

## Chapter 31 - The Billionaire CEO's Runaway Wife

“If it isn’t my dear sister-in-law,” Lidia smiled.

“Funny, that’s not what you called me last time we met,” Sarah said narrowing her gaze.

Lidia’s carefully manufactured expression slipped. Ruth struggled to control a laugh while Ava fought a smile. Lidia shot both angry glares but neither was particularly concerned. For Ava any threat was merely show as she was virtually untouchable. No one would risk earning the Prescott’s ire. Macey enjoyed the same benefits as a member of the DaLair family but also as a famed artist. Sarah briefly wondered if Rosemary could be a similar shield once her identity was revealed.

“And I’m certain Macey never sent you an invitation,” Ava said.

“A friend gave me her invite since she couldn’t attend,” Lidia answered with a dismissive wave.

“And which friend is that?” Ava asked. If anyone was stupid enough to risk the DaLairs’ anger by sharing their invitation then they deserved to be placed on the family’s blacklist, the Prescott’s as well.

“Does that really matter?” Lidia shrugged.

“This is a DaLair event so yes it does,” Ava answered. “And you should know better than to show your face around here. Or have you forgotten the charity gala last Christmas?”

Lidia blushed and Sarah immediately wondered what Ava referred to. Did something happen between the DaLairs and Stantons?

“Look, I’m not here to start anything,” Lidia said after a moment.

“That would be a first,” Ruth muttered. However there was no sign of Madeline and usually the pair kept each other in close attendance.

“I just wanted to talk to Sarah...in private.”

“Anything you want to say to her can be said to us,” Ava said.

“It’s a private, family matter.”

“Since when? Stantons love airing their laundry in front of everyone,” Ruth said.

Lidia glared at her but Ruth neither quailed nor retreated. As an editor Ruth lived far outside normal social circles. As Rosemary’s editor and contact she was confident Briarwood would never fire her and even if they did she could work elsewhere. What was more she was on good terms with Macey DaLair and Ava Prescott so she would never be blacklisted.

Sarah appreciated her friends’ support but this conversation would go nowhere if they continued contradicting Lidia. No doubt she came there for a reason but that would only be revealed according to Lidia’s whims. Sarah wouldn’t let the others fight her battles. Setting aside her champagne flute she stepped forward.

“Fine. Let’s have a chat.”

“Sarah, are you sure?” Ruth asked.

“It’ll be fine,” Sarah gave them a reassuring smile. “I’ll be right back. Check on Zoe for me.”

Ruth and Ava shared concerned looks but acquiesced. They recognized Sarah’s need to stand up for herself. In Ava’s case she had experience facing her tormentors including her own sister. It was something Sarah also had to do. Reluctantly they let her go and made their way back to the kids.

“Oh, there you are,” Macey greeted as they returned glancing at the preoccupied kids and dropping her voice, “where’s Sarah?”

“She had something to take care of,” Ava said as Ruth glanced around them.

“Looking for someone?” Macey asked her.

“I was just wondering where Lucas was,” Ruth said.

“He didn’t come,” Macey shook her head.

“Are you sure?”

Macey nodded.

“That’s strange,” Ruth said. “He insisted on being Sarah’s escort to events. He even made Tailor add it to their agreement.”

“What agreement?”

“Right after Lucas found out Sarah was here...they drafted a sort of contract. Lucas can't make any public announcements about their relationship or Zoe and he can't say anything about her being...you know Rosemary...in return they are staying with him and he was to be her escort to events she attends. I thought he was to trying to win her back.”

“A contract?” Macey repeated giving Ava a look.

“Yes, Tailor drafted it himself. It's all legal and binding.”

“Really,” Macey was surprised. “Let's go talk to Julius. Ava.”

“I have the kids,” Ava nodded. “Theo, where do you think you are going? Come back here.”

The older boy sheepishly returned to his mother as Macey and Ruth departed on a mission. Julius was not hard to find being the center of attention after his long absence. Unlike his father who was too intimidating and his brother who was far more reserved Julius was outgoing with a natural charisma that could charm just about anyone. If not for his fierce devotion Macey might have been inclined to worry but he never so much as glanced at other woman no matter how much they tried to catch his eye.

The effect was doubled when he was with Silas who stood almost six inches taller. Silas's reputation had softened since his marriage earning him just as many admirers eager for his attention but like Julius he only had eyes for his wife. The pair stood together now chatting easily with a young man bearing a striking resemblance to Julius and a young woman.

“Julius,” Macey said as they approached.

“Hello, sweetheart,” Julius immediately broke his conversation to wrap an arm around her, kiss her neck and nibble her ear. Macey blushed at his audacity though she certainly didn't mind the attention. “Look who finally showed up.”

“Hi Aunt Macey,” the young man greeted.

“Jude!” Macey smiled. “I'm so glad you made it. And who is this?”

She studied the pretty brunette at his side. Her dress was nice though obviously of cheaper quality than others in the room. Her hair was up in an unadorned ponytail but the necklace she wore, though simple, was stunning and quite clearly beyond her own means.

“This is Jessica,” Jude introduced. “Jess, this is my Aunt Macey.”

Julius gave his nephew a playful smirk. This was the first time Jude had introduced them to a girlfriend. According to March they had only met the young lady once or twice themselves and she was particularly nervous about meeting Augustus.

“It's very nice to meet you,” Macey smiled and offered her hand for a shake.

“Oh my god! It’s really you!” Jessica gushed. “I can’t believe I’m shaking hands with M. Gray! I love your work!”

“Thank you,” Macey said feeling her face warm. She met many admirers over the years but this was the first time it was a person she was sure to become intimately connected to. Jude wasn’t one for arbitrary relationships so if he was introducing this young lady it was almost certain their family would be growing soon.

“Oh, there’s grandpa,” Jude said. “Come on, he really wants to meet you.”

Jessica was positively giddy after meeting Macey and allowed Jude to lead her toward the DaLair patriarch without protest. Macey could only hope she maintained that attitude when meeting him. Augustus was rather particular when it came to the partners his progeny selected.

“Wow, I’m here with a celebrity,” Julius chuckled. He hadn’t gotten more than a shy smile from the demur lady at his nephew’s side.

“Stop,” Macey gave him a warning look. Glancing at Ruth she remembered why she sought out her husband in the first place. “Have you seen Lucas?”

Julius raised an eyebrow at her query, “Not since he came to the office a couple days ago. I told you about that. Why?”

“Apparently he has an agreement with Sarah to be her escort to events...so why did she come here alone?”

Julius glanced at Silas, “What kind of agreement?”

“It’s more like a contract,” Ruth said at Macey’s prompting.

“Contract?”

“Yeah, Tailor drafted it for them and they both signed it.”

“You’re sure about that?” Silas asked.

Ruth nodded. Both men frowned. There were several rules their fathers had taught them about business over the years. One of the first was to tread carefully around a Stanton. They were difficult to negotiate with but once an agreement was made, signed and official they adhered to every word. At least that was the case with Lucas’s predecessor, Alice Stanton, and she passed down that mentality to her successor from what they heard.

“Damn, I don’t have his number anymore,” Julius muttered. “How about you Si?”

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“What did you want to talk about?” Sarah demanded.

Lidia had led her away from the crowded reception room to an area near the bathrooms. There were small private lounges also nearby but Sarah had no interest in them or being anywhere near Lidia for that amount of time.

Lidia paused, her face briefly showing her irritation before she was able to mask it again. A server passed and she snagged the two glasses off his tray offering Sarah one. Looking at the offering with an irritated look Sarah nonetheless accepted knowing Lidia wouldn't get to the point until she did.

“I want to propose a truce,” Lidia said.

“A truce?” Sarah looked at her.

“Yes. I honestly don't know what is going on in my brother's head. For years he's been obsessed with finding you. I thought after you left that was the end of it but apparently not for him,” Lidia shook her head. “When I went to talk to him about you he got all defensive and told me to stay away and not bother you.”

Sarah frowned, “I thought you said no one cared or looked for me after I left.”

“Well...”

Lidia's hesitation was enough to confirm the truth. Sarah was stunned into silence for several moments. So Lucas really had looked for her. Though she wanted to believe it she hadn't dared entertain the idea. But it was true. Lucas had been looking for her. But why?

“So...like I said. I don't know what my brother is thinking but I don't want to stir up any trouble,” Lidia continued when Sarah remained silent.

Sarah drew in a slow breath. So that's what this was all about...the text messages. Her former sister-in-law was worried about the messages getting out.

“So...truce?” Lidia raised her glass as if for a toast.

Sarah eyes her warily. There was still something off. Lidia was a schemer, conniving and manipulative. Sarah couldn't shake the feeling there was something else going on. Lucas warned Lidia to keep clear and she was at a party hosted by trustworthy friends. Lidia would be stupid to try anything tonight.

Lidia smiled shaking her glass. Sarah watched her trying to figure out what might be going on in her head. There had to be some angle to this offer. Figuring out Lidia's twisted mind was no easy task and Sarah didn't want to make the others worry by being gone too long.

“Fine.” Sarah clanked her glass with Lidia's before taking a gulp of champagne to seal the truce.

Immediately her face twisted in disgust at the bitterness that invaded her mouth. Sarah frowned looking at her glass sniffing the sparkling liquid. It didn't look any different to what she drank before. She looked at Lidia wondering if she tasted it too only to find the latter smirking, rolling her untouched glass in her fingers.

Sarah stared at her a sinking feeling already seizing her. Suddenly arms encircled her and pulled her into what seemed to be a small lounge though it also appeared to be something of a cleaning closet. The dimness of the room gave her little detail to focus on as she was shoved against the wall and a tongue invaded her mouth.

She pushed the body away aiming a slap against a chiseled face. Her retribution was met with a sinister laugh. Light spilling from the doorway gave Sarah just enough to see who her attacker was and it was someone she never wanted to see: James Goodwell.

"I knew you'd be feisty," he laughed. "I love feisty."

"Y-you son of a..." Sarah shook her head. Everything seemed to be closing in on her. She looked to the door to escape only to see Lidia standing there with a cruel smile on her face.

"I don't care what you do just do it. And make sure you get pictures and send them to me so I can blast them on the gossip pages," Lidia said then looked at Sarah. "You should have listened when I told you to stay away. Now you're going to pay."

Sarah's face flushed with rage as she lunged for the figure at the door but everything felt heavy and strange. A hand gripped her wrist pulling her back and forced her against the wall again. His tongue invaded her mouth a second time as she struggled to shove him away. She took another swing but it didn't connect. Her hands weirdly tingled and her vision was rapidly losing focus.

"That's right, baby. Keep fighting. We have about ten minutes before the drugs reach full effect and you got to get me hard before then if we want to have any fun."

Pushing him away she tried for the door again but he grabbed her by the waist and tossed her onto a dust-covered sofa. Sarah forced her body to move sitting up but he shoved her down and straddled her. His face hung over her and she felt his already stiff member pressing against the clothing separating them.

"We're going to have fun tonight, baby!" he smiled.

"N-No!" Sarah forced a scream past her numb tongue.

Chapter Thirty-Two

## Chapter 32 - The Billionaire CEO's Runaway Wife

“Sarah! Zoe!” Lucas called as he stepped into the house.

He stopped at Reagan’s shop on the way home. The side trip had taken longer than he planned but he hoped Sarah would approve of the results as this was the first event they would attend together since their divorce.

“Sarah?” Lucas paused. The house was definitely too quiet for a three-year-old and a dog.

“Señor?” Ulma asked stepping out of the kitchen wiping her hands on a towel.

“Where are they?” Lucas asked.

“They already left. Señora didn’t think you were coming.”

“Damn it,” Lucas shook his head spinning around and heading back out the door. He took too long.

“Where’s Sarah and Zoe?” Alan asked when Lucas returned to the car alone.

“They are already gone.”

“Shit.”

“Just go. We’ll catch up with them at the Mixer.”

“Right.”

Lucas was a bundle of nerves as Alan headed across town. There was so much he had to say to Sarah when he saw her he only hoped she would listen. As for Madeline, Lidia and his mother...he would deal with them.

Reaching their destination Lucas was out before the car was completely stopped much to Alan’s surprise and chagrin. Darting past the surprised valet Lucas hurried inside reaching the lounge where the majority of DaLair events took place. Thankfully he was not stopped at the door and stepped inside. His gaze swept the room looking for any glimpse of her.

Nervously Lucas headed in ignoring any who tried to catch his attention. Until he found Sarah and Zoe nothing else mattered. He wasn't even sure what she was wearing making his task more difficult.

"Daddy!"

Lucas paused turning to the excited voice in time to catch Zoe as she ran toward him. He scooped her up kissing her temple as he held her close. At least one fear was alleviated. His baby was safe.

"Daddy, you're late!" Zoe declared after their embrace and gave him a disapproving frown.

"I know. I'm sorry."

"Mommy said you weren't coming."

"No. I...I should have called to let you two know I was running late," Lucas shook his head. "I'm sorry about that."

"I forgive you...this time. But don't do that again."

"Right. Promise."

"Oh, there you are."

Lucas turned to see Julius, Macey, Silas and Ruth approaching followed closely by Thomas and Tracy. Silas quickly moved to Ava who had been watching the tender scene between father and daughter with a pleased smile. Both Prescott and DaLair broods watched still swarming around the excited Daisy who barked at the ever-growing crowd.

"Yeah. I made it," Lucas nodded to them. "Where's Sarah? I need to talk to her."

"I'm not sure," Macey said. "She just stepped aside to talk to your sister."

"Lidia?" Lucas felt himself go cold. "When?"

"Like five minutes ago," Ruth said. "We were actually planning to call and ask why you weren't here but none of us have your number."

"Shit." Lucas muttered setting Zoe on her feet.

"Daddy, that's a bad word," the three-year-old admonished.

"There you are!" Alan declared catching up. "Next time you want to run off I'm not..."

"Not now, we need to find Sarah!"



“What? What happened?”

“Lidia.”

“Shit,” Alan said.

“We need to split up and cover the entire venue,” Lucas announced.

“Luke, what is the matter?” Julius asked.

“I’ll explain later, please, we have to find her first.”

“Mike, get the team and spread out,” Silas looked toward the security personnel quietly blending in.

“Ah, dad,” Theo stepped forward. “I saw Aunt Sarah.”

“You did? Where?” Lucas asked.

“She went that way,” Theo pointed. “I was going to follow but mom spotted me and told me to not go wandering off.”

