

Chapter 41 - The Billionaire CEO's Runaway Wife

“Is she still asleep?” Sarah asked as she unlocked the door and held it open.

“Out like a light,” Lucas chuckled as he entered.

Daisy circled around them. As soon as she was released from her lead she darted off to inspect the house they hadn’t visited all weekend. Thanks to Ulima it was neat and orderly.

“What about the luggage?” Sarah asked as she closed the door.

“Leave it until tomorrow,” Lucas said. “It’s not going anywhere.”

Sarah chuckled but nodded and preceded him up the stairs. Reaching Zoe’s room she opened the door and turned on the light coming to a sudden halt as she stared.

What had been an average guest room was transformed. The walls were a warm primrose purple. One had been turned into an accent wall with a woodland mural filled with all sorts of animals hidden in the foliage. The old bed had been replaced by a smaller, four-poster bed with a barnyard bedspread. There was now a reading corner with a beanbag chair and dozens of picture books as well as a crafting and art table.

Sarah turned slowly taking it all in as she finally faced him. Lucas stood in the doorway anxiously watching her reaction.

“Is it okay?” Lucas asked. “Do you think she’ll like it?”

“When? How?” Sarah asked letting her eyes take it all in again.

“While we were gone. I wanted it to be a surprise,” Lucas said. He hadn’t expected his grandmother to steal his thunder but he still liked how this room turned out. “Is it?”

Sarah stepped close to him taking his face in her hands as her eyes shined with tears. She pressed their lips together unable to find the words to describe her gratitude and joy at seeing what he had done.

“So I take it I did good?” Lucas smiled. “I’m glad.”

“I can’t believe you did this,” Sarah shook her head. “Although I should say you got Alan to do it.”

Lucas snorted a laugh. She wasn’t wrong. Though it had been his idea he left it to Alan to make arrangements. Alan had found an interior designer and given them carte blanche to make the perfect room for a three-year-old.

“Why?”

“Because I want both of you in my life,” Lucas said as if it should be obvious. “How am I doing?”

Sarah stifled a laugh leaning against him, “Good. You are doing good.”

“Good.”

Sarah hesitated before moving to the bed to draw back the covers. They made another quick change to get Zoe into her pajamas so she could sleep comfortably. Daisy hopped onto the bed and curled up next to her. Stepping back Sarah could only imagine Zoe’s surprise and delight when she woke up in her new room.

Lucas let his hand slip to her waist as he walked her down the hall to her own door which had been replaced as well during their absence. Sarah stared at the door. That’s right. They had separate bedrooms.

Lucas cleared his throat, “If you need anything I’m just right down the hall.”

“Right,” Sarah nodded facing him. “Thank you.”

Lucas tucked a stray hair behind her ear. As much as he hated his grandmother’s meddling he certainly hadn’t minded the weekend. They had made a lot of progress he didn’t want to jeopardize.

“Sleep well,” Lucas leaned forward kissing her forehead before reluctantly retreating.

Sarah watched him disappear into his room before stepping into her own. Closing the door she leaned on it wondering what she was doing. Wasn’t it only last week she told herself he wanted nothing to do with her? It wasn’t easy to remember when he was doing everything he could to make her forget. Seeing him with Zoe made her heart ache. What would the last four years have been like if he had been there?

She shook her head. Where were those thoughts coming from?

Yet seeing him at the aquarium, the amusement park and the beach she thought he looked so happy and relaxed. In fact it was probably the first time she ever saw him truly stress-free before. During their marriage he struggled to live up to his grandmother’s legacy and stand on even

ground with Julius and Silas. She had always wanted to give him a place where he could let go of his anxieties and rest.

Perhaps that was Zoe's special brand of magic. It was difficult for anyone to deny the three-year-old's happy giggles and energetic activity. She was definitely a good influence on him.

With a sigh she changed into her pajamas and slipped into bed. Sarah lay for several moments waiting for sleep to take her. She turned and rolled over to see the other side of her bed empty. Silently chastising herself she rolled onto her back again. Two days. All it took was two days for her to get used to his presence. Perhaps that was Alice's plan from the beginning. Sometimes that woman was exceptionally irritating.

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Lucas lay in bed. He had pulled on a pair of sweat pants. Since he wouldn't be sleeping with Sarah anymore he left off the t-shirt. Glancing at the other side of the bed and seeing it empty he could almost curse his grandmother. She was a hopeless meddler...but she was always right. Sarah was perfect in every way and he was a fool for not seeing it sooner.

He smiled recalling their trips to the aquarium and amusement park. Sarah was carefree and full of laughter as Zoe dragged them from one attraction to another. It was a sight he would never tire of seeing to say nothing of what she looked like in her bikini at the beach. It wasn't any wonder she garnered the attention of so many admirers.

With a sigh he reached for his phone looking through the photos he took during their various outings. There were even a few of all three of them together courtesy of a few passersby including the elderly couple from the beach. He smiled again at the fresh memories.

Suddenly his breath hitched as he reached the final pictures. They showed him scooping up Sarah and dunking her as well as her dunking him to say nothing of their kiss. He swallowed a lump in his throat. Evidently the elderly couple took the liberty of snapping pictures when he left them in charge of watching their things. He certainly couldn't find fault with them for taking these.

Lucas sighed trying to get comfortable. They took some big steps. He had to make certain they didn't take any steps back. There was only a week before he learned Sarah's final decision. He hoped she would stay.

There would be logistics to figure out. They would have to maintain two households not to mention the care of the animals on the Vermont farm, perhaps a groundskeeper. He didn't think he or Sarah would appreciate a roommate but there were plenty of outbuildings on the farm and space for a small cottage.

They could travel upstate every weekend so the keeper would only be needed during the week. As much as Zoe was enjoying her time in the city she was a country girl and wouldn't be happy away from her farm or animals for long. And he wouldn't want to cage her.

A knock interrupted his private musings. He sat up as the door opened. To his surprise Sarah stood there looking at him. She seemed pale and anxious.

“Is something the matter?” Lucas asked immediately worried she had another nightmare.

Sarah shook her head, “I...can’t sleep.”

“That makes two of us,” Lucas smiled. He hesitated before patting the bed. “Want to talk?”

Sarah blushed even as she fought a smile before making her way to the bed and lay down next to him. Lucas rolled over on his side so they faced each other. Already he felt calmer now that she was in sight. He reached for her hand and gently held it in his.

“I still can’t believe what you did with Zoe’s room,” Sarah said with a smile.

“Well, you haven’t seen the backyard yet.”

“What did you do?” Sarah asked.

