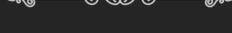


The Billionaire's Twins Play Matchmaker Book One: Chapter 22



"Daddy!" Aria squealed as soon as she threw open the door.

She ran toward him with her arms wide. Julius didn't hesitate to drop his bag and scooped her into his arms blowing raspberries against her cheek. Aria giggled hugging him tight.

"Dad!" Caden followed her out the door. He ran forward to hug his father's leg. Caden was never one to be clingy but now he desperately wanted the attention of the father he only just met.

Julius patted the boy's head as their greeting finally clicked and he asked, "What did you call me?"

"Mommy said you're our daddy!" Aria announced. "Is it okay to call you that?"

Julius sucked in a breath before dropping to his knee to hug both of them. He was shaking but his voice was husky and calm, "I would love for my babies to call me daddy."

They hugged him tight. Perhaps they had been waiting for this moment longer than even him; after all most children are curious about their parents. It warmed him to know they wanted him in their lives despite being absent for so long.

"Aria! Caden! You know better than to open the door for strangers!" Macey rushed to the door but stopped when she saw the trio on the doorstep.

"It's okay, mommy!" Aria said happily. "Daddy's home!"

Macey's face reddened but Julius chuckled. Standing he stepped up to her pulling her into his arms. Capturing his mouth he kissed her long and slow, savoring her taste. Her arms hesitantly circled him holding him close and prolonging their kiss.

He bowed his head to nibble her ear and whispered, "You heard her...daddy's home."

Macey blushed leaning against him to hide her embarrassment. His embrace tightened keeping her close less she tried to escape. Her body felt so good against his. It took everything he had not to start stripping her right then and there so he could touch her skin.

"Daddy, are we going to stay here all night?" Aria asked.

"Dinner will burn," Caden complained.

Julius chuckled finally releasing Macey and allowing her to retreat inside he reclaimed his bag and herded the children in ahead of him. He was already imagining what it would be like to return home like this every night, to be greeted by his children...and his beautiful wife.

Macey returned to the kitchen unwilling to face him again while the kids circled him as he removed his shoes. Caden was the first to ask about the bag, "What's in there?"

"Well, some of my clothes," Julius said.

"Does that mean you're going to stay!" Aria bounced excitedly.

"If your mom let's me."

"She will," Aria said confidently.

"You think so?" Julius studied his children's happy faces.

"Ah-huh," Caden agreed. "She missed you a lot!"

Julius swallowed back his eagerness glancing at the woman making herself busy in the kitchen. His heartbeat echoed in his ears. With the way her body responded to him he knew it couldn't be coincidence. She missed him. That had to mean her feelings hadn't completely cooled. If she had feelings for him then there was hope. His mind went to the velvet lined box he had grabbed from his desk and packed in his bag. He still had a chance.

"Are you going to wear your suit all night?" Aria asked.

"How about I change and then we can play a game before we eat?"

"Yeah!" Aria and Caden cheered.

* * *

Katherine pulled up across the street from the villa and parked. Julius's car remained in the driveway. She wasn't sure if she should be grateful for that or not. With a sigh she picked up her phone and paged through the articles she managed to find. It took some time but eventually she found an exposé about Julius's wedding eight years ago. Apparently it had been a private affair and media had not been invited which was why only a few newspapers even covered the story.

The images accompanying the articles were official wedding photos released by the DaLairs. Julius stood smiling with his blushing bride. They were nearly ten years younger in the photo but she was definitely the same redhead. She really was his wife. Katherine would be lying if she said the redhead wasn't pretty in her mermaid-style gown with a sweat heart neckline.

Katherine chewed her lip as she continued through the articles. The marriage didn't last long and she disappeared quietly after two years. As the cab driver said there was plenty of speculation about the separation from the beginning since the DaLairs made no official announcement. Apparently she had not been a socialite; in fact, her family had been quite poor.

Rumors circulated about how she even managed to attract Julius's attention. Some claimed she purposely sought him out to entrap him in a marriage since she didn't have the social standing anywhere equal to his.

Macey Grayson was the daughter of a painter and a nurse. Her father, Carl Grayson, was a Vietnam vet and his paintings always depicted soldiers. Somehow he managed to gain Augustus as a patron. Most speculated it was because Augustus himself was a veteran and was known to be a vocal supporter of other veterans that attracted him to Carl's work.

Now that Katherine thought about it during her occasional visits to the DaLair estate she had seen several paintings of soldiers scattered throughout the mansion. Could all of those paintings be Carl Grayson's work? Even without knowing the story behind them she thought them distasteful and determined to burn them once she and Julius inherited the estate.

Macey disappeared without a trace so why was she suddenly back? And the children. They couldn't be more than five which meant Macey had been pregnant when she disappeared. Were they the reason she left? Katherine wasn't the only one speculating. She looked again at the recent articles of Julius and Macey and the kids. It wasn't the articles that caught her attention this time but the comments posted underneath.