“Thanks,” Lucas gave the boy a pat before rushing off in the direction indicated not waiting for the others to follow.

Lucas pushed his way through the crowd not caring if he stepped on any toes. His only thought was to find Sarah as quickly as possible. He was just a few minutes behind but he still wasn’t sure what his sister was planning. Apparently threatening her once was not enough to warn her away. When he caught up with her he would show her how wrong she was.

Finally getting himself free of the crowd Lucas paused to find himself close to the bathrooms as well as the kitchen where servers exited and entered keeping out of the way of their patrons. Where should he go now? Which way? Sarah would never follow Lidia far, certainly not away from public eyes.

Deciding to check the kitchen he paused at a muffled, “N—No!”

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Tears streamed down Sarah’s face as she struggled to push the heavy body off of her. She wouldn’t let anyone take something from her again. She wouldn’t accept that kind of pain again. But her limbs felt heavier and heavier. Her coordination was waning as she struggled against the numbness invading her mind.

“That’s right keep fighting!” James laughed. “It makes the fruit so much sweeter.”

He laughed tugging at his belt. The door suddenly flew open allowing light to fill the dim room again. Irritated at the interruption James yelled, “Hey! Get the fuck out of here, busboy! We’re busy!”

But the light didn’t dim and the door remained open.

“I said—”

Whatever threat James meant to deliver was cut off as he was thrown to the side and rolled onto the floor. Through hazy vision Sarah saw another looming figure descend on her attacker punching him until his face was bloody and a sickening crack sounded when his nose was broken.

She rolled off the sofa crumpling on the floor as she struggled to reach her rescuer but her body wouldn’t obey her commands and the darkness crept in.

“Luke! Stop!”

More figures appeared finally pulling the brawling men apart.

“Luke! You’ll kill him!” Julius said as he and Silas managed to drag Lucas off the nearly unrecognizable James Goodwell, not that Julius had much sympathy for the latter but he also didn’t want Lucas to face murder charges.

Lucas was shaking with fury. The moment he flung open the door and saw the scene in front of him he saw red. Now with Silas and Julius at his side he allowed himself to breathe but that brought him another moment of panic.

“Sarah!”

Shrugging off the others Lucas fell to his knees at her side. She batted his hands away but her motion was jerky and uncoordinated.

“Sarah, it’s me. Look at me. It’s all right. You’re safe,” Lucas gently smoothed her hair from her face letting her see him clearly.

“...L—Luke?”

“That’s right. I’m here. I won’t let him touch you.”

A sob shuddered through her and she practically collapsed into him. He held her close as her body trembled slowly releasing the tension from its fight. Finally he was holding her but there was no sense of accomplishment as the adrenaline continued to course through him. If he had been even a few minutes later...

He couldn’t allow himself to think about it.

“Hey, big man,” Julius looked at Silas’s security personnel standing just outside the door alongside Thomas and Alan. “You got a flashlight?”

With a silent nod Mike handed over a slim pen light. Julius nodded gratitude before kneeling beside the pair on the floor. He hesitantly touched Sarah’s shoulder only for her to shudder. Considering what she just went through it was remarkable she handled being surrounded by so many men.

“It’s all right, Sarah. It’s me, Jules. It’s okay.”

She looked at him with unfocused eyes but seemed to recognize him.

“I just want to check something. It won’t hurt,” Julius assured her.

He gently held open her eyes to keep her from blinking as he shined the light into them. She winced but otherwise seemed to be calm. Julius frowned taking the light away.

“Jules?” Silas prompted knowing what he suspected.

“I think she’s been dosed.”

“Dosed?” Lucas repeated. “You mean drugged?”

Julius nodded taking out his phone and selecting a contact, “Yeah...this is Julius DaLair. I need medical transportation at the Baccarat. Park at the service exit near the kitchen. Thanks.”

No sooner did he end that call only to make another, “Doctor Darman? Julius. I have a patient here we think was dosed with an unknown drug. Yeah, I called for a medi-van. They’ll be here in a few minutes. Thanks, doc.”

Lucas looked at him curiously.

“Doctor Darman has been our family’s doctor for years. She’ll be discrete and make sure Sarah has the best care. Promise.”

“Most drugs of this nature are fast-acting and leave the system quickly,” Silas seconded. “If we wait too long we’ll never know what they dosed her with.”

Lucas nodded accepting their reasoning and was grateful for their cooler heads. In truth he could barely think straight except to hold onto Sarah and protect her. His gaze fell on James still unconscious. The rise and fall of the man’s chest alone indicated he was in fact still alive.

“We’ll take care of him,” Julius said. “You just worry about Sarah. All right?”

Lucas nodded.

“Mike, you and the team block off the area and clear a path through the kitchen,” Silas ordered. “We don’t need any rumors starting.”

With a nod Mike disappeared from sight leaving Thomas and Alan watching the scene with concern.

“Alan,” Lucas suddenly came back to himself. “Lidia lured Sarah here and is probably the one who drugged her. I don’t care how you do it, what you have to promise or how much you have to pay...I want the camera footage from tonight. I want proof.”

“On it.” Alan nodded and disappeared on his mission.

Julius looked at his phone as it buzzed alerting him the medical van had arrived. He gave Lucas a reassuring nod. Lucas didn’t feel nearly as optimistic as he carefully gathered Sarah in his arms and stood carrying her bridal-style. She was limp. Her breathing was shallow and she didn’t make a sound.

Apparently whatever they gave her was just as fast-acting as Silas guessed. Maybe the only thing that delayed her succumbing to it was the adrenaline surging through her while she tried to fend off her attacker. Now that she knew she was safe she stopped fighting. At least that was his hope.

“Tom, once Lucas and Sarah are on their way to the hospital let the ladies know what happened. Try not to alarm the kids,” Silas said.

Thomas nodded.

“Zoe,” Lucas suddenly froze. What should he do? He couldn’t leave her there but he also didn’t want her to see her mother like this.

“It’s fine. We’ll take care of Zoe,” Julius patted his shoulder. “We still have some of Lyra’s old clothes. The kids can have a sleepover with her and the puppy.”

Lucas nodded in gratitude. Thomas held the door and directed him to the kitchen before looking back at Silas, “What about you two?”

“We’ll stay here until the police arrive,” Julius answered.

“You called them?” Thomas asked glancing at Silas as he found a heavy-duty flashlight among the stored cleaning supplies.

“Not yet,” Julius said.

Thomas grimaced before pulling the door closed and instructing one of the security team to stay behind and guard the door. No one in or out until Silas gave the word.

Julius stumbled in the now dim light to what appeared to be an old wet bar. Though covered in a thick layer of dust turning on the sink caused a steady stream of water to come out. He also found a switch which turned on an overhead light. Remarkably the bulb was still good. The room was still dark but at least there was some light. Grabbing a mop bucket Julius filled it at the sink. Once it was half full he carried it over to James's prone form. He looked at Silas to see the other had removed his coat and was rolling up his sleeves.

"You ready?" Julius asked.

"You don't have to stay," Silas said.

"As if I would miss this," Julius replied before dumping the cold water on James's head.

James woke up sputtering and tried to rise.

"Oh, don't get up James, relax," Julius gently forced him down again before taking a seat on the over-turned bucket. "We have so many questions for you."

James looked from Julius to Silas who quietly smacked his palm with the flashlight.

"James, James, James," Julius sighed. "I am quite certain the last time I saw you I told you never to show your face to me again. Too bad you weren't smart enough to listen. So...Now we are going to play a game. Let's call it: 20 Questions, Russian Roulette style."

James nervously glanced back at Silas.

"Here's the rules," Julius continued. "I'm going to ask a question and you are going to answer. If it's the truth I'll ask another. If we detect a lie; however, Silas will break one of your bones...and just for the fun of it, because games are supposed to be fun, we won't tell you in advance which bone he'll break. Don't you just love surprises? I know I do."

James seemed to try to swallow his nervousness as his darting gaze went from one to the other.

"All right, first question," Julius said, "let's start with something easy. James, how many women have you drugged and raped?"

The prone man trembled, whimpering. After a moment Silas cleared his throat drawing Julius's attention. Following Silas's gaze Julius noticed the warm pool soaking the floor between James's legs. The pair shared a disgusted look before Julius turned his attention back to their helpless prisoner.

"...So, more than one, I take it," Julius said taking out his phone. "James, can I call you Jimmy? Jim-Boy...I want names. Alphabetically, chronologically, height, age...you can pick how you want to list them...but I want all of them. So let's start...And before you say otherwise...I know you remember. A man like you doesn't forget and remember there is a time limit to our patience."

Silas smacked the palm of his hand with the flashlight again as a reminder.

“So...first name.”

Chapter Thirty-Three

## Chapter 33 - The Billionaire CEO's Runaway Wife

Lucas sat on the edge of his seat staring at the hospital bed where Sarah lay unconscious. Except for a brief moment when the EMTs gave her IV fluids she hadn't stirred. He watched her carefully recalling the doctor's warning that they had to closely monitor her breathing. When they first arrived at the small private hospital there had been some discussion over the need to ventilate her.

The nurses had immediately drawn blood and he had been asked to leave the room so they could do a physical check given the state she had been found in. The very thought James might have succeeded had him seeing red all over again. He paced the hall until he was allowed back into the exam room. Sarah lay now still in her gown but covered with a light blanket.

“Mister Stanton?”

Lucas jerked to attention looking at the door where the doctor stood. She gave him a reassuring smile closing the door before speaking to ensure their privacy.

“I have the tests back. Miss Thomas was given a large dose of benzodiazepine, most likely Valium.”

Lucas trembled, “So, what does that mean?”

“I've ordered a dose of flumazenil to reverse it but it will take some time for it to take effect. We'll continue to monitor her closely,” Doctor Darman said. “It's difficult to say exactly how long she will be out after the reversal is administered but these results explain her uncoordinated behavior. Given her state she would never have been able to fend off her attacker and we did confirm she was not violated.”

Lucas let out an uneasy breath. If he had gotten there even a few minutes sooner he could have prevented it entirely, “I should have called her.”

“Mister Stanton, any later and this would be a very different story,” the doctor reminded.

He nodded.

“I’ll send the nurse in with the reversal and we can call you once she’s awake.”

“No. I’m staying.”

She nodded before stepping out leaving him with his thoughts and regrets. Lucas held his head. It had taken too long to go through the camera footage and finalize his plans for his sister and mother. If they thought there would be no retribution they were wrong. Proof or no proof there was no doubt Lidia orchestrated the whole attack and he would make her pay.

A knock on the door preceded the nurse who entered with a needle. She smiled at him before moving to Sarah to administer the reversal. His phone buzzed alerting him to Alan’s text message. Mutely Lucas nodded to the nurse as she left before opening the message.

Got the footage. Plenty of angles of Sarah following Lidia but there’s no coverage for that corner.

Lucas sighed. Evidently Lidia was getting smarter or she was just lucky that the area was a blind spot. Without hard evidence it would be difficult to prove in court but he didn’t need a jury’s conviction. As far as he was concerned he already knew the truth.

Got it. Lucas typed back.

How’s Sarah?

Still unconscious. She was just given a reversal for the drugs she was given so hopefully she’ll wake up soon.

Need me there?

No. Go home and get some sleep.

Lucas paced the room for several minutes before taking his seat again. But he just couldn’t relax. He didn’t know if it was adrenaline or worry that kept him agitated and unable to rest.

“N—n—n—!”

Lucas froze as Sarah mumbled her face twisting as if in pain. Her head and arm twitched as if trying to fend off her attacker. He held his breath. It was the first movement she had made since the van ride.

“...N—no...S—s—s—STOP!”

Sarah whimpered and he knew exactly what memory she was trapped in. He stood making his way to the bed and gently clasped her cold hand, “It’s okay Sarah. I’m here. You’re safe.”

Lucas had no idea if she could hear him but she fell silent. Her brow furrowed and he knew her dreams were still troubled. He waited as she slowly woke more and eventually opened her eyes. Lucas sucked in a breath.

Sarah blinked her gaze still unfocused. Suddenly her gaze widened and she jerked up. Her body trembled as her eyes darted from one corner of the room to the other.

“It’s okay. We’re in a hospital,” Lucas said. “Julius and Macey are watching Zoe. She’s safe. The doctor here has been the DaLair’s private doctor for years so you are in good hands. Do you...what do you remember?”

“...I...” Sarah’s brow furrowed. “I remember going to the party with Zoe. Macey and Ava were there with all the kids. I remember Ruth arriving and talking to some people. And...Lidia...”

She suddenly went white.

Lucas grimaced, “Lidia lured you to a corner and drugged you, right?”

Sarah shivered, nodding, “How did you...”

“Macey said Lidia showed up,” Lucas sighed. “I knew it was trouble as soon as she said it...any...anything else?”

“...I was grabbed and he forced me against the wall and...Oh god!” Sarah hugged herself as her stomach clenched.

“Hey! Easy!” Lucas grabbed a trash can and handed it to her in time for her to dry heave into it. He held her hair and gently rubbed her back as she shook.

“He didn’t...He never got that far,” Lucas assured her. “The doctor checked just to be sure...so you don’t have to worry.”

Sarah slowly caught her breath as his words sank in. Relief flooded her but the shame still lingered. How could she have been so stupid? She should have known better when it came to Lidia.

“Hey, hey...Shh,” Lucas gently embraced her holding her against his chest. “You’re safe now. You were drugged. He knew exactly what he was doing. They both did. I’ll make them pay. I swear it.”

Sarah felt herself relaxing almost against her will. That’s right. They were the ones at fault...not her. There was a veil in her mind making it difficult to remember everything but she did at least recall one important fact.

“You were there,” Sarah softly muttered. “...You stopped him.”



“I should have killed him,” Lucas said reluctantly releasing her. He stood and walked to the sink filling a small paper cup with water and bringing it to her. “I might have if Julius hadn’t pulled me off of him. I’m so sorry, Sarah.”

“You’re apologizing for saving me?” she asked carefully sipping the water. It wasn’t very cold but it still soothed her throat.

“I...no. For being late. For not calling you. If I had been on time or at least called you so you knew I was on my way I would have been there with you. Lidia would never have gotten close to you,” Lucas hung his head.

“Maybe. Maybe not.”

“What do you mean? Sarah I...”

“Lidia approached me when I was with Ruth and Ava. Even if you were there you probably would have spent some time with Julius and Silas and she would still have gotten her chance.”

