## **Book One: Chapter Three** "Julius, you look like hell."

With a sigh he turned to face an older version of himself. March was ten years his senior and growing up the brothers had been quite close. Their connection remained to this day. Standing next to each other it was not difficult to see the family resemblance: sandy blonde hair, gray eyes, prominent nose, chin and jaw. They could almost be twins. Julius gave his brother a warning look before sipping his whiskey. All around them

were people dressed in fine suits and summer dresses despite the lingering chill of spring. The air had a party feel with balloons and even a DJ as they crowded the wide, stone patio surrounding the pool of the DaLair family estate. A large sign declared: Happy Birthday, Augustus!

Augustus DaLair was the reigning patriarch of their family empire. At sixty-five he was as domineering as ever and despite losing his much loved wife to cancer thirty years prior he soldiered on with a sharp mind and cutting wit. He was known to be ruthless to his enemies but exceptionally generous to his friends. Everyone strived to be on his good side hence the dedicated attendance for the day's festivities. "Dad! Uncle Jules!"

The brothers turned smiling as a much younger version of themselves approached.

something of a miracle. March and Rose had struggled to conceive and the pregnancy had

been fraught with difficulties throughout. Jude was born four weeks premature and struggled to survive even with the latest technology and techniques. Yet all that was hard to imagine now. His height rivaled his father and he was an open, charismatic young man with a bright future. There had been no doubt in his mind about following his father's footsteps as the only heir to the DaLair business empire and was currently enrolled at Southern New Hampshire

Jude DaLair was nineteen. The only son of March and his loving wife Rose he was

"Jude!" March exclaimed wrapping his son in a bear hug. Like their father, March always wanted a large family. Given the difficulty of Jude's birth he was resigned to one progeny but March would never give up the happy years with his son and wife. "Dad!" Jude chuckled hugging him back.

There was no embarrassment from his father's affections. Like his father and uncle Jude had been raised to cherish close filial ties.

"Hey nephew," Julius ruffed his hair. "Uncle Jules!" Jude mockingly whined about his hair being messed up.

"It's all right," Jude shrugged. "Honestly the stuff they're covering is pretty basic. I learned more on bring-your-son-to-work day."

"Well it's only your first year," March chuckled. "And not everyone has your advantages." "True," Jude agreed. He knew he was exceptionally lucky. "What's the matter

"Just a little stressed at work," Julius made an excuse.

Uncle? You look like you haven't slept in days."

was a secret Julius simply couldn't bear to tell.

"She keeps the others away."

crumbling apart.

see her again."

truth.

"Brother, I know how you feel but..."

"You have no idea how I feel," Julius snapped.

"How's school?"

"There's your mom," March said changing the subject, "make sure you say hibefore you disappear."

"It's about Macey, isn't it?" March said quietly when they were alone again. The anniversary of her disappearance was around the corner. Every year Julius's mood got worse and his drinking increased to dull the depression and guilt but it never

"Sure. Sure." Jude laughed but obediently went search of his mother.

Julius scowled.

worked. The collapse of Julius's marriage made news six years ago yet was all but forgotten

now. Still not even March knew the whole truth: that she had been pregnant at the time. It

March had been there that night though he hadn't seen their argument, only the aftermath. He pulled his brother away from the bar and the social harpies congregating around him to demand what he was doing and where Macey had gone only to receive a disgusted answer, she's probably flirting with some other guy It took everything in March not to hit his brother right then and there but settled for calling him an idiot. Shoving Julius toward the door March told him to head home, get his

mind right and talk to his wife. He had hopes for his brother's marriage, until it all came

"Don't you think I know that? Do you think it makes it easier?"

"No. I don't imagine it does. Is that why you put up with Katherine?"

"Okay, you're right. I don't. But you might have to face facts. You might not ever

"And what about the wedding she's planning?" Julius grunted not offering a genuine answer. He had no plans to marry her. In fact he had no plans to attend the function at all. Surely that would send her a clear message.

March studied his brother. It was hard to believe it had come to this. Like Julius he

grew up with Macey and considered her his little sister. He couldn't remember exactly when he realized Macey developed a crush on Julius but he watched as she struggled to keep her

feelings to herself while Julius remained oblivious. Like any teenager Julius dated several girls and the hurt in Macey's gaze as he ignored her was palpable to those who realized the

come crashing down. Only now in her absence did Julius realize how much she meant to

him but it was too late. If March could turn back time he knew he would have done more to

When Augustus proposed their marriage March supported the idea hoping time together would help Julius finally realize the truth about Macey's true feelings but it had all

him. "There you are dad!" Katherine squealed as the DaLair patriarch finally made his appearance. "Happy Birthday!" Augustus scowled at the woman he only ever referred to as the Harpy How his son endured someone so blatantly shallow and deceptive was beyond him. Out loud he

that she was a successful real-estate agent much sought after for the attention she devoted to her clients as well as the reputation of her father-in-law. "Yes, my dear," Augustus smiled at his daughter-in-law hugging her tight. "You are

"Happy Birthday, granddad," Jude said joining them to try and ease the tension. "Jude! My boy!" Augustus welcomed his grandson with a hearty hug completely forgetting the woman who constantly irritated him.

and had he not lost his wife so early he might have had ten kids and still not been satisfied. After his loss he devoted his time to his sons and later his grandson. Rose easily earned her father-in-law's favor and it was known he treated her as a cherished daughter.

