

Book One: Chapter Two

Six Years Later

“Julius!”

Julius sighed as he looked up from his paperwork to see his self-proclaimed fiancée stride into his office. The woman didn’t know the meaning of the word knock among many others.

Katherine Trent was everything one expected of an heiress: blonde, tall and well-endowed. Her parents were hotel moguls worth several million but still far short of the DaLair family. Yet with their support Katherine had never needed to work a day in her life. Instead she spent her time traveling the best social circles looking for her perfect groom. She found it in Julius. He was everything she wanted: rich, powerful and handsome.

“Julius! Look I have found the perfect venue for our wedding!”

Scowling he accepted the brochure seeing it was for **Twin Peaks Country Club**. Even for members the reception hall would cost a million to reserve at such short notice. He grunted.

“I thought you decided on **Tribeca**” Julius said.

He knew her family had already made the down payment for the reservation which was non-refundable. Despite being a prominent family they still had limited means and certainly couldn’t afford to throw it around even for their daughter.

“That one was fine but this one will take the wedding to the next level!” Katherine squealed.

“No.”

“What?”

“I said **no**” Julius glared not likely to repeat himself. “The other hall is already reserved.”

“But Julius, don’t you want...”

“No.” He snapped.

Katherine brought her lip forward, quivering it as she pouted. Julius glared at her, unyielding. The stand-off continued for several moments before she finally gave in.

“All right, but mommy will be so disappointed.”

“She’ll live.”

“Well I already know how you can make it up to me,” she smiled. “I want M. Gray to be our photographer.”

“Who?”

“Really, Julius sometimes I think you were born under a rock,” Katherine gave him another brochure.

This one was for an art exhibit. Apparently M. Gray was a photographer and quite famous. The brochure announced the opening of the new gallery and its exclusive contract to display M. Gray’s work in America. Julius knew very little about art so he only gave it a cursory glance.

“M. Gray is only the most famous photographer of this decade! Everyone praises his work as genius. Can you just imagine what our wedding will look like through his vision!”

Julius gave a noncommittal grunt as his phone rang. Picking it up the receiver he answered, “Prescott, to what do I owe this call?”

Katherine waited impatiently as he listened to the man on the other end of the line. Julius hoped she would take the hint and go but she remained as if determined to get the last word in.

“No. I told you before we weren’t interested. Yeah, maybe next time.”

The moment Julius set the receiver down Katherine began exactly where she left off. “The gallery’s grand opening is next week and will have M. Gray’s newest show on display for the first time anywhere! It will be the perfect opportunity to contact the artist, you know face-to-face. It’s supposedly really difficult to contact them. I guess he’s a bit of a recluse or something but there is no way he would deny seeing us.”

Julius shrugged. An outing to an art gallery was the least offensive of her usual appeals. Though his answer was less than enthusiastic she was satisfied. Pecking a kiss on his cheek she breezed out as quickly as she entered finally leaving him to his work. Scowling Julius grabbed a handkerchief and wiped away the lingering wetness Katherine left on his skin. Her touch was nauseating. Glancing at the brochure again he realized the gallery looked familiar.

Opening a drawer he removed an invitation that had arrived a few days ago for the grand opening of the same gallery. He remembered it because it was an invitation sent by his father. Augustus DaLair was not much of an art aficionado and yet he now somehow owned a gallery and wanted to display the photographs of this artist? Were they also war buddies just as he was with Macey’s father?

And now Katherine wanted to go to the gallery to appeal to this photographer too? What was so special about M. Gray? Not for the first time he wondered how he got himself roped into this situation. Angrily he stood and went to his liquor cabinet pouring himself a glass of whiskey.

He knew exactly how he got here. Two years ago he got drunk like he did most nights since Macey’s disappearance. Katherine came up to him and aggressively started making out with him right at the bar. His mind had been elsewhere. His inhibitions and standards were lower. So low in fact he was beginning to wonder if something had been slipped into his drink.

Luckily his brother was at the same party, peeled her off of him and took Julius home to sleep it off. Shortly after that Katherine started to claim he was her fiancée even going as far as buying herself an engagement ring. He hadn’t cared in the beginning but now she was planning their wedding.

One moment of weakness and his life was sliding out from under him. Pouring himself another drink Julius returned to his desk. But really it started falling apart long before that. Hesitating he unlocked the bottom drawer to remove a small velvet lined box and a folder. Taking another sip of his drink he opened the folder. On top was a pack of papers: divorce papers. Lying on top of that was a short note written in a careful scrawl. In moments he was taken back to that night six years ago.

* * *

Slam!

“Macey! How dare you ignore my calls!” Julius shouted as he stumbled into the apartment. “Macey! Don’t ignore me! We’re not done talking!”

He made it through the entry, past the kitchen tossing his keys and phone on the counter without really seeing it or the items left on it and skirted the living room as he headed toward the bedroom. If he had been sober he might have realized it was too quiet and no one would be able to ignore his drunken ranting.

“Macey!”

He burst into the bedroom only to find it empty. Undeterred he headed for the master bath intent on finding his wayward wife. Throwing open the door he stumbled all the way into the luxury shower before he realized she wasn’t there. Turning he staggered toward the door kicking over the garbage can and tripping on the trash that spewed across the floor. Sprawling on the bedroom floor he passed out completely.

A splitting headache woke him the next morning. Rising from the floor he shuffled through the fog to reach the toilet and relieved himself. He groaned as he head slowly woke from its trash and a thought suddenly occurred to him.

“Macey! Don’t think I’ve forgotten about last night!” he called.

Quickly washing his hands he kicked his way through the garbage again. Growling in anger he righted the trash can and began throwing the refuse away. He hated messes.