Lucas sighed sitting on the edge of the bed. She wasn’t wrong. Lidia would have waited for the perfect opportunity to approach her without him nearby. But still...

“And I could have called you,” Sarah said after a moment. “Zoe told me I should...I just didn’t think...”

She fell silent. They sat in silence for some time in their own thoughts.

“I didn’t know about the text messages they were sending you. I didn’t even know they had your number,” Lucas said. “I’m so sorry they put you through that.”

Sarah frowned. He really didn’t know?

“...And I...I never slept with Madeline. I promise I didn’t.”

Sarah shook her head ready to argue. She really didn’t want to go through this again.

“I can prove it,” Lucas insisted catching her off guard as he took out his phone and showed her a picture of one of Madeline’s messages.

“I don’t want to read it,” Sarah shook her head.

“You don’t have to, just look at the date she sent it,” Lucas said.

Reluctantly she looked at the notation.

“Sarah, I was in London on that weekend. The hotel lost my reservation and Alan I shared a room. He’ll tell you...it was just us.”

Sarah frowned.

“And this one here. Look. That whole week I spent in the office planning a big merger. Alan and I slept on my office couches. I can get security footage for you if you want.”

Sarah chewed her lip.

“And this one...the last one she sent you. That was the day you left me. I was passed out in your bed.”

Oh, that’s right.

“If you want I’ll have Alan cross-check as many of these dates as he can to prove to you I was never with Madeline.”

“But then why did you call her name?”

Lucas shook his head, “I don’t know. I wish I had answers but I don’t remember that night. And the reason I don’t remember is because Lidia dosed me.”

“She drugged you? Her own brother?”

“We have it on camera. I can show you if you want,” Lucas said. “We think Lidia and Madeline planned it together. Once, in college, Madeline and I...I swear it was only that one time. After Lidia drugged my drink Madeline hung onto me all night, probably waiting for it to take effect. Between the drug, the alcohol, Madeline...maybe my mind went back to that night...I don’t know. I wish I did. I wish I could give you the answer you deserve. But I can’t...”

Sarah studied him as his expression twisted in confusion and agony. She didn’t see any indication he was lying. It seemed he was in complete earnestness.

“I do remember you though,” Lucas said after a moment, “that day when we were kids and you were being bullied until I stepped in.”

Sarah blinked her face flushing pink.

“I remember thinking you were cute. And your eyes...I thought your name was Rosemary. I even had Alan try to find you in the school’s register.”

“You did?” Sarah asked hardly believing it. Did he really remember? Did he really try to find her back then?

“I’m such an idiot,” Lucas shook his head. “I should have realized it was you from the beginning. If I tried even a little to get to know you...but I didn’t. I’m sorry.”

He looked at her his gaze shining with regret. She had waited so long to hear him say those words, to acknowledge her. The heaviness she had carried for so long lightened freeing her of its burden.

“I should have asked for your name, walked you home...something. You’re everything I ever wanted: kind, gentle, adventurous, independent, spirited, witty...beautiful. But I don’t deserve you.”

Sarah bit her lip as he bowed his head. His self-loathing was palpable. Despite the pain she had suffered she couldn’t blame him. He really wasn’t part of his family’s plotting and...he didn’t cheat on her. That maybe more than any other fact settled in her heart.

She reached for his hand gripping it in her own. His fingers felt so cold. Sarah squeezed his hand. Eventually he responded by squeezing her hand back. His thumb traced circles on the back of her hand. But he kept his head bowed unable to meet her gaze or too afraid to.

“...Maybe you should let me decide that,” Sarah quietly declared.

Hesitantly he finally met her gaze. She was calm. The sterile hospital room and fluorescent light brought out the blue in her eyes. He fought the smile trying to disrupt his grim expression. Slowly he raised his hand to smooth her hair behind her ear and stroked her cheek. She didn’t shy from his touch which sent his heart racing.

She was actually looking at him, not ignoring him, and letting him touch her without shying away. He wanted desperately to be closer but he didn’t know if she would allow it. After a moment he raised her hand to his lips and kissed it.

Sarah blushed.

Lucas studied her, his heart hammering in his chest and echoing in his head. He leaned forward cupping the back of her head and kissed her forehead next. With a sigh he rested his forehead on hers savoring the fact she let him so close.

Sarah trembled when he leaned close and kissed her forehead. It was like a butterfly kiss. Now they sat with nothing between them. The walls she tried to build had all but crumbled. But oddly she didn’t miss it. She thought she heard a knock but she was too consumed with her own thoughts to pay it mind.

As they sat they heard a small gasp. They looked to the door to see Silas and Ava watching them. Lucas gave them an annoyed look as Sarah turned a deep shade of red.

Silas fought a smile but there was no denying the mirth in his gaze. Beside him Ava had a look of shock her cheeks bright pink. She suddenly turned to Silas and swatted his arm.

“What did I do?” he asked.

“You could have warned me,” Ava admonished.

“How was I supposed to know?” Silas asked innocently letting his gaze drift to Lucas who still looked annoyed but also displayed a pink tinge to his cheeks at being caught.

Ava shook her head before hurrying to the bed, “Are you all right, Sarah? Thomas told us what happened...for the most part. We didn’t want the kids to worry.”

“I’m fine,” Sarah nodded. “They stopped him before...”

She couldn’t finish the thought and she shuddered. Lucas squeezed her hand in comfort even as Ava reached for her other hand and held it. No one asked her to continue. Sarah was grateful for their support.

“Julius and Macey would have come too but they wanted to get the kids home,” Ava explained. “Don’t worry about Zoe. She was so excited to have a sleepover with Lyra.”

Sarah smiled picturing how Zoe probably danced with excitement for her first ever official sleepover.

“We would have taken her but...”

“Daisy,” Sarah nodded.

Ava sighed giving her a pensive smile, “Just when I think I’m over everything my sister did...I get another reminder.”

Silas slipped an arm around her waist and kissed the back of her head in comfort. No doubt he was thinking of ways to make Marilyn pay though she was long gone from their lives.

“You’re doing good,” Sarah said. “Remember how long it took you to even get close enough to give Applejack a pat let alone a treat? Petting Daisy on the first day is huge.”

“Thanks,” Ava sighed, hesitating. “We did come here for another reason, though.”

Sarah and Lucas waited each having a sinking feeling. Ava remained silent letting Silas explain.

“Julius and I talked to James while we waited for the police,” Silas announced.

Lucas raised a brow. He could only imagine just what kind of talk they had. Sarah paled at the mention of her attacker’s name. She tensed prompting Lucas to trace circles on the back of her hand with his thumb.

“He confessed to doing this with twelve other women.”

Sarah’s eyes went wide. She felt Lucas squeeze her hand but her mind was numb. Twelve?

“You’re saying he’s drugged and raped twelve others?” Lucas asked wanting clarification.

Silas nodded.

“So many,” Sarah shivered.

“He gave us their names. We gave the list to Tracy. She’s going to work on contacting them. If she can she’d like to make this a class action case and get them some retribution. But it probably won’t be easy,” Silas explained. “We have him dead to rights for what he did tonight but there probably isn’t much evidence as far as the others are concerned especially considering the time that has passed. It’ll be their word against his. Tracy may be able to establish a pattern of behavior...that is if any of them are willing to step forward.”

“It just isn’t right,” Ava shook her head. “Victims hiding in shame while their attackers walk around as if it was nothing.”

“I’ll testify,” Sarah said. “I’ll talk to them too if it’ll help. If they know they aren’t alone they might be more comfortable.”

“We’ll let Tracy know,” Silas nodded. “She’ll want to talk to you anyway...She said something about consulting Tailor.”

“Uncle Tailor will be all too glad to help,” Sarah nodded. She could trust Tailor to handle everything Tracy needed. Neither would rest until justice was served.

Chapter Thirty-Four

## Chapter 34 - The Billionaire CEO's Runaway Wife

“Well, we should go. We sent the kids home. They’ll be wondering what’s taking us so long,” Silas said.

“We’ll talk tomorrow,” Ava said. “Let’s have lunch at Julius and Macey’s.”

“Sure.” Sarah nodded.

Ava lingered before Silas finally managed to escort her out. He gave Lucas a small grin which made the latter’s cheeks turn pink.

Lucas remained silent until they had gone. Hesitantly he looked at Sarah who was avoiding his gaze but this time it felt different. Her cheeks were tinged a faint pink. At least it was shyness not anger or disgust that made her avert her gaze.

“So...where were we?” Lucas asked.

Her blush deepened.

“Sarah, I know I don’t deserve it but...I’d like a second chance,” Lucas said. “Can we...can we start over?”

She blinked finally looking at him, “You want a do-over? Just forget everything and wipe the slate clean?”

“No. No, of course not,” Lucas shook his head. “I put you through so much, make me pay for it. I just...I just want a chance to prove I can do better.”

“...Okay.”

Lucas blinked, “Okay?”

Sarah nodded, “Okay. We’ll try it.”

Lucas struggled not to leap to his feet and shout. A chance! She was giving him a chance! A real chance! There was so much to make amends for he didn’t know where to start.

“...What about Lidia?”

“Don’t worry about her. I already have Alan working on it. Once it’s done you’ll never see her again.”

“...and Madeline?”

“She’s fired and banned from the office as well as everywhere else I’m likely to be. I won’t let her, Lidia or my mother anywhere near you. I don’t want Zoe even knowing their names.”

Sarah allowed a small grin. It seemed the three-year-old had truly charmed her father. She noticed it before on their trip to the Statue of Liberty the way he scooped Zoe up on the ferry to keep her from getting lost in the crowd. If nothing else she certainly stirred up Lucas’s protective instincts.

A gentle knock on the door prevented further talk as the doctor entered. She smiled as she approached, “How are you feeling?”

“All right, I guess,” Sarah answered.

“It’s good to see you awake considering the dosage you were given.”

Sarah grimaced, “I only took one drink of it.”

The doctor nodded checking her heart rate and blood pressure. She seemed satisfied, “I’d like to take another blood sample and see how much is left in your system.”

Sarah nodded, “Do I have to stay here?”

“...No. If you feel like you will rest better at home that’s fine now that you have woken up,” Doctor Darman said after a moment. “There may still be some traces of the drug in your system for the next several hours so I would ask you to exercise caution and avoid any sort of strenuous activity.”

“I’ll make sure she gets home safe and rests,” Lucas said.

The doctor nodded, “I’ll send in a nurse to remove the IV and discharge you.”

\* \* \*

Sarah shivered in the night chill as they stepped out of the hospital. She breathed deep letting it clear her head. A moment later someone covered her shoulders. Tensing she looked to see Lucas settling his coat over her. His expression was soft, concerned. She gave him a small smile of appreciation.

“I haven’t had a chance to tell you yet...you look stunning in that dress,” Lucas said.

Sarah blushed, “Thank you.”

“I just wish I could have danced with you tonight,” Lucas sighed.

Sarah fought a smile as her face warmed. A car pulled up alongside them. Alan stepped out opening the door for them. Lucas escorted her to the vehicle looking at Alan with a confused expression.

“I thought I told you to head home and get some sleep,” Lucas said.

“Well, I drove Sarah’s vehicle home first then went back for yours. It was late so I figured I’d swing around to see how it was going here. Good?”

“We’re making progress,” Lucas said before ducking into the vehicle after Sarah.

As Alan pulled away and drove them home Sarah tried to relax. Her hands trembled and she rubbed them trying to fend off the chill or nerves. Suddenly another hand enveloped hers. Looking up she saw Lucas watching her with concern.

“Cold? Should I tell Alan to adjust the temperature?”

“No. I’m fine.”

He raised her hand to his lips kissing it watching her reaction. The rest of the ride was quiet. Waving Alan off Lucas escorted Sarah inside himself. The house was dark and quiet but Ulma had left the light on in the kitchen. Lucas helped Sarah up the stairs and escorted her to her bedroom door. She hesitated turning to face him. He seemed at an equal loss.

“So...I’m just a couple doors down,” Lucas finally said. “If you need me just...”

“I will,” Sarah nodded. “Thank you. Oh, your coat.”

Lucas accepted it back letting himself admire her in her dress again. She really looked beautiful in it. He wished he had seen her in it under better circumstances. Next time...

“Well, good night,” Sarah hesitated before finally stepping inside her bedroom and shutting the door.

Lucas stood in the hallway for several minutes before retreating to his own bedroom. Baby steps.

Glancing at the bandage the EMTs put around his knuckles reminded him of the rather grizzly bruising and cuts from when he pummeled James. He should have killed him. The idea that Sarah would have to face her attacker again, even in a courtroom angered him. But maybe it was for the best. Sarah was strong. She didn’t let anyone else fight her battles for her and maybe it would give her some closure. But she wouldn’t be alone. He would be there for her.

With that thought in mind he changed into a pair of flannels and collapsed on his bed utterly exhausted from the day’s events. Tomorrow would be a new start.

Lucas drifted off to sleep. He didn’t know how long he had been asleep when he was suddenly awakened by a blood-curdling scream.

“NO!”

Lucas jerked awake practically leaping out of bed. He blinked his sleep-addled mind a step behind.

“Stop!”

Lucas stumbled out of his bedroom following the cries to Sarah’s door. He hesitated but her cries continued.

“Sarah? Sarah!”

Lucas gripped the doorknob finding it locked.



“Stop!”

“Sarah! Damn it! Open the door!”

He rammed his shoulder against the door. It creaked but held firm. With a grunt Lucas tried again feeling the door give slightly. A third attempt finally had it burst inside as the door jamb cracked and gave way.

Lucas stumbled into the bedroom. His gaze fell on the bed where Sarah tossed and turned, thrashing as she fended off her unseen attacker. He rushed to the bed gripping her flailing arms.

“Sarah! Sarah, wake up!”

She struggled a bit longer before her eyes fluttered open. For a moment she didn't seem aware of her surroundings then her gaze focused and she finally saw him.

“L-Luke?”

“Yeah,” he nodded.

Sarah sat up wrapping her arms around him as she shook with relieved sobs. Lucas gently embraced her trembling form. Stroking her hair in comfort he waited for her to calm down.

“I was back in that closet,” Sarah finally calmed down enough to speak. “He was coming after me and I screamed for him to stop but...”

Lucas's embrace tightened, “I won't let him near you. I promise.”

