mom in shifts."

Alexis thought about that, "Maybe at night. But I don't think both SUVs are for her."

"What makes you say that?"

"I think the other one was for us and since we're all in for the night now there's no reason to have two hanging around."

"It does seem like overkill for one person," Sean commented. "But what makes you think they are also watching us?"

"It's a hunch."

"Why though?"

"We'll gure that out once we nd out who owns the vehicles. Sean?"

"Right." He grabbed her school tablet from her bag.

Setting it on the coffee table he connected to a neighbor's WiFi and set up his network to disguise his IP before heading to his destination: the DMV. Theo retrieved a drink from the fridge before opping on the couch beside his brother. Alexis sat cross-legged in the chair waiting for the results. Neither of them asked what he was doing since neither would be able to follow.

"Did you get the make and model?" Sean asked. All vehicles looked the same to him.

"Ford Escape. Probably 2010 or so," Theo answered easily. "I doubt they'd go for the latest model but it certainly wouldn't be older than that either."

First license plate?"

"PR—1834."

"And the second?"

"PR—1211."

Sean's brow scrunched together as he stared at the small screen.

"Can't nd them?" Theo asked.

"No. I got it. But they are owned by the same company."

"Company cars? Well that's not surprising," Theo shrugged.

"Who owns them?" Alexis asked.

"Prescott Industries."

"Sounds like a bunch of pricks."

"It's our father's company, Theo," Alexis said.

"Oh...so I was right." Theo chuckled.

"When did you gure it out?" Sean looked to his sister who was certainly the fastest thinker of the three.

"The music competition," Alexis said after a moment. "It's attended by a bunch of social elites so there was a chance either our father or grandfather would attend. No one else would have a reason to follow us or mom around."

Ever since they could remember their mother never spoke a word about their father and they never asked. Their mother was not so tight-lipped when she thought they were asleep. More than once she and their aunt stayed up late sitting at the kitchen table talking. Usually it was their mother's quiet sobs that woke one or more of the siblings. But it was through those conversations they pieced together the truth about their parents.

Their mother's real name was Avalynn Carlisle. She was one of two heirs to Carlisle Enterprises. Their mother should have been living a comfortable life but her sister had drugged her, set her up to take a fall and ruined her reputation. Their maternal grandfather disowned her.

To make it worse their biological father Silas Prescott and tassed the Carlisle's greatest rival. He had teamed up with their aunt to use their mother and wore her away like garbage. Never once had he tried to contact her or make amends. In fact they were quite certain he had no idea they even existed. So why the interest now?

"I thought you said you met our father at the hospital," Theo said. "You said he acted like he had no idea who you were."

"I did. He did. If the director hadn't said his name I wouldn't have known it was him. I never told him mine."

"Fine but he wouldn't connect your name to mom anyway," Sean argued. "I mean Alexis Carter wouldn't mean anything to him."

"True but I doubt it's my name he recognized. You two say all the time I look just like mom and Aunt Tracy says I play just like mom used to."

"So you think seeing you play clued him in?" Sean asked. "Even so...why would he care? He dumped her."

"He is still single and he doesn't have any other children..." Alexis said.

"You're kidding. You think he really cares about that?" Theo suddenly sat up.

Prominent family businesses relied on the reputation of their founders to prosper. Everything the family did reected on the business including whether or not the business was likely to continue into the future based on the family's heirs. It was why the DaLair's reputation was growing while Tomlinson's faded. Silas was young enough not to worry about such things just yet but he might also be feeling pressure to provide an heir since he did not have siblings himself.

"Well there's only one way to nd out," Alexis said, "we're just going to have to ask him."

"Seriously?"

"Always. Sean you still have access to Prescott Industries' mainframe don't you?"

"Of course." Sean nodded.

A simple phishing scam had granted him access to not only Prescott Industries but also Carlisle Enterprises. Once he had access he quietly burrowed deeper into their respective systems gathering passwords, codes, even going as far as to create his own admin accounts to give himself better access to various systems. As of yet he hadn't attempted to manipulate their systems and as long as he didn't act it was unlikely his presence would be detected.

"Unless they delete my accounts I'll always have access," Sean shrugged. "It's not like a hole in the sand where I need to keep digging or it will ll in."

"Then send him an email."

"And what am I going to say?"

"...Say...We know your secret. Bring \$500,000 in unmarked, non-sequential bills to the penguin enclosure at the New York Aquarium. Noon, Friday."

"Are you serious?"

"If we're going to ask for 500K might as well make it a mil." Theo argued.

Alexis shook her head, "No. If we ask for too much he'll take it as an actual threat. We want him to think we're amateurs or else he'll come down with a whole goon squad."

"You know, sometimes you scare me, sis," Theo said.

"And what is that supposed to mean?"

Sean sighed, "All right. Give me a moment to work this through a few more networks... although I suppose it's ne if he traces it since he already knows where we live."

"Why do you want to talk to him anyway?" Theo asked. "We already know he's garbage."

Alexis didn't answer right away. Though they only knew bits and pieces of the story something their mother said during the late night talk sessions bothered her. She said her sister had met some guys at the bar bragging about the trick they were playing on a friend. If true there was a chance their father was not a willing participant. On top of that, though their conversation at the hospital had been somewhat stilted he hadn't come across as the bastard they usually cast him. She didn't know why she wanted to give him the benet of the doubt but there were questions she was desperate to ask if given the opportunity.

"What about the two guys tailing us?" Sean asked.

"We'll lose them when we have to. It's not too dicult to fool adults."

"True that," Theo agreed.

Sean nodded as he worked to access one of his dummy accounts. Mimicking the IP of a computer onsite he typed out the message Alexis dictated and sent it to their father. If he had a computer at home he would read it immediately otherwise it wouldn't be delivered until the next morning. In either case there wasn't any going back now. He couldn't help but wonder what their father would think when he read it.