

## Chapter 21 - The Billionaire CEO's Runaway Wife

Lucas sat at his desk staring at the computer screen lost in thought. He thought a conversation with Samuel would enlighten him about Sarah. Well his eyes were definitely open now. There was so much he hadn't known, so much he still didn't know but one thing was abundantly clear...he was an ass and an idiot. If he could dig a hole and bury himself right now...he would.

Sarah had been abandoned by her brother, dismissed by her father and ignored by her husband, betrayed on the deepest levels by all of them. The only person she could trust was her mother who passed away when she was so young. With a limited budget she poured her heart into her wedding only to be criticized for her inadequacy. She endured so much because of his neglect. What woman would have stayed unless...

She really did love him.

She loved him.

In a world of fakes and frauds and con artists she had been the one real thing in his life.

And he pushed her away, off into the shadows like some dirty secret.

All the important men in her life had judged her, ridiculed her and abandoned her. And she, in turn, walked away from each of them. After hearing the story from Samuel Lucas was practically shaking with rage and shame that in Sarah's mind he was no better than her father.

But he had no one to blame but himself.

He married an amazing woman and allowed his own prejudice to blind him. She loved him. She wouldn't have put so much effort into the wedding, wouldn't have even agreed to it, if she didn't love him. And he dismissed her. He dismissed her.

And now he was paying the price.

Sarah was everything he always wanted. She was lively and energetic, thoughtful and caring, gentle and strong, beautiful and sexy. There weren't enough words to describe her in any language. And she loved him...or at least used to.

Now there was only one person she loved, who she devoted herself to: Zoe.

He still couldn't believe he was a father to such an adorable, energetic little girl. How had he gone so long without her sparkling eyes and bright smile? If he failed this challenge how would he go on without being able to see her again? How could he convince Sarah to stay in his life after he hurt her?

She suffered so much. She survived by walking away and cutting them out of her life. How could he convince her to let him back in? That it was safe to let him back in?

"Hello brother!"

Lucas jerked out of his spiraling thoughts to see Lidia had let herself in without knocking. Madeline was right behind her coyly smiling at him as they approached the desk. Lucas glanced at the pair with no real expression on his face.

"This is a place of work. What do you want?"

Lidia hesitated. Four years ago it was a simple matter to drag her brother out for a shopping trip. He never denied her anything letting her meander and browse to her heart's content. Of course Madeline was included in all activities. It was part of the plan.

Neither could remember when they decided Madeline would be Lucas's perfect wife but it had become their ultimate goal. Once Madeline and Lucas married they would be like real sisters and the pair spent many long, giggling nights discussing everything they would do once they were family.

His marriage to Sarah had thrown a wrench into their plans but it wasn't anything they couldn't handle. It was clear Lucas hated her so all they needed to do was put pressure on her and eventually Sarah would make a mistake so unforgivable Lucas could divorce her. It took longer than they thought it would but they succeeded; however, that was their last success.

Since Sarah left Lucas became obsessed with her. He refused to entertain their demands and inane requests. He didn't take them shopping. He didn't take them out anymore at all. Lidia and Madeline were at a loss to explain why he treated them so coldly.

"Well the DaLair Mixer is in a couple of days and we thought it would be great to coordinate with each other. You know...a united front," Lidia said.

Her brother used to be on good terms with the DaLairs but as of late the relationship soured. She didn't know why. But appearance was important and she wanted to show everyone the Stantons didn't need the DaLairs.

"And why would I want to do that?" Lucas asked his expression unchanging. "We are not a united front. More importantly we aren't even family."

His gaze drifted to Madeline as he spoke making it clear he referred directly to her. Over the last four years he had grown particularly cold toward her almost treating her like a complete stranger.

There had been no photo opportunities and the rumors they worked so hard to start went cold. Madeline puckered her lips into a pout hoping for sympathy but his expression didn't change.

"That's exactly what we wanted to talk to you about," Lidia said. "We think it's time to stop beating around the bush and put certain rumors to rest."

"I see. And those rumors wouldn't happen to be about Sarah coming back, would they?" Lucas asked.

Lidia bit her lip. She hadn't seen him at the party and assumed he left early like always but apparently he had seen Sarah after all. Perhaps Sarah specifically confronted him.

"Don't worry about it. I don't know what lies she's telling now but we'll take care of her so you don't have to worry..." Lidia jerked back as Lucas suddenly leapt to his feet.

He leaned over his desk holding her in a glare he usually saved for outrageous complaints from the Board, "You listen and you listen good. Stay away from Sarah. You will not call her. You will not talk to her. You will not contact her in anyway. Go anywhere near her, try to start anything with her and you're done. Got that?"

Lidia backed a step feeling herself tremble at his tone. He wasn't joking.

"And that goes double for you," Lucas shifted his gaze to Madeline. "Now get out unless you intend to do your actual job."

They hesitated only a moment before withdrawing. Clearly it wasn't a good time. Trying to cover their rejection by maintaining a superior attitude as they retreated there were no halting rumors that would undoubtedly circulate about how their visit had been cut short.

Stepping onto the elevator Madeline finally asked, "What are we going to do now? She's gotten to him somehow."

"Don't worry. I'll take care of her."

"He told you to stay away from her."

"So? I'm his sister. It's not like he's going to do anything to me. Besides I don't have to go anywhere near her. I can make rumors fly from anywhere. Just watch."

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"That was pretty impressive," Alan smirked. It was a pity Sarah hadn't been there to witness it.

Lucas slumped in his chair.

"Do you think she'll actually listen?"

“No. I saw the wheels turning.”

“So what do you want to do?”

“Can you get a paternity test done...quietly?”

“Yeah sure, but why?”

“Lidia doesn’t know about that night but I doubt she would let it go to chance.”

“You think she’s going to try to stir the board up and fake the test?”

Lucas sighed. For as long as he had known his sister there was one thing he absolutely understood: she never gave up. She was so assured of her own superiority she fully believed she was untouchable. Truthfully he hadn’t done much to dissuade her. So it was partially his fault though their mother probably deserved the greater burden of blame for encouraging it.

“Don’t worry. I’ll take care of it,” Alan assured him.

Lucas nodded but it was only the beginning. Lidia would not simply stop at one trick. He had to anticipate all of them. But he also had to anticipate Sarah’s reaction and he was less sure of himself there. He still knew so little about her.

For instance...where was she now?

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“Ooo! Mommy where are we?” Zoe asked as Sarah set her on her feet.

They had spent the morning at the Museum of Ice Cream. Sarah collected several photos of Zoe running around the immersive environments. It was almost like being in Willy Wonka’s Chocolate Factory with brightly colored rooms of giant ice cream cones, sprinkle pools and a three-story slide all devoted to the history of the dairy confection.

Not surprising real ice cream was available throughout the museum allowing them to choose various flavors and toppings to suit their whims. Sarah was certain Zoe would go into a sugar coma by the end of it but she kept running around without an end in sight to her energy.

Zoe’s laughter brought Sarah peace of mind and great joy but it couldn’t last forever. Ava’s words still weighed in her mind.

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“...So are you going to tell me about what’s going on?” Ava asked as they watched the kids play taking turns throwing the ball for Daisy and chasing the puppy as she fetched it.

“What do you mean?”

“I mean you and Lucas.”

“What are you talking about? You invited him.”

“You didn’t have to tell him,” Ava said. “Unless you wanted him to come along.”

“Okay will you just stop with your little psycho-analysis,” Sarah shook her head.

“You still love him, don’t you?”

“I said stop, Ava. It doesn’t matter what I felt four years ago. He never cared about me and it’s over.”

“Is it?”

“Ava...”

“I’m just saying I know. I told you all about what it was like after the night Silas and I spent together and he thought I was a maid. How cold he was and how terrified I became of him ever finding out about me and the kids.”

Sarah nodded.

“And I told you about what it was like when we finally met again after ten years. How sweet he was and caring and kind.”

“It’s different,” Sarah insisted. “You two were drugged and tricked. It was a misunderstanding. Lucas and I...we...”

“Are you sure it’s that different?” Ava asked.

“Silas always loved you. Lucas...never cared about me.”

“If he never cared why has he spent the last four years looking for you?”

“He what?”

“He’s been looking for you,” Ava said. “He’s never stopped.”

Sarah’s brow furrowed trying to fight the flutter in her heart. Did he really look for her?

“I’m not saying you give him a free pass. Just don’t write him off. Running from the pain doesn’t make it go away.”

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“Mommy?”

“Sorry baby, this is an art gallery,” Sarah explained. “We’ll go to the Museum of Natural History tomorrow but I wanted to take you here first.”

Stepping into the small gallery they were immediately faced with a large painting featuring soldiers relaxing against a tank. Strong brush strokes highlighted their tired, almost vacant expressions. There was no glory, no sense of accomplishment. It was a picture of people who had a long, hard day and would have another tomorrow. The painting was titled, Coffee Break by Carl Grayson.

Moving further in they saw a baby grand piano in the center of the space surrounded by false walls that could be moved depending on the changing exhibits. The curator smiled from the desk. She was there to answer any questions they might have but otherwise they were free to explore as they wished.

Sarah wandered through the space. It had been so long since her last visit and she was pleased to see Macey’s work was as engaging as ever. Unsurprisingly Zoe’s favorite was A New Perspective. She particularly liked the fuzzy jumping spider holding up its mandibles as if playing a game of peek-a-boo.

The latest collection was called Daddy’s Girl and featured several images of Julius with their latest little one, Lyra. Sarah smiled at the images of the pair napping on the couch together and playing on the floor with baby toys. Macey always managed such clever compositions that were true to life but also hid the identities of her family models.

For Sarah who knew their family it was not difficult to figure out who was who but for someone who wasn’t close to them personally identifying them would be a more difficult task as she chose angles in profile or shadowed. Yet those angles also gave her work a more intimate feel. As if you were peering over their shoulder.

While they viewed the latest series chronicling Lyra’s baby days up to her first day of school the gallery door opened letting in another visitor. Almost immediately Beethoven’s Sonata #16 echoed throughout the space. Peering around the corner Sarah saw a young boy at the piano expertly tapping away surrounded by a red-haired girl his own age as well as two younger kids.

“Oh my god! Sarah!”

She turned and was immediately engulfed in a fierce hug.

“Hi Macey.”

“That’s it?” Macey suddenly pulled away. “Three years and all you have to say is Hi Macey?”

As usual Macey looked gorgeous with her bouncing mane of red hair and bright green eyes that always made Sarah envious. Her clothing was casual but there was no need for her to put on airs. As a well-respected artist and wife of one of New York's most powerful businessmen no one would dare criticize her even if she went out in her pajamas.

"You better have more to say than that!" Macey declared.

"Mommy, who's that?" Zoe peeked around her staring at the new woman.

"This is your Auntie Macey," Sarah said. "Macey this is Zoe."

"Oh my god, you are so precious." Macey sank to her knee.

Whatever reservations Zoe had instantly melted away and she eagerly hugged the aunt she had only heard about. Macey squeezed her tight before holding her at arm's length to really look at her.

"You are as beautiful as your mother!"

"Thank you," Zoe giggled.

"Mommy?"

Macey turned as a five-year-old with strawberry-blonde hair approached. Aside from the lighter hair she was her mother's miniature complete with green eyes that sparkled when she was excited.

"Lyra, you remember the friend I told you about? I taught her photography for the book she was writing?"

"Auntie Sarah!" Aria greeted hurrying up to them and eagerly hugging her.

"Oh, this is Auntie Sarah?" Lyra said.

"Yes. And this is her daughter, Zoe."

"Hi Zoe!" Aria greeted.

"Hello." Zoe smiled feeling a little self-conscious as another joined them, a boy about eight years old.

"Coda, say hi," Macey said while Caden continued to play.

"Hi," Coda half hid behind his older sister as he studied them.

Though it looked as if the elder DaLair brother was ignoring them, Caden called from the piano, “Hello Aunt Sarah, Zoe.”

“Hi Caden,” Sarah chuckled. As far as he was concerned nothing compared to music. “I saw Lexi and the boys last night.”

Caden nodded not showing any trace of embarrassment or perhaps he had already endured too much teasing for it bother him. Aria was not known for pulling punches when she chose to push buttons. The disparity between the twins always fascinated Sarah who no longer had a good relationship with her own brother.

## Chapter Twenty-Two

# Chapter 22 - The Billionaire CEO's Runaway Wife

“So do you want to talk about it?” Macey asked as they settled on a pair of chairs Sylvia brought out for them.

The kids sat on the floor near the piano drinking juice procured from the gallery’s employee break room along with snacks purchased from a vending machine. Caden had finally left off playing to join them while they ate.

“Ava told you.”

“Of course she did,” Macey scoffed. “We’ve been so worried about you. All we’ve gotten for the past four years are updates from Ruth, seriously. How could you just leave and not tell us?”

“I just...I had to leave.”

“Did you? So you cut out all the people who love and care about you for what? You didn’t think we would have defended you or taken your side? Didn’t you trust us?”

“I trusted you. I do trust you. But I couldn’t stay, not after...”

“Sarah, you can’t keep running away. Believe me. I know.” Macey shook her head. “I ran all the way to Paris, remember?”

“It’s different for me than it was for you and Julius.”



“You think so? You think I wasn’t ostracized because everyone thought I was below him? You think I didn’t have to endure rumors about him having women on the side?”

“But they were just rumors. You knew the truth. He was there for you. It’s not the same.”

“Maybe on the outside it looked that way,” Macey said. “Just because Julius was there physically doesn’t mean he was there emotionally or that I didn’t feel alone.”

Sarah chewed her lip.

“And when it got bad I ran away. I ran when I should have talked to him. We could have saved ourselves a lot of time and pain if we just talked.”

“So you think I should forgive him too.”

“Did I say that?” Macey snapped. “Don’t put words in my mouth, Sarah. I said talk to him. Tell him all the ways he made you suffer. All the pain he made you feel. Make him earn his place if he wants it. Lord knows these men need a few lessons in working for something after the way they are handed things all their lives.”

Sarah stifled a laugh.

“And I know you still love him,” Macey sighed.

Sarah stared at her mouth agape.

“You don’t have to say it. We know.”

“We?”

“Me and Ava. It’s our curse. We always fall in love with the wrong men...stupid ones.”

Sarah bowed her head trying to contain the laughter that bubbled up. Macey chuckled along with her. Taking a breath Sarah said, “We should start a club.”

“Right. Wives with Stupid Husbands Club.”

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While their moms chatted and laughed Zoe suddenly looked at Aria with a serious expression asking, “How do you make your mommy and daddy love each other?”

Aria blinked, “Do your mom and dad not love each other?”

“I don’t know.”

“Do they hug and kiss each other?”

“No.”

“That’s not good,” Aria shook her head.

“That doesn’t mean anything,” Caden said. “Our mom and dad didn’t hug and kiss in the beginning either.”