When she finally calmed down, Sarah released him. Lucas was reluctant to let her go but obliged watching her with concern. She wiped away the last of her tears wondering what she should do. How was she going to fall asleep?

“I think I'll make some tea, maybe have a snack,” Sarah muttered.

“You need to sleep,” Lucas gently admonished. If she started pattering around in the kitchen she was likely to stay up the rest of the night. A sleepless night would do her no good.

“I...can't. What if I dream I'm back there again?”

“You won't do anyone any good if you don't sleep.”

“...I can't.”

“Let's try this,” Lucas moved to sit beside her.

Grabbing extra pillows to prop himself up he reclined back and gently embraced her again. Sarah tensed resting her head on his shoulder while he stroked her hair as if consoling a child. Though the thought made her grimace she couldn't deny the comfort it brought and she slowly relaxed.

"There you go," Lucas said feeling her body slowly release its tension. "I'll be right here. You are safe."

Sarah sighed. She blinked as the exhaustion and stress of the day slowly seeped out of her. Drifting off she jerked awake trying to fend off her tiredness.

"Sleep Sarah. Just sleep." Lucas muttered.

She blinked this time not fighting the heaviness invading her.

\* \* \*

Sarah woke. Her mind felt muddled and heavy. Slowly memories of the previous night emerged from the fog. She recalled the party, Lidia...James...She shivered sitting up.

Beside her Lucas slept. His head was propped on pillows in what had to be an uncomfortable position. Though he wore flannels his chest was bare. It seemed he had slept on top of the covers as well.

Part of the night was shrouded in a fog and probably would remain so but Sarah did remember a few things very clearly. Lucas was the one who had pulled James away. He also took her to the hospital and stayed with her all night waiting for her to wake up.

She remembered the way he woke her when her dreams turned into a nightmare. Sarah's gaze went to the door seeing it wide open, the door jamb cracked and splintered where it used to latch. Did he break down the door to get to her? Frowning she looked at Lucas seeing that his eyes were now open.

Calm brown eyes surveyed her and she felt her face warm as he asked, "Did you sleep all right?"

"Um...yes. I did."

"Good." Lucas sighed stretching and cracking his neck.

Sarah cringed at the pops that issued from him. His discomfort was her fault but he didn't seem bothered. She looked again to the door, "Did you...break the door down?"

Lucas glanced at it. His expression betrayed nothing as he said, "It was locked and you were screaming."

"Oh." Sarah felt her face warm again.

“You were having a nightmare,” Lucas said rubbing her arm.

“Thank you,” Sarah muttered feeling shy.

Her cell phone suddenly rang. She jumped and felt silly as Lucas leaned over and offered the phone to her. Looking at the screen she saw it was Tailor. She bit her lip and was tempted to ignore the call but knew he would only panic if she didn't.

Giving Lucas an apologetic look she answered, “Hello, Uncle Tailor.”

“...What happened last night! Tracy said...”

“I'm fine. Uncle really. No Julius and Silas were around. I mean I didn't stay in their presence all night. There were people I had to talk to,” Sarah sighed. “No, no. Uncle would you please stop? I'm the one who decided to talk to Lidia alone...”

“I should go,” Lucas whispered seeing the phone call was going to take awhile.

She nodded still trying to calm the frantic man on the other line. He stood moving to the door hanging on its hinges.

“I'll—ah—get this fixed,” he sheepishly whispered before retreating to his room.

Sarah watched him fighting a laugh. Was that really her ruthless, neglectful husband? A man who didn't even acknowledge her four years ago? Did her sudden departure really throw him for such a loop?

“...And where was Lucas?” Tailor demanded. “If he let you...”

“Uncle Tailor, stop!” Sarah said. “Luke is the one who stopped it. He beat James to a bloody pulp from what I hear...”

It took some time to calm Tailor down and she was finally able to hang up. Sarah slumped on the bed and glanced at the broken door remembering the rather intimate way she woke up. It really did seem like he genuinely cared.

It had been her idea to ignore him until he stopped trying. That was all she had to do with her brother and father. Ignore them long enough and they simply gave up. She thought Lucas would be no different but he seemed determined to prove her wrong.

Sarah chewed her lip for a few minutes longer before going to her closet. If she was going to get answers she needed to ask questions.

# Chapter 35 - The Billionaire CEO's Runaway Wife

Ulima was already busy in the kitchen when Sarah made her way downstairs. Lucas leaned against the counter sipping from a coffee cup. He wore jeans and a simple button-up shirt so it seemed likely he didn't intend to go to work.

“Morning señora,” Ulima greeted delivering her usual morning cup of tea before returning to the stove where she had scrambled eggs, beans and peppers cooking.

Sarah sipped her tea feeling the familiar prickle of being watched. She glanced in Lucas's direction to see him quietly watching her as usual. One of the reasons she ignored him was due to the intensity of his gaze. Whenever he looked at her it was like someone seeing a steak for the first time after a fast.

“Umm...can we talk?” Sarah asked finally gesturing to the living room.

“Sure,” Lucas followed her sitting in the chair while she took the sofa.

He waited anxiously for her to continue. Sarah hesitated not sure where to start but finally settled on a question that had been plaguing her since she saw him at the zoo.

“Luke, why...why are you still wearing your wedding ring?” Sarah asked. “And why did you look for me? You always told me to disappear. I thought that is what you wanted.”

Lucas set down his cup and twisted the simple band. He wasn't sure what she wanted to hear but he could only give her an honest answer, “If I took it off...then it would really be over.”

“But I thought...” Sarah's brow furrowed in confusion.

“I didn't know what my grandma was thinking when she arranged our marriage. I still don't. All I knew about you was that you were Nathan Tomlinson's daughter, you went to school for education and you were a teacher. That's it. I didn't...I didn't recognize you as the cute girl from school.”

Sarah blinked. Cute girl? Did he really think she was cute? Sarah fought a smile but she couldn't deny the warmth that knowledge gave her.

“When grandma first proposed our marriage one of her stipulations was that we had children within the year.”

Sarah blushed.

“Yeah. I talked her out of that saying we needed time to get to know each other before we...got intimate,” Lucas cleared his throat. “But I didn’t follow through. I never took you out or had a conversation or even sat down for a simple meal. I should have made an effort but I didn’t. I figured if you weren’t taking the wedding seriously I didn’t have to take the marriage seriously.”

“The wedding?”

“You wouldn’t know this but...the agreement my grandmother made with your father included five million for the wedding.”

“Five?” Sarah looked at him in shock.

“What’s more your father provided receipts to show you went over budget for another two million.”

Seven million dollars? Sarah paled.

“I went to the wedding expecting a seven-million-dollar event,” Lucas said, “which obviously it wasn’t. I didn’t know you poured your heart and soul into it while your father embezzled the money.”

Sarah shook her head. Her father stealing that money was not surprising but to think he still thought he deserved to walk her down the aisle and appear like a devoted father afterwards.

“I didn’t know you did everything yourself...that you didn’t even have a wedding planner,” Lucas continued. “I should have been there. If I had stepped in sooner I would have realized what happened. I would have strung your father up by his toes.”

Sarah fought a smile.

“I never gave your phone number to my mother, Lidia or Madeline. I don’t how they got it.”

Sarah carefully digested the news.

“But that’s no excuse for how I treated you or for how I let them treat you in public and private,” Lucas said. “For that, I’m sorry. I’m going to make it up to you, starting with Madeline, Lidia and my mother. If you want I’ll track down your father and make him give back every dime meant for you.”

“No,” Sarah shook her head. “I don’t want to see him and I don’t want the money. If money was all he cared about...he can keep it.”

Lucas nodded, “What about your brother?”

“My brother?”

“He helped me with the video footage of the Mixer so...ah...he knows about Zoe,” Lucas hesitated to tell her. “He’d like to meet her but I told him that’s your decision. I didn’t know if you wanted to speak to him or not...after everything.”

Sarah nodded glad he didn’t make promises. She wasn’t sure how she felt about her brother let alone allowing him to see Zoe. Maybe they could talk privately first. When they were little they used to be inseparable and if she was honest she did miss the connection but she didn’t know if she could trust him.

“So...what do you plan to do about your mother, Lidia and Madeline?” Sarah asked after a moment.

“I’m cutting them off,” Lucas said. “Alan is closing their accounts as we speak. And I’m going to put the estate up for sale. By the time it’s all done they will be penniless and homeless. And as for Madeline...She’s fired and banned from all Stanton properties, offices and businesses.”

Sarah slowly digested the information. If there was one thing Patricia and Lidia cared about more than their reputations it was money. For them it was important to have more than others and flaunt it at every opportunity. Though Madeline lacked the family and the money to do the same she clung to Lidia’s heels to at least give the appearance of wealth.

“...And us?”

“Well...with your permission...can we start over?” Lucas asked. “Hi, I’m Lucas. It’s nice to meet you.”

Sarah snorted a laugh. Was he serious?

“Okay, maybe not that far back,” Lucas shrugged pleased he could make her laugh. “But...let’s get to know each other...spend some time with each other. Just you, me and Zoe. All I know about you is that you’re a famous author, you’ve been around the world and like spicy food. I’d like to learn more, the way I should have done from the beginning. What do you think?”

“Okay,” Sarah finally agreed. “Let’s give it a try.”

“Señor, señora, breakfast is ready,” Ulma softly beckoned.

“Shall we?” Lucas asked.

Sarah nodded. Lucas stood offering her a hand. She looked at it and for a moment he thought she wouldn’t take it. Finally she placed her hand in his and let him help her to her feet. Breathing a sigh of relief Lucas escorted her to the table and helped her sit before taking his own seat.

Glancing up he saw Ulima was watching him with a bemused expression. Though she tried not to pry into the lives of her employers Ulima couldn't help but be concerned for Sarah who she knew had suffered as well as little Zoe. She wanted both to be happy and though she pitied Lucas she wasn't certain he was good enough either. To see him now was quite amusing and even a little reassuring.

Setting plates down in front of them Ulima retreated to the sink to wash dishes while they ate. Sarah surveyed the scrambled eggs, beans and peppers then grabbed a handy bottle of Tabasco a second before Lucas. They looked at one another sheepishly.

"Dibs after you're done," Lucas said.

Sarah chuckled spritzing the hot sauce over her breakfast before handing it to him. Lucas treated his breakfast with the same care as she did before picking up his fork.

Hesitating with the first bite he said, "So—ah—what is your favorite color?"

Sarah blinked looking at him.

"I figured I should start somewhere."

Sarah broke out into a laugh shaking her head.

\* \* \*

Lucas sat in the passenger seat looking at the modern Soho home. He had never been there before but Sarah had no difficulty driving there. Much like Silas and Ava's brownstone it was clear she was no stranger here.

"Something wrong?" Sarah asked. After a morning of asking twenty questions the ride across town to visit Julius and Macey was surprisingly quiet. Not only that, but Lucas seemed to grow even more tense the closer they came to the sleek home. "Luke?"

"Promise not to repeat this to anyone?"

"Sure."

"Julius terrifies me."

Sarah snorted a laugh, "Why?"

"Well...he's Julius DaLair. They are titans of the business world and a family to be feared and respected."

"Right. Well, we'll see what you think after you see him with the kids," Sarah chuckled. He was in for quite a surprise.

Her amusement didn't comfort him as Lucas slowly followed her up the steps to the front door. The doorbell was answered by a pleasant-looking housekeeper hired to watch over the Soho house a few years ago.

"It's good to see you again Missus Stanton, Mister Stanton. Mister and Missus DaLair are waiting for you on the patio. Lunch will be ready in a few minutes."

"Thank you," Sarah said not bothering to correct the housekeeper's use of her former title while Lucas was in attendance.

She led the way through the house letting Lucas take in his surroundings noting the piano prominently displayed in the living room as well as the photographs scattered throughout. No doubt they all carried M. Gray's signature. There were also a few paintings. The ones depicting soldiers were certainly painted by Macey's father. There were a few landscapes; one of the Eiffel Tower and another of the countryside, that reminded him of the one in Sarah's Vermont home. It could be by the same artist though he was hesitant to ask.

The back door slid open with ease and they stepped out onto the patio. Beyond, the backyard was long and narrow with a shed tucked into one corner and a small pool and hot tub on the other. At the far end of the yard was a play set with swings and a sandy surface not unlike the one at the Prescott's if smaller because of the size of the yard.

Five kids darted in and around the set with the corgi running after them desperately trying to herd them together. The kids shrieked with laughter as they darted from one part of the play set to the other trying to avoid and confuse the excited puppy. Even amongst the chaos it was easy to spot Zoe, the single blonde surrounded by redheads.

"Look who finally crawled out of bed."

Lucas turned to see Julius sitting at the table with a glass of ice tea. He felt his cheeks warm though he knew well enough that he had done nothing Julius implied.

"Excuse me," Macey said skirting past them with a tray of sliced fruit. "Come and sit down. Julius, really? You could be a better host."

She batted his hand as he reached for the fruit. He gave her an incredulous look, "Did you just slap my hand?"

"These are for our guests," Macey said smiling at Lucas and Sarah.

"Mommy! Daddy!"

They turned as Zoe ran up to them. Giggling she wrapped her arms around her mother as Sarah picked her up and held her.



“Are you feeling better mommy?” Zoe asked. “Auntie Macey said you had to go home cause you were sick.”

“Yes,” Sarah glanced in Macey’s direction with a grateful nod. “I was a little sick. But I’m all better now.”

“Cause daddy took care of you?” Zoe asked.

Sarah’s gaze slid toward Lucas and her face warmed, “Yes. Daddy took care of me and now I feel much better.”

“Good!” Zoe smiled.

“Why don’t you go and play, munchkin,” Lucas said patting her head. “We’re going to talk to your Auntie and Uncle for a while.”

“Kay!”

Sarah set the three-year-old on her feet and watched as she took off running to rejoin the others, Daisy on her heels. She watched her glad that the others kept the truth from Zoe. Sarah couldn’t imagine how it would affect her to know what really happened.

“Come on and have a seat. Donna is bringing drinks in a moment.”

Lucas held Sarah’s chair encouraging her to sit before taking his own seat. His gaze drifted briefly to Julius to see the other smiling with amusement. Lucas felt his face warm.

“So how are you really feeling?” Macey asked.

“Surprisingly okay,” Sarah said after a moment. She paused as the housekeeper brought out more ice tea before retreating inside. “It was a little rough when I first got home but...”

She glanced at Lucas her face warming with the memory of how they woke up.