“You’ll see in the morning,” Lucas winked.

Sarah chuckled. She continued to debate whether she should be encouraging him or not but in his case encouragement didn’t seem all that necessary.

“So...tomorrow,” Lucas said. “How about we meet for lunch and we can shop for your dresses for the party...yours and Zoe’s. Masks too. Alan sent me a link to a store we should check out.”

Sarah smiled and nodded.

“Good. I’ll swing by here after I get back from meeting with my mother and Lidia.”

“So, are you really going to do it?”

“It’s already done,” Lucas said. “Their accounts are frozen and arrangements have been made with an auction house. All I’m doing tomorrow is informing them.”

“Would it be wrong to say I’m glad?”

“They tormented you for too long. You’re entitled to wallow in glory,” Lucas said. “...Did you want to come with me?”

“Go with you?”

“To see them. To show them they never broke you, that you are stronger than they could ever imagine. I didn’t know if you would want that otherwise I would have offered sooner.”

Sarah chewed her lip. After a moment of thought she said, “I can’t promise I won’t slap them.”

“I wouldn’t think of stopping you,” Lucas shook his head. “I might even take pictures.”

They shared a laugh. Lucas raised her hand to his lips and kissed it.

“Just think about it. You deserve retribution and closure.”

“Thank you.”

“Sweet dreams.”

“You too.”

* * *

Zoe giggled as a warm tongue licked her nose. When she didn’t get up the tongue licked her cheek next and was quickly followed by a cold, wet nose.

“Daisy!” Zoe laughed sitting up and hugging the corgi as it wiggled into her lap. She hugged the puppy close as her gaze slowly took in her surroundings.

At first she thought she was in her room at her grandmother’s but this one was smaller with only one mural. There was a reading corner and a project table as well as dozens of stuffed animals and games. She wondered just where she was. Did her parents take her to some place new? Was this a new surprise?

Crawling out of bed she headed to the door and stepped into the hallway with Daisy at her heels. Zoe paused, looking first to her left toward the stairs where the inviting smells of breakfast were already drifting upward. Then she looked to her right down the hallway where there was a door to the bathroom and several bedrooms. This was definitely her father’s house.

She looked back at her bedroom again as a smile spread across her face. Her daddy had made a special bedroom just for her. Giggling she hurried to her mother’s room and peeked inside to see the bed empty. Maybe her mother was already awake?

Padding down the hallway she reached her daddy’s door and quietly pushed it open. Unsurprisingly she found him still asleep but he wasn’t alone. Moving to the foot of the bed she climbed onto the trunk for a better look.

Her daddy laid on his back his head lolling to one side. Beside him lay her mommy. Sarah’s head rested close to his shoulder. Zoe had known her parents shared a room at her grandmother’s but she had always gone in search of the butler for breakfast rather than disturbing them. This was the first time she had seen them together.

Standing up she clapped excitedly before hopping onto the bed and pouncing on her daddy's prone form. Lucas suddenly shot awake with a groan of pain.

"Morning daddy!" Zoe happily declared unaware how close she had come to a rather sensitive area.

"Morning," Lucas sighed falling back on the bed as he caught his breath. That was not a pleasant way to wake up.

"Zoe, what are you doing?" Sarah mumbled. The sudden jolt woke her up too but she mercifully was not the target.

"I'm saying good morning!" Zoe said.

"Good morning," Sarah sighed. "Did you go to the bathroom yet?"

"No."

"Let's go. Come on," Sarah rolled out of bed. "It's not nice to jump on people when they are sleeping. You should apologize."

"Did I hurt you daddy?"

"I'm all right," Lucas assured her.

"Come on, bathroom," Sarah beckoned.

Lucas groaned as the three-year-old crawled over him helping her down before she really did hit a sensitive spot and sighed once she joined her mother at the door. Zoe came to a sudden halt before rushing back to the bed.

Lucas rolled onto his side and caught her up as she gestured for a hug. Planting a sloppy kiss on his cheek she said, "I really like my new room, daddy!"

"Do you? Good. I got something else for you too," Lucas chuckled. "I'll show you after breakfast."

"Yea!" Zoe squeezed him tight before he released her.

She happily skipped over to her waiting mother with the corgi at her heels. Lucas watched them feeling content maybe for the first time in his life. Only a week ago he was a bundle of nerves ready to snap but now he felt at ease despite the confrontation to come.

He frowned. Today he was going to close the book on one part of his life for good. If not for the news his grandmother gave him it would have been even more daunting but he still had family if he chose to contact them. He worried how it might affect Zoe but then again...she didn't seem to

have any problem calling anyone an uncle, aunt or cousin. Blood relations didn't mean anything to her so maybe it was time to take a page out of both her and her mother's book. He would not only walk away from his past but he would make a new future with the family of his choosing.

With a sigh Lucas sat up looking at the door. He waited a moment longer for Sarah but hearing the guest shower start up he figured she intended to stay awake. Even though his morning hadn't quite started the way he expected it didn't change the fact he had woken up with the two most important ladies in his life at his side. Hopefully both would stay.

His private musings were interrupted by his phone. Glancing at the screen to see it was Alan he answered, "Hello."

"Hello? That's it?" Alan asked. "No how are you? How was your weekend?"

"Fine. How was your weekend?"

"Fabulous. After I finished up your errands I had some time for a road trip to Vermont."

"Vermont? Why would you...never mind," Lucas sighed though he couldn't help his grin. He was genuinely happy for his long-time friend and assistant.

"And while we're on the subject...how was your weekend?"

Lucas hesitated recalling the beach, park and aquarium. It all seemed unreal though he knew his phone was full of pictures. Without a doubt it was the best weekend of his life.

"...It was the best one I've ever had."

"I'm glad to hear it," Alan sighed relief. "What about Zoe? Did she like her surprises?"

"She's only seen the room so far," Lucas smiled. "After breakfast I'll take her outside and show her the other one."

"I got all the accounts closed," Alan said after a moment, "aside from Madeline's personal savings which I don't have access to. I don't know how much is in it but given her spending habits I doubt it's much. Everything else has been suspended and cancelled."

"Good. I'll drive up to the estate today to give them the news. And the auction house?"

"They are coming today to take pictures for their catalog. Are you really going to sell everything off?"

"Aside from anything Sarah may choose to keep...yeah. I discussed it with grandma already. She doesn't have any attachment to it. She prefers her home in Brighton."

"Well, as long as you won't regret it later."

“It’s too big. I like having them close. Besides, there is still the farm in Brattleboro if we need a country getaway...if Sarah decides to keep me around.”