“Macey, get in here the clean this up! I wasn’t put on this earth to clean up after a woman!”

A small, plastic piece caught his eye. It almost looked like a toothbrush but with no bristles. Turning it over he read the digital display: **pregnant** Julius’s hangover was instantly forgotten as the single word sank in.

Pregnant

“Macey!”

Julius rushed into the bedroom to find it empty. The bed was unused and no sign of the redhead who shared it with him for the last two years. Suddenly panicked he darted out of the bedroom heading to the kitchen.

“Macey!”

She always woke early to start the coffeemaker knowing he couldn’t get his day started without his morning cup. There was no sign of her and none of the usual breakfast smells. The living room was likewise absent of life. He continued to check every room of the condo refusing to believe she was really gone.

The faint smell of burnt paper eventually led him to the study. Here at last was something she had touched. Stepping up to the desk his eyes fell on the stack of papers: the divorce papers he requested from his lawyer in a moment of impulse after hearing the rumors circulating about her. He had been enraged that she thought she could play him for a fool. But he was a fool.

Resting on top was her engagement and wedding rings. It was a simple, understated set. Her engagement ring was a smooth band with five small stones: three diamonds and two emeralds. The wedding band it was made to attach to was likewise a simple band with three stones: two diamonds and a slightly bigger emerald in the center. Underneath the rings was a note. With a shaking hand he reached for it.

You win. I officially want nothing from you

No. No-no-no-no

Panic sent his heart racing as he spun around and headed to the kitchen again. Her purse, wallet and keys sat on the counter. He ignored them reaching for his phone and dialing her number. Julius listened to the ring until it finally went to voicemail.

“Macey! Pick up the phone! **Please**”

Hanging up, he dialed again only to receive the same results. He tried again. Julius was ready to try a fourth time before a thought occurred to him. Checking to see the time was past eight he searched his contacts for a new name and hit **send**. It rang twice before a chipper voice answered.

“You’ve reached the Lord of the Underworld...”

“Chris shut up!” Julius snapped. He was not in the mood for the usual antics of the director of his company’s IT department.

“Okay geez. Someone woke up on the wrong side of the bed.”

“Just shut it. I need you to track Macey’s phone and tell me where she is.”

“...You realize that is illegal, right?”

“I don’t care! She’s not answering and I need to find her. Can you do it?”

“...What’s the number?”

“646-555-4547,” Julius ran a hand through his hair.

“Just so you know I’m doing this because she might be in the gutter somewhere because that will hold up in court.”

Julius let out an audible groan. She couldn’t be injured. **Dear God, let her be okay** Out loud he demanded, “Well?”

“Hold on. This takes a little time even if you do it legally. Do you know if her phone is on?”

“It rang before going to voicemail,” Julius headed to the bedroom to change switching his phone to speaker.

“Good. If it was off it would go directly to voicemail.”

Julius pulled on a pair of jeans and a clean polo before returning to the entry for a jacket and shoes all the while watching his phone and waiting for Chris’s verdict. Just as he reached for his keys he got his answer.

“Got her.”

“Where?”

“She’s about six blocks from you. Just down the street.”

Julius rushed out the door and down to the underground parking. Leaping into his favorite car; a blue Shelby GT, he raced out onto the street following Chris’s directions. He suddenly screeched to a stop at a quiet intersection. Climbing out phone in hand Julius searched for any flash of red hair.

“Where is she, Chris?”

“She should be right there. You’re practically on top of her.”

“Chris there is nothing here...” Julius cut himself off as his eyes fell on the garbage can on the corner. “Chris, call her phone.”

The spirited sound of Beethoven began to play. Blood drained from his face as his fears crept in. Clenching his jaw he approached the can shoving off the cover. Reaching inside he rifled through the trash before straightening with her phone in hand. Julius began to shake: trembling with rage and fear. It couldn’t end like this.

Please

“Boss?” Chris asked over the phone.

“She threw it in the trash.”

“Damn. Okay. So what now?”

“We have a route. She obviously came this way. There have to be cameras.”

“Yeah, but...”

“I don’t care how you get it done. Find her!”

* * *

Setting aside the papers he picked up the stack of five photos underneath. Their resolutions were poor. Only one was in color. They were retrieved from various sources: a neighbor’s **Ring** an ATM, surveillance and security cameras. One thing they all shared was the subject: a woman dressed in jeans and a hoodie as she walked down the street hugging herself.

Only one gave him a proper view of her face as she walked under a street light. Despite the poor resolution it was clear she was upset and had been crying. Her normally sparkling eyes were clouded with sorrow and fear. Macey had always been a vibrant woman but in the image she was pale and listless. She looked broken, abandoned. He had done that. It was his fault.

Numbly he flipped through the photos as guilt gnawed on him. They tracked her to a bus stop and then she simply disappeared without a trace. He spent the last six years trying to find her but always he came up empty. Finally he came to the end of the folder and last two items. He had combed the hospitals to find the one she visited. He now had a copy of her tests confirming her pregnancy as well as a picture of the ultrasound estimating the baby’s development.

Julius stared at them for a long, quiet moment. He had people stake out several hospitals hoping to catch her. Babies required careful monitoring even before they were born but she never appeared and no one recalled a woman matching her description. He refused to believe she was gone. She had to be out there...somewhere.

His shoulders shook with pent up emotion. Slowly he opened the small box to reveal both of their wedding rings. Next to hers was his own: a silver colored band inlaid with a green strip through the center. He had worn his for four years after her disappearance refusing to give up hope. Julius fingered the tiny diamonds and emeralds, belatedly recalling they were in fact their birthstones. With a sigh he once again found himself silently rehearsing his planned speech for when he found her again.

Would he ever be able to say it? Would she even listen?

Macey, where did you go? Come home...please

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