“We did manage to talk out a few things.”

Macey nodded. It was clear the tension between Sarah and Lucas was far less than it used to be. She had been terrified for Sarah after Thomas took them aside to explain the situation out of the kids’ hearing. Macey wanted nothing more than to rush to Sarah’s side but she also didn’t want to alarm the kids. Thomas assured them Lucas was taking Sarah to the hospital while Julius and Silas dealt with her attacker.

It was almost twenty minutes before Julius and Silas returned informing them the police took James into custody. Despite the good news they both looked rather grim. They refused to say anything in front of the kids. Macey didn’t get the full story until after the kids were asleep and Julius was ready to tell though it wasn’t exactly pillow talk.

It was disturbing enough to hear what James almost did to Sarah but to hear he did it to so many others. The thought gave her chills. She couldn't imagine the terror Sarah must have felt at that moment. It gave her goosebumps. There had been a brief time when James pursued her despite the fact she was already with Julius and once or twice he tried to give her a drink.

Macey always refused and after warning James off once Julius completely lost his patience punching the other in the face and breaking his nose. The headlines in the gossip column made her cringe but Julius, March and Augustus merely shrugged it off. Macey worried Julius would be charged with assault since it was all caught on camera and in front of witnesses but he never was and James never approached her again. Now it seemed it had been a narrow escape.

"I should have ended him like dad told me to," Julius muttered setting down his glass. "Put him out of everyone's misery."

Lucas nodded. Augustus DaLair was notoriously ruthless to anyone who presented themselves as his enemy. There was a long list of families who regretted being on his bad side. March and Julius had more amicable natures though people learned quickly it was not wise to trouble or threaten their families.

Chapter Thirty-Six

## Chapter 36 - The Billionaire CEO's Runaway Wife

"Sarah!" Ava's voice exclaimed interrupting them.

Sarah stood letting herself be engulfed in a hug. It was as much for her own comfort as it was for Ava's. Unlike Macey who had grown up in a loving household both Sarah and Ava endured various forms of abuse and neglect so intimate gestures like hugs were reassuring.

Silas released the kids into the yard where they hurried to join the others. Ben and Isaac in particular were eager to play with the puppy again. With a sigh Ava slowly released Sarah and carefully studied her expression.

"Are you really okay?"

"Ava, I'm fine," Sarah gave her a reassuring smile. "Promise."

"Let's sit," Silas gently encouraged.

Lucas stood helping Sarah to sit while the newcomers joined them. Moments later the housekeeper arrived with two glasses of tea before leaving them to talk while the kids played.

“So...” Julius hesitated clearing his throat, “as you know James confessed to twelve other attacks. Tracy is contacting the victims. We don’t know how long it will take for her to track them all down but his lawyer is sure to press the courts to hurry especially if he gets wind of what we’re trying to do.”

Sarah nodded. Tracy was a bulldog to say nothing of Tailor. Whatever tricks James’s lawyer tried to play he wouldn’t get far.

“I’m surprised he actually confessed,” Macey said. “How’d you convince him to come clean?”

Julius and Silas shared an uneasy glance. It was enough to tell Lucas exactly how they did it though the women didn’t seem to have a clue. If they were honest it was not a topic to be debated in mixed company.

“Well, I for one hope he gets what’s coming to him,” Sarah declared when the men remained silent.

“I agree, but he’s only one of many,” Ava said. “We should do something to protect ourselves.”

“This from someone who travels around with a security team?” Julius asked with a smirk earning a glare from Silas.

“Security team or not I think it would be good to be prepared,” Ava said. “What about self-defense classes? Tracy said martial arts are really good training.”

“I’m not sure any of us prepared for years of commitment and dedication it would take to follow Tracy’s lead,” Macey said, “but she did mention her gym offered self-defense classes weekly that focused on breaking holds and fending off attackers. I taking those classes would be a good idea. And Lexi and Aria too.”

“Absolutely!” Ava declared. “Sean and Theo already train with the security team so it’s only right Lexi had the same experience. What do you think, Sarah?”

Sarah bit her lip her mind hazily recalling her desperate attempt to fend off James. She had felt so helpless and the idea of preparing and training to make herself stronger had appeal. It might even help ease the anxiety causing her nightmares.

“It’s a good idea,” Lucas suddenly spoke up. “And Sarah can do anything she wants.”

Sarah blinked looking at him and blushed slightly at his earnestness. Macey and Ava fought smiles at the exchange between the hesitant pair.

“Well, at least he has his lines down,” Julius commented sharing a bemused look with Silas. The latter chuckled and Lucas felt his face warm.

Macey swatted Julius’s arm but he caught her hand and kissed it with a smile. Lucas snuck sheepish glances at the pair marveling how different Julius seemed in private compared to his public image.

\* \* \*

“Well, it looks like Aunt Sarah is okay,” Theo commented as they watched from the play set.

The older kids watched the younger ones play while they kept an eye on the adults. Alexis in particular studied their parents with concern. After a moment she said, “Yeah, looks like it.”

“You don’t think so though,” Sean guessed.

“I don’t think Aunt Sarah was sick. You saw how frantic Lucas was after hearing she had a talk with Lidia,” Alexis said. “Something pretty serious must have happened for Aunt Macey and Uncle Jules to take Zoe home for the night.”

“So now what?” Theo asked. “The adults are being tight-lipped.”

“How’s it going with project Lidia?” Alexis asked.

“Good,” Sean said, “though I had some unexpected complications.”

“What do you mean? Someone blocking you?”

“No, beating me to the punch,” Sean shook his head. “Looks like she made someone else mad. I started noticing traces of hacking while I was poking around.”

“Are they going to be a problem?”

“No. They’re doing our job for us. I did manage to get into Stanton Inc. and poked around their finances a bit too.”

“And?”

“Looks like they’re closing Lidia’s accounts and Madeline is off their payroll.”

“Good,” Alexis said. “Seems Lucas is taking action himself.”

“Bout time,” Theo sighed. “Why are adults so slow?”

“A question for the ages,” Sean shrugged.

“Keep an eye on it for now,” Alexis said.

“Yes, boss.”

\* \* \*

“Back to the matter at hand,” Silas cleared his throat, “about last night...did Alan find anything?”

“No,” Lucas admitted. “We have Lidia soliciting Sarah and leading her out of the crowd but that corner is a blind spot so we don’t have any footage of her being part of the attack.”

“What about phone records?” Julius asked.

“I don’t know if it will help,” Lucas shook his head. “Lidia’s been friends with James for years so talking on the phone or even meeting in public is not unusual.”

“So circumstantial at best,” Silas said.

“Maybe in court,” Lucas agreed, “but I know the truth and after I told her to stay away from Sarah.”

“She clearly didn’t take your warning to heart,” Julius said.

“It’s my fault for always bailing her out of trouble,” Lucas sighed. “She expects it and thinks she’s untouchable.”

“I’m sure there is plenty of blame to go around,” Silas said. “You weren’t the one who raised her after all.”

Lucas grimaced. There was that but it wasn’t much.

“Which brings us to your grandmother,” Julius announced.

“What about her?” Lucas asked.

“Have you spoken to her lately?”

“No.”

“I think you should,” Julius said.

“Why? She’s been retired for years. She doesn’t know anything about this.”

“Are you sure?”

“What exactly are you implying?” Lucas demanded.

“Only that my father always warned me to tread carefully around the infamous Alice Stanton,” Julius said.

Lucas frowned.

“You don’t find it the least bit strange that of all the women in the world she chose one with genuine feelings for you to be your bride?” Julius asked. “That it is just a coincidence?”

Lucas opened his mouth to protest then snapped it shut. He had never given it much thought but now that Julius pointed it out it did sound suspicious. Why did his grandmother insist on Sarah being his bride enough to speak with both of them to ensure it?

“But if Alice knew what was going on why didn’t she step in?” Macey asked.

“That would be my fault,” Sarah sighed.

The others looked at her curiously.

“Part of the agreement I made with her was that she wouldn’t interfere,” Sarah admitted.

“Interfere?” Lucas repeated.

“I don’t know how she knew, but she knew everything,” Sarah blushed, “about what happened in the schoolyard. She said she had her eye on me ever since and thought I would be a perfect partner for you. She said she’d fix everything and that I shouldn’t worry but I told her no...I said if you and I were going to be together she couldn’t interfere. No matter what.”

“A Stanton honors every agreement to the letter,” Julius nodded.

“Unfortunately not everyone got that memo,” Silas added.

“Yeah, the in-laws interfered.”

They glanced at Lucas who looked pensive and deep in thought. Sarah nervously looked in his direction wondering what he thought about her agreement with his grandmother. Realizing his expression must look dark he shook his head and gave her what he hoped was a reassuring smile.

“Sarah, did your agreement with her include confidentiality?” Lucas asked. “I mean, did you stipulate she wasn’t allowed to say anything about it to me?”

“Um...no. I didn’t mention anything like that.”

“I see.” Lucas looked at Julius who seemed to understand his concern. “I think you’re right. I do need to talk to my grandmother.”

Julius nodded. It wasn't the first time a family made plans for someone's future without properly consulting them about it. Even if done with the best intentions it only caused problems later if everyone wasn't on the same page from the start.

"Come with me?" Lucas looked at Sarah.

"Me?"

"You and Zoe. I know our agreement said no contact with my family without your approval...but you were always her favorite. She'll be thrilled to meet Zoe provided the news doesn't give her a heart attack. She's wanted great-grandchildren for years."

Sarah blushed. Alice was the only Stanton who welcomed her and defended her against constant attacks from Patricia and Lidia. The Stanton matriarch's home was also the one place she was guaranteed never to run into Madeline as Alice couldn't stand the latter and banned her from the property.

"We can make a weekend of it," Lucas said. "We can take Zoe to the aquarium, Luna Park, the beach. Just us."

Sarah thought it over. The New York Aquarium was already on her list of places to take Zoe and she had also considered the famous Coney Island Amusement Park as well. She was also curious what the Stanton matriarch would say when presented with her great-granddaughter. After everything that happened they could use a getaway. Finally she nodded.

Lucas breathed a relieved sigh. As much as he wanted to consult his grandmother he didn't want to lose any time with Sarah and Zoe in the process. He wondered what his grandmother would say when he confronted her.

Chapter Thirty-Seven

## Chapter 37 - The Billionaire CEO's Runaway Wife

"Here we are," Lucas said as he pulled up to the gate and waited for the intercom to crackle to life.

"Name?" the haughty voice asked.

"Luke, as if you don't have me on camera William."

“...Yes Master Stanton. Do come in.”

The gate opened allowing him to pull into the driveway before closing behind him. People on the street paused to watch as it was unusual for someone to come and go from the property but he paid them no mind.

Unlike most retired billionaires Alice Stanton did not live in some fancy, sprawling estate. Her home was located in Brighton Beach and though it was certainly a home worthy of her it was small and understated compared to the large mansions owned by the DaLairs, Prescotts or Worthingtons. But that was the way she liked it.

The three-story mini-mansion had everything she could ever need including several extra bedrooms for visiting family members, a large backyard with a pool and garden. It was also a stone's throw away from the ocean. The small property was easily cared for by a single housekeeper who was also the cook and butler who doubled as gardener and valet.

Lucas's mother and sister hated staying there thinking the house was too small to be worthy of them. On the other hand, Lucas had always enjoyed its relaxed atmosphere free from the burdens of society's expectations. That was probably the reason why Alice preferred it too.

In the past Lucas had never taken a day off work let alone an actual vacation. Even during the holidays he spent most of his time on the phone with the office much to his grandmother's annoyance. This time work was the furthest thing from his mind. Beside him Sarah sat in the passenger seat looking nervous though she really didn't need to be. Alice would certainly welcome her with open arms. In fact she would probably greet Sarah with more warmth than her own grandson. Zoe was practically bouncing in her seat with a wiggling Daisy at her side.

The garage doors opened allowing him to park inside next to the large mini-van that served as Alice's sole mode of transportation. Turning off the SUV he hesitated and glanced at Sarah. They shared a nervous look, both anxious for different reasons, before disembarking. While Sarah went to unbuckle Zoe Lucas grabbed their luggage even as William stepped out to greet the arrivals.

“Master Lucas.”

“William, how are you?” Lucas gladly handed over some of the bags. One thing he was learning to appreciate in preparing for this trip was the sheer amount of things small children evidently needed when they traveled.

“Quite well, thank you.” William accepted the bags with no small amount of surprise.

The older man was still spry despite his age and thought he had seen just about everything while in service to Alice Stanton. However, Lucas's sudden call had come as a surprise. It wasn't anywhere near the holidays so it naturally piqued the butler's interest. Lucas usually arrived in a sedan from his office's motor pool and with only one bag. To say William was shocked by the older model SUV as well as the amount of luggage would put it mildly.



Daisy suddenly rounded the back of the SUV barking at the butler unsure if he was friend or foe. William stared at the puppy with a mixture of surprise and wonder.

“You got a dog?”

“I got a lot more than that.”

Even as Lucas spoke Zoe ran around the vehicle. Reaching the puppy she stooped, picking up its front feet and hugged it close saying, “No Daisy! Be good.”

Setting the puppy back on all fours Zoe straightened to look at the butler. The pair shared a rather long look before Zoe broke the silence.

“What’s your name?”

“I’m William. I’m the butler.”

“Hi Mister William! I’m Zoe and this is Daisy! And that’s my daddy!” Zoe declared pointing to Lucas before turning to Sarah who followed her. “And this is my mommy!”

“Madam Sarah,” William bowed as she appeared. “It is a pleasure to see you again.”

“It’s good to see you again, William,” Sarah smiled.

She had always gotten along with the aging butler as well as the cook neither of whom had any great affection for either Lucas’s mother or sister given their tendency to be abusive towards staff.

“Hello to you, Miss Zoe,” William smiled at the three-year-old who giggled at the formal title. “Right this way.”

He escorted them inside setting the luggage down beside the stairs. Zoe skipped into the foyer staring up at the deep mahogany interior and classic art pieces. It reminded her of the brownstone Uncle Si and Auntie Ava lived in and knew immediately to be careful around so many antiques.

Lucas set down the last of the bags on the stairs to see William quietly surveying him. No doubt there was much the butler wanted to say if not for the presence of their company.

Daisy whined sniffing around the Persian rugs.

“Uh-oh mommy. I think Daisy has to go,” Zoe declared.