“How are you going to manage a farm?” Alan asked.

“We’ll figure it out,” Lucas said. “Even if Sarah and Zoe choose to live in Vermont most of the time I can drive up every night after work, or at least the weekends. We can do holidays there or here or in Brighton. Whatever they want to do, I’ll do it.”

“Don’t take this the wrong way but it sounds like you’re whipped.”

“As long as it’s Sarah holding it I don’t mind.”

“Wow, that’s an image,” Alan laughed. “I’ll meet you at the estate then to get the auction house reps started and debrief the security team.”

“Thanks. Oh, I’m going to need you to do a little research on someone for me.”

“Who?”

“My father. My biological father. According to grandma he lives in Tucson. I have two brothers too.”

“...Holy shit.”

“I’ll send you the names.”

“Right. Oh, because I know he’s going to ask again what should I tell Samuel?”

“Tell him I told Sarah he wanted to talk to her and meet Zoe but it’s up to Sarah.”

“Got it. Well, good luck. See you soon.”

“Thanks.” Lucas stood and headed for the bathroom. He needed all the luck he could get.

Chapter Forty-Two

Chapter 42 - The Billionaire CEO's Runaway Wife

Lidia woke up feeling relaxed and satisfied. Gingerly she touched her mud pack grimacing at the cost of beauty. Reaching for her phone she checked her messages finding none from James. It had been several days and he had promised to send her pictures as soon as the deed was done.

Annoyed she typed a quick message: When am I going to get those photos? If I wait too long everyone will have forgotten about the Mixer and move on. I don't think you appreciate the gravity of the situation.

After sending it she stood and headed to her bathroom. If she couldn't count on James to get the job done she'd have to think of a new strategy. It was clear Lucas was getting attached. The old adage absence makes the heart grow fonder was clearly coined just for him. Who would have thought he'd actually fall for a dumpy, old housewife?

Stepping out of the shower freshly washed and skin smooth Lidia heard her phone buzz. Hoping it was James with the promised pictures she picked it up and opened the alert. They were pictures but not the ones she wanted. Under the headline: Family Day at the Beach was half a dozen images of Lucas at the beach with Sarah and the child.

Lidia's jaw dropped seeing her brother of all people making sandcastles, lounging on the sand and splashing in the ocean. The last image of a rather passionate kiss had her fuming. How could her brother do this? Did he not care how Madeline would feel when she saw this? To say nothing about the board members? Didn't he care about the Stanton's reputation at all?

She should have taken him by the hand four years ago after the divorce. Rather than let him pine she should have sent him out with Madeline to build up gossip and rumor. Once public opinion put them together there would have been no way for him to back out. They wouldn't be having the problems they were now even if Sarah did show up with a kid. There was still time to turn this around. She just had to think it through.

Lidia stewed over her thoughts as she dressed. She was still mulling them over when she headed downstairs to join her mother for brunch. As neither were early risers this was usually their first meal of the day.

Patricia Stanton sat regal and proper at the patio table. She preferred to eat outside when the weather allowed. Maids hurriedly moved out of Lidia's way as they set the table. More than once the staff suffered bitter reprisals for moving too slowly.

"Good morning, darling," Patricia greeted.

"Good morning, mother," Lidia answered plopping in her seat with a pensive expression.

"Dear me, what on earth is causing you to have that face? You'll get worry lines. What's wrong?"

"You know Lucas hasn't been himself for the last four years."

Patricia nodded. Four years ago they successfully chased off the gold-digging tramp his grandmother forced him to marry. For years Patricia had wanted to give Alice Stanton a piece of her mind but couldn't. The latter simply had too much power. If Alice wanted she could erase all of them without a moment's hesitation. Now that Lucas was head of the family Patricia thought she would gain the upper hand but it hadn't turned out as she expected.

True, they occupied the family estate while Alice lived in her beach shack and they had all the luxuries they could ever ask but no one sought out Patricia for advice or her presence to elevate social gatherings. She always despised charity events and fund raisers loudly declaring they were a waste of time. While she certainly didn't miss such events she no longer received a single invitation to anything.

Even Lidia's invitations were rapidly declining which made no sense as Lucas wasn't married. Lidia was the de facto female head of the Stanton household until Lucas and Madeline were married. She should have been inundated with invitations.

Patricia had a feeling Macey DaLair and Avalynn Prescott were leading a boycott against them. They were almost as bad as Alice Stanton when it came to wielding power without thought or concern for others. It was enough to infuriate Patricia but not for her own sake, but Lidia's. There had to be a way to get back at them but one had to be careful. Neither the DaLairs nor the Prescotts were to be taken lightly.

"So what about your brother?"

"He's seeing her again."

"Who?"

"That woman grandmother forced him to marry. She's back."

"What!" Patricia exclaimed. That was impossible! Not after all their hard work to drive her off.

"And she has an urchin too!"

"A child? Lucas's?"

"There's no proof. The ugly thing looks just like her. Absolutely nothing from Lucas...but she's the right age."

"Well...obviously she was cheating on him with some gutter trash."

"That's why I had James meet her at the DaLair's Mixer," Lidia said. "It wasn't easy getting in there either without proper invitations."

"You were always a clever girl," Patricia smiled. "So you left them together?"

“Of course, James never stops half way. He was supposed to send me pictures so I could post them all over social media but he hasn’t sent me anything yet.”

“I’m sure he’ll get to it eventually. Men are like that.”

“Well I need rumors circulating when I accuse her of infidelity. The Board will insist on paternity tests to prove whether her little snout is actually Lucas’s.”

“What if it is?”

“Mother, this is America. You can buy anything for the right price...even a fake paternity test.”

“That’s my girl.”

“Lidia! It’s just awful!” Madeline stormed onto the patio.

“Don’t worry. A few pictures mean nothing,” Lidia assured her assuming she had seen the gossip page.

“What are you talking about?” Madeline asked.

“What are you talking about?” Lidia asked.

“I’ve been fired!”

“What!” Lidia and Patricia gasped in unison.

“Look, this came today,” Madeline thrust a single sheet of paper into Lidia’s hands. It was a formal letter and quite brief.

This letter is to inform you that your employment at Stanton Inc is hereby terminated due to excessive absences without leave. Furthermore, you are banned from entry at any and all Stanton Inc properties, offices and business locations.

Lidia read through it twice before handing it back, “Clearly there is a clerical error.”

“You think so?” Madeline asked as she sat down.

“Of course, Lucas would never fire you,” Lidia assured her. “After lunch we’ll go see him. You’ll see. He’ll clear the whole thing up.”