“Oh. That’s right. I forgot that part.”

“What are your parents like when they are together?” Caden asked.

“Well, daddy’s always looking at mommy but she tries to ignore him.”

“What about when your dad isn’t around? What is your mom like then?”

“...Sad. She smiles and tries to be happy but she’s sad. I can tell. Sometimes I hear her cry in her sleep.”

Caden nodded. All of this was just like when their parents weren’t together. Finally he said, “Your mom and dad already love each other. They just pretend not to.”

“Why do that?”

“Because adults are silly,” he shrugged. “The important thing is to encourage your dad without being pushy.”

“How do I do that?”

“Well, answer all your dad’s questions,” Aria said, “especially when he asks about your mom. He needs to know about what your mom likes and doesn’t like.”

Zoe nodded recalling her breakfast conversation with her father. He did seem to be curious about her mother.

“And it’s important he doesn’t scare your mom by being too aggressive,” Aria said. “Otherwise your mom will run away from him. And you have to keep an eye on people trying to get between them.”

Zoe gave them a puzzled look.

“There may be some people trying to keep them apart,” Caden agreed. “You have to watch out for them.”

“What do I do if they show up? I’m only three.”

“Honestly, Sean, Lexi and Theo have more experience with that than we do,” Caden said.

Zoe sighed. This was certainly not going to be as easy as she thought it would be but she wanted her mother to be happy.

“Just don’t try to push them too quickly,” Aria said. “Adults have to think they are in charge and they usually do things too slowly but you can’t rush them.”

Zoe nodded. There seemed to be a lot of rules. She hoped she could remember them all.

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“Oh! You are coming to the DaLair Mixer aren’t you?” Macey said clutching Sarah’s arm.

“Well I don’t know.”

“You have to! You and Zoe will have such a good time.”

Sarah shook her head. She absolutely couldn’t expose Zoe to that world. Her baby needed to be protected.

“Oh please say yes!” Macey pleaded. “March, Rose and Augustus all want to meet Zoe. Caden, Aria, Coda and Lyra will be there...not to mention Sean, Lexi, Theo, Isaac and Ben too. Augustus insists all the kids be there. Ruth is also invited of course.”

Sarah hesitated. It would be nice to see all the kids playing together. Zoe needed kids her own age to play with, a dog simply wasn’t enough. She occasionally played with kids when they went out to the park but she never asked if they could come to their house for an actual play date.

“I don’t even have anything to wear.”

“Then we’ll go shopping!” Macey laughed. “You and Zoe can each get matching dresses.”

“I get to wear a pretty dress like mommy?” Zoe suddenly perked up.

“Would you like that?” Macey asked.

“Yes!”

“There, you see. She wants to go. You have to come, Sarah. Please?”

“Oh...all right. We’ll go.”

“Excellent,” Macey took out her phone sending off a couple of texts. “I just told Ava, Ruth and Tracy so you can’t back out.”

Sarah sighed as her own phone chirped no doubt with their eager replies. Following Macey and the kids Sarah drove to the mall only to find Ava and the other kids already waiting. Her mouth dropped open as she looked at Macey who just smiled. Either they broke speed records to arrive ahead of time or they were already at the mall waiting. Was this really all planned?

Phalanxed by the four guards Ava and the children always traveled with they made their way through the shopping center with an ever-eager Zoe. Sales clerks practically fell over themselves to engage the trio of society's elite and their children. Sarah was a little uncomfortable with the attention but Macey and Ava simply shrugged. Both had enough experience to know it was a reaction they couldn't control.

While their mothers chatted and caught up with one another, the kids wandered the racks looking at gowns not only for their mothers but also for the girls. They would stop at another store for the boys.

"Lexi?" Zoe hesitated.

"Yeah, what's up?"

Zoe hesitated looking at Aria who gave her an encouraging nod.

"Is there a way to find out if daddy has a girlfriend?"

"You think your dad has a girlfriend?" Lexi asked.

Zoe shrugged, "I don't know. He promised not to hurt mommy."

"Sean."

"Social media," Sean answered taking out his phone and searching through posts. It took a few moments before he finally said. "Madeline Rogers."

Zoe's face fell, "So daddy does have a girlfriend."

"Not necessarily," Sean frowned, "although Lexi is a better judge of body language than I am."

He handed over his phone and let her look at the pictures he found along with their headlines. Clearly the gossip columns were pairing them up. It was also pretty obvious what Madeline wanted but...

"A video would be better but... Yeah I don't think your dad likes this woman at all," Lexi said.

"Really?" Zoe asked hopefully.

“When we first met our dad there was a woman hanging around him too even though he made it clear he didn’t like her,” Lexi said handing Sean his phone back. “She even tried to break our parents up.”

“You know, this post is from four years ago,” Sean said. “I can’t find anything more recent either.”

“Four years?” Lexis thought about it. “That’s when Aunt Sarah left. Sounds like Madeline was trying to break them up so she could take her place.”

“But if they aren’t together after four years then Zoe’s dad probably doesn’t like this woman at all,” Theo agreed.

“So…daddy likes mommy?” Zoe asked hopefully. “And that woman tried to hurt mommy before. Do you think she’ll try it again?”

The older kids shared a look and nodded. In their experience women who were obsessed with powerful men like their dads didn’t give up easily.

“I think she had help,” Sean announced. “Looks like she’s friends with Lidia Stanton.”

“Who’s that?” Zoe asked.

“She’s your dad’s sister.”

“So…she’s my auntie? But mommy never talked about her.”

“Well if Lidia was helping Madeline to break up your parents it’s safe to say she and your mom didn’t get along,” Theo said.

“So I have a mean auntie?” Zoe’s face fell.

Aria grimaced. Her mother was an only child and her father’s sibling was affectionate and kind as was her aunt so she didn’t have any experience with cruel relatives like the Prescott siblings.

Alexis knelt to Zoe’s level saying, “Our mom’s sister is mean too so we don’t consider her our aunt. So you don’t have to call Lidia your aunt either.”

“Okay. I don’t want a mean auntie.”

Alexis nodded patting her head and stood. After everything their own parents had gone through she and her brothers made certain their little brothers never learned about their earlier struggles. She felt that same protective instinct now for Zoe.

“So…what are we going to do?” Theo asked.

“I think that should be obvious,” Alexis announced giving Sean a pointed look.

“Hack their socials and flood the media with compromising photos,” Sean nodded. “Looks like we’re in the gossip business again.”

“Just like old times,” Theo chuckled.

“Speaking of old times,” Lexi said, “if they broke up Zoe’s parents once they’ll try to do it again.”

“So keep an eye on Aunt Sarah and get footage.” Theo took out his phone. With a wink he slipped away.

“Don’t worry Zoe,” Lexi smiled encouragement. “We got this.”

“Aria, look at this dress!” Lyra said. “Won’t mommy look pretty?”

“Yep. She will.” Aria agreed when she saw the dress her younger sister picked. “What about your mom, Zoe? What kind of dresses does she like? Our mom likes mermaid-style.”

Zoe shrugged. Her mother didn’t wear many dresses especially fancy ones. Aloud she said, “She likes all kinds but her favorite colors are purple, gold and red.”

“That’s a weird combo,” Sean commented but the girls remembered autumn was Sarah’s favorite season.

“Then how about this one?” Aria pointed out a burgundy gown with a cowl-style neckline.

“That’s pretty,” Zoe declared liking the sparkly fabric.

“Then we’ll definitely grab that one,” Lexi agreed recognizing the need to distract the three-year-old. Taking care of adults was best left to older kids.

It was unfortunate they wouldn’t be able to maintain proper surveillance since they didn’t live under the same roof as Zoe and her mother. They could only hope her father was aware of his sister and Madeline’s plot and was maintaining watch himself. Then again...adults were not very observant. This would take some strategic thinking.

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“Oh! Sarah, that’s the one!” Ava declared as she stood in front of the mirrors for their approval.

The kids clapped loudly especially Zoe who loved to see her mother dressed-up. Both Macey and Ava had their turns on the pedestal so the focus was on Sarah. Now that their gowns were set it was time to choose dresses for the girls.

“Oh stay right there and we’ll help Zoe find something to match,” Macey said.

Rounding up the kids Macey and Ava herded them to the kid’s section eager to see Zoe and her mother dressed up together. Sarah chuckled at their eagerness. In fact she was also looking forward to seeing it too. She had always been jealous of Ava and Macey when they shopped with their daughters. For the first time she could experience it herself.

“Well, well, what do we have here?”

Sarah stiffened and slowly turned. Standing a few feet from her was not a person she ever wanted to see again. Lidia held a little black dress as if she wanted to use the fitting rooms. Beside her was Madeline also looking to try on a dress. Sarah’s gaze briefly scanned the shop floor expecting to see Lucas but remarkably he was nowhere to be seen. So Lidia and Madeline were shopping alone?

Sarah glared at them mustering the strength she so carefully built over the last three years. That’s right. She was strong. She had done everything on her own while these two hadn’t worked a day in their lives expecting everything to be handed to them. They couldn’t intimidate her.

“Hello Lidia, long time, no see,” Sarah answered evenly. “It was nice while it lasted.”

Lidia sneered, “Just who do you think you’re kidding? Coming back here when it was pretty obvious no one cared you left. No one came looking for you, did they? My brother threw a party to celebrate.”

“And let me guess you stained the carpet of his condo so badly he had to move out,” Sarah sighed. “That tracks. Neither one of you is housebroken.”

Madeline grew red though Lidia managed to maintain a somewhat neutral expression. Even so, it was clear Sarah struck a nerve. Perhaps neither of them had been aware he moved out of his condo, or if they did they didn’t know where he lived now. What else didn’t they know? After all Ava assured her Lucas had been looking for her despite what Lidia claimed.

“You think you are so smart,” Lidia laughed. “I took a peek at your phone. It seems you erased all those text messages I sent you. Oh well.”

Sarah frowned glancing at her purse which sat open alongside Macey’s and Ava’s. Reaching into it she pulled out her phone seeing that it was opened to her messages though of course Lidia and Madeline’s contact information and previous messages weren’t there. It was hard not to laugh.

“So this is what you were concerned about,” Sarah shook her head. “What’s the matter? Afraid you’d get caught in your little scheme. Well let me put your fears to bed. All your little messages aren’t on this phone because you never had this phone’s number.”

Lidia’s smile slowly disappeared but Sarah wasn’t done.

“But don’t worry, I have all of your messages and your sadistic mother’s and of course I have all of Madeline’s. That phone is with my lawyer who has kept it safe all these years. Just waiting.”

Not only had Lidia’s smile completely faded she had gone deathly pale.

“So if you don’t want the scandal of the century coming down on your heads...I suggest you stay as far from me and my daughter as you can.” Sarah smiled enjoying their shocked faces.

“Because my lawyer can’t wait to plaster your names in the headlines and drag you through the mud.”

Lidia hesitated but she had no comeback. If word got out she deliberately broke up her brother’s marriage it was unlikely she would recover her reputation and her mother...dear god the things her mother wrote sounded like they came from a wicked witch. If that ever became public knowledge...

“Ma’am, did you want to try on that dress?” the sales clerk nervously asked. She had fallen silent during the exchange and wisely so.

“No. I won’t be buying anything here. It seems this store has lost its charm. Come on, Madeline.”

They left their dresses and Sarah felt a little lighter. Why had she ever let herself be intimidated by them in the first place?

“Mommy! Mommy! Look what I found!”

Sarah set her phone down and turned to see Zoe holding a pretty magenta dress. It wasn’t quite the same color as her gown but it was close and would look absolutely adorable on her.

“So pretty, let’s put it on so we can see how we’ll match.”

“Okay!”

“So?” Alexis sidled up to Theo as they watched Sarah take Zoe into the changing rooms.

Wordlessly Theo handed over his phone and played the video he just took. Once it finished he smiled, “Aunt Sarah is vicious. Maybe we don’t have to worry about her.”

“Maybe,” Alexis frowned. “We’ll still keep an eye on it the best we can. Lidia doesn’t strike me as the type to give up after one lost battle.”

“True that.”

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“Oh my god, Lidia what are we going to do?” Madeline asked. “If your brother reads those texts...he’ll...”

“Calm down,” Lidia said. “Clearly she hasn’t shown them yet. We just have to get rid of her before she does.”

“How are we going to do that? She doesn’t seem to be in a hurry to leave.”

“I know what we’ll do,” Lidia took out her phone and selected a contact. “Sarah thinks she’s so smart but we’ll just take her down a peg or two...Hi James! How are you? Look, I got a proposal for you...”

Chapter Twenty-Three

## Chapter 23 - The Billionaire CEO's Runaway Wife

“Oh my god!” Alan suddenly exclaimed from the couch where he was working on his laptop. “You’re Edward!”

Lucas looked up from the papers he was trying to focus on, “What?”

“You’re Edward!”

“What are you...” Lucas hesitated. Zoe called him that too. “What does that mean?”

Alan rolled his eyes before bringing his laptop over and setting it on the desk. On it the browser had been left on an online shopping site and displayed a list of Rosemary Thomas books in order but Alan was only interested in one: Willow Remember Me?

“It takes place in Spain but that isn’t the important part,” Alan announced. “In it Rosemary is investigating an illegal gambler’s den where she meets Edward who is investigating the same thing. At first they don’t really get along but they agree to work together because they have the same goal.”

“And?”

“What do you mean? They get together. Like, really together.”

Lucas felt his face warm, “Oh. So he’s her love interest?”

“Yeah. At the end of the book she finds out he’s a prince and engaged to someone else,” Alan said. “So Rosemary...leaves. She just leaves, poof, disappears never to see him again. But she finds out she’s pregnant later.”

Lucas felt himself run cold. A brief love affair that turns sour? And Rosemary leaves without a trace? A moment of passion that results in a baby? Silas’s words came back to him in a flash, “...once you know it’s Sarah who wrote these books they almost work like an autobiography.”

Now it made sense. Yes, the books were fiction but Sarah relied on her own personal experiences to guide them which meant the truth was woven into the narrative. That’s what Silas meant.

“Get me the books,” Lucas said.

“What? All of them?”

“Yes. Today. Now.”

“Give me an hour,” Alan nodded sensing his desperation. “I’ll be right back.”

Lucas forced an uneasy breath. While he waited he read the blurbs of the other books. The information focused on plot, not the character, which meant he would have to read the books to find answers. But did he have enough time? He only had two weeks to convince her to stay. Even if he managed one a day it would take almost all the time he had left. There had to be a short cut.

With Alan’s browser tab open he spent the next hour searching for outlines of each book. While the descriptions detailed plot highlights they didn’t offer much about the character traits of Rosemary herself and it was the character he was interested in.