“We’ll take her to the backyard,” Sarah said looking at William. “That’s okay, isn’t it? I have bags so I can pick it up.”

“Dear me no!” William gasped in horror. “I shall pick up the dog’s leavings. You don’t have to worry about that, ma’am.”

“It’s all right. I can do it.”

“Nonsense. I am the groundskeeper and I shall handle it.”

Sarah gave him a wry smile but knew better than to argue. Instead she grabbed a few dog toys and hurriedly ushered Zoe and the anxious corgi outside. Lucas watched them wanting nothing more than to follow but there was business to attend to. He glanced at William to see the butler watching him curiously.

“Make sure they have everything they need,” Lucas said.

“Of course. They shall want for nothing.”

“My grandmother in the study?”

“Yes.”

“All right.”

Lucas sighed running his hand through his hair before marching down the hall to the library. Like all the rooms his grandmother frequented it was on the first floor. Though the small mansion was equipped with a motorized chair to scale the stairs Alice preferred to stay on the ground floor. Knocking on the closed door he waited for her permission to enter before opening it.

“Well, Lucas. This is a surprise,” Alice said closing the book she had been idly reading and set it down on the coffee table. She motioned for him to have a seat as well but he wasn’t interested in small talk.

Alice Stanton was not a tall woman but in her younger days she stood straight and proud. Despite the fact she was now in a wheelchair she still maintained that stately grace and no one would think to belittle or disrespect her. She sat in a soft, lavender dress with a floral design. Her auburn hair had faded to silver long ago but her gaze was as sharp as ever.

“Grandma.”

“So what brings you here?”

“You know why I’m here, or do you really want to play dumb?” Lucas said gripping the back of one of the chairs. “Why didn’t you tell me the details of your agreement with Sarah?”

“Why didn’t you ask me about it?” she challenged.

“Are you serious?”

“You stormed in here demanding to know every little detail about my arrangement with her father,” Alice said. “Were you never curious about my agreement with her? It was no secret she and I had a private conversation.”

Lucas shook his head, pacing.

“My agreement with Sarah was no interference. I didn’t want any of my actions to sway you. It would have been different if you sought me out first...at least that’s what I told myself.”

“How long?” Lucas finally stopped pacing. “How long have you known about me and her, when we were kids?”

“Let’s just say not everyone hired at your school was there to merely teach,” Alice waved a dismissive hand.

Lucas collapsed in a chair feeling like a fool.

“You were my chosen heir. I was leaving nothing to chance.”

Lucas shook his head his gaze straying to the book on the table his grandmother had been reading: *Daisies in Bloom* by Rosemary Thomas. He suddenly sat up seizing the book and giving his grandmother a hard look.

“How long have you known Sarah is Rosemary?”

“Luke, I own Briarwood Books,” Alice said. “I bought it specifically because she is Rosemary and Briarwood is her publisher.”

“Does she know?”

“That I know she’s Rosemary? Yes. That I own Briarwood? No. At least I don’t think so.”

“How long have you known about Zoe?” Lucas suddenly asked his gaze hardening. “Tell me you didn’t know.”

Alice sighed, maneuvering her motorized chair to the desk and grabbed a small photo album. Moving close to Lucas again she offered him the book. He stared at it apprehensively before taking it and opening it. On the first page was a picture of Zoe in the NICU, small and fragile but fighting for her life.

Lucas sucked in a breath turning the page. The album was full of pictures of little Zoe first in the hospital with her mother then in a home that appeared to belong to friends. The same mocha-skinned woman, boy and older lady he had seen in Sarah’s pictures at home made several

appearances. Evidently Sarah had stayed with them after leaving him. Paging on he found pictures of Sarah and Zoe in Vermont and the life they made for themselves there.

Shutting the book he glared at his grandmother, “You knew the entire time! And you didn’t tell me!”

“You never asked,” Alice said with a shrug.

He leapt onto his feet, fuming. She knew! The entire time she knew!

“You knew I was looking for her and you didn’t tell me!”

“I was waiting for you to ask for my help, or at least my advice,” Alice said. “And given the way you practically threw her out I wasn’t so sure you deserved to have her in your life after all.”

Lucas hung his head as a fresh wave of shame hit him.

“I hired a man, Roy Austin. He used to work for the Eagle. I asked him to keep an eye on her...and my great-granddaughter. I couldn’t interfere but at least I could watch over them.”

Lucas sank back into the chair still trying to wrap his head around his grandmother’s confession. He searched for four years and she knew where they were the entire time. His voice was hoarse as he croaked out, “Why? Why did you arrange our marriage? Why Sarah?”

With a sigh Alice once again shifted her motorized chair to the desk. He watched as she unlocked the bottom drawer and pulled it out revealing the files within. She looked at him solemnly.

“These are files of every woman you’ve ever had contact with. Childhood friends, high school sweethearts, classmates, bedmates.”

Lucas cringed.

“I’ve looked into every single one to find your perfect partner: the one woman who could match you, that wouldn’t cower and who genuinely cared for you. You were my heir and I wasn’t going to take any chances and let you end up like those Worthington boys or worse that Avery boy. Julius and Silas had the kind of life I wanted for you. I didn’t realize you were your own worst enemy. At the very least I figured Sarah’s physical attractiveness would spark something in you.”

Lucas sucked in a breath, “Well, I had help. Did you know Lidia and Madeline were sending Sarah texts implying I was sleeping with Madeline? Or that my mother was sending her texts asking why she hadn’t killed herself yet?”

“Those greedy bitches,” Alice said surprising Lucas who had never heard her curse before. “I should have cut them all off long ago.”

“You’re the one who always said you can’t abandon family.”

Alice pressed her lips together as if deep in debate with herself. Finally coming to a decision she moved her chair to her safe hidden in a lower cabinet. Leaning down she entered the combination and rummaged through the paperwork until she found the file she was looking for. Without a word she maneuvered her chair close to him and handed him the file.

Lucas glanced at it before taking it. With a sigh he opened it knowing his grandmother wouldn’t explain until he looked through the contents. It was always the same game she played wanting to know just how much he observed on his own.

Lucas read the first few sheets noting they were paternity test results. There was nothing terribly strange about that even when he saw his and his sister’s names at the top. Most people in positions like his grandmother liked the assurance of official documents. Nothing was strange until he noticed the results: negative.

His brow furrowed and he looked up at his grandmother.

“You know I had a difficult pregnancy. I had to rely on fertility treatments just to conceive,” Alice sighed. “I worried your father might share the same fate and I wasn’t wrong. The results of his tests are there as well. Your mother was desperate to be acknowledged by providing an heir. So she took action...and a lover.”

“A lover?”

“His file is in there,” Alice nodded. “Steve Davis. After you and your sister were born I offered him ten million dollars to disappear and never contact either of you again. He took the money. He lives in Arizona now, has a construction company. He’s married and has two boys. Mason Luke Davis and Walter Lidia Davis. Your younger brothers.”

“...So I’m not your grandson?” Luke asked. “We aren’t family?”

“Luke, I chose you to be my heir,” Alice said. “Blood or not, you are my grandson and the one I chose to carry on the family legacy. My son was not happy with my decision and devastated by the fact your mother cheated on him. He hit the bottle hard and in a fit of rage one night got into an accident. I count my blessings it only cost his life and not the lives of innocent bystanders.”

Lucas stared at his grandmother still trying to wrap his head around it all.

“Family is what we make it,” Alice said. “Your mother insisted that you couldn’t lose both parents so I agreed to let her remain in the family register as long as she didn’t interfere with my plans for you. It seems she let it go to her head. Well, I say it’s time I corrected her...high time.”

“No.” Lucas shook his head. “I’m the head of the family now. That’s my job.”

“And what are you going to do?”

“I’m already doing it,” Lucas met her gaze evenly. “Alan’s clearing the paperwork as we speak. I’m closing their accounts and I’m selling the estate.”

Alice gave him a careful look before nodding approval.

“But they were only part of the problem...I’m the one who drove Sarah away.”

“The first step is admitting your fault. The next is to apologize.”

“Done and done,” Lucas said. “Sarah said we could start over but where do I even begin?”

“Sarah? You’ve seen her? And Zoe? Where are they?”

“In the backyard with the dog.”

“They are here! You brought them here and you’re only telling me now!” Alice practically leapt out of her chair. “Let’s go!”

“How did you not know she was here?” Lucas asked. “Your publishing company is hosting a masquerade for her to reveal herself as the real Rosemary. You didn’t know?”

“Of course I knew that,” Alice waved a dismissive hand. “Approval for such things must come through me. That doesn’t mean I’m privy to all details. I trust Ruth to get the job done. She’s never failed and always keeps Sarah’s best interests in mind. How long have they been here?”

“A week.”

“A week!” Alice turned her chair toward the door. “Let’s go! I want to see my great-granddaughter!”

Chapter Thirty-Eight

## Chapter 38 - The Billionaire CEO's Runaway Wife

“Come on Daisy!” Zoe shrieked as she ran through the maze of flower beds.

Sarah chuckled watching the pair run off some much needed energy. If only she could be as carefree. She wasn’t sure how she was going to face Alice after her impromptu departure. Sarah supposed she should have sent the Stanton matriarch a letter or at least a note.

“Sarah! My darling!”

She turned to see Lucas a step behind his grandmother as she wheeled up to her. As soon as she was within reach Alice gripped Sarah’s hand and pulled her close.

“It’s so good to see you! I’ve missed you so much!”

“Th-thank you,” Sarah stuttered slowly straightening. “How have you been Alice?”

“Oh fine. Just fine. Bored out of my mind. Without you no one comes to visit me.”

“Visit?” Lucas asked.

“Yeah, I usually took an Uber here once a month,” Sarah nodded blushing slightly.

Lucas merely stared at her slowly comprehending. Ulma mentioned times she left to meet a friend. He had thought that friend was Ruth, her editor, or Ava after he heard how Sarah helped the former overcome her fear of horses. Now it seemed at least some of those visits were to his grandmother.

“You are as beautiful as ever!” Alice smiled. “You must have some exciting stories to tell. You could always spin a good yarn.”

“Mommy!” Zoe laughed as she suddenly reappeared. Seeing her mother was no longer alone she happily exclaimed, “Daddy! Catch me!”

She ran to Lucas who immediately scooped her up with a laugh. Daisy circled his feet panting loudly as she sat. Lucas planted a kiss on Zoe’s forehead asking, “Having a good time?”

“Yes! The garden is so pretty!” Zoe declared before her gaze settled on Alice. “Hello.”

Alice sat not believing her eyes as she stared at her great-granddaughter. Though she had seen Zoe in pictures and even prevailed upon William to drive her to Vermont to watch Zoe and her mother from afar once or twice, to see the three-year-old up close was a new experience. Alice found her hands trembling in anticipation of actually holding her.

“Zoe, this is your great-grandmother Alice,” Lucas introduced. “Grandma, this is Zoe.”

“Hello Grandma Alice!” Zoe greeted without missing a beat reaching out to hug the older woman.

Reluctantly Lucas relinquished his daughter setting her in Alice’s lap. Alice held the little one gently afraid she would suddenly disappear if she squeezed too hard. From the moment she received the first pictures of Zoe’s birth Alice prayed and hoped for this moment...to finally hold her precious great-granddaughter.

Lucas watched his grandmother with a mixture of amusement and sadness. This scene should have played out four years ago if not for his stupidity. He looked at Sarah to see she was also absorbing the scene with a slightly pensive look. Perhaps she felt the same way he did.

Daisy approached the wheelchair and sniffing it apprehensively. With a whine the pup reared up on its hind legs and placed its forelimbs on Alice's knee as it sniffed the old woman.

"Well hello there," Alice greeted.

"That's my puppy Daisy!" Zoe eagerly introduced.

"She certainly is a cute thing," Alice said petting the puppy who licked her hand.

In truth dogs had never appealed to her. Alice preferred an orderly environment and never encouraged pets. However, she would never deny Zoe her pleasures. The pup would always be welcomed.

"Have you eaten dinner yet?" Alice asked.

"No. Donna made us a big lunch at Auntie Macey's!" Zoe said.

"Well, it's almost dinner so we will take care of that," Alice chuckled. "William, let's have dinner on the veranda today."

"Of course ma'am."

They let the three-year-old and puppy run around the yard while they sat on the patio watching over them. At least Sarah sat. Lucas remained on his feet keeping a close eye on the excited pair making sure they didn't go near the pool which had no fence to separate them.

An hour or so later William reappeared setting the table. Several minutes later he set out salad and cucumber sandwiches as appetizers. They let Zoe play a little longer until the main course arrived: herb-crusted chicken, string beans and rice. Wrangling the three-year-old, Lucas carried her to the table intending to place her in her seat but Alice beckoned for her to sit in her lap again where she insisted Zoe sit while they ate.

"So what are your plans for tomorrow?" Alice asked.

"Mommy and daddy are taking me to the aquarium!" Zoe declared.

"The aquarium?"

"The New York Aquarium," Sarah said. "Zoe wants to visit all the zoos while we're here."

"Also Luna Park and the beach," Lucas added.



“I get to swim in the ocean!” Zoe declared.

“All in one day?”

“No, the weekend. We’ll be here until Sunday.”

“Sunday!” Alice smiled in delight. “Excellent! This place can get pretty lonely all by myself. And it sounds like you’ll have a lot of fun.”

“Are you coming too grandma?” Zoe asked.

“Oh, I don’t know. It’s not easy getting around nowadays.”

“But you can come to the aquarium right? We get to see penguins and sea lions and turtles and fish!”

“You should come with us,” Sarah encouraged.

“Well...it has been awhile since I was out,” Alice considered the offer. Going to the beach was out of the question and she wouldn’t like the crowds on the boardwalk. The aquarium did seem like the most enjoyable experience. “All right. I’ll go to the aquarium with you tomorrow.”

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“Is she still asleep?” Sarah asked as William led them upstairs. She glanced behind her at Lucas who followed carrying a sleeping Zoe.

After dinner Zoe regaled Alice in all sorts of stories about Vermont, their farm and all her barnyard friends. Eventually she talked herself to sleep. Alice wisely decided it would be best if they all got their rest. It would be a long day tomorrow.

“Here you are,” William said opening a door. “This is Miss Zoe’s bedroom.”