“That won’t be necessary,” a deeper voice interrupted.

The trio looked up to see Lucas standing over them. He was dressed casually in a polo shirt and trousers. His demeanor was calm and collected as he surveyed them with an unfriendly scowl.

“Luke!” Patricia exclaimed. “It’s not like you to come calling so early. Have a seat and join us! Rachel, bring another plate!”

“I’ve already had breakfast,” Lucas dismissed the invitation.

“Oh nonsense. It’s a mother’s pleasure to provide for her children. Rachel!” Patricia called again. “Where has that girl gone?”

“Don’t bother,” Lucas said. “I’ve already dismissed the staff. They are collecting their severance pay, bonuses and references from Alan as we speak.”

“What? What are we supposed to do?” Patricia demanded. “A house like this requires a workforce to maintain.”

“Which is why I’m getting rid of it,” Lucas said. “I have an appraiser here to arrange everything to sell the estate and its contents. The auction for the artwork and furnishings will be in a couple weeks and the estate should be sold by the end of the month, if not sooner. You have the next hour to pack and vacate the property.”

“Now just a minute, w-where are we going to live?” Patricia stuttered. Never in her wildest dreams did she imagine this would happen.

“I don’t give a damn,” Lucas coldly eyed her. “A motel, in a van. Makes no difference to me.”

“This is the family estate. You can’t just sell it,” Patricia insisted. “What will your grandmother think?”

“She said I can do as I please. She has no attachment to this place,” Lucas said. “And neither do I.”

“B-but...what will everyone think when they hear you’re selling the estate?”

“They can think whatever they like. It doesn’t matter to me.”

“Lucas, you can’t kick your own family out on the streets,” Patricia admonished.

“Oh, I’m not just kicking you out. I’ve also closed all your accounts. So you might as well cut up every single card you have. They are all worthless.”

“W-why would you do that!” Patricia demanded.

“You actually have to gall to ask?” Lucas took out his phone, “let’s review: why haven’t you killed yourself yet? Why else would I have generously donated a knife set to you for your wedding?”

Patricia paled.

“Should I go on? I have almost a thousand more examples I could give,” Lucas said. “Funny how you are only concerned with family when it’s you.”

“Now Lucas, I only did that because she wasn’t worthy of you. I was protecting you. That woman is not a proper Stanton.”

“And you are? Shall we talk about Steve Davis?”

Patricia snapped her mouth closed as her eyes went wide.

“Who is that?” Lidia asked.

“Our father. Our biological father,” Lucas glared at his sister. “Our mother was so desperate to conceive an heir she took a lover. Did you really think grandma didn’t know?”

Patricia trembled, “...Your father...”

“Was so upset to learn his wife cheated on him and his children were not his own he got drunk and got into a car wreck,” Lucas said. “But our biological father is alive and well in Arizona. We even have two younger brothers.”

“That’s a lie...” Lidia shook her head unwilling to believe it.

“And you would know because you lie all the time?” Lucas prompted. “Maybe you’re so used to lies you don’t know the truth when it’s right in front of you.”

Lidia fell silent.

“Luke...” Madeline reached for his hand.

He pulled away and glared at her, “Don’t ever touch me. And don’t call me by my first name.”

“But Luke, what about...”

“Get this straight...we are not friends and we damn sure are not lovers.”

“But I thought...”

“Thought what? That drugging me so I would crawl in bed with you would be funny? Or that I would ever want to be near you?”

“Lucas what are you talking about?” Lidia tried to compose herself again.

“It’s all on camera, sister,” Lucas glared at her. She immediately went pale. “So what was your plan? Break up my marriage and force me to take this disgusting excuse for a human being as my next wife? So you two could play sisters and drag the Stanton name through the gutters?”

“No! We...”

“God! I feel so stupid!” Lucas shook his head. “I knew you were a shameless bitch and yet I trusted you. I actually thought you’d never betray me, your own brother. You, who doesn’t know the meaning of the word loyalty.”

“Now, that is enough!” Patricia said. “I will not tolerate that kind of language in my house. That is your sister you are talking to.”

“Not anymore,” Lucas said. “She’s been struck from the Stanton family register. She gets nothing. Not a damn cent. I’m cutting you both off for good. And if you come anywhere near me, Sarah or our daughter I swear I’ll bury you so deep they’ll never find the body...not that anyone would bother looking for you. Who would miss you?”

The three women at the table fell silent.

“I suggest you start packing before the security personnel I hired to watch the property arrive,” Lucas said. “I better not see any of you ever again.”

Spinning around he marched back inside. The trio sat in stunned silence. This was certainly not the morning they expected to have. Wiping her mouth with a napkin Lidia stood.

“I’ll talk to him. We’re siblings. He’ll listen to me.”

Chapter Forty-Three

Chapter 43 - The Billionaire CEO's Runaway Wife

“Make sure you get pictures of everything,” a young brunette said as the photographer focused on the painting in front of them. “And make sure to get establishing shots of the interior. We want to make sure the real estate brochure is warm and homey.”

“Just what do you think you are doing?” Lidia demanded. “Who are you?”

“Denise Richardson, I’m an appraiser for the Duke Richardson Auction House,” the brunette answered with a smile and presented her with a card. “Mister Stanton contacted us to handle the auction of the estate and its contents. It’s going to be very exciting.”

“Stop it right now,” Lidia snapped. “There has been a mistake. Your services are not needed so you can leave now.”

“Mister Stanton said you would say that,” Denise maintained her smile. “He said to ignore you. Let’s get shots of the living room next. Then the dining hall. We’ll do the bedrooms last.”

“Where is my brother?” Lidia demanded hating the way she had been dismissed.

“I believe he went to the study,” Denise said. “Remember anything marked with a post-it is not for sale.”

Lidia spun on her heels and headed to the library. It took her a moment to recall where it was as it wasn’t a room she had ever been to before. Reaching it she suddenly stopped at the sound of voices within.

* * *

“How’d it go?” Sarah asked as soon as Lucas joined her.

“...Good,” he said as he leaned against the desk and sighed.

“You didn’t have to face them alone. I could have gone with you.”

“No, I had to do that myself,” Lucas shook his head. “It’s my fault they thought themselves untouchable. And it’s my fault they were able to hurt you.”

“It wasn’t all your fault, you know,” Sarah said leaving the bookshelf she was perusing to join him. “I could have told you about the text messages they were sending me sooner. I just didn’t think...”

“I would care,” Lucas finished reaching over and pulling her close with his arm draped over her shoulders.