“Got ‘em,” Alan announced as he returned with a large shopping bag from the bookstore. “All right we have the Foxglove Files, the Manchineal Tree, To Catch a Cattail, Blackberry Spirits, Sage Advice, Poppy Dreams, Willow Remember Me? This is the one where she meets Edward. Followed by Primrose Dawn and Daisies in Bloom. Primrose is about Rosemary’s pregnancy and Daisies in Bloom follows the birth of her daughter.”

Lucas reached for Willow Remember Me? This was the very same book Silas tried to give him. Silas claimed he read them all so, of course, he would know what was in each book. Lucas felt himself warm as he trembled. He wasn’t sure if it was from embarrassment or rage.

“You know that book came out...” Alan hesitated as Lucas looked up. “A year after Sarah left you. She must have been writing it before she left.”

Lucas grimaced but it left many questions. Why did she wait for the seventh book to write about him? Why wait until the third year of marriage? Taking a deep breath he opened the cover to read the dedication:

As always I must thank my ever dutiful editor Ruth. Without her encouragement Rosemary Thomas would never have seen the light of day.

And to my Prince, wherever and whoever he may be.

Lucas swallowed back his disappointment. What did he expect? In order to maintain her anonymity she wouldn't name names and he hadn't done anything to earn a favorable mention. With a sigh he turned to chapter one.

"Ah...you really should start with the first one," Alan said but fell silent at Lucas's glare. "Well, um, you don't have to. Most of them aren't direct sequels...more like sequential. You shouldn't miss too much reading them out of order."

"Alan, do me a favor. I want you to write an outline of each book with everything you learn about Rosemary."

"Rosemary?"

"Yes...I don't care about plot just the character. Her likes, dislikes, family...whatever details are given."

Alan frowned. Those sorts of details rarely meant much when it came to the plot but then again it was clear Lucas didn't care about the books. If Rosemary was meant to be Sarah then any detail shared about her could be one about Sarah.

"Right. Okay." Alan reclaimed his laptop and returned to the couch. It seemed they wouldn't be getting much work done after all.

As Lucas read his mind wandered and he couldn't focus on the plot. Suddenly a thought occurred to him and he paged ahead scanning the words looking for the one that concerned him. Finally spotting a mention of Edward he paged back to the beginning of the chapter to read.

\* \* \*

Okay. So this didn't go as planned.

I took a deep breath calming my racing heart from the shock of my sudden escape. Clearly Harold and I needed to have a talk. If he was going to continue hanging around he would have to improve his early warnings. But that was a concern for another day.

I turned to my rescuer as he too caught his breath. Six foot with broad shoulders, his arms were almost as thick as my thighs. His brown hair was wavy, almost curly, and I immediately wondered what it would be like to run my fingers through it.

Where did that come from?

His dark eyes scrutinized me: confusion, anger, shock, lust, revulsion...it all seemed to flicker in his gaze. Honestly I wasn't sure what to think about the last two.

"So are you going to tell me why you're here?" he finally asked his voice smooth and alluring.

Honestly where were these thoughts coming from?

"It's an illegal gambler's den," I answered holding up my camera. "Obviously I'm gathering evidence to shut it down."

"You're American."

"Thank you Captain Obvious." I rolled my eyes. I couldn't place his accent but it gave his voice a richness that would send any woman's heart racing.

"All right. Let's see those pictures and you can go."

"Excuse me?"

"This is no place for a woman."

"Oh really? Misogynistic much?"

"I'm not...Do you not understand what just happened? What those men were going to do to you when they caught you? They could have killed you!"

"Yeah...well, there are worse things. Besides I owe it to my friend to finish what they started."

"Friend? And where is this friend?"

"The morgue."

He fell silent.

"The Policia say it was an accident. An accident. A championship swimmer drowned. Anyway you say it, it sounds suspicious. He asked me to help and I'm not leaving until I do."

"I thought you said they were dead. How did they ask for your help?"

And here we go...

"As I said, there are worse things than death. So what do I call you?"

"...Edward."

"Rosemary."

\* \* \*

Lucas leaned back running a hand through his natural wavy hair. Ever since he was little it bothered him. If it was a little tighter it would be curly and if he allowed it to get long it was almost like an afro. A CEO shouldn't have such soft hair. It just didn't strike an intimidating profile but did Sarah really like it that much?

He reread the description. It really did seem like she appreciated his physique. So she thought he was good looking. It shouldn't matter but it made him embarrassed somehow.

It made up for the fact he hadn't been able to take his eyes off her since he spotted her at the party. His eyes must have run down her curves a hundred times. If he closed them now he could clearly picture her. The now familiar yearning to touch her smooth skin and feel her body next to his bloomed and he could feel his pants tighten.

Lucas set the book down trying to marshal his thoughts. But all he could think about was the purple dress she had worn: the swell of her breasts, the roundness of her hips. And her legs... But it wasn't the first time he had a chance to see her body. His mind and memory were admittedly foggy but he still remembered their wedding day.

He stood at the altar with Alan beside him. Lucas had already peeked at the rings. They were nothing special. In fact they were rather plain. Her ring didn't even have a single diamond chip. At the time he thought it an insult but now he knew she had paid for them herself.

She couldn't spend the money she made from her books freely on the wedding if she wanted to keep it secret. He couldn't imagine her frustration, torn between wanting the perfect wedding and avoiding the suspicion of her family. Lucas frowned.

Sarah walked herself down the aisle after a single bridesmaid. Her dress was simple, off the shoulder and layered with lace over satin that was somewhat off-white with age but gave it an antique look. The bodice hugged her waist and accentuated her gentle breasts and hips. She was tall, taller than average which meant she had plenty of leg and he remembered thinking it was rather frustrating her skirt hid them from view.

When she reached the altar to face him he was finally able to fully appraise her height. She was only a few inches shorter than himself. That fact alone made him more appreciative of his grandmother's choice. While Silas didn't seem to have any issue with Ava's petite form Lucas much preferred a woman he could look in the eye without stooping.

Sarah had a pleasing face, a smooth jaw and straight nose. Her lips were full and her eyes...hazel. In the warm light of the church they were very green though later when they stepped out to the waiting limo they took on a bluish tinge. Her eyes were fascinating to watch as they shifted depending on the light and her emotions like mood rings.

At the time he pushed these thoughts away not wanting to admire anything about the wife his grandmother chose. It was no secret he had been against it but there was nothing he could do. His

grandmother's edict was very clear. If he wanted to be her heir he had to marry. She expected grandchildren within a year. He managed to convince her he and his bride needed time to learn about each other before they tried to get...intimate.

But he never tried. He never took her out to dinner or even shared a quiet meal at home with her. Ulima's cooking would have made for an excellent opportunity to find some common ground. For years Lucas lamented that no one around him appreciated spicy food. While he put up with their bland preferences they complained about his breath. Meanwhile he could have been enjoying meals with Sarah.

Bewitching eyes, long legs, spicy food: it seemed everything about her was specifically matched to him. He couldn't imagine a more perfect fit. And yet he hadn't seen it, never acknowledged it. He ignored her and slowly she faded into his shadow.

God what an idiot he was!

"Alan, you finished?" Lucas rubbed his temples.

"I've only done the first book, but here you go."

The Foxglove Files

Born in Louisiana.

Education degree from college.

Substitute teacher.

Mother died when she was young.

Raised by her aunt who was also a medium.

First ghost she spoke to was her mother.

Father unknown drifter. No siblings...

Lucas looked at the list Alan made. It really didn't amount to much, maybe more was revealed with each book. Perhaps it required more thorough exploration like the chapter he had been reading. This wouldn't work. Glancing at the clock he saw it was only noon. There was still time...Vermont.

"Where did you say Sarah was living?" Lucas asked.

"Vermont."

"I mean city."

“Oh,” Alan hesitated looking through his messages. “Brattleboro.”

“How far is that?”

“Drive wise?” Alan called up his phone’s GPS. “Three and half hours, approximate.”

“Right. Let’s go.”

“To Brattleboro?”

“Yeah, let’s go. I want to see where my wife and baby have been living.”

Chapter Twenty-Four

## Chapter 24 - The Billionaire CEO's Runaway Wife

Alan wasn’t sure if the drive was too long or too short but he was certainly ready to be done with it by the time they arrived at their destination. Lucas was a bundle of nervous energy. As soon as they had gone to the company’s motor pool and selected their vehicle Lucas yanked off his tie and threw his jacket in the back.

While Alan programmed the GPS and drove Lucas continued to page through Willow Remember Me? pausing to read wherever Edward appeared. Alan couldn’t tell if reading made Lucas more anxious or if the ride was making him tense the closer they came to their destination.

The picturesque New England countryside eventually gave way to a picture-worthy New England town. Lucas finally set down the book to take in his surroundings. He wasn’t sure if Brattleboro was larger than expected or smaller.

It was, in a word, quaint. Living in New York inured him to crowds and organized pandemonium. This town was far more peaceful and postcard worthy. Lucas breathed deep as they passed a mother and child and immediately pictured Sarah and Zoe walking along with Daisy on her leash. A smile appeared on his face. He could almost see Zoe dancing around her mother eagerly asking questions as the puppy spun circles.

This was the perfect place to raise such a precocious child. What would it be like to walk along these storefronts with them? Just the thought of it was easing the knots in his shoulder and back. Without a word Alan pulled up to a storefront and parked.

“Why are we stopping?”

“Since I found out Sarah lived here I had a friend do some digging. Apparently she owns this store.”

Lucas blinked looking at the window sign: Cindy’s Antique Chic. He frowned, “Who’s Cindy?”

“Her mother.”

“Oh.” Lucas fell silent.

That was right. Samuel said their mother had been into antiques, a love she passed to Sarah. Apparently Sarah named the store after her mother. Maybe this store was a dream her mother once entertained but was never able to attain. It was a shame really considering Sarah’s father certainly had the means to help her mother establish such a store but apparently he never did.

Considering how much money Sarah made as an author there really was no reason for her to operate such a store except as a passion project to honor her mother’s memory perhaps the only family member she loved and acknowledged.

After a moment of thought he stepped out. Alan followed his example and entered the store. It was small and cramped but organized. It was clear Sarah paid a lot of care and attention to her shop. Though her income didn’t depend on it she approached it with complete seriousness.

Lucas slowly circled the displays noting how she set up areas as if part of a living space. A rocking chair sat in the corner beside shelves laden with books and tin toys. The space was set aside by a woven rug and a lamp made of tarnished copper tubing, a birdcage strung with beads and Edison bulbs. Another corner had been set up like a living room with a reupholstered chair and side table. Near the door was a kitchen cabinet with cast iron pots and pans as well as dishes and utensils.

Curio cabinets were loaded with various collectibles and interesting finds. Lucas paused studying a shelf loaded with interestingly shaped, colored bottles. In fact there was a chandelier over the checkout counter with bottles hanging from it. Not everything was valuable but value and beauty were in the eye of the beholder.

“Can I help you?” the clerk emerged from the back carrying a crate with more items.

“Just browsing,” Alan said with a smile while Lucas ignored him.

“Oh...you two together?” the clerk asked setting the crate on the counter glancing from one to the other.

“What? No. He’s just my boss,” Alan shook his head. “He’s...looking for a gift for his wife.”

“Oh. I can suggest something. What kind of things does she like?”



“Well, that’s the problem. He doesn’t really know,” Alan shrugged. “And I’ve never been interested in women so it’s basically like two blind people stumbling around in a china shop.”

The clerk shared chuckled with him before hesitantly repeating, “Not interested in women?”

“Yeah. I don’t...swing that way. If you know what I mean.”

“Me neither,” the clerk muttered as he carefully removed items from the crate to price.

Though he spoke low Alan heard his words well enough. Hesitating he sidled closer to the counter, “So what are you interested in? I mean...what is there to do around here?”

The clerk gave him a startled glance before answering, “Well anything you want really. I’m part of the theater troop.”

“Really?”

“Yeah, last year we put on a performance of *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead*. I was Rosencrantz.”

“No kidding? I saw that play back home. Wish I could have seen yours.”

“Well, it was nothing special,” the clerk blushed. “I’m Kyle.”

“Alan. So are you putting on a play this year?”

“Yeah, ah, *Into the Woods*.”

“Never heard of it.”

“What? Really? Well, it’s a musical...”

Lucas sighed slowly turning to take in the whole store. This wasn’t getting him anywhere. Glancing at his watch he saw the time. Shit.

Heading to the door he paused when Alan didn’t follow. Looking over his shoulder Lucas saw him talking to the clerk he hadn’t even acknowledged. In fact Alan almost seemed to be...flirting?

Alan wasn’t one to talk about his personal life but Lucas knew he had a difficult time meeting prospective partners. Considering he worked as many hours as Lucas it was understandable there wasn’t much time left for other activities. The business world, like all others, also labored under its prejudices and misguided misogyny making it difficult for anyone who wasn’t a straight, white man to achieve success and prestige.

Alan never complained. He simply did his job but in the back of his mind he had to be boiling. As much as Lucas wanted to let him have this moment there simply wasn't time. It was another three-hour drive back and they were already pushing their luck.

"A-hem!" Lucas cleared his throat.

Alan grimaced glancing over his shoulder before turning back to Kyle, "Looks like I'm being paged. I know I should have insisted he get his license."

Kyle smirked.

"Ah, here," Alan grabbed a piece of paper from the crate and wrote down his phone number. "Uh, call me? I'd really like to see your new play."

His cheeks turning pink Kyle nodded. He reached for the cash register and pulled out a length of receipt tape jotting down his own phone number before handing it to him. They both smiled shyly as Alan backed away and eventually made it outside where Lucas waited by the car.

"Did you get what you needed?" Lucas asked.

"Not yet but..." Alan paused feeling his cheeks warm.

"Sorry to cut you short but we are in a bit of a time crunch."

"Right." Alan nodded climbing behind the wheel as Lucas slumped in the passenger seat beside him.

"Look at it this way, he works for Sarah so if I can find a way to keep her in my life you're guaranteed he'll be in yours."

"So my love life depends on yours?" Alan said. "That's not really comforting."

"Just drive." Lucas rubbed his temple. "You know her address, right?"

"Yeah." Alan sighed and pulled away from the curb.

They left town and drove another mile or so before Alan turned at a mailbox and drove down a narrow driveway. The trees suddenly parted allowing them to enter a small, homestead complete with barn and pasture. Even though Lucas was expecting a farm it was still a shock to see.

Like the town they just left the farm was quaint and charming. Lucas stepped out of the car slowly taking it in. This was where Sarah chose to raise their baby. Miles away from the hustle and bustle of the city it offered fresh air and woods full of discoveries for an enterprising little girl. He felt himself relax as he pictured her running around the yard with Daisy at her heels.

“There’s the horse!” Alan excitedly exclaimed stepping toward the pasture to snap a picture on his phone.