They entered the bedroom expecting a normal guest room only to stare in complete shock. Two of the four walls bore a mural of a farm filled with all sorts of animals. The other two walls had a mural with a forest filled with wildlife. One corner was a reading nook with shelves filled with children’s books as well as a kid-sized rocking chair and an adult one. Another corner was set aside for art projects with all sorts of paints, crayons, a table and an easel.

There was a four-poster bed with a canopy. The canopy and bed sheets were decorated with stars as was the ceiling. Stuffed animals sat on just about every available space: on shelves, in the chairs and crowding the bed. There were also dog toys and a basket for Daisy. It was clear Alice prepared this room specifically for her great-granddaughter hoping they would eventually meet.

The sight brought tears to Sarah’s eyes. Composing herself she went to the bed pulling back the covers so Lucas could lay the little one down. He pulled off Zoe’s shoes careful not to wake her.

Sarah retreated to the dresser selecting a nightgown. With seemingly practiced ease Sarah slipped off Zoe's shirt and exchanged it for the nightgown. She then slipped off Zoe's pants before tucking her in. The process was almost effortless. Lucas wondered how often she had to resort to this sort of bedtime preparation.

They retreated to the door as Daisy hopped up on the bed and curled up next to her sleeping mistress. They smiled at the scene before closing the door. Clearing his throat William led them to another room. He opened the door then nodded to them before taking his leave.

Confused they peered into the room to see it was the usual room Alice assigned to them since their marriage. Nothing had changed and all appeared normal. It was several moments before they realized she meant them to share it and the queen-sized bed. Lucas felt his face warm as he looked at Sarah who had gone red as well. In the past he had trudged to another guest room or went back to his condo to avoid the whole situation claiming he had to work. He could tell Sarah was thinking the same thing.

It was unlikely any other rooms had been prepared for their impromptu visit but he also worried about her having nightmares. One thing was certain he didn't want to repeat the same mistake.

"I—ah—I can sleep in another room," Lucas finally said. "So you don't..."

"No," Sarah interrupted. "We're both adults. We can share a bed."

"Are you sure?" Lucas asked not wanting to appear over-eager. It would be the first time he spent a proper night in the same bed with her but after the attack he didn't want to make her uncomfortable.

"It'll be fine," Sarah nodded. "I mean, we spent last night together."

Lucas held back a laugh. It wasn't exactly a magical night but it had been their first together since the divorce and only their second ever. Neither night was a fond memory for them.

"So...I'll get ready first," Sarah said retreating to the bathroom after grabbing pajamas from the dresser.

Lucas nervously sat on the chaise lounge trying to calm his racing heart. He was thrilled she trusted him enough to allow him even in the same room. As he sat his gaze went to the coffee table to see the file about his biological father. Of all the things his grandmother could have told him that was not a bombshell he expected. He hoped visiting his grandmother would clear up some issues but things were only getting more complicated.

"Bathroom is free."

He looked up to see Sarah emerge wearing flannels. She skirted past him to the bed careful not to meet his gaze.

Lucas stood and followed her example gathering his sleepwear before entering the bathroom. Splashing water on his face he tried to clear his mind but it was hopelessly muddled. He had no idea what he was going to do about his biological father. Would he even want to see him? And what about Zoe? What would she think about a grandma and grandpa even he never knew? Or Sarah?

Lucas shook his head. No. First thing first: make amends with Sarah and deal with his mother, sister and Madeline. After that was done he could worry about the rest.

Stepping out of the bathroom in sweats and t-shirt he quietly padded to the bed where Sarah had already settled on one side. Though she looked asleep her eyes opened as he pulled back the covers. Lucas hesitated, "Would you like a pillow or something between us?"

"...No. It's all right. I trust you."

"I never thought I'd hear those words," Lucas sighed slipping into the bed and lying on his back.

"So what did you discuss with Alice?"

"Oh, this and that. Apparently she already knew you were Rosemary and she knew about that time in the schoolyard."

"And she knew about Zoe," Sarah added. "I refuse to believe she got that bedroom ready in a day."

Lucas chuckled.

"You know, after I left every now and again I felt like I was being watched," Sarah said. "I guess I was."

"Yeah. She had someone follow you. Not all the time but she wanted to keep an eye on you and Zoe, just in case," Lucas said. "She's always been a stickler for family first...I guess that's why she made me her heir even though..."

"Even though what?" Sarah asked turning on her side to face him.

"Even though we're not related."

"What?"

"My mother had an affair. My biological father lives in Arizona with his wife and two sons. I have two younger brothers. How is that for a bombshell?"

"Are you going to contact to them?" Sarah asked. She assumed if Alice told him the truth she would also give him contact information.

“I don’t know. What do you say to someone who walked away from his children for ten million?”

“How about hi?” Sarah suggested.

Lucas looked over at her giving her a disgruntled look.

“I’ve been doing a lot of thinking lately,” Sarah said, “and I’ve come to a few conclusions.”

“And they are?”

“We are both totally and hopelessly screwed up.”

Lucas blinked then suddenly barked out a laugh. Rolling over so he could face her he said, “And how did you come up with that conclusion?”

“Well, I have huge trust issues and when push comes to shove I walk away,” Sarah said. “It doesn’t solve the problem. It just removes me from the middle of it.”

“And I’m so busy trying to live up to my grandmother’s legacy I second-guess every decision so I end up doing nothing...or I listen to my mother and sister which turns everything into a disaster,” Lucas sighed. “I’m so sorry, Sarah.”

“Luke, stop,” Sarah reached for his hand and squeezed it. “You already apologized and the more you stew over it the worse you are going to feel.”

“All right,” Lucas breathed deep and kissed her hand. “Good night.”

“Good night.”

Chapter Thirty-Nine

## Chapter 39 - The Billionaire CEO's Runaway Wife

Sarah woke feeling warm and well-rested. Her head was nestled on a pillow her face pressed close to Lucas’s while his arm draped over her waist their bodies a hair’s breadth apart. Looking over her shoulder she saw most of the bed behind her meaning she had moved closer to him during the night. But when?

“Sarah?”

She turned back to see him calmly watching her.

“...I’m sorry,” she said after a moment. “It seems I’ve invaded your space.”

“I don’t mind,” Lucas said his lips twitching with a smile. “You started whimpering in your sleep so I reached for your hand. We must have moved closer after that. Were you dreaming about him?”

Sarah frowned, “I don’t remember. Maybe? Did it go on for long?”

“No. Just a few minutes.”

“Thank you.”

“I really didn’t do anything.”

“You were here. You stayed. That means more than you know.”

He smiled smoothing her hair, “Always.”

“So...about your mother and sister...are you sure you want to go through with it?”

“It’s done. I’m cancelling their accounts and cutting them off from all Stanton assets. They’ll have to sell their dresses and jewelry just to get by unless they find jobs. Madeline is fired and removed from the payroll. They’ll all be banned from the Stanton office, properties and my personal properties. I’m going to sell the mansion they have been squatting in.”

“Isn’t that the Stanton estate?” Sarah asked.

“It’s just a house, one we don’t really need and I don’t have any attachment to it,” Lucas said. “I prefer the house in Astoria, plus grandma’s here...and your place in Vermont. I don’t think there’s any need for more than that is there?”

“My place in Vermont?”

“I hope I’ll be welcome.”

Sarah bit her lip. Her home in Brattleboro was her retreat, her sanctuary. Could she share it with him? A week ago the answer would definitely be no...but now...

She couldn’t deny it was still awkward at times but it felt nice to have him close. It was just like she originally hoped when they were married. This felt nice. Finally she said, “Let’s see how this weekend goes and I’ll consider it.”

Lucas broke out into a wide grin, “Deal.”

\* \* \*

After breakfast William took out the large mini-van. It was equipped with a hydraulic lift capable of loading Alice's wheelchair. They followed the van in the SUV much to Zoe's disappointment as she wanted to ride with her great-grandmother. Once they reached the Aquarium William took his leave promising to return when they were done.

Zoe happily walked alongside her great-grandmother as they toured the outdoor exhibits first. She proudly shared the bits of knowledge keepers at the other zoos she visited told her about the sea lions and penguins she had already seen. Though Lucas was a little jealous he did not have his daughter's undivided attention he didn't mind sharing as he and Sarah trailed a step behind holding hands.

They snapped several photos of Zoe running around coral formations and a kelp forest dome. Unsurprisingly the touch pool was her favorite. She giggled as she pet marine snails, sea urchins and crabs. Even Alice, who hated all things fish, seemed to enjoy it even petting a snail. A close second for the three-year-old was the Ocean Wonders Exhibit.

Zoe marveled at the fish and especially the sea turtle that seemed to take particular interest in her. After a lunch of oven-fired pizza and boardwalk fries, they went to the Aquatheater Show. They followed up with a Wildlife Encounter which had Zoe giggling when one of the sea lions kissed her.

Returning to the villa they laid Zoe down for a much needed nap and spent time on the veranda with Alice catching up with each other. Sarah didn't seem particularly surprised to learn Alice had purchased Briarwood Books. It certainly made sense why Ruth never seemed to run out of funds when it came to promoting Rosemary. By the same token she also didn't seem surprised Lucas paid a clandestine visit to Brattleboro.

She still wasn't sure how she felt about possibly meeting with her brother. Sarah couldn't remember the last time she had a conversation with Samuel and found herself agitated at the prospect of seeing him face-to-face.

"I'll be right with you," Lucas assured her. "You won't have to face him alone if you're nervous. You don't have to see him at all if you don't want to."

"No. I promised I wouldn't run away anymore," Sarah said. "But I want to meet him first before deciding whether to let him meet Zoe."

Lucas nodded.

"That's more than fair," Alice agreed.

"What about you?" Sarah asked. "Are you going to do anything about my father stealing all that money?"

“The money doesn’t bother me,” Alice shrugged, “the fact it was meant for you does.”

“I wouldn’t even know where to start looking for him,” Sarah shook her head. In truth she hadn’t thought much about him.

“Reno,” Alice answered easily. “I could have him dragged back here with one phone call.”

“No,” Sarah shook her head. “I don’t have anything to say to him.”

Alice nodded. For her it was enough Sarah herself had returned with Zoe. There was no reason to dredge up the past. After a time she asked, “And your mother and sister?”

“By Monday they will be penniless and homeless,” Lucas said.

“Good, everything should be done before the book party. That is your day and we don’t want anything to disrupt that.”

Sarah blushed. She supposed she should get used to being the center of attention but it still made her uncomfortable. Lucas squeezed her hand in silent support. He couldn’t wait for everyone to finally know how amazing she was. It would truly be an eye opener for New York.

“Mommy?”

“Oh hello, sweetheart,” Sarah turned seeing Zoe in the doorway.

The three-year-old rubbed her eyes as she approached with Daisy trotting alongside her. Zoe crawled onto the couch between her pants tucking herself against her father who leaned down and kissed the top of her head.

“Did you sleep well?” Sarah asked.

“Ah-huh,” Zoe nodded. “What are we going to do tonight?”

“We are going to have dinner with your grandmother and then...we’re going to the park,” Lucas said.

“What park? Like Central Park?”

“No. Luna Park.”

“It’s like a carnival,” Sarah explained.

“Are there rides?”

“Yep. Rides and games and junk food,” Lucas said.

“Yea!” Zoe giggled. “Can Daisy come?”

“Sweetie,” Sarah shook her head.

“We can bring Daisy if you want,” Lucas said.

“Yea!”

Sarah shot Lucas an exasperated look.

“It’s a public boardwalk,” Lucas shrugged. “Pets are allowed as long as they are on leashes.”

Zoe bounced in her seat giggling with excitement. It was going to be just like the county fair only this time her dad was coming too. They were going as a real family.

\* \* \*

Zoe bounced along between her parents holding their hands as they wandered along the crowded boardwalk. Daisy trotted along on her leash and earned several admiring glances. Sarah and Lucas shared chuckles as the three-year-old looked at everything in fascination.

“Ooo! Can we go on that one! And that one!” Zoe let go of one of their hands to point out the rides that caught her eye. “Ooo! And that one!”

Their first stop was the pavilion housing the carousel. Lucas hung back with the dog while Sarah and Zoe waited in line eventually making it to the ride. He was ready with his phone to take pictures as Zoe giggled and waved from her horse. The next ride Zoe settled on was the Grand Prix. This time Sarah took the dog letting Lucas ride with the ever-eager toddler.

When it was their turn they climbed into the colorful race car. Lucas let Zoe take the controls as the car cruised around its track. Sarah snapped pictures happy to have someone else’s help in wrangling the three-year-old for a change. Daisy took festive atmosphere all in stride. The young pup had plenty of experience in crowds thanks to Zoe’s desire to take it everywhere.

Not surprisingly the Tea Party ride caught Zoe’s attention. She had seen advertisements for Disney World so she was quite familiar with the park’s tea cup ride and the one at Luna Park looked very similar. This time Sarah rode with her helping her use the center wheel to control its spin. Lucas watched the pair laughing and enjoying themselves glad they were both so carefree.

They paused for carnival food and Lucas spent a decent amount of time trying to remember when he last had so much deep fried confections let alone the pure sugar of cotton candy. Carrying Zoe on his shoulders they continued to wander the park. He held Sarah’s hand as they walked. Suddenly his phone buzzed with an alert.

Taking out his phone he looked at the message from Alan: It’s done.



“Something wrong?” Sarah asked.

“Not at all,” Lucas shook his head. “Everything is perfect.”

Sarah gave him a curious glance as he smiled and kissed her hand.

“Promise.”

She let it go as Zoe spotted the next ride she wanted to try. This time Lucas took her on Magic Bikes that looked like a cross between a hang-glider and a bike. The riders had to pedal and controlled how it rose and fell. Though Zoe had a great time Lucas found his legs were aching and knew he’d be sore the next morning.

For the next hour Zoe rode to her heart’s content splitting her time between the tea cups, one of the kid-friendly roller coasters as well Fire Patrol which had its riders in bright red firetrucks armed with water guns so they could put out the burning buildings making it a ride and a game all in one. By the time they called it a day and headed back to Alice’s villa Zoe was out cold.

Lucas carried her inside while Sarah held open the door despite William on hand. The butler chuckled at the exhausted three-year-old. Between the aquarium and the amusement park she already had a full weekend of fun and there was still tomorrow.

Laying Zoe down in her bed they retreated downstairs to the study where Alice was eager to hear about their outing and see the pictures they took. She watched Lucas carefully noting his new relaxed attitude.

“So what are your plans for tomorrow?” Alice asked.