“Yeah.”

They stood in companionable silence for several minutes before he spoke again, “Find anything good?”

“Actually yes,” Sarah said holding up the book in her hand. “There are quite a few first editions and even some special collector’s editions that would be worth keeping.”

“Take as many as you want,” Lucas said. “I told them anything you mark with a post-it isn’t for sale.”

“I don’t think we have enough space for all of these,” Sarah gestured to the nearly eight-foot book shelves heaped with books that were probably never read.

“We’ll make space,” Lucas said. “I’ll add a new room for a library for you if you like.”

“I don’t need that,” Sarah laughed at his outrageous offer.

“Need or want,” Lucas smiled. “Just say the word.”

She shook her head resting her arms on his shoulders, leaned close and kissed him. Lucas savored her warm, soft lips. This would never get old.

“What is going on in here!”

The moment was shattered as they both pulled away, startled by the interruption. In the doorway stood Lidia her face red at catching their intimate moment. Lucas glared at her.

“Shouldn’t you be packing?” he asked.

“I should have known it was you!” Lidia ignored his quip and strode into the room her gaze not wavering from Sarah. “You shameless tramp! Just wait until everyone finds out who you share your bed with!”

Lucas tensed, his anger rising. Before he said anything Sarah squeezed his shoulder and handed him the book in her hand. With a tense smile she stepped away from him and approached his fuming sister.

“Lidia, there is something I’ve always wanted to say to you,” Sarah said reaching her. She raised her hand and slapped her former sister-in-law across the face.

Lidia stumbled back covering her face as her cheek flared a deep red. Her expression was frozen in utter disbelief. She had never been struck before. She was a Stanton. No one would dare.

She looked at her brother but his eyes were on Sarah. His gaze followed her like a moth attracted to a light, enraptured by her every move. Though Lidia had been willing to bet the beach photos were doctored it was not so easy to deny when it was right in front of her. She tore her gaze from him back to Sarah who watched her with the same superior smile.

“Lidia, you are a self-centered, greedy, little bitch. And I hope you get all the happiness and charity you have given to so many.”

“W-Wh...are you just going to let her talk to me like that?” Lidia demanded desperately looking at her brother again.

“Yes,” he answered without hesitation.

Sarah returned to him reclaiming the book. There was a slight blush to her cheeks but her eyes sparkled with mirth. It felt good to get that off her chest.

“Shall we?” Lucas asked. More than anything he wanted to get home and hug Zoe. He was tired of the repressive nature of this place.

“It will take me hours if not days to look over all these books,” Sarah sighed. As much as she wanted to be thorough she didn’t want to have to keep coming back to this place.

“I’ll tell Alan to have them boxed up and delivered to the house. You can take your time looking.”

“Really?”

“Absolutely,” Lucas assured her. He’d be willing to keep the mansion and all of its contents if she said the word but he knew this was not her favorite place. “Is there anything else you’d like to look at? Any of the furniture?”

Sarah glanced around them with a shrug, “It’s all beautiful but…”

“It’s more fun to find it forgotten in a barn and restore it yourself?” Lucas guessed.

Sarah looked at him surprised but perhaps she shouldn’t have been. Lucas had gone to considerable lengths to learn everything he could about her. She gave him a wry smile wondering if he’d be willing to join her on one of her antique scavenger hunts. He did say she could redecorate the house if she wanted to.

“Let’s go,” Lucas stood taking her hand. “I promised to take you and Zoe shopping and then we can have lunch. How does Indian food sound?”

“Sounds fantastic. Zoe loves curry.”

“Excellent,” Lucas escorted her to the door not giving Lidia a second glance even as he called over his shoulder. “If you’re waiting for James to call you…don’t. He’ll be preoccupied for awhile.”

Leaving the stunned Lidia behind they headed for the foyer where Lucas paused seeing his mother and Madeline waiting. Apparently they were still hoping for a last minute reprieve even as he appeared hand-in-hand with Sarah. Patricia and Madeline stood with mouths agape at the sight not sure how to process what they were seeing.

Lucas was ready to tell them off again but Sarah stepped forward a second sooner. Leaving him she marched straight to Madeline and delivered the same greeting she had given Lidia. As Madeline stumbled back holding her cheek Sarah turned her attention to Patricia.

“You know, with all the ordinary household objects around this place one wonders why you’re still here,” Sarah sweetly smiled as she quoted one of many texts she had been sent. “Surely even you can’t be that inept.”

Patricia turned bright red.

“This better be the last time we ever meet,” Sarah said. “You won’t like how it will end next time.”

Not sparing another glance at Madeline Sarah returned to Lucas’s side. He kissed her temple as his arm encircled her waist.

“Staff taken care of?” Lucas asked as Alan joined them.

“Yes, final checks and recommendations are all issued and most have already departed.”

“Good. The appraiser is going through now,” Lucas nodded. “Have all the books boxed up and sent to the house.”

“All the books?”

“There are too many to go through now.”

“Of course.”

“And as soon as the squatters have left change the security codes.”

“It shall be done,” Alan struggled not to laugh in front of the squatters.

“Thanks,” Lucas nodded opening the door and escorting Sarah out into the fresh air. She breathed deeply as soon as they were outside. “You okay?”

With a strained smile she nodded, “Yes...That was more stressful than I thought it would be.”

Sarah hugged herself as if fending off a chill. It had been hard to maintain her composure. She wanted to scream and throw things. If she had seen the trio gathered around their table on the patio she probably would have flipped it over. But she didn’t want them to think they could affect her that way.

Lucas’s arms slipped around her and he held her close letting her tension slowly ease away. She leaned against him accepting his support and comfort.

“Let’s go home,” Lucas said after he felt her relax. “Zoe’s waiting and we have shopping to do.”

“Right. Hopefully we can find three matching masks.”

“Three?”

“Of course, you are coming to the masquerade too, aren’t you?”

“I wouldn’t miss it.”

“You better not be late this time,” Sarah looked over her shoulder at him.

“Never again.”

“Good.”

Lucas chuckled escorting her to the waiting SUV. Helping her in he paused to glance up at the expansive mansion. This was the last time he would set foot here and he was happy to put it behind him. There was a better place waiting for him.

* * *

As soon as Lucas pulled up to the house Zoe rushed out to greet them with Daisy at her heels.

“Daddy!”

Lucas scooped her up holding her close as she threw her arms around him in a tight hug. The last of the tension he held from the confrontation with his family eased. Nothing else mattered except the three-year-old’s future. He hadn’t mentioned it yet and their agreement prohibited him from any public announcements but he had already taken steps to ensure Zoe’s future as the sole Stanton heir.