At the fence a bay gelding stood watching them. It took Lucas several moments to recognize the horse from the back of the third book. Alongside it was a donkey and two goats. All four animals watched them curiously before gradually losing interest and wandering away from the fence. Several chickens pecked around the barnyard wholly unconcerned with their visitors.

Lucas turned his attention back to the house. It had a large open porch that covered two sides of it giving its occupants pleasant views of the barn and yard. With a sigh he climbed the steps and hesitantly tried the door only to find it locked. He let out a disappointed sigh. What else did he expect?

Lucas was ready to turn away as Alan joined him, “Locked?”

He nodded.

Alan squatted checking under the welcome mat to find nothing. Standing he stepped up to the door and felt along the head of the door frame. With a smile he took down a key that had been placed there.

Lucas raised a brow as Alan unlocked the front door and gestured for him to enter. With some trepidation Lucas stepped into the house Sarah and Zoe had made for themselves.

Unlike the house in Astoria which had largely been left untouched it was clear Sarah made this one to suit herself. The kitchen was painted a bright yellow and the living room a warm goldenrod. There was artwork: photographs by M. Gray as well as a large painting over the mantel. The shelves were lined with books, not just Rosemary Thomas but also classics like the *Scarlett Letter*, *Pride and Prejudice*, *Sherlock Holmes* among others including more recent titles like *Reading Lolita in Tehran*, *Mala’s Cat* and the *DaVinci Code*.

It was clear Sarah was an avid reader and her tastes in literature rather eclectic. Yet it wasn’t the books that caught his attention. It was the pictures. Across the mantel and scattered on different shelves were framed photographs all featuring Sarah.

There was an image of her in a jumpsuit standing beside a small plane with a half dozen others as well as a picture of her in the air tandem jumping with an instructor. Another featured Sarah on horseback in full western gear as they rounded a barrel. In a different picture Sarah wore a masquerade mask alongside another woman with mocha-colored skin. Both were rather flushed and toasting the camera.

Lucas’s mouth went dry as his gaze fell on an image of Sarah in a bikini and scuba gear. There was one of her, Macey and the twins. Caden and Aria couldn’t be more than three at the time confirming just how long Sarah had actually known them. Another pictured Sarah on a tropical beach with a parrot perched on her shoulder.

There were so many with just as many stories to tell. Then he spotted the ones with Zoe. On the wall was a frame with a single picture in the center surrounded by other smaller ones. The center picture showed Zoe in NICU. All round it were smaller pictures labeled: one month, two months, three months...clearly charting her growth through her first year. There was a picture of Zoe and the two goats outside. Another featured her and her mother riding double on Applejack. One showed Zoe sitting with the same mocha-skinned woman from the mask picture as well as a boy about the same age as Zoe. Another included the same boy with Zoe rolling out dough with an older lady. There were also pictures of Zoe and Ruth as well as a few with Taylor on some sort of camping-fishing trip.

The only one missing was Lucas.

Silently he picked up a picture with Sarah and Zoe on an unnamed beach in their swimsuits building a sandcastle. Lucas didn't know where they were but he desperately wished he had been with them. He was such a fool.

"Hey! This must be her writing desk," Alan said in awe sitting down as he ran his hand along the polished top.

All of the furniture in the house were antiques rescued from various sales and stores. The wood had been carefully oiled and restored while the upholstery had been replaced and recovered allowing it to look like a matching set despite the differences in style. The desk was no different. It had been carefully sanded and varnished. There were still some scuff marks and discoloration from use and age but it just gave the desk more character.

Alan smiled as he ran his fingers along the grain. For years he wondered what Rosemary's writing desk looked like, what kind of home she maintained to spark her creativity. Now he knew. Alan looked out the window in front of him to see the large play set in the yard. A solitary chicken perched on the climbing dome made from metal framework.

So this was Rosemary's world.

Alan glanced over his shoulder to see Lucas had joined him and was studying the view out the window.

"...So. I suppose the bedrooms are upstairs," Alan said. "Did you want to take a look?"

Lucas's cheeks tinged pink at the thought of seeing Sarah's bedroom. After a moment he shook his head his gaze going back to the picture in his hand with Sarah and Zoe on the beach. As much as he wanted to see the bedroom he wanted to be invited first.

"We need to head back," Lucas said. "It's getting late."

"Right." Alan nodded. "Let's go. You have people waiting for you."

The thought almost brought a smile to his face if only it were true. Maybe Zoe was waiting but Sarah was still too distant. How could he possibly close the gap? Leaving the house as they found it Alan locked the front door before re-hiding the key.

With Lucas quiet in the passenger seat Alan retraced their journey back to the interstate and another three-hour ride home. Setting the cruise control Alan sighed and stretched. He glanced at Lucas who remained silent staring out the window.

“Hey, what’s that?”

“Hmm?” Lucas blinked.

“That.” Alan pointed at his hand.

Lucas followed the gesture to see he still clutched the photograph of the beach holiday. Staring at the scene he said, “I guess I forgot to put it back.”

“Well, it’s too late to return it,” Alan sighed. “But I don’t think it would be a good idea for Sarah to find out.”

Lucas grunted not taking his eyes off the picture. Alan glanced at him and smiled.

“What?” Lucas warned.

“Nothing. Nothing at all.”

## Chapter Twenty-Five

# Chapter 25 - The Billionaire CEO's Runaway Wife

The drive back was long and conducted in awkward silence. Lucas spent the majority of it staring at the photo studying every inch of Sarah’s body on display in her bikini. There was no self-consciousness in her expression and she seemed wholly comfortable as she built a sandcastle with Zoe.

It was a drastic change from how she acted now. Whenever she was around him she seemed uncomfortable in her own skin. Was it because he used to ignore her? Did she not like the attention he gave her now? Would she be okay if he was someone else? The thought of another man showering her with attention made him fidget with jealousy.

“If you sigh one more time I’m pulling over,” Alan warned.

Lucas glared at him.

“I’m serious. Sighing at the picture isn’t going to help. What are you thinking about?”

“You don’t think...I mean Sarah wouldn’t have...”

“A boyfriend?” Alan asked.

“Yeah.”

“I don’t think so. According to Kyle she isn’t seeing anyone.”

“Kyle?”

“The sales clerk at the antique shop.”

“You talked to him about Sarah?”

“About the shop,” Alan corrected. “Which naturally led to talking about his boss.”

“And here I thought you were just flirting.”

“I was.”

Lucas raised a brow in confusion.

“Hey, if you get your love life in order maybe I can finally have one. Any information can be helpful.”

“You really like him, don’t you?”

Alan’s cheeks tinged pink which was more than enough confirmation for Lucas. He had never seen his friend flustered before.

After a moment Alan finally spoke, “Just don’t mess this up.”

Lucas grimaced. That was easier said than done. How did one even begin to make up for the past six years? He had made so many mistakes. Did he even have the right to be forgiven?

“Look, you have to talk to her,” Alan continued when he didn’t answer.

“She won’t even look at me.”

“She doesn’t have to look at you to hear you,” Alan said.

“And what am I supposed to say?”

“Start with...I’m sorry. I was an idiot. And you hope it’s not too late to make up for it.”

Lucas nodded.

“Just bite the bullet and do it.”

“What if she says there isn’t a chance?”

“Then at least you’ll know. Isn’t that better than making yourself sick worrying?”

Lucas breathed deep. He supposed that was correct. Maybe this was how Julius felt when Macey returned with the twins. The fear of rejection, constant worry about her and the children’s health...He had to start somewhere.

He was impatient to be home but the car ride seemed to drag on forever. It was almost eight before Alan finally pulled up to the house. Lucas frowned realizing he had probably missed dinner. His heart hammered in his head as he approached the front door. Tucking the picture in the shopping bag alongside the Rosemary books he took a deep breath before entering.

The scent of corn, chicken, cheese and vegetables was still thick and the house had a pleasant warm feeling. Ulima stood over the sink washing dishes confirming his fear. They had already eaten. Though he was used to coming back to a quiet house now there was noise and bustle. Sarah and Zoe sat in the living room playing Go Fish at the coffee table.

Daisy suddenly stood and barked to announce his arrival before running toward the door to greet him. The puppy turned circles in front of him as if unable to contain its excitement.

“Daddy!” Zoe squealed running up to him.

Lucas slid the shopping bag under the narrow table near the door and dropped to his knee to catch her hugging her close. He suddenly felt at ease letting his tension during the car trip melt away. If every day ended like this he would be happy. He kissed her temple.

“Daddy, you missed dinner! Ulima made tamales!”

“I’m sorry about that...I was catching up with work and lost track of time.”

“You shouldn’t work so hard, daddy,” Zoe frowned. “Mommy says it’s important to get rest too.”

“I’ll remember that,” Lucas nodded.

“Ulima saved you some tamales.” Zoe led him to the kitchen. “She made yours and mommy’s with chili powder so they are real spicy!”

Lucas allowed himself to be led to the table where he set Zoe on a chair before taking his own seat. Ulima gave him a disapproving look for being late but set a plate of tamales wrapped in corn husks in front of him. They were still warm so at least he wasn't too late.

As he unwrapped the tamales Zoe told him all about her day: visiting the ice cream museum and jumping into the sprinkle pool before visiting Macey's art gallery. It seemed Sarah wanted to show Zoe as many attractions as she could while they were in town. He also suspected Sarah was trying to keep herself busy and avoid thinking about certain things.

He listened, picturing Zoe running around the pink environments, playing tag as she ducked around large ice cream cones before visiting the ice cream bars for a sundae made to her specifications. He could almost hear her shriek happily as she slid down the large, twisting slide.

"And then we saw Auntie Macey!"

Lucas broke into a fit of coughs as he struggled to swallow his meal in surprise. If Macey and the kids were in town then Julius was back as well. He felt himself breaking out into a cold sweat. What would Julius think once he learned Sarah had returned and Lucas was trying to win her back?

"Daddy? Are you okay?" Zoe asked. "Are you sick?"

"No." Lucas shook his head. No doubt he had also gone pale. "So you got to meet Auntie Macey, huh?"

"Yep! And then we met Auntie Ava at the mall and we went shopping for dresses!" Zoe bounced in her seat. "I got a special dress to match mommy's! Auntie Macey says there is going to be a big party and me and Daisy get to go!"

Lucas chuckled. She had to be talking about the DaLair Mixer. It had become a summer tradition to celebrate Julius, Macey and the kids' return to the States. Though they visited whenever they could during the kids' seasonal breaks summer was definitely the most anticipated but even that was not enough for the DaLair patriarch. From what Lucas heard Augustus was leaving his eldest son in charge more and more to run off to France and visit at every opportunity spending time with his young grandchildren.

"Auntie Macey said we're all invited!" Zoe declared. "And Auntie Ava and Uncle Si are going to! We'll all be together!"

Lucas forced himself to swallow. He couldn't remember the last time he was invited to any event hosted by the DaLair family, let alone the Mixer which was among their more exclusive gatherings. It was at the end of the week and he wasn't sure if that was too much or too little time to prepare to face Julius. Yet it was also the first event he would be able to attend with Sarah and Zoe so he was also looking forward to it.

"Daddy, you are going to come too, right?"



“Of course, princess,” Lucas smiled patting her head. “I wouldn’t miss it.”

He glanced at the living room wondering if Sarah was sharing the same thoughts. Lucas’s mind recalled the plum-colored gown she wore at the last party and immediately wondered what her new dress looked like. And Zoe had a dress to match? His heart pounded in anticipation.

“Zoe, time for your bath,” Sarah suddenly interrupted.

Her expression seemed conflicted and he was getting used to it. Not for the first time he wondered what was going through her mind. Was she happy? Worried? Scared? Excited?

“Ah, do I have to? I want to talk to daddy some more.”

Sarah chewed her lip.

“You need to listen to your mommy,” Lucas said. “It’s my fault for being late.”

“Okay,” Zoe sighed still disappointed. “We’ll talk tomorrow, right?”

“Right.”

Reluctantly Zoe slid off her chair and headed toward her mother. Lucas watched her a moment before suddenly getting to his feet, “Sarah...can we talk?”

“What? Now?”

“Please?”

Sarah hesitated.

“I can take conejita upstairs for her bath, Señora,” Ulima offered.

“You don’t mind?”

“Of course not.”

Sarah hesitated then nodded. Zoe didn’t seem at all perturbed by the change and happily preceded Ulima upstairs with Daisy bounding up after them.

Lucas watched them until they were out of sight but hesitated unsure where to begin. Alan suggested starting with an apology but would that really be enough to cover...everything?

“...So what do you want to talk about?” Sarah prompted after a moment. “Does it have anything to do with that?”

He followed her gesture to see she indicated the bookstore shopping bag. Grimacing he looked at her to see a deep frown.

“I didn’t take you for a reader.”

“I’m not,” he admitted. “Not usually but...Alan said you do extensive research for your books. I just...wanted to learn more about you.”

“And you didn’t just ask me because?”

“I didn’t think you’d want to talk to me.”

Sarah chewed her lip. He was beginning to realize it was a gesture she made when she was deep in thought or struggling with some internal debate.

“I made a lot of mistakes...I admit that. I want...I want to make it up to you.”

She shook her head turning away.

“Please Sarah,” Lucas grasped her hand. “Please, I just...tell me what I need to do. Yell at me. Curse me. But please, don’t shut me out. I’ll do anything...”

“Just stop!” Sarah yanked her hand away. “I won’t be made a fool again.”

“You were never a fool. I was. But I promise...”

“Promise what?” Sarah snapped. “Promise not to sneak around behind my back and attack me through your mistress?”

“Sarah, I didn’t...”

“Don’t lie to me!” Sarah shook with anger. “Don’t act like you didn’t know what you were doing when you gave my number to that slut. Or that you didn’t know what she and your sister and your god-forsaken mother were texting me.”

Lucas frowned. Text messages? From Madeline, Lidia and his mother? But that was...

“I heard enough from that...bitch. Every morning like clockwork she told me how good you were to her and how many times you made her cum...And your sister asking me why I was getting in the way of your great love affair. And don’t even get me started on your mother.”

“What text messages?” Lucas asked. “Do you still have them? Can I see them?”

Sarah scoffed at his feigned concern, “Ask Taylor. He has my phone. All the messages are still on it. I didn’t delete a single one.”

Tailor? Her lawyer?

“I tried to pretend it didn’t matter,” Sarah said. “That it was all just lies. But you told me the truth right from your own mouth!”

“What?”

“Oh don’t act stupid. The night I left as if you don’t remember.”

“Sarah, I don’t remember,” Lucas said. “I remember taking Lidia and Madeline to the Mixer. I remember talking to a few people and having a few drinks then...nothing. Nothing until I woke up in your bed the next morning.”

Sarah blinked. She wanted to argue but the confusion on his face was too real, too genuine. Did he really not remember?