“Well, we still have to hit the beach,” Lucas said with a wink in Sarah’s direction.

She blushed.

“Then I suppose we have to head back,” Lucas said. “We have some shopping to do for the book party...and I have to see my mother.”

Alice raised an eyebrow at that.

“She’s going to have to vacate the mansion so it can be sold,” Lucas said.

Alice nodded.

“Are you really okay with that?” Sarah asked looking from one to the other. “I mean, it’s the family estate.”

“Oh that thing was my husband’s idea,” Alice shrugged. “He hated the city so he wanted a place in the country. I for one prefer the city. The countryside is too quiet. I like the hustle and bustle.”

“What about this place?” Sarah asked. She couldn’t remember when it was purchased but even though it was probably a smaller, quieter neighborhood back then it had certainly changed.

“This was our winter home when I was working and we couldn’t drive upstate everyday in the inclement weather. Herbert never liked this place. He said the beach attracted a bad crowd. Too noisy. Everything was always too noisy.”

“Still, all the memories...”

“My memories are up here,” Alice tapped her temple. “The mansion is just a place. Besides, I haven’t been there for years. Anything I would want in it was already moved here. But you should take anything you want. Artwork, furniture, books...help yourselves.”

Sarah and Lucas shared a look. Lucas wasn’t particularly interested in anything but Sarah liked antiques so there were plenty of furnishings she would like. Come to think of it...all the furniture at the Astoria house was new and modern since most of it came from his condo. It was a sharp contrast to the furnishings in the farmhouse that Sarah had chosen. Perhaps he should reclaim some of the furniture from the mansion before it was sold...or maybe Sarah would want to decorate it herself.

“What do you think?” Lucas finally asked.

“About?” Sarah gave him a curious glance.

“Is there any furniture for the mansion you want to keep?” he asked.

“Me? But...”

“Or if you rather we can shop estate sales and antique shops to refurnish the house.”

“What’s wrong with the furniture you have?” Sarah asked.

“It’s not really your style. I want you to feel comfortable,” Lucas said.

“Oh.” Sarah felt her face warm. Was he really asking for her permission? Was he really concerned about making her feel at home?

“...I mean...if I can convince you to stay,” Lucas hurriedly added afraid he had pushed her too far.

“Yes,” Sarah said to stop him from blundering on. “I always like projects so I can find a few things for the house.”

Lucas breathed slowly and let himself relax. Why was it so difficult to have a simple conversation with Sarah when he could face down a dozen board members at one time?

Alice quietly sipped her tea with an amused smile. If she had any insights into his dilemma she wasn't sharing.

## Chapter Forty

# Chapter 40 - The Billionaire CEO's Runaway Wife

“Catch me, daddy! Catch me!”

Zoe sprinted into the surf toward Lucas. Laughing he scooped her up from the knee-deep water. The beach was crowded but not terrible. They had come early hoping to beat most of the crowds. He honestly couldn't recall the last time he wore a pair of swim trunks; however, when they stopped at the house in Astoria to pack a small bag had been delivered with swim trunks, sunscreen, beach towels and even a couple of buckets for playing in the sand inside.

Lucas could just imagine the smirk Alan had plastered on his face when he dropped it off. But he was grateful nonetheless as he tossed Zoe into the air and caught her in what was becoming her favorite game. She squealed delight as he spun around like the carnival rides they rode the day before. Hugging her close he slowly made his way back to the beach where they had made a sandcastle just out of reach of the tide.

Sarah lounged on one of the towels a few feet further up on the warm, dry sand. They had decided to take turns with Zoe in the water making it easier to watch their things though they really hadn't brought much aside from the necessities. It also made it easier to snap photos though a nice older couple nearby helped them with a family photo while they worked on their sandcastle.

The couple even offered to watch their things if they both wanted to join Zoe in the water. When Sarah originally packed for their trip she had included hers and Zoe's swimsuits assuming they would spend some time in the hotel's pool. She never intended to visit the beach. But there had already been a lot about this trip that was unexpected.

If anyone told her she would be hanging out on the beach with her ex-husband she would have laughed. She knew seeing Lucas again was going to be difficult but she never expected any of this. And though she had worried what effect meeting her father would have on Zoe it seemed they brought out the best in each other.

Lucas had never shown a paternal side before. Whenever they went to events where Julius or Silas brought their children Lucas always gave them a wide berth. Because of that she wasn't

surprised when he declared he didn't want children with her despite the fact he would eventually need an heir.

Watching him now it was hard to remember his aversion. He cradled Zoe tenderly and kept her within sight at all times. Even when he swung her around and spun with her he was always careful that she was secure. And Sarah wasn't the only one who noticed.

There were several women on the beach some with families and some without. The attention of several strayed to Lucas whenever he was in the water with Zoe. Sarah couldn't blame them. Lucas had always taken care of his body. He was lean and fit. Add to that his prominent dimples when he smiled and the way he took care of Zoe there was plenty to attract a woman's attention.

Sarah's face warmed as she caught herself ogling him again. But he was her ex-husband so surely that was allowed. Last night they lay in bed together discussing various topics of the past, present and future. His late night confession had her blushing even now: I'm not much of a reader but I did read a Rosemary Thomas book recently. Do you really like my hair?

Sarah thought she was going to die of embarrassment once she realized what he meant. The Rosemary book he obviously read was *Willow Remember Me?* with the description of Edward, which was certainly based on him. Lucas had always hated his hair but Sarah's hand always seemed to itch with the desire to run her fingers through it.

She hesitated to admit it but eventually confessed the truth. Surprisingly he blushed but also smiled like a child in a candy store. Even now she felt the sting of embarrassment though his delight also made her smile.

"Penny for your thoughts."

Sarah blinked realizing Lucas had returned. Salt water clung to him as he set Zoe on her feet before spreading himself out on the sun-warmed towel.

"Did you have fun?" Sarah asked as Zoe plopped next to her.

The three-year-old's body was chilled from the extended time in the water but Zoe was smiling ear to ear as she declared, "Yes!"

Sarah chuckled as Zoe went back to the sandcastle adjusting its moat for the tenth time.

"So what were you thinking about?" Lucas asked when she didn't answer his first inquiry.

"Oh nothing...you know...just about last night," Sarah glanced at him to see a pink tinge coloring his cheeks.

\* \* \*

"...Do you really like my hair?" Lucas hesitantly asked.

“What are you...oh...” Sarah recalled Edward’s physical description from Willow Remember Me? It was clearly a reference to Lucas. He had always hated his hair which tended to curl unless he kept it cropped extremely short. Lucas thought CEOs should have a serious profile and curly hair was too soft for an intimidating image.

“Well?” Lucas prompted again when she remained silent.

“Yes,” Sarah admitted though it caused her face to warm.

“And you want to run your fingers through it?”

Sarah felt herself growing warmer. After a moment she said, “You know not everything I write is true to life.”

“But some things are. Is that?”

“...Yes,” Sarah muttered not meeting his gaze. It was so embarrassing to admit but yes she always wanted to, longed to, run her fingers through his hair whenever it got long enough to start curling.

“...You can if you want.”

Sarah looked up at him to see his cheeks had taken on a faint pink hue. Was he serious?

“Any time you want.”

\* \* \*

Lying out on the towels Lucas felt his face warm at the memory of last night. He couldn’t believe he had actually said that but even more surprising was when Sarah reached over and ran her fingers through his hair. His scalp still tingled with the memory. What would she think if he asked her to do it again?

Though they had fallen asleep apart she had moved closer sometime in the middle of the night. They woke up entangled with each other again. He couldn’t say he minded her snuggled up against him but it worried him she was having nightmares. Lucas knew Sarah preferred to push things to the side and move on rather than think about them but he didn’t think that would help her in this case. She insisted she was fine but he now understood that was her way of dealing with certain situations. Sarah wasn’t running from it necessarily but she was still trying to bury it.

He didn’t have the greatest track record when it came to handling difficult personal situations. Maybe Ava would be the best one to consult but Lucas was beginning to feel professional help would be best. If Sarah hated burdening her friends with her troubles then perhaps a completely neutral party was the best answer but he didn’t know how to suggest it without insulting her.

“Penny for your thoughts?” Sarah asked letting her fingers run through his enticingly damp curls.

Lucas fought back a moan as his scalp tingled and sent tremors of pleasure down his back all the way to his toes pooling in one area he knew was a sensitive topic for both of them.

“Luke?”

Lucas cleared his throat hoping her gaze didn’t stray too far south, “Sarah, I don’t want this to sound offensive so don’t take it the wrong way but...have you considered talking to a professional about what happened?”

“Excuse me?” Sarah shot him a glance but she seemed more confused than upset.

“I know you don’t like to burden others with your problems, we’re alike that way, but...what about talking to someone who can listen and offer professional advice?” Lucas hesitantly studied her reaction. “You’re having nightmares and I’m worried. I don’t know how to help.”

Sarah chewed her lip. At first she wanted to scream at him. What did he know? But there was no malice in his gaze. He was sincere. She had never considered seeking anyone’s help before handling everything that came her way on her own. For her it was a sign of strength but maybe she was making things harder for herself.

Lucas had a point. She hated burdening people, especially those she cared about. There was a certain appeal to a neutral third party, one that could offer professional guidance.

“I’ll think about it,” Sarah promised and Lucas gave her an encouraging smile.

He reached for her hand and kissed it, “I’m here for you if you want to talk, any time.”

“Thank you.”

“Mommy! Let’s swim!” Zoe left off her castle renovations and plopped into her mother’s lap.

Sarah chuckled holding her now warmed-up daughter in her arms. Lucas smiled basking in the sight of them together. Would it be wrong if he started calling them his ladies? It was probably too soon but it was difficult to deny the possessiveness waking in him especially with all the men on the beach stealing glances at Sarah.

He thought most men considered children a turnoff but it seemed that was not the case here. When Sarah’s admirers invariably looked in his direction he met their gaze with a scowl. So far none dared approach which suited him fine.

Lucas turned his attention to Sarah and Zoe as they reached the water splashing in up to Sarah’s knees. Though they hadn’t discussed it in advance it was the depth both felt was safe for the three-year-old to handle. Sarah crouched in the water to bring herself to Zoe’s level as they playfully splashed each other.

He wished every day could be like this but eventually they had to return to the rest of the world. They each had responsibilities and his started with settling things with his family. For Sarah's sake and Zoe's future he couldn't let them walk away.

Lucas glanced behind him at the elderly couple still enjoying the sun. They smiled and he gave them a nod before standing. He wasn't one to trust strangers but right now he had another mission. Striding into the water he headed directly toward Sarah and Zoe.

Seeing his approach Sarah stood wondering if something had happened. Without a word he stooped and picked her up. Sarah shrieked in surprise as he held her bridal style and gave Zoe a mischievous grin.

"Luke, what are you doing?" Sarah demanded even as he took a couple steps into deeper water. "Don't you dare!"

With a smirk he let her go dropping her into the water as she shrieked. Sarah righted herself and stood up sputtering. She turned to him ready to drag him into the water only to see he had claimed a laughing Zoe and held her as if she were a shield.

"Why you!" Sarah stomped toward him determined to get some form of revenge.

Laughing his arm slipped around her waist and he pulled her close. They stood together for several moments catching their breaths. Sarah leaned against him. Just when she thought he was going to be serious he pulled a prank she certainly didn't expect. Still, she liked that silly side. She was certain it was a side of himself he never showed to others.

"That wasn't so bad, right?" Lucas asked.

Sarah calmly disengaged Zoe from his embrace. The three-year-old was laughing in delight at her parents' antics.

"Sarah?" Lucas prompted suddenly worried when she didn't answer him. Perhaps he took it too far.

Without a word she suddenly gave him a shove. Surprised he was taken off balance and fell onto his backside and briefly dipped under water. He sat up spitting out salt water and looked up to see her satisfied smirk.

"You shouldn't start something you can't finish," Sarah proclaimed.

With a daring smile he stood and pulled her into his embrace before she could escape and held her close. He pressed his forehead to hers whispering, "You are a dangerously tempting woman."

"It's about time you noticed," Sarah smiled enjoying his nearness. Even if she was being naïve she didn't mind if this day went on forever.

He suddenly leaned forward giving her a peck on the nose. Sarah blinked surprised by his audacity but she wanted more. Reaching up she curled her fingers around the back of his neck and pulled him close pressing her lips to his. After a moment of hesitation he answered her silent beckoning working their lips against each other. She welcomed the intrusion of his tongue letting him deepen the kiss.

When they finally drew back from each other Sarah looked to see Lucas's satisfied smirk. She blushed and suddenly recalled they were still on the beach surrounded by people. Zoe giggled still clinging to her as she held the three-year-old on her hip. Clearing her throat she turned and headed to their towels to collect their things. Lucas followed but though she tried to pretend everything was normal he couldn't wipe the smile from his face.

\* \* \*

Daisy greeted them enthusiastically when they returned to Alice's villa. The puppy hated to be left behind. Once again Zoe had fallen asleep in the car. As much as Sarah wanted she couldn't let the three-year-old nap without a quick bath. Zoe muttered complaints as her mother carried her to the bathroom to wash away the salt water, sand and sunscreen before changing her into a nightgown and finally letting her sleep.

Sarah chuckled. She couldn't remember a time when Zoe had so thoroughly tuckered herself out. With a sigh she headed to her own bedroom intent on taking a shower herself.

When she got there she found Lucas seated on the chaise lounge. He was freshly showered and changed. Obviously he had the same idea as her. As he sat he looked over a rather thick file.

"What do you have there?" Sarah asked.

"Oh, just the file on my biological father," Lucas shrugged. Though he tried to appear nonchalant it was clear he was having a difficult time.

"Can I see?"

Without a word he handed it over. Sarah looked over the files skimming the information.

"Both of my brothers are married. One has a couple of kids," Lucas said. "Apparently I'm an uncle."

"So have you decided to contact them?"

"I don't know. They probably don't even know I exist. He's probably forgotten all about me."

"I don't think so."

"What makes you say that?"



“Your brother’s names: Mason Luke and Walter Lidia. Those aren’t random names.” Sarah handed him the file. “I don’t think he forgot about you at all.”

Lucas took back the file looking at the names again. It couldn’t be a coincidence. Maybe it was a message.

“Just think about it,” Sarah patted his shoulder and kissed the top of his head before heading to the bathroom.

Lucas sighed. Maybe she was right.