was ready to defend them to the death. It was well-known he always wanted a large family

Augustus was a man of intense loyalty and filial love. He cherished his family and

This was not something Katherine successfully achieved. Her jealousy toward Rose

place within the DaLair family. Augustus had no interest in her at all. The gathered crowd murmured quietly amongst itself. A few shot Katherine sympathetic looks but most averted their eyes. None dared defend her for fear of incurring his wrath themselves. Augustus was not a man to be trifled with. He could singlehandedly

make or break someone's career and it would serve no one to befriend someone who clearly

suit sidled up to the DaLair patriarch. His dark hair and eyes as well as his impressive six

foot five height made him instantly recognizable: Stephen Hugo, Augustus's personal aid as

well as secretary, valet, chauffeur and, some said, body guard. Though the last title was told

as a joke the truth of the matter was Stephen was also a veteran and highly trained or else he

wouldn't have caught Augustus's eye. It was not a stretch to say no man was closer to the

As the crowd milled around clearly uncomfortable a tall gentleman in a simple black

did not have his favor.

from entry.

patriarch than Stephen save his sons. Bending close to his employer's ear Stephen whispered low. Augustus's expression immediately softened and he eagerly turned to his aide saying, "Are they really?" Stephen nodded. Pecking a kiss on Rose's temple Augustus excused himself

The sight that waited him took his breath away and made him smile broadly. "Happy Birthday, Grandpa Gus!" two excited five-year-olds declared as soon as they saw him through the Skype connection. "Hello, you rascals!" he chuckled. The boy and girl on the screen giggled. The boy had a rather serious expression

despite his bright green eyes. His blonde hair had a reddish tint to it. While his features

The girl possessed her mother's vibrant red hair and bountiful curls but her gray eyes

were nearly identical to his father his sister had softer features inherited from their mother.

Reaching the desk Augustus sat down and turned his attention to the open laptop.

at one o'clock, in Paris it was already evening and nearly the twins' bedtime. Being so far from his grandchildren was a constant irritation to Augustus who was so devoted to his family.

"Ah, that is right. It's only a week away," Augustus nodded.

"We have a special present for you, grandpa," the girl said.

"Mommy had to work," the boy said. "There's a lot to get done before her big show."

moved along the keyboard with practiced ease.

"Oh do you?"

"Where's your mom?" Augustus asked.

"Joyeux anniversaire, Grand-pérë!the pair said together. "Thank you, my little birds," Augustus smiled. "Mommy says we'll be visiting you soon." "That's right. I'll be seeing you real soon," Augustus promised. "You be good for

"Okay grandpa. We'll be good! You be good too! Love you!"

grandchildren sing and play their song in front of the stunned crowd.

your mother now. I don't want to hear about any shenanigans."

Comments (4)

any sense at all...he would take advantage of this opportunity. Things were about to get very interesting.

help his brother. Instead of waiting for Julius to figure out the truth he should have just told

declared, "And exactly what's so happy about it? Last thing I want to look at is you!" "Now dad," Rose said coming up to him to play peacemaker: a role she was all too familiar with. "This is a happy day." She was a small woman. Short and almost rail thin. Her lack of weight had always been a health concern but it didn't matter what she ate she hardly gained a pound. Despite

right. Forgive this cranky old man." "Of course," Rose tenderly smiled.

Katherine's forced smile faded. For two years she tried to earn the DaLair patriarch's favor and never once received so much as a grin from him. He was ruthless in his rejection and without Julius to contradict him or support her no one else dared stand against Augustus.

often made her snap at the latter. Had she realized her tantrums were well known to the patriarch she might have curtailed her childish behavior though it wouldn't have secured her

claiming he had an urgent business matter to attend to before retreating inside with Stephen close at his heels. Rose let him go with a conflicted look on her face. It wasn't like Augustus to interrupt such a gathering for business but in the interest of reducing the guests' tension she let him go. Augustus hurried down the hall his cane rasping harshly in his haste. Reaching his study he disappeared inside. Stephen closed the doors and remained outside guarding it

definitely belonged to her father. "Are you having a good birthday?" the girl asked. "Of course. And it's even better now," Augustus smiled. "I've been missing you both so much!" "We miss you too!" the pair declared.

They hadn't been together since their grandpa flew to Paris for their birthday.

Though they Skyped at least once a month it wasn't the same as seeing each other in person.

All calls had to be carefully planned as Paris was six hours ahead so while his party started

The melody unexpectedly changed to a far simpler one with an upbeat tempo and soon the girl's voice chimed in, "Joyeux anniversaire! Joyeux anniversaire! Joyeux anniversaire grand-père Gus! Joyeux anniversaire à toi

was if they were able to perform the number in person. How he would have loved to see his

Augustus chuckled at the adorable pair. The only thing that could have made it better

She stepped back from the screen as her brother carefully set up his keyboard.

Placing his hands on the keys he played Beethoven's Ode to Joy Augustus sat back as the

all too familiar chords echoed around him. His smile broadened as the boy's fingers nimbly

sweet voice. It took him five years but he finally convinced his wayward daughter-in-law to return home. He could only guess at the fireworks that would begin once they set foot in the States. He already knew his sons would never forgive him once the truth was known but Augustus was prepared for that. It was time Julius earned his comeuppance and if he had

savoring the memory of his grandson's expert piano playing and his granddaughter's clear,

All too soon the call ended and he slowly closed the laptop. Augustus leaned back