Who is that woman with Julius DaLair?

She's so hot! Man, the rich get all the goods.

I thought he was engaged.

Looks like everyone here forgot he was married. (This comment was accompanied by an image of the wedding photo.)

Those kids are so cute! Are they related?

Julius DaLair doesn't have kids.

Are you nuts? Look at the boy! They're practically twins!

Did he just pull these kids out of thin air? What is he a magician?

My God! Did all of you forget his marriage? If you saw his wife you'd know that little girl looks exactly like her. (Below the comment was a picture of Macey and Julius at an event sometime after their marriage.)

Wait...he was married?

Oh I remember now! He was married but his wife disappeared like five years ago.

Right. People thought he murdered her and she was buried under the Giant's stadium.

Well those kids are about five. You know his brother's wife had difficulty during her pregnancy...maybe Julius's wife did too. I mean who wants to raise kids surrounded by all those cut throat business men and harpies?

So are they still married?

I'm pretty sure they got a divorce.

There is no way they are divorced. One does not kiss their ex like that!

But he's supposed to be engaged to that blonde...what's her name?

Engaged! Oh please. In her dreams maybe! Have you ever seen them out together anywhere that wasn't a public event? I mean, they don't even arrive together!

Let's settle this right here and now. Who would you want to be seen with...sophisticated and classy (A picture of Macey in her blue gown appeared)

...or trashy and cheap (A picture of Katherine desperately pulling down her cocktail dress after exiting the cab appeared)...Choose wisely.

Katherine's face flushed with embarrassment and she tossed her phone into the backseat. How dare they? She was a woman of means. The daughter of a well-respected family. How dare they compare her to a...nobody! The nothing daughter of a talentless painter!

She couldn't let this woman steal her future. Katherine climbed out of the car and headed across the street. She had a mind to march directly up to the front door and give that redhead a piece of her mind but stopped short. What if Julius answered the door?

Hesitating she circled to the side of the villa. There she found a gate to the backyard but it was locked. The backyard itself was surrounded by a tall stone wall capped with an iron-wrought fence. Even the stone wall was above Katherine's height as she walked down the narrow alley.

Finding metal trash cans Katherine climbed on one. They added just enough height to allow her peak into the manicured backyard. She glimpsed a pool and a Jacuzzi as well. As she silently fumed at the beauty of a home she deserved the backdoor burst open and the twins ran out onto the patio.

"Hurry Caden! Before daddy catches us!"

The twins hurried down the patio steps. The girl turned right and ducked into the step's shadow while her brother turned left and hid behind the odd shed that stood off to the side. Moments later Julius emerged.

He had exchanged his suit for a pair of jeans and a maroon sweatshirt. Katherine nearly fell off her precarious perch. She never saw him in casual clothes before. She didn't even know he owned casual clothing.

Julius descended the steps slowly before turning right and immediately snatched the girl from her hiding place. She squealed laughter as he tossed her into the air before catching her. He blew raspberries against her cheek and pretended to eat her by nibbling her neck. She giggled.

"Stop it daddy!"

He laughed holding her tight, "Now where is your brother?"

"Run Caden! Run!" Aria called warning not that it would help. There really weren't many hiding places beyond the bushes along the wall.

Julius found Caden a few seconds later, scooped her up and also blew raspberries on his cheek which made him giggle as much as his sister. Normally Caden did not like to be touched or held unless it was his mother or Aunt Vicki but with his father he lowered his guard and welcomed the attention.

"Well I caught you, now what?" Julius chuckled holding both of his children.

"New game!" the twins immediately declared.

"Oh? And what's that?" Julius knelt setting them on their feet.

The twins shared a look before Aria shouted, "Get him!"

Together they pushed their father knocking him down before climbing on top of him to hold him down. Julius let out a shout, laughing before declaring, "Oh, you've done it now! It's time for tickle monster!"

He circled his arms around them and immediately started tickling them. The pair screeched laughter squirming to get away but he held them fast.

"Daddy! Stop!"

"Not until you say I win!" Julius said continuing his tickle assault.

"Dinner's ready!" Macey declared from the door. "Come in and get cleaned up!"

Julius finally released the kids letting them return to the patio. With a satisfied sigh he got to his feet and followed. Reaching the door Macey chuckled as she brushed stray grass from his shirt. Without a word he pulled her into his embrace kissing her. They stood forehead to forehead for a long moment before retreating inside.

The door barely closed when Katherine's perch gave out and she tumbled to the concrete. She slowly picked herself up rubbing her elbow. Wincing she limped back to the street leaving the garbage can and trash where it had fallen. Reaching her car she slumped into the driver's seat.

Who knew Julius had it in him to be so caring and loving? He certainly seemed to believe the children were his and they even called him daddy. Would it do her any good to throw suspicion by demanding paternity tests? What if they really were his? Could she somehow bribe the doctor to fake a negative test? Did her father have enough money? Would any doctor risk the DaLair's anger by doing so even if she could afford it?

What should she do?