Perhaps it was too soon but he hoped Sarah would stay and maybe, just maybe, Zoe wouldn’t be an only child forever. The thought also terrified him. Sarah had a difficult pregnancy with Zoe and he was afraid of what another might cost her. He wouldn’t risk Sarah’s health even for the possibility of expanding their family.

Feeling eyes on him Lucas looked up to see Sarah watching them with a soft smile. He returned her smile with his own. Shoving away his thoughts he hoped they weren’t written in his expression.

“Did you and mommy finish your important business?” Zoe asked.

“Yes we did.” Lucas chuckled. They hadn’t gone into any details when they left the three-year-old behind. “Do you like your new play set?”

“I love it!” Zoe exclaimed.

“Good.” Lucas smiled broadly. Before they left Lucas took her outside to see the play set that had been installed while they were gone for the weekend. Zoe had been so excited she almost didn’t mind that her parents had to run an errand without her.

“So, you’re mom and I were thinking we should go shopping.”

“Shopping?”

“Yep. You and your mom need dresses and we need to get masks for the book party. What do you think?”

“Yea!” Zoe clapped. “Are we going to the party together?”

“Yes we are. And I’ll be on time.”

“You better be,” Zoe gave him a serious look.

“Promise.” Lucas smiled kissing her forehead. “From now on I will come home early every day. And no more working on weekends or holidays.”

“Good.” Zoe giggled hugging him again.

Lucas glanced up to see Sarah and Ulima watching them. Feeling embarrassed he cleared his throat, “So, shall we?”

“Let’s go!” Zoe declared.

Only having experienced Lidia’s shopping sprees Lucas didn’t know exactly what to expect as they entered the department store in search of dresses. To his surprise Sarah only briefly glanced at the various options on the racks. Lidia usually grabbed ten or twelve at a time but Sarah looked and moved on.

When she caught him watching she simply said, “My stylist will pick one out for me.”

He was only more confused as Zoe darted in and out of the racks looking at every dress, feeling the material before moving on to the next. Lucas was hard pressed to keep an eye on her before she suddenly declared, “Mommy! This one!”

Sarah joined her carefully taking out a shimmering gold gown with an illusion-style neckline. It was a rather bold choice but the fabric was soft and would hug her curves nicely without being too revealing.

“Are you sure about this one?” Sarah asked.

“Ah-huh, it’ll bring out your eyes,” Zoe answered in all seriousness as Lucas picked her up.

“You should try it on,” Lucas agreed eager to see her in this gown knowing she would look gorgeous in anything.

“All right,” Sarah rolled her eyes but there wasn’t anything she wouldn’t do to please Zoe.

She disappeared into the dressing rooms. When she emerged to stand in front of the mirrors Lucas and Zoe were ready and excited to see the results. Zoe clapped, pleased her mommy

looked so pretty. Lucas could only stare. Sarah had looked beautiful in her other dresses but this one definitely made her look like a Hollywood star.

“Doesn’t mommy look pretty?” Zoe prompted when he remained quiet.

Sarah shyly looked at him blushing. Lucas hesitated a moment longer before stepping up to her taking her hand as the other slipped around her waist and he slowly spun around in an impromptu dance. The blush coloring Sarah’s cheeks deepened as he leaned close.

“I’ve been wanting to dance with you since the first time I saw you in that purple gown,” Lucas whispered. “I hope you’ll save at least one for me at the masquerade.”

“Sure,” Sarah smiled. “Of course.”

“Zoe’s right,” Lucas smiled, “this dress does bring out your eyes.”

Sarah didn’t think her face could feel warmer as her blush deepened even more. Lucas chuckled wanting to kiss her but sensing she needed some space to recover her composure.

“Well, since your mom has her dress, how about we look for yours?” Lucas asked looking at a happily giggling Zoe.

“Yea!” Zoe danced in place.

“Be right back,” Lucas hesitated then kissed Sarah’s temple. “Stay right here.”

Sarah chuckled and watched as the pair disappeared into the racks. She doubted they would find anything to match her current gown for Zoe to wear but she waited for them. Her phone buzzed. Wondering who it could be she rummaged through her discarded jacket for her phone. Opening the message she frowned as she read it.

“Mommy! Look at my dress!” Zoe declared holding up a yellow, princess dress that looked like it was pulled from a Disney movie.

Lucas chuckled at Zoe’s enthusiasm before noting Sarah’s pensiveness. Catching the eye of one of the store’s associates he flagged them down, “Excuse me, she’d like to try this on if you don’t mind.”

“Of course. Come on, little one,” the girl greeted leading Zoe into a dressing room.

“Sarah?” Lucas stepped closer to her and touched her arm. “Is everything okay?”

Sarah jumped at his nearness before giving him a hesitant smile, “Yeah, everything is fine.”

“Sarah,” Lucas looked at her with concern.

“Tracy wants to meet tomorrow to discuss the trial,” Sarah answered.

“Do you want me to go with you?” Lucas asked immediately concerned.

“Would you?”

“Of course.”

“Thank you.”

Chapter Forty-Four

Chapter 44 - The Billionaire CEO's Runaway Wife

Sarah sat in Tracy’s office anxiously fidgeting. Beside her Lucas reached over to grip her hand in support. After successfully buying dresses they had gone in search of masks. Following Alan’s advice they hit on a store called Abracadabra in Manhattan.

The rather realistic props turned Lucas’s stomach and he worried Zoe would be scared by some of the more grotesque decorations. However she showed absolutely no fear and even found some of them funny. His confusion was not cleared up until Sarah informed him that they spent last Halloween in New Orleans. Nothing in that store compared to some of the displays they had seen while trick-or-treating.

Not only did they find three matching gold and black masks to wear but also a spooky raven statue Zoe insisted they buy for Ya-Ya’s Halloween display. Apparently Ya-Ya took Halloween quite seriously. After success in the mask shop Lucas took them to Mughlai Grill only a twenty-minute drive away. Both the mask shop and the restaurant proved to be high on Zoe’s growing list of favorite places.

Shopping and food were adequate distractions allowing Sarah to forget the meeting to come but only just. Her nerves kept her awake and unable to sleep even after talking long into the night with Lucas. They left Zoe under Ulima’s care and Lucas drove to Tracy’s office. Now as they sat she kept fidgeting. Lucas gripped her hand in encouragement. Sarah gave him a nervous smile.

“You got this,” Lucas said. “You are stronger than him. And there is nothing he can do to hurt you.”