“Alan said he stuffed me in the car and told the driver to take me home but I don’t remember. I don’t remember arriving here or how I even got in. I have no idea what happened...well...” Lucas glanced up to the ceiling indicating Zoe. “I...Zoe makes it pretty obvious what happened, but I don’t remember...”

Lucas fell silent as Sarah suddenly burst into hysterical laughter tears running down her face as she trembled. He stared at her not understanding the conflicting emotions on display. It was several moments before she was in control again. Her laughter slowed but the tears didn’t stop.

“How ironic is that?” she said struggling to catch her breath. “The worst night of my life...I’ve spent four years trying to forget it...and you don’t even remember it!”

She seemed to breakdown into tears but Lucas stood stunned. Did she say the worst night? Taking a deep breath Sarah wiped away the wetness staining her cheeks not daring to look at him.

“...Sarah, wh—what happened that night? Please...tell me.”

Enraged she faced him ready to unleash her pent-up fury but his face was still a mask of confusion and worry. He truly didn’t remember. The irony was unbearable. Sniffing and trying to compose herself Sarah felt the weight of those memories crush her again. He would probably laugh if she told him. But he wouldn’t break her. Not this time. She wouldn’t give him that power.

Lucas watched her in concern. Suddenly she became very calm as if she had summoned it from somewhere deep within. It was like a crashing wave and honestly a little scary. He preferred her hysterical laughter.

“A loud noise woke me up,” Sarah finally said. “I got out of bed to see what it was.”

Lucas grimaced. What if it had been a break in? What might have happened if a criminal decided to hurt her?

“I opened my bedroom door and...there you were. You grabbed me and kissed me,” Sarah didn’t smile or blush speaking in a voice devoid of emotion. “I pushed you away and asked what you were doing here. You smelled like a brewery.”

Lucas bowed his head feeling his face warm.

“You picked me up like a sack of potatoes. I told you to put me down before you fell down. I guess I should count myself lucky we even made it to the bed instead of on the floor.” Sarah shook her head. “You kissed me again. Undressed me. I...I’d never been with anyone before so...”

Sarah’s voice trailed off. She couldn’t...How could she find the words to describe what she felt that night? Could he ever even understand?

A moment ago Lucas had felt himself warm with embarrassment but now he felt himself going cold with shame. Did she mean what he thought she meant? If she hadn’t been with anyone before that night then...

“You were a virgin?” he quietly asked.

A pink tinge colored her cheeks.

His eyes widened. She had been a virgin than that was her first time...ever. Lucas swallowed a lump in his throat. While he certainly was no don Juan he had a few partners here and there. He had even been a first for one or two of them and he remembered it could be quite painful for a woman if their partner was not mindful.

A cold chill crept into him and a fear seized him. He wanted to ask but her twisted facial expression made it die in his throat. But...he had to know.

“...Did...did it hurt?”

She shuddered and he knew his answer even before she spoke, “...You were forceful...I haven’t let anyone touch me since. Whenever they want to...be intimate...all I can think about is the pain. So I stopped trying.”

Lucas felt his stomach drop. He may have hated the idea of anyone else touching her but this was not what he wanted.

“And when you...finished...you called me Maddie.”

It took a minute for her words to sink in. He stared wide-eyed as he asked, “I what?”

“You said ‘That’s right baby. That’s what you want, isn’t it Maddie?’” Sarah trembled glaring at him daring him to lie to her again. “And then you passed out and I crawled to the shower to scrub off the shame.”

Lucas winced at the venom in her voice. As much as he wanted to deny it he couldn’t. He had no memory of any of this but her conviction was too great. He knew he messed up and drove her to leave him but he hadn’t expected this.

“The first time my husband ever touched me and the entire time he thought he was having sex with his mistress,” Sarah laughed but there was no humor in her voice. “So don’t...don’t lie to me. If Maddie is the one you want go...have her. But leave me out of it. I won’t be that woman.”

Chapter Twenty-Six

## Chapter 26 - The Billionaire CEO's Runaway Wife

“Mommy?”

They both jerked to attention as the silence between them was broken. Sarah quickly wiped her eyes before looking up the stairs at Zoe who stood freshly washed and in her pajamas.

“What is it, baby? You should be in bed.”

“I wanted a bedtime story.”

“Okay.”

Sarah turned away from Lucas and climbed up the steps. She scooped up Zoe and continued without a backward glance. Like a puppet drawn by a string he slowly crept up the stairs passing Ulima who watched him with a pensive look. He wondered how much of their conversation she heard but didn’t dare ask. Head bowed he crept toward Zoe’s bedroom door. Lucas leaned against the wall listening to the voices drifting out of the room.

“Mommy, are you made at daddy? Did he make you cry?”

“...No. It’s...remember what I told you about tears?”

“That tears aren’t bad but it’s bad to hold them in.”

“Right.”

Zoe looked at her mother with concern.

“Hey, I haven’t told you how I met your daddy. Do you want me to tell you the story?”

“Yeah!”

Sarah managed a strained smile, “Well, we met when we were still in school. I think I was twelve? So about Aria’s age.”

“Really?”

“Yeah. When I was little I used to always carry notebooks with me so I could write my stories,” Sarah felt herself relax as she continued the story. “Not everyone liked that. They thought I was weird and sometimes called me names.”

“That’s not very nice.”

“No. It’s not. One day they were making fun of me and one pushed me. I fell down and dropped some of my books and things. They started kicking dirt on everything. And then, suddenly, there was your daddy,” Sarah softly smiled at the memory. Even now she felt a pleasant warmth in her chest. “He stood between me and them and told them to stop. He was quite brave to stand up to so many.”

“Daddy saved you? Like a knight protecting a princess!”

“Yeah. Just like that,” Sarah smiled the nostalgia slowly waning.

“Is that when you fell in love with daddy?” Zoe asked.

Sarah bit her lip suddenly standing, “All right. Time for bed.”

She tucked Zoe in and kissed her forehead. Zoe giggled at her mother’s attempt to change the subject. Sarah chuckled heading for the door.

“Good night, mommy,” Zoe said.

“Good night, baby.”

Stepping out of the room Sarah hesitated but the hallway was deserted. She bit her lip certain Lucas had followed them up...or maybe she was just hoping he did. Sarah shook her head. Would she never learn her lesson? He never cared about her and never would. She quietly stepped into her room unaware of the eyes watching her.

Lucas’s mind was reeling with a roller coaster of emotions, shame and shock from the story she told of their one and only night together. How could he have allowed it to happen?

He hurt her, hurt her deeply. She hurt so much she allowed no other to come close to her again. She was actually afraid: afraid of being close to someone both mentally and physically. He didn't even know it was possible to hurt someone that much.

The guilt was crushing. But then...

When Zoe asked if he caused her tears he fully expected Sarah to throw him under the bus. She would have been well within her rights to do so. He had caused her so much pain she no doubt hungered for his comeuppance...but instead she told Zoe a story. And that story...

Could it be true?

He didn't remember any such incident and yet...there was no denying the conviction in Sarah's voice or her smile as she recalled the memory. If it were true then...she loved him since they were teens. Downstairs he had wished for a ten-foot-hole to bury himself in when Sarah told him about their night together. Now he realized it wasn't nearly deep enough.

When the story was over and Sarah headed for the door Lucas hurriedly ducked into his own bedroom to avoid facing her. He was such a coward. But what right did he have?

The house fell silent as everyone turned in leaving him to wallow in his misery alone. Lucas headed to his closet changing into sweats before collapsing on the bed in utter exhaustion. How could he hope to fix any of this?

\* \* \*

Lucas sighed as he walked the near-deserted halls. It was annoying that the teacher had held him back to talk to him but he really didn't have any desire to join the debate team. Since he was ten his grandmother had been preparing him to take over as CEO and that required a lot of extra classes and study as it was. He didn't have time for anything else.

The teacher claimed it would be a good way to make friends but what did he need friends for? There was simply too much to do and not enough time to get it done.

Rounding a corner Lucas stopped suddenly to avoid running into a classmate as he went around the other hallway. Without looking up, the tall boy walked on muttering something about the nurse taping his glasses. Lucas watched him a moment wondering if he should demand an apology but eventually decided against it.

Instead he headed outside to meet Lidia and go home. Exiting the school he paused as his gaze fell on a group of kids taunting an unfortunate classmate that somehow earned their ire. Scowling he headed down the steps ready to skirt around the group and continue on until he spotted Lidia in the middle of the bullies throwing her own insults at their victim.

Since when did she participate in these sorts of things?

His gaze went to the unfortunate soul caught in their net to see a cute blonde. She was tall for her age and somewhat lanky due to her late development. As he watched Madeline suddenly stepped forward shoving the girl and making her lose her balance. She stumbled and fell forward dropping her books as she ended up on her knees. The group laughed kicking dirt.

Though Lucas seldom interfered with his classmates' immature pastimes he suddenly veered from his path and pushed his way into the middle of the group.

“What do you think you are doing?!”

The laughter immediately stopped as he stared them down.

“Is this how you were raised? I suppose your parents are so proud!” his gaze flickered to Lidia. “Is this the graceful and dignified lady grandma raised you to be?”

Lidia winced. Their grandmother had many rules if they expected to be Stanton heirs. She expected them to be dignified and venerable at all times. Any steps out of line would earn immediate retribution not just for them but also for their mother who was supposed to raise them according to their grandmother's expectations.

Lucas's gaze shifted to Madeline. She cowered under his glare. She was only able to attend this school because Lidia begged their mother to pay her tuition. If she crossed the line she could easily be forced out.

“Get out of here!” he ordered the group. “Scram!”

The group scurried away in different directions.

“Luke...”

“Get in the car!” Lucas ordered his sister. “Now. And you better hope I don't mention this to grandma.”

Visibly paling Lidia grabbed Madeline's arm and dragged her away. If he threatened to tell their mother she wouldn't have cared but their grandmother was another story. Once the others left Lucas sucked in a calming breath then turned to the blonde girl.

She was quietly gathering her books. Kneeling he picked up one of her notebooks and offered it to her. Glancing at the cover he said, “Rosemary? That's a pretty name.”

Hesitantly she accepted her notebook looking at him for the first time. Her eyes were the most bewitching green-brown with a hint of blue around her irises.

“Thank you,” she nodded looking away as she stood.

“My name is Lucas,” he said awkwardly introducing himself.



She nodded backing a step as her face became red. Lucas hesitated not sure how to continue the conversation. What came after names?

“Hey! Luke!”

He looked toward the voice waving at the approaching figure. Turning back to the blonde he was startled to see she had gone. Confused he looked around but she was nowhere to be seen. Where did she go?

“Hey Luke, what’s up?”

“Nothing,” Lucas answered as Alan reached him.

“Lose something?” Alan asked.

“There was a girl here.”

“You are sure you didn’t imagine her?”

Lucas gave him an irritated look.

“Okay, fine. What’s her name?”

“Rosemary.”

“Pretty but I don’t think we have a Rosemary in our class.”

“Maybe she’s in Lidia’s class.”

“Maybe. If you want I can look into the school records.”

“Can you do that?”

“Sure. Just don’t ask me how.”

\* \* \*

Lucas laid awake the memory percolating from the recent dream. It couldn’t be, could it?

Alan searched through the school records and found no student named Rosemary. Lucas kept an eye out for her for several days but didn’t see her again. Gradually he let himself forget.

But it was Sarah the entire time?

He pictured the girl again as clearly as he could and compared her to Sarah. They looked a lot alike. She was Sarah, she had to be. It was Sarah the entire time. He recalled the boy in the

hallway. That must have been Samuel going to the nurse's office after abandoning her. How did he never put it together? Even after hearing the story from Samuel he hadn't connected it. Not until last night listening to Sarah talk to Zoe did his mind finally unearth the memory.

Lucas rolled out of bed stumbling to the bathroom. How could he have been so stupid? How did he miss it? How did he not recognize her?

He could picture her clearly on their wedding day. When the priest told him to kiss the bride she looked at him so shyly a pink tinge to her cheeks and her eyes...hopeful.

It was why she had agreed to the marriage in the first place. She probably hoped he would remember even until the last moment. And he trampled on that hope. She stayed two years desperately clinging to that simple hope and he destroyed it.

God he was such an idiot!

Splashing water on his face he dressed and headed downstairs. The smells of breakfast were already filling the house as he reached the first floor. Zoe sat at the table munching churros while she practiced her letters and numbers. Ulma chuckled at her antics but fell silent as Lucas sank into a seat at the table.

"Daddy?" Zoe looked at him. Her gaze practically brined with questions.

"Morning, munchkin," Lucas patted her head memorizing every inch of her face.

"Did you have a good night's sleep?"

"No, baby. I didn't."

"Is it because you and mommy argued?"

"We weren't arguing," Lucas shook his head.

"Then why is mommy mad at you?"

"Before you were born...I did a very bad thing," Lucas hesitated, "and I hurt her."

"Then you should apologize," Zoe said. "Mommy says if you know you did something wrong you need to say you're sorry."

"I think this might take a little more than an apology."

Zoe frowned.

"But I'm going to fix it," Lucas said meeting her gaze. "I promise. I'm going to make this right."

Zoe's gaze narrowed.

"I promise, Zoe. I'm going to make it up to your mother. I just...need a little time."

"How much?" Zoe asked.

"A couple of days...I just need a couple of days."

"Are you coming to Auntie Macey's party?"

Lucas frowned before realizing she meant the DaLair Mixer at the end of the week. If he got Alan to work on it immediately it could work. It would have to work.

"Yeah," Lucas finally said. "I'll be there and I'll have a special surprise for your mother. Hopefully, she'll forgive me after I give it to her."

"She'll forgive you. Mommy loves you."

"You think so?" Lucas looked at her hopeful for the first time.

"Ah-huh. You just have to be brave daddy."

"Okay. I'll be brave," Lucas stood kissing her forehead. "You take care of your mom for me. I'll be gone a couple of days but I'll come back once I have everything ready."

"Promise?"

"Promise. I'll make it right."

Zoe gave him a small smile and nodded. Patting her head he moved to the door pausing to grab the picture from the bookstore bag. If he felt himself giving up he would use it for motivation. This was for his family. He couldn't lose sight of that.

Stepping outside he found Alan already waiting. Climbing into the passenger seat Lucas breathed deep as Alan pulled away.

"So...everything good?" Alan asked.

"No. It couldn't be worse."

Alan blinked surprise.

"Take me to the DaLair Plaza."

"Are you sure?"

“Yeah. I need some advice.”

“All right.”

Alan kept glancing at him as they drove on. It had been years since Lucas last spoke to Julius. Even when they were on speaking terms Lucas never sought the other out. Though Lucas never admitted it Alan suspected Julius DaLair intimidated him. If he was going to see Julius now it had to be for a good reason.