Sarah breathed deep letting his words sink in. He had said the same thing several times the night before. It was quickly becoming a mantra as she struggled to control her racing heart. She just wanted it over and done with.

“Hi Sarah,” Tracy greeted as she entered sitting on the edge of her desk. “Lucas.”

He nodded as her gaze bore into him. He had always felt something hostile in her gaze, always scrutinizing his every move for motive and never giving up her suspicion. Now was no different.

“How are you doing?” Tracy turned her attention back to Sarah.

“Fine...” Sarah glanced at Lucas reading his exasperated frown. “About as well as can be expected. I’ve had a few nightmares, especially the first night. I still feel anxious when I’m alone.”

Lucas nodded. She didn’t cry out when she slept anymore but it was difficult for her to relax and fall asleep. They often spent hours talking until she finally drifted off. He was glad she wanted to talk to him but still worried if it was enough.

“That’s not uncommon,” Tracy said, “in fact a lot of people in your situation suffer from insomnia, night terrors and anxiety. You seem to be coping all right though.”

“Luke’s been a big help just letting me talk it out. Although he did suggest a professional if I wanted.”

“It’s not a bad idea,” Tracy agreed. “It’s good you want to talk and that you are comfortable talking about it. A lot of people are too ashamed of the event and usually bury it. If you decide that’s a route you want to take I can suggest some good ones.”

Sarah nodded.

“Anyway, the reason I called is because I have managed to contact some of his other victims,” Tracy said.

“H-how many?”

“Nine so far. We’re still trying to track down the others,” Tracy hesitated. “One we know committed suicide shortly after the attack.”

Sarah shivered. Lucas squeezed her hand.

“Two have outright refused to speak to us,” Tracy said, “which is not unexpected. So far only four have agreed to meet with us and discuss options. That’s one reason. The second reason I asked you here is because his lawyer is trying to expedite the case. He wants it over and done with quickly so we don’t have time to prepare.”

Lucas scowled.

“I don’t want you to worry about that. Tailor is helping to stall him. But his lawyer wants to meet you.”

“Why?” Sarah couldn’t help but be surprised.

“He’s probably hoping to intimidate you into dropping the charges,” Tracy said.

“Like hell!” Sarah declared.

“That’s the attitude,” Tracy smiled. “If you’re up to it...I’d like you to meet the other victims.”

“How many are here?”

“Six. As I said only four have agreed to press charges so far. I’m hoping to convince the others.”

“I’ll talk to them,” Sarah nodded and stood.

Lucas moved to stand but Tracy gestured for him to stay seated, “It took a lot of work to get these women here. I’d rather not jeopardize their cooperation by introducing too many people.”

Lucas reluctantly agreed. No doubt they would be more comfortable with other women and he certainly didn’t want to make them nervous. Sarah gave his hand a squeeze and flashed him a reassuring smile.

“I’ll be right here if you need anything,” Lucas said. “But I don’t think you will.”

Sarah followed Tracy to a small conference room with a long table. Around the table were six women. No two seemed to share a connection: blonde, brunette, redhead, black hair; blue, brown, green eyes; tall, petite, thin or curvy. None of them had the same features at least to her eyes.

Sarah selected a seat and hoped she didn’t look as nervous as she felt while Tracy started the proceedings, “You all know why you are here and this may come as a shock but you are all here for the same reason.”

The women around the table gave each other hesitant looks.

“There is someone here who wants to talk to you. Sarah?”

“Hi,” Sarah greeted and hesitated before she began. “My name is Sarah, although you may know me better as Rosemary Thomas.”

“The author?” one shyly asked.

“Yes. At the end of the week my publisher will be holding a book release party to reveal my identity as a sort of stunt. I ask you keep it to yourselves until then. A few days ago I was attacked. I was drugged and sexually assaulted,” Sarah gave them a moment to process her confession. “Luckily the attack was interrupted. My rescuer took me to the hospital and my attacker was arrested. But I know all of you weren’t so lucky.”

She paused looking at each of them. Some hung their heads in shame others blushed and some seemed pensive wondering where she was going with this confession.

“Our attacker is a coward and the lowest form of filth. He wants us too scared and ashamed to speak up. But I say to hell with what he wants!” Sarah snapped startling them. “He doesn’t get to choose. He’s the one who should be hiding in shame. And I am going to do everything I can to make sure he can’t do this to anyone else.”

The others shared nervous glances.

“I know some of you might be afraid. You have lives to live and families to take care of. You have to make your own decision about whether you want to accept Tracy’s offer to charge him...Doing so means you will be forced to relive the worst night of your lives...So I understand if you don’t want to. And there is no guarantee of conviction even if you do step forward. But if we stand together...They can’t ignore all of us. He can’t make us be silent. We are the ones with power...not him.”

“Aren’t you afraid of what this will do to your reputation?” one asked. “I mean, everyone knows who you are. You’re famous.”

“If Rosemary Thomas can show other women they aren’t alone...I’d call that a win.”

“It happened so long ago,” another shivered. “Can he even be convicted?”

“There is no statute of limitations on first degree rape,” Tracy informed, “and second degree has a twenty-year statute so we are well within the allowed time regardless. I won’t lie. The more time that has passed the more difficult it will be to find verifiable proof but I won’t leave any stone unturned if you choose to proceed. In Sarah’s case we have eye witnesses as well as hospital records. I want to send him away for the rest of his life. That’s the criminal trial. After that we can talk about civil hearings and the possibility of seeking compensation for all of you.”

Tracy paused letting them digest what she said.

“His lawyer is trying to rush the process so we have limited time to prepare. We are stalling him as much as possible. He does not get to decide the narrative. I will make sure your story is told.”

“I’m in,” a brunette at the end of the table said. “Let’s cut his balls off once and for all.”

Some grimaced at her harsh words but others nodded.

“What do you need from us?” one hesitantly asked.

“I need to hear what happened with as many details as you can remember. Place, time, date...anything we can check and verify,” Tracy said. “If we can we’ll locate camera footage, medical records, phone messages. The more verifiable proof we have the better our case. I will dedicate every resource at my disposal to ensure justice is served.”

Several nodded though they still looked nervous.

“What about the trial?”

“You will have to give testimony,” Tracy said. “It’s important for the judge and jury to hear your story from you. To put a face to it and know they will have to face you when they make their decision.”

“I don’t know if I can,” one mumbled so low she thought it went unnoticed.

“I’ll be there,” Sarah assured her. “We all will be. We’ll hold each other up and show him we’re united.”