Chapter Twenty-Seven

## Chapter 27 - The Billionaire CEO's Runaway Wife

Lucas sat for several minutes breathing deep. He glanced out the window at the office building towering over him. It really wasn't any more impressive than the Stanton building but it represented something he couldn't quite name.

Alan watched him with concern as Lucas held the picture of Sarah and Zoe. Finally he nodded as if answering a silent query. He wasn't going to lose them. This was for them.

Setting down the photo he finally opened the door and climbed out. Looking back at Alan he said, “I'll be right back.”

Fighting his nerves Lucas marched inside heading to the front desk. He had to do this.

“Can I help you?” the receptionist asked.

“I'm here to see Julius.”

“Do you have an appointment?”

“No.”

She looked up startled by the unexpected answer. No one could see any of the DaLairs without an appointment.

“Please just call him and tell him Luke wants to see him,” Lucas said. “If he says no I'll leave. Please just ask.”

The receptionist pressed her lips together before nodding. Lucas let out an uneasy breath as she picked up her phone. He tried to relax letting his gaze wander across the room. The lobby was surprisingly comfortable. Its décor almost seemed like a lodge with over-sized, comfortable chairs, a fireplace with wood and stone veneer.

A large photograph hung over the fireplace mantel featuring a line of kids oldest to youngest jumping into a pool hand-in-hand. Though it was in black and white and their backs were turned to the camera there was no denying the kids featured were the DaLair grandchildren: from Jude to Lyra. Augustus loved his family too much to allow any other on the wall and just as one knew the subject matter it would certainly be no surprise to learn it was taken by M. Gray.

“Excuse me sir.”

Lucas turned back to the receptionist.

“Mister DaLair will see you. Head to the last elevator and take it to the executive floor.”

“Thank you.”

Lucas nodded wanting to smile but couldn't. It was only a small step forward. Following her instructions he took the elevator up and emerged in a new lobby. Here too were large, comfortable chairs and a receptionist desk. He walked up to the counter expecting a repeat of the first floor but the new receptionist seemed prepared for him.

“Mister DaLair's office is through there all the way down the hall.”

Lucas nodded following the directions past several offices and meeting rooms. Eventually he arrived at a dark walnut door with a silver name plate: Julius DaLair, VP. He hesitated before knocking.

Moments ticked by before the door finally opened revealing Julius DaLair. Julius was not a particularly tall man, only average height, making him several inches shorter than either Silas or Lucas both of whom were just over six feet, but he stood with the authority of experience.

Leaning on the door Julius studied Lucas a long moment before saying, “Come in Stanton. We were just talking about you.”

“We?” Lucas let himself be ushered into the sleek office.

There were several photographs on the walls featuring the kids in various poses and compositions. It was clear the only thing greater than Augustus's love for his grandchildren was Julius's love for his children.

The office had four large chairs arranged around a coffee table. March sat in one sipping a coffee. It was clear the brothers had been catching up when Lucas paid his call. Anxiously Lucas nodded to the elder DaLair brother.

“Don’t look so nervous,” Julius said grasping his shoulder. “Let’s sit.”

Lucas sunk into the chair Julius directed him too and took in an uneasy breath.

“So...to what do we owe this visit?” Julius asked returning to the chair across from his brother. “And don’t say it’s because you missed me.”

Lucas fought a smile at Julius’s nonchalant attitude. Though it was several years ago, Lucas remembered how Julius was before the kids. A strong drinker he used to cause a bit of havoc at various functions much to his family’s embarrassment. Macey and the children changed that. Since reconnecting with Macey and the twins Julius never had more than one or two drinks preferring to keep a clear head.

Taking a deep breath Lucas finally said, “I messed up. I messed up real bad and I don’t know how to fix it.”

He half-expected Julius to laugh but the DaLair brothers merely nodded. It seemed they were already aware of his mistake. Considering how long Sarah had known Macey it shouldn’t be a surprise that Julius would know about Zoe despite spending most of the year in Paris.

“...I—ah...” Lucas hesitated, “I thought Sarah wasn’t taking the marriage seriously...that it was just for show. I didn’t...I didn’t know she had genuine feelings for me...ever since we were kids. I didn’t know what her family was like...what her father did...”

Julius quietly listened, thinking about his own marriage. He too thought his marriage was merely a façade. Macey was convenient. He had known her since childhood and grew up with her. But that blinded him to her true feelings.

Sometimes he wondered what it would have been like if she had gone back to school after her mother passed away. Perhaps that time apart would have given him enough distance to realize the truth his father and brother already knew. Then again, maybe not. Though he often wished the past would be different he would never trade the life he had now with his family.

“...I never even tried to get to know her,” Lucas shook his head. “Maybe if I just sat down with her I might have...I never even imagined she was...”

“Well, you wouldn’t be the first man to misjudge his wife,” Julius said. “I must say though, you certainly went up in flames.”

Lucas bowed his head. That wasn’t even the worst of it. Knowing Sarah often hid her pain he knew the truth he was about to reveal had never spoken aloud, “It’s worse than you know.”

Julius raised a brow.

“The night we spent together...I was drunk...I—ah—came on too strong...”

Julius's gaze narrowed his gray eyes boring into the man in front of him. Whatever Lucas's faults he was at least forthright but now he was hesitant to speak.

"Are you trying to say you forced yourself on Sarah?" Julius glared.

"...It was consensual...I think," Lucas shuddered. "I didn't take care of her at all or try to..."

March pinched the bridge of his nose. If there was one talk Augustus never hesitated to have with his sons it was one about the responsibility a man had to ensure his partner's comfort especially the first time they were together. It had been the most awkward and uncomfortable talk either March or Julius endured but both were grateful for their father's words so much so that March let Augustus lead the same talk with Jude much to his son's horror. Julius hadn't decided if he would allow Augustus to have that conversation with Caden when the time came or not.

"Lucas..."

"I know. There is nothing you can say, no name you can call me, that I haven't already called myself," Lucas shook his head. "I don't...I don't deserve forgiveness."

"Well that isn't really our call," Julius sighed. "That's up to Sarah."

"How can I even ask her for that?"

"You don't."

Lucas glanced up at Julius.

"You beg for it. Apologize and swear that you will do better...you hope her love is strong enough to grant it but...you don't ask for it."

"What if it's not?"

"Then that's the price you pay. You lose."

Lucas bowed his head shaking. It was the answer he expected but it didn't hurt less.

"The question is why are you here? Shouldn't you be on your hands and knees begging her?"

"There's something else..."

Julius and March waited in silence.

"Apparently Madeline sent Sarah text messages implying I was having an affair."

"Implying?" March repeated.

“I never touched her.”

“Never?” Julius asked.

Lucas took in a ragged breath, “Once, back in college. When I graduated Madeline said she wanted to give me a special gift. She, ah, gave me a blow job...but that’s it. I swear. It was just that one time. And I never touched anyone when we were married.”

Julius nodded. Over the years Macey and Ava had many discussions about Lucas’s alleged infidelity. He wasn’t sure how they arrived at their consensus but both were convinced it was rumor and heresy. Since Sarah left him Lucas’s behavior had changed quite drastically so Julius was willing to give him the benefit of doubt.

“There’s more,” Lucas said. “Text messages from my sister and mother. I didn’t even know they had her number.”

“You think they were plotting together?” March asked. “I suppose it wouldn’t be the first time. You remember the trouble Si had after he found Ava and the kids.”

“Right...with that Jennifer or whatever her name was,” Julius nodded.

“And the trouble you had with Katherine.”

Julius grimaced. The less said about that the better.

“And...”

“There’s more?” Julius looked at Lucas.

“The night I was with Sarah...I don’t remember any of it. My mind is completely blank.”

“Blank?”

“I remember taking Lidia and Madeline to the Mixer. I had a few drinks and talked to some people then...nothing. Nothing until I woke up the next morning.” Lucas shook his head. “I’ve been blackout drunk before but nothing like that.”

“What do you think?” Julius looked at his brother.

“He could have been dosed.”

“Dosed?” Lucas repeated. “You mean with a drug?”

“Wouldn’t be the first time,” March shrugged looking at Julius who frowned. Though they still had no evidence they were quite certain he had been drugged the night Katherine came on too strong and March had to pull his brother away before it escalated.



“It could explain why your memory is wiped clean,” Julius agreed.

“It’s no excuse,” Lucas shook his head. “But it would explain a few things, like you said.”

“So...what are you going to do?” Julius asked.

“...I got to go,” Lucas lurched to his feet. “I got to see those text messages. And I got to see if Alan can get video of that night. It was four years ago though.”

“A venue like that has security cameras and I bet they are saved digitally,” March said.

“If anyone can get a hold of it, it’s Alan,” Julius agreed.

“Right. I’ll...I’ll see you at the DaLair Mixer,” Lucas nodded to them. “I got to go.”

They watched him leave with a note of concern.

“Well that was interesting,” March said. “You think he’ll be all right?”

“Let’s just hope he’s prepared to see some ugly sides to his family.”

“I never did like his sister,” March agreed. “Or his mother. You remember what dad used to say about Alice though, right?”

“About how you had to be careful around her because she knew more about you than you knew about yourself?”

“Yeah. How much do you think she knows?”

“She arranged for him to marry someone with genuine feelings for him since they were children. I don’t think that’s a coincidence.”

“Me neither. I wonder why she didn’t step in before it got so out of control.” March nodded.

“Maybe she couldn’t.”

“You mean she had an agreement with Sarah?” March asked. Everyone knew Sarah had a private discussion with the Stanton matriarch before the wedding.

Though Alice was notoriously difficult to deal with she always adhered to the terms of an agreement. She never backed out and always upheld her end of the deal. A trait that Lucas did his best to emulate.

“That would be my guess.”

\* \* \*

Lucas stepped out of the office building breathing deep and trying to keep himself calm. Alan pulled up to the curb and he climbed in. While Alan turned in the direction of the Stanton building Lucas dialed a number from his contact list.

“Lucas?”

“Robert, I need you to get in touch with Tailor.”

“Tailor? As in Tailor Reeve, your ex-wife’s attorney?”

“Yes.”

“Why?”

“Sarah said he had her old phone. There are text messages from my mother, sister and Madeline on it. I want copies. I want to see what they were sending.”

“All right...Lucas the divorce was finalized four years ago. Don’t you think it’s a little late?”

“It’s a lot late but that doesn’t mean it’s too late. Just get me the messages.”

“All right.”

“Good, you have until noon.”

“Noon? Seriously? Cooperation between lawyers takes finesse and time and negotiation.”

“I don’t care. Just get it.” Lucas hung up the phone with a sigh. “Alan, I need you to get some camera footage.”

“Camera footage?”

“The Fortune500 Mixer, four years ago.”

“Why?”

“It might have been more than just alcohol I ingested.”

“You mean drugs...That could explain why you have no memory.”

“Right. I just need to know for sure.”

“All right. I’ll make some calls as soon as we get to the office.”

Lucas nodded trying to shed his anxiety. This was only the beginning and even if he found the answers it still might not be enough to earn Sarah’s forgiveness. He wouldn’t blame her. He

certainly didn't deserve it but he hoped she might eventually grant it and perhaps even allow him to stay in hers and Zoe's lives.

It just had to be enough. He couldn't lose them again.

Chapter Twenty-Eight

## Chapter 28 - The Billionaire CEO's Runaway Wife

Lucas sat staring at the same email for the hundredth time. His mind kept wandering though he tried to keep it busy while he waited. Alan paced beside the window negotiating over the phone for the security footage. It seemed it wasn't going to be as easy as Lucas hoped. He would prefer to avoid official channels and skip the red tape but perhaps he wouldn't have a choice.

Shortly after eleven there was a knock on the door. Startled he looked up as Robert entered with Tailor a step behind. Lucas blinked wondering why the older man was present. He looked to his own lawyer for answers.

"He insisted on coming," Robert said, "otherwise we'd have to subpoena to see them. I didn't think you wanted to go through the paperwork."

"I didn't," Lucas nodded. "Did you bring it?"

Tailor removed a thumb drive from his briefcase, "The phone and sim card are in my vault. But everything was copied onto this."

Lucas accepted it from the older man with some trepidation. Some part of him didn't want to see it but he had to. He had to know.

"Here, let me," Alan said taking the drive and plugging it into his laptop.

Lucas stood letting Alan sit at the desk. He was suddenly filled with nervous energy and paced to try to alleviate it as his friend opened the drive to look at its contents.

"Okay, three folders: Madeline, Lidia or Patricia. Which one did you want to read first?" Alan asked.

"Madeline."

Alan opened the file slowly scrolling through the seemingly never-ending stream of text messages. Lucas leaned over his shoulder reading. His face grew bright red after the first message.

“What the hell is this?”

Robert grimaced as he read a few himself curious about what the fuss was about. Cautiously he said, “It appears to be a mistress bragging about how well her man treats her to his wife.”

“I never touched her!” Lucas snapped.

“Never?” Tailor raised an eyebrow.

Lucas hesitated, “Once, in college. That’s it. Never when I was married. I would never do that to Sarah or anyone else. My grandmother taught me to always honor my agreements.”

“She did,” Alan agreed. It was Alice’s unspoken rule that all contracts and agreements were binding and would be honored to the letter.

Tailor considered this. Lucas’s reaction was a bit surprising but it didn’t feel like an act. In fact he seemed genuinely outraged but there was also no physical proof.

“I hate to say it but you don’t have proof,” Robert said eyeing Lucas and echoing Tailor’s thoughts. “It’s a he said, she said situation.”

Lucas shook with his pent-up rage. If these were the messages Sarah was reading every day it was no wonder she believed he was cheating. It was enough to make him sick.

“We can maybe prove some of these are lies,” Alan said after a moment.

“What do you mean?” Lucas asked.

“Look at this one here.”

Lucas leaned forward to read, “Luke was sooo good to me. Five times. A new record.”

“Not the message. The date. Look.”

“August tenth.”

“Does that sound familiar?”

Lucas frowned.

“It should. We were in London for a conference and had to stay in that crappy hotel.”

“Oh right,” Lucas’s memory slowly caught up. “They lost our reservation and were overbooked so we had to share a double room.”

“Yeah, we were lucky to get our own beds,” Alan nodded. “So how did you sleep with Madeline if you were across the Atlantic sharing a room with me?”

Lucas nodded his anxiety slowly dropping. That’s right.

“And these too. Look December twelve through the eighteenth. That was during the Baker merger.”

“Yeah. We spent the entire week here at the office. We slept on the couches and took turns washing up in the employee restroom.”

“We joked about installing a bathroom in your office if we were going to make a habit of it. And I definitely would have woken up if Madeline tried to make a late night call on you,” Alan said. “Not that she would want to between all that spicy food you like to eat and the lack of a shower you got pretty ripe by the end of the week.”

Lucas swatted his shoulder but it only made Alan laugh harder.