“I also want to offer all of you trauma counseling,” Tracy said. “If you want someone safe to talk to I know some great people.”

“And we have to join your case to get that?” a shy blonde asked.

“No. The counseling is free and not dependent on your cooperation with the case,” Tracy shook her head. “The counselors are medical professionals. Anything you say to them is protected by patient confidentiality and will not be used in court. Whether you choose to press charges or not...I encourage you to seek their help.”

“W-why would you do that?”

“Because we are women. We take care of each other. We hold each other up and we protect each other,” Tracy paused as her phone buzzed. She read the message before setting it back down. “I’ll give you some time to think about and discuss the offer. You don’t have to decide today but the sooner we can start the better. Sarah.”

Sarah nodded and followed her out. They returned to her office where Lucas anxiously waited. He stood as they entered. Sarah gave him a reassuring smile.

“His lawyer is here,” Tracy said. “Not a word about the others in conference. We’re not sure he knows about them or not.”

They nodded even as there was a knock on the door. Sarah and Lucas sat while Tracy answered it and ushered in the newcomer.

“Miss Lamont,” the rather pudgy looking man in a suit said by way of greeting.

“Randall,” Tracy greeted, “my client Sarah Thomas. And Mister Stanton.”

The rival lawyer’s eyes widened as they settled on Lucas. Neither stood nor shook the lawyer’s hand.

“So what do you owe the pleasure of this visit?” Tracy asked leaning against her desk, not offering him a seat.

“Right,” the lawyer cleared his throat. “I have been authorized by my client to offer you a substantial sum and avoid public ridicule.”

“Who’s avoiding public ridicule?” Sarah asked. “Me or him? Because he’s the one who should be worried.”

“I will remind you Miss Thomas that this will be a public trial. The public does not look kindly on women with ruined reputations.”

“Well it’s a good thing I don’t have one,” Sarah smiled. “Which is more than your client can claim.”

“Now Miss Thomas I don’t think you are listening...”

“No, you’re the one who isn’t listening,” Sarah stood. “You go and tell your client I will see him in court. And if he dares show himself to me anywhere or anytime before then I will give him a black eye to match his broken nose.”

She maintained a brave front until the lawyer departed. Once he was out of sight she sank into her seat with a sigh. Lucas immediately wrapped an arm around her shoulder and held her close.

“You were amazing,” he whispered.

“He’s right,” Tracy agreed. “That was excellent.”

Sarah held up her hands to show them trembling. It was a lot easier to fake confidence than truly possess it. Lucas clasped her hands in his own warming them.

“I should take you home,” he said after a moment. “We could both use some Zoe time.”

Sarah chuckled. She couldn’t deny wrapping her arms around her little girl sounded good. After a moment she said, “Actually we should go to the zoo. We still have two to visit before she sees them all.”

“I’m in,” Lucas said.

“Oh, Lucas,” Tracy hesitated. “I solicited James’s phone records. I didn’t find any texts or messages concerning the planning of the attack but we have proof of Lidia contacting him both before and after.”

“I hope you find proof she was involved,” Lucas said.

“If we can find proof that she was his accomplice she’ll face jail time,” Tracy reminded.

“Make sure you put her away for as long as possible,” Lucas said. “She’s already lost her home and money so I’m sure she’ll appreciate the free accommodation.”

“I’ll keep that in mind,” Tracy mimicked his sardonic smile.

“Shall we go to the zoo?” Lucas looked at Sarah.

She looked back at Tracy, “Unless you still need me?”

Tracy shook her head, “I’ll be going over their testimony and allocating resources for the next few days. They may want to talk to you again. I’ll let you know.”

Sarah nodded and stood. Lucas immediately pulled her close whispering, “You are amazing.”

Chapter Forty-Five

Chapter 45 - The Billionaire CEO's Runaway Wife

Sarah sighed as she rode the elevator down to the tech floor. After the visit with the lawyer and spending the rest of the day running after Zoe at the zoo, she insisted on a day of lazing around the house. The books for the estate arrived so she spent time looking through the crates choosing ones that most interested her while she sat on the patio watching Zoe run around her new play set with Daisy and Ulima’s granddaughter Savannah.

Ulima had been both surprised and thrilled Sarah remembered she had a granddaughter and encouraged her to bring the little one whenever she wanted. Sarah hoped the pair would be good friends.

Lucas had to return to work so it was the perfect time to recharge and relax. Nothing about this trip had gone as planned but she didn’t entirely regret that. She had reconnected with Macey and Ava. Zoe made friends with the kids and expanded her family many times over. They had even reconnected with Alice who was the doting great-grandmother Sarah always knew she would be.

She knew facing Lucas was going to be difficult but his desire to reconnect was a surprise. From the start she had been prepared for an argument, the same old recriminations, but he offered none. Instead he practically begged to be a part of her life. Even now it was hard to believe.

She wasn't ready to forgive him but that didn't mean she wasn't impressed by his commitment. Changing Zoe's room and installing a play set certainly spoke to his desire to be a father. He was caring and supportive, attentive and eager to show how much he wanted her to stay in his life. She had to admit it felt good for someone to be fighting for her for a change.

That led her to another issue she had yet to face, which is what brought her to the Stanton offices today. Leaving Zoe with Lucas where she was certain he wouldn't get any work done she headed to the IT offices. She followed Lucas's directions to her goal. Pausing at the door she took a deep breath and almost laughed. Why was she so nervous? Knocking she opened it and stepped inside.

Samuel sat at the computer attention glued to the screen as he said, "Leave your complaints in the box. I'll get to it eventually."

"Some things never change," Sarah sighed. "You're still not much of a people person, are you?"

Samuel practically leapt to his feet in surprise. He stared wide-eyed at the figure standing at his door. Though he asked for this meeting some part of him didn't think it would really happen.

"Are you going to offer me a chair?" Sarah asked.

"R-right," Samuel hesitated before stumbling around his desk and offering the only chair besides his own for her to sit.

Sarah took a seat and watched as he nervously circled back to his chair. He sat leaning over his desk then changed his mind. Standing he wheeled it around to face her before sitting again. She watched his anxious fidgeting struggling not to laugh. And she thought meeting Lucas again was awkward.

"So...how have you been?" Sarah asked.

"I...ah...I've been good," Samuel hesitated. "Busy...with work. And you?"

"Same," Sarah nodded. "I opened my own antique shop, you know, like the one mom always wanted to have."

A smile stretched his face. Their mother always talked about opening her own antique store. Several times their father promised to buy her one but he never followed through. It was only one of many broken promises.

"So I heard...you divorced Lucas."