“And look at this last one,” Alan pointed out. “That was the night of the Mixer. You couldn’t have slept with Madeline passed out in Sarah’s bed. I mean, it’s only a small drop in a big ocean but at least we can prove some of them false.”

“Legally speaking you don’t have to prove all of them false,” Robert said. “If you can prove some of them are lies then that sets a precedent and casts suspicion on the others. Right Tailor?”

Lucas looked at the other lawyer with an expression of surprise having forgotten the older man was still there.

“That is correct,” Tailor agreed watching Lucas with an impassive gaze. It was impossible to tell what he was thinking but at least he seemed to be giving Lucas the benefit of doubt.

“You believe me?” Lucas asked.

“In the beginning I had no reason to disbelieve these texts. But seeing your reaction and hearing your friend’s rebuttal...I have my doubts about the validity of these accusations.”

Lucas nodded. It was a start and hopefully Sarah would agree but Madeline wasn’t the only one texting her. Looking back to Alan he said, “Open the texts from Lidia.”

“All right,” Alan opened the next folder and grimaced as he read the messages.

Lucas read over his shoulder with a disgruntled expression though he couldn't say he was surprised. Madeline and Lidia had always been close friends so the fact that she was exasperating the situation in favor of Madeline shouldn't come as a shock.

"Certainly seems like your sister at least believes you and Madeline are an item," Robert commented. "Or they are working together to make Sarah believe it."

Lucas frowned. His marriage had been approved and arranged by his grandmother so he hadn't expected such open rebellion on Lidia's part. They all had a healthy dose of fear and respect for their grandmother but he noticed Lidia's attitude change over the years especially after he was declared the Stanton heir and placed in charge of its interests. Maybe his sister thought she didn't have anything to fear now that he had taken over the reins.

Finally he said, "Now my mother's."

"Before that," Tailor interrupted. "I suggest you sit down to read those."

Lucas's brow puckered in confusion.

"Trust me."

Alan hesitated before standing and offering Lucas the chair. Once Lucas was seated he opened the final folder. Lucas glanced at Tailor a moment before focusing on the messages but he barely read one before he was on his feet.

"What the hell!"

"What?" Robert peered over his shoulder, startled by his outburst, "Why are you still here? Why haven't you strangled yourself with a cord yet? Holy shit."

Unable to stay seated Lucas paced the office shaking at the threats and suggestions his mother had been unleashing for years behind his back. Alan reclaimed the chair and scrolled through a few more but they were all the same.

"No offence, but your mother is sick," Robert said.

"How could she do that? Say those things?" Lucas paced. "If grandma found out she'd be cut off and thrown out. Same with Lidia. I didn't think they'd ever try to openly defy grandma like this."

"Maybe now that your head of the family they thought they could get away with it," Alan said. "What son or brother would toss his family aside?"

"What husband lets someone abuse his wife like this?" Lucas challenged his face contorting in rage. "They are going to find out. When I get through with them...Have you gotten the video?"

“They are playing hardball,” Alan shook his head, “citing invasion of privacy. We may have to subpoena them in order to release the footage.”

“What video?” Tailor asked with a frown.

“From the Mixer four years ago,” Alan answered. “Luke has no memories of what happened that night and we’re not entirely sure it was all due to alcohol.”

“I see,” Tailor nodded. “I’ll give them a call and get it then.”

“You?” Lucas looked at the older man. “Why would you do that? Why help me?”

“Oh, it’s not for you. But this may bring Sarah some much needed closure,” Tailor said. “I’m also doing it for Zoe. She’s never asked about her father but she’s wanted to meet you for a long time now. She seems to be getting attached so I’d like to figure out what kind of man you are.”

“Exactly what are Sarah and Zoe to you?” Lucas asked. “And don’t say they are your best friend’s daughter. I don’t buy it.”

Tailor sighed. After a moment of thought he said, “In my life there was only one woman I ever loved. Unfortunately she loved my best friend. So I watch over her legacy now.”

Lucas stared at him, “...Sarah’s mother. Does she know?”

“Perhaps. Sarah’s very perceptive but we never talk about it,” Tailor stood. “Give me a day. I’ll return tomorrow.”

“You think it’ll be okay?” Alan asked after Tailor had gone. “I mean, he doesn’t really have a reason to help and we don’t have a reason to trust him.”

“He cares about Sarah...that’s enough.”

“All right,” Alan shrugged.

“How many of Madeline’s text messages can we prove are lies?” Lucas asked returning his attention to the computer.

“Oh well...” Alan closed the other windows and focused on Madeline’s messages. “So to start...”

\* \* \*

Lucas nervously entered the house. It was late but there was still a warm, pleasant smell in the kitchen. Ulma had left his supper in the fridge waiting to be warmed up. Though he wasn’t terribly hungry he took out the small container and set it in the microwave.

He sat down at the table slowly eating the dumplings sprinkling them with Tabasco for added flavor. As he ate he imagined Sarah doing the same thing and he smiled at the thought. He wondered if she would like the Indian restaurant he found several years ago. Maybe when this was over she would go with him. He hoped so.

The meal was quiet and unfulfilling. Without Zoe or Sarah it quickly lost its charm and wasn't particularly satisfying. After a while he tossed his leftovers and quietly headed upstairs. Passing the living room he noted the scattered toys. Lucas was not one for messes preferring everything to be organized but seeing the children and dog toys left out gave the house a warm feeling. It was a reminder of how sterile and lifeless his world had been.

With a sigh he climbed the steps and paused on the landing. Quietly he peeked into Zoe's bedroom. She was sound asleep with the corgi curled up next to her. The canine stirred as Lucas entered and yawned. Seeing their visitor was someone familiar the dog relaxed and settled back to sleep. Lucas quietly moved to the bed sitting down and watched Zoe sleep.

His gaze moved across the room. Since it was a guest room it had been left alone in neutral tones. Even the comforter was just plain beige. There was nothing wrong with the overall scheme but it didn't suit the three-year-old at all. She should have warm, bright colors.

Here too were a few scattered toys as well as souvenirs from her trip so far. There was a Statue of Liberty statuette and stuffed animals from the Bronx Zoo. There was also a pink picture frame, a New York frame and a brown one with horseshoes in the corner. Both were currently empty but he was certain each would eventually house pictures from the trip.

Looking around the room Lucas could almost picture the colorful shelves and a little table, maybe even an art corner with an easel. It brought a smile to his face to see the room made for her. He recalled the play sets at the Prescotts' as well as the one in Vermont. The yard here had more than enough space. He almost called in a work order now to have one installed.

Lucas nodded to himself and gently stroked Zoe's hair. He would get Alan on it as soon as the other issues were resolved. Standing he let himself out of the room and headed down the hall. He paused at Sarah's door. Hesitating he placed a hand on the door and quietly leaned on it.

Soon, Sarah. I promise I'll figure it all out. And maybe...maybe earn some forgiveness.

Quietly he turned and continued to his own room. Yanking off his suit he showered before collapsing on his bed.

He had to make it right. There was so much to atone for but he had to make it up to her. One thing was certain his family would pay. He now understood why Sarah insisted Zoe be kept away from them. The very thought of his mother coming anywhere near the three-year-old made him shudder.

Absolutely not. Never.



Zoe would never know his mother or sister. He would not allow them near her. They did not deserve to know the perfect little imp that was his precocious daughter and she would never be caged by them.

Just like her mother...they both belonged in the sky flying free.

Sarah...

Whether she acknowledged it or not she was still shackled by her past. He would find some way to help her break the last of those chains. But how?

Chapter Twenty-Nine

## Chapter 29 - The Billionaire CEO's Runaway Wife

“You look like hell,” Alan commented as Lucas slumped in the passenger seat. “Did you sleep at all?”

“Tried.”

Lucas ran his hand through his hair. He lay awake trying to figure out some way to make up for the pain and misery his mother, sister and Madeline put Sarah through. An apology just didn't cut it. He had to do more. She deserved more.

“Well, Tailor came through.”

“He did?”

“Oh yeah. I got the emails late last night. He works fast.”

“Emails?”

“Yeah, the files are compressed. I needed help getting them open and running...so I called in Samuel.”

“Samuel?” Lucas sighed. He was already apprehensive enough without involving Sarah's brother but Samuel was the head of his IT department and he had to know what happened that night. Sarah deserved the truth.

When they reached the office they immediately absconded themselves in Lucas's office with instructions they were not to be disturbed. Samuel was already there cuing up the email attachments to play on a large screen for their benefit so they didn't have to crowd around the computer as he worked.

There were six camera feeds in total and Samuel displayed them to play in sync with each other. The resolution wasn't great and the compression made it oddly grainy but it was still good enough to identify familiar figures and for Lucas to find himself in the crowd.

Lucas's eyes darted across the camera feeds watching himself as he escorted Lidia and Madeline into the venue. What had he been thinking bringing them in the first place? Sarah had claimed she was sick which was unusual. She had never made excuses before. He should have gone to her to see if she was okay.

Thinking back it was a clear red flag and even if he hadn't shown up drunk later she might have left him anyway. After four years of waiting for him she had reached the end of her patience.

Yesterday he finished reading the Edward passages and followed Rosemary to the end when she realized he was engaged. As Alan said she simply left, disappeared without a note or good-bye.

It mirrored Sarah's departure so closely it made his heart race. He could only imagine Edward's confusion, anger and emptiness when he woke to find she was gone. Or maybe he didn't have to imagine. After four years of searching he was all too familiar with that emotion. He wondered if Sarah wrote that scene before or after she left him. The book never mentioned Edward nor showed him again.

Did Sarah forget him as easily? No. Tailor said she needed closure. But what did that mean? Did it mean she would leave him as soon as she got it?

"Oh."

Alan drew Lucas out of his private musings. Looking up he asked, "What?"

"Well, I don't know if this is good news...but I figured out how you were dosed."

"So I was drugged?"

"Looks like," Alan nodded. "But you're not going to like it."

"What did you mean by that?" Lucas asked.

"See for yourself. Samuel, can you rewind it about thirty seconds?"

Samuel nodded rewinding the footage as Alan stepped closer pointing to one of the feeds for Lucas to focus on.

Lucas stared at the screen not sure what he was watching. It showed the open bar at the Mixer but that was hardly surprising. He recalled going there for refreshments several times. But the clip he was watching didn't have him on screen at all. Instead he saw Lidia at the bar as she ordered two drinks: what looked to be a scotch and her usual Manhattan.

His brow furrowed and he frowned. As he watched she took out her clutch and dropped two small tablets into the scotch. She stirred the glass before leaving the bar with both drinks in hand.

“What? What was that?”

They watched her cross several feeds before she eventually reached Lucas. He watched in disbelief as she handed the drink to her brother. The siblings clanked glasses before both drank. Lucas stared at the screen as Samuel paused the feed waiting for further instructions.

There had to be a mistake.

It couldn't be.

Lidia?

“Alan...explain and use small words.”

“You saw the footage for yourself, Luke. She didn't change glasses or hand it off to someone else.”

“...So you're saying my own sister drugged me,” Lucas said. “Why?”

“Well...here's what happened after,” Alan looked at Samuel and nodded to allow the camera footage to continue playing.

Lucas watched his face growing beet red as he saw himself on some impromptu dance floor. There wasn't sound on the feed for which he was grateful. Not that it mattered since he was pretty certain he hadn't been dancing to actual music. Worse, he wasn't alone. Madeline was at his side grinding on him like some horny teenager.

“And that's where I cut in,” Alan sighed as he made his appearance and pulled a still dancing Lucas off screen. “We know the rest. I put you in the car.”

Lucas rubbed his forehead sinking into a chair. It was one thing for Lidia to send disturbing text messages in hopes of causing strife but to go so far as to drug him...He didn't even have words to describe the depths of the betrayal. This went far beyond tormenting Sarah...and what was Madeline thinking?

“Stupid question.”

“What?” Alan asked turning toward him at his muttered comment. “What was that?”

“It’s practically a coup,” Lucas said. “Do you think they always had this planned...take over everything?”

“Look, you and I both know Lidia and Madeline have never worked a day in their lives. They are practically allergic to it. I don’t think they want control of the company...just you.”

“So I do all the work and they get everything they want: clothes, jewels, cars, whatever because I never tell them no.”

“No one ever told them no,” Alan corrected. “It’s not all on you.”

“Mother,” Lucas frowned. Really there was no way to know whether she was involved in this or not. She could have just egged them on or masterminded the whole thing. Or was it all Madeline’s idea?

“Face it, Madeline’s been obsessed with you since forever.”

“You knew?”

“You didn’t?”

“She was just Lidia’s friend. I—I didn’t pay any attention to her. I didn’t...God I feel like an idiot.”

“Go with the feeling.”

“You’re no help.”

“You wanted to know. Now you know.”

“And I wish I didn’t. Sarah is never going to forgive me.”

“Let her make that decision and stop jumping to conclusions.”

“How am I supposed to face her? What am I even going to say to her?”

“Say you’re sorry. You were an idiot. Your sister and her friend are sociopaths. And stop avoiding her.”

“I’m not...”

“Yes, you are. You leave early and stay at the office late all to avoid her. Or have you forgotten you are trying to win her back?”

“I just...I just think she probably wants her space.”

“Did she tell you that? Or did you make that decision for her?”

Lucas rolled his eyes.

Alan grabbed the photo from the coffee table and thrust it into his hands, “It’s time to choose, Luke. Which future do you want? This? Or that?”

Alan gestured to the frozen images on the television screen then to the photo in his hand. Lucas looked away from the screen to the image of Sarah and Zoe on the beach. There was no contest.

“It’s time to man up,” Alan declared.

“Who’s that?” Samuel asked looking at the photo in Lucas’s hand in confusion.

Lucas stiffened. He had forgotten the technician was there. Hesitating he handed the framed photo to Samuel to look at properly.

Samuel studied it for some time, “That’s Sarah...but who’s the girl?”

“Zoe,” Lucas said, “our daughter.”

“Zoe...I’m an uncle?” Samuel asked. “How long have you known?”

“About a week.” Lucas remembered the day of the book fair and following them through the zoo.

“H-how old is she?”

“Three,” Lucas said with a strained smile.

“Three.” Samuel repeated. “And this video is from that time. Then does that mean...”

“Lidia and Madeline succeeded,” Lucas said. “Sarah left me, divorced me and had our child without me and almost...”

“Almost what?” Samuel asked when he hesitated.

Lucas shook his head unable to continue. Samuel looked to Alan for explanation.

“There were complications when Zoe was born. They almost didn’t survive.”

“Then...Sarah and Zoe might have died and I would never have known,” Samuel said. His already pallid complexion grew paler. Perhaps he did have some feelings for his estranged sister.

He studied the photo still in his hand. His sister was smiling brightly with a laughing Zoe in her arms. It was a long moment before Samuel spoke again.

“They look happy. What—what is Zoe like?”

“She’s an imp,” Lucas said. “She’s full of energy and life it’s impossible not to be swept up by her. She’ll steal your heart in a second and never give it back.”

“Can...can I meet her?” Samuel finally tore his gaze from the photo.

Lucas grimaced. He certainly couldn’t blame him for wanting to know his niece but what would Sarah think? Would she agree to that? Would she even accept the suggestion from him?

“I...I don’t know if Sarah will allow that,” Luke finally admitted.

“Luke, I’m begging you,” Alan sighed. “Talk to Sarah. Just talk to her. Beg her to listen and then tell her everything. You just have to do it.”

“And if I do and she still leaves me?”

“She’s definitely going to leave you if you don’t. So you might as well take the chance.”

“Right. Tonight is the DaLair Mixer. I’m going to be her escort so...I’ll talk to her before we leave.”

“Finally!” Alan sighed with relief.

“Ah, shit.” Lucas cursed.

“What?”

“I need a suit.”

Alan rolled his eyes taking out his phone, “I’ll call Reagan and tell him it’s an emergency.”

Chapter Thirty

## Chapter 30 - The Billionaire CEO's Runaway Wife

Sarah sighed as she and Zoe wandered the exhibits of the Museum of Natural History. Zoe found the life-like dioramas fascinating and it was all Sarah could do to prevent the three-year-old from climbing into the exhibit space to explore. Despite trying to keep her wits about her Sarah’s mind kept wandering.

It had been two days since Lucas dared show his face to her. Apparently her outburst had scared him away or she really hadn't meant anything to him. She was tempted to claim the latter if not for the fact he returned home every night.

She knew because after putting Zoe to bed she laid awake waiting. Eventually she would hear the sound of the car pull up outside. A few minutes later the front door would open and close. She would then hear Lucas downstairs pattering around no doubt eating the food Ulma left him. She could almost picture him generously adding Tabasco just as she did.

After a while she would hear him climb the steps. First he would check on Zoe then he would come to her door. There he would pause several minutes before eventually heading to his own bedroom. The house would go quiet and she would lay awake wondering if he was asleep or as restless as she was.

It had felt good to yell at him and unleash her frustration but now she didn't know what to do. There was no denying Zoe had become attached to her father and if Sarah was honest so was she. She cringed when he invited himself on their trip to the Statue of Liberty but he seemed to enjoy it as much as they did. It was sweet the way he held Zoe and how his smile brought out his dimples. They looked like a real father and daughter.

And it wasn't just Zoe he was showering with attention. She could feel his gaze on her at all times as he watched her every move. After years of enduring his indifference and ignoring her it was nice that he was now captivated by her. And even though he seemed to be avoiding her he came home every night adhering to their agreement and determined to prove he did not want other bed partners.

As much as she wanted to hate him she just couldn't. The pictures on her phone from their site-seeing trip showed her the man she had always wanted: caring, supportive with a gaze that smoldered with desire only for her. Sarah shook her head trying to dissipate her thoughts. She did her best to ignore him and maintain a disinterested attitude but...

She was always aware of where he was in the room. Like a moth drawn to a flame she snuck peeks in his direction when she thought he wasn't looking. Whenever their gazes met she shivered at the desire barely contained within his eyes. She tried telling herself she was seeing things and it was all her imagination but some part of her simply wouldn't believe it. When he was nearby she felt secure and safe and when he wasn't around she missed him.

"Mommy! Look! It's so cool!" Zoe exclaimed.

Sarah smiled joining her underneath the life-size blue whale model marveling at the immense size.

"Mommy, did you see one of these when you went scuba diving?"

"No. I'm afraid not. I did see some Gray Whales though."

“Are they this big too?”

“No,” Sarah chuckled. “Not quite. But they are big in their own right. Come on, let’s get lunch and then we’ll go to the Central Park Zoo.”

“Mommy, how many zoos are there?”

“Five, including the aquarium.”

“Wow! Can we see them all?”

“We’ll see. We have a whole week of sight-seeing to do.”

“Yeah!”

The Central Park Zoo was smaller in scale compared to the Bronx Zoo and home to several endangered animals. Unsurprisingly Zoe loved the pygmy goats at the children’s zoo but the real hit was the Tropic Zone where much of the exhibit space was glass free allowing visitors to share the same space with the colorful and varied bird life. By the time they were ready to head home Zoe had thoroughly exhausted herself and fell asleep in the car.

Returning to Astoria Sarah carried a sleeping Zoe inside and up to her room to take a nap. Without Zoe for a distraction Sarah fell back into her private musings. She couldn’t hold onto her fantasies just because Lucas was giving her a little attention. He didn’t care about her. He never would. He said so himself. Now was no different and she would be a fool to think otherwise.

For years she had built a wall around her heart with those thoughts and at the time it seemed like a sturdy barrier. Why then did it feel like it was crumbling? Was she really so weak?

Worse than her own conflicting emotions betraying her was Ava and Macey who seemed convinced he did have some feelings for her. They didn’t go as far as to say she should forgive and forget. Rather they suggested not writing him off and to be open to a second chance.

She knew they meant well and their suggestions were based on their own experiences with their husbands but her situation was completely different. After all Silas had always been in love with Ava and Julius, whether he realized it or not, loved Macey. But Lucas had never loved her.

Sarah sighed letting her mantra rebuild her crumbling inner walls. It was easier to do now that Lucas was avoiding her.

That’s right.

It was all a game to him.

His heart belonged to Madeline and always would.



He could have Madeline. She had Zoe.

She was still certain she was getting the better end of the deal.

Sarah strengthened her resolve. Just one more week. One more week and her book would be out and she and Zoe could go home. She would never have to see him again. Soon everything would be back to the way it had been.

\* \* \*

Ulima made them a light supper since they would be going out. Sarah took advantage of Zoe's nap to shower so all that was left was to get themselves ready. Dressing Zoe first in her velvet dress and white tights Sarah styled the three-year-old's hair in a pair of braided pigtails.

Sending her downstairs to show off to Ulima and keep clean Sarah made her own preparations. The dress Zoe and the kids picked out was sleek and sultry without revealing too much. Once she had it on she played with her hair unsure how to style it. Finally deciding to leave it down Sarah used a curling iron to tame the ends by curling them under to give her hair a more body. Normally she parted it down the center but tonight she parted it to the left giving her a slightly more exotic style to go with the dress. Light make-up and her antique amber jewelry completed the look.

Sarah looked at her reflection, satisfied. Every battle required the appropriate armor and here was hers. It had nothing to do with wanting to catch Lucas's eye. It didn't matter to her if he noticed or not.

At least that was what she told herself.

Heading downstairs she paused giving Ulima and Zoe a nervous smile and turned to give them a full view. Zoe clapped loudly declaring, "Mommy, you look so pretty!"

"Thank you, sweetheart," Sarah tried to ignore her disappointment that Lucas had decided not to keep his promise to be her escort. It was fine. She didn't need an escort anyway. "Let's go, shall we?"

Sarah headed for the door for their jackets. Zoe frowned, "Mommy, aren't we going to wait for daddy?"

"Your daddy isn't coming, sweetie. He's probably forgotten all about it."

"Then shouldn't you call him and remind him?"

"Zoe, that won't do any good."

Zoe's face fell. He promised they would go to the party together. She had been looking forward to going as a family just like her cousins. Daisy whined sensing her disquiet and nuzzled her hand.

"Zoe, look at me."

She looked up seeing her mother crouching down to her level. Her mother was trying to maintain a determined look but her gaze glistened with the unshed tears she was holding back.

"Baby, I know it's hard to understand but sometimes things don't work out the way you want. I will always be here for you."

"Promise?"

"Promise."

Zoe forced a small smile not wanting to worry her mother as Sarah helped her into her jacket. Clipping on Daisy's lead they headed out to the SUV and climbed inside.

It was difficult to say if the trip into town was long or short but eventually Sarah pulled up to the Baccarat, the DaLair's long-standing favored venue despite the fact it was in the middle of remodeling. Handing her keys to the valet she ushered Zoe and the puppy inside to check their coats and proceeded to the lounge.

They were allowed entry with ease. No one asked about the corgi eagerly sniffing the strange scents around them. Sarah paused letting herself adjust to the crowded, intimate gathering. Though this event had started as a welcome home party for Julius and Macey it had become bigger over the years with several people attending for the sole purpose of making contact with Julius. Since he spent most of his time in Paris it was a rare opportunity to meet him.

Somehow he had gained the reputation of being a business maverick and risk taker. People who had been turned down by his brother and father often approached him for one more try. Unfortunately Julius's business sensibilities very closely paralleled the rest of his family so he hardly ever agreed to anything they turned down.

"Sarah!" Macey eagerly greeted them as soon as they entered. "And Zoe. You look so pretty! And who is this?"

Daisy barked sitting up to beg for attention.

"This is my puppy! Her name is Daisy."

"So this is Daisy!" Macey laughed. "She is so cute!"

Daisy spun circles happily yipping with the attention she was receiving. Macey chuckled glancing behind them as if expecting a third. She frowned but wisely decided not to ask about their absentee escort.

“Come on, let me introduce you.”

Macey guided them to a small group speaking rather intimately with each other. Sarah knew them all by sight having met them several times: Julius, March and Rose as well as the infamous Augustus.

“Look who just arrived,” Macey declared as they neared.

“Oh Sarah!” Rose immediately embraced her. “You look stunning!”

“Thank you.”

“And who is this?” Rose turned her attention to Zoe.

“I’m Zoe!” the three-year-old answered without a moment of hesitation. “And this is Daisy.”

The DaLair men chuckled at the toddler’s brazen attitude. So many people approached them with apprehension and more than a little fear so it was refreshing to meet someone with such confidence. Julius was immediately reminded of Aria and Lyra both of whom were equally outgoing.

“Who are you?” Zoe asked.

“My name is Rose and this is my husband March,” Rose introduced. “And that is Julius.”

“Oh, are you my Uncle Jules?” Zoe asked turning to him and tilting her head to the side like her curious puppy.

“That’s right,” Julius smiled liking her more and more as Macey sidled up next to him. “March is my brother so you can think of him and Rose as your uncle and aunt too.”

“Really?” Zoe looked at the other pair with eager expectation as they smiled and nodded. “Yeah! I have a lot of uncles and aunties now!”

This brought another chuckle from the group as she looked at Augustus with expectant eyes. He cleared his throat, “I’m March and Julius’s father, which makes Caden, Aria, Coda and Lyra my grandchildren.”

“You’re their grandpa?” she asked.

“That’s right. You can call me grandpa too if you like.”

“Yea! Just like grandpa Taylor!” Zoe clapped bouncing excitedly and earned amused but sad smiles from the group.

It was clear the little girl loved meeting people and expanding her family. She seemed almost starved for familial connections that she would likely never receive from her actual blood relatives considering the fact Sarah was estranged from her own family and Lucas’s was better left forgotten.

“Where are Uncle Si and Auntie Ava and everyone else?” Zoe asked.

“They are over here,” Macey said, “I’ll show you.”

Macey led them to a small quasi-private nook with a table where the kids were gathered for the convenience of their parents allowing them to be watched. The table was laden with various treats and baked goods as well as a bowl of punch for their exclusive use. The security guards Silas employed were stationed nearby to ensure the kids were not approached by overeager guests. Macey, Ava and Tracy took turns watching the kids and roaming the venue to meet with guests.

“Puppy!” Ben happily exclaimed sliding off his seat to run up to Zoe and Daisy.

Isaac, Coda and Lyra quickly followed suit. Zoe had regaled the DaLair siblings with several stories about her puppy so they were eager to meet the canine. Daisy was only too happy to greet and sniff them while cleaning their faces of any sugary crumbs.

“Oh Coda, don’t let her lick your face!” Macey admonished but it fell on deaf ears as the kids laughed and rolled on the floor completely enthralled with the dog.

Sarah shrugged and shook her head at the ineffective warning. There were just some things one couldn’t control once children and animals were combined. She learned to live with it like grass stains.

“Oh Sarah!”

She turned to greet Ava and Tracy. As always Ava’s greeting came with a warm hug as she shot Macey a questioning look. Macey gave a subtle shake of her head to confirm Lucas had not accompanied them. Ava tried to contain her disappointment. When Lucas came to the brownstone he watched Sarah with such a longing expression Ava was certain she was right about his desire to have her back.

“There are some people I’d like to introduce you to,” Ava said.

“What about...” Sarah glanced at Zoe happily seated on the floor with the other kids and Daisy.

“Don’t worry. They’ll be fine.” Ava nodded to one of the rather burly men in suits.

Each held a glass of what appeared to be champagne but was really only soda water. Their suits helped them blend in unless one noted the military precision of their surveillance deployment.

“Ava and Silas never travel without them,” Macey chuckled. “We also take turns watching the kids and now it’s mine. So go have fun! I’ll be here if the kids need anything.”

In truth the presence of the adults was probably moot with the older kids in attendance and watching over their younger siblings. The Prescott triplets and DaLair twins were quite mindful of the younger children but neither Macey nor Ava could suppress their instincts to watch over their broods.

“All right. Zoe, stay here with your cousins. If you need anything just ask Auntie Macey, okay?”

“Okay!”

With Zoe’s happy reply Sarah allowed Ava to lead her away. Ava seemed to make it her personal mission to introduce Sarah to as many people as possible. It seemed a waste of time since she was planning to return to Vermont in a week but making a favorable impression here would only help to make Ruth and the publisher’s party that much grander and more spectacular.

With that in mind she ignored the occasionally dubious looks others gave her as she was introduced to them. Clearly they remembered her but her new look, attitude and confidence soon had them changing their minds about how much they actually knew. Ruth arrived shortly after she did and gave her much needed support as she made her rounds. The more they associated Sarah with the publisher the easier it would be to accept her as Rosemary when the time came. Surprisingly many people were excited for the masquerade and the big reveal.

“Miss Clark, you have to tell me,” an eager socialite said, “do you know the real Rosemary? I mean, you’re her editor so you have to have met her at least once, right?”

Ruth chuckled glancing at Sarah, “Of course I’ve met her. In fact, she’s a childhood friend of mine.”

“Really! Oh, what’s she like?”

“Well she’s kind and generous when it comes to helping friends and she’s fiercely loyal. She’ll never abandon a friend even if the rest of the world turns their backs,” Ruth said while Sarah tried not to blush.

Is that really how Ruth saw her? Sarah glanced at Ava who smiled and nodded when she saw Sarah’s attention waver. It seemed she also felt that way about Sarah.

Sarah sipped a bit of champagne to hide her embarrassment. She was finally starting to relax and enjoy herself despite her earlier melancholy.

“Well, what a coincidence!”

Sarah gave a start as she turned to see Lidia standing among the crowd. The latter wore a self-satisfied smirk making Sarah wonder what she was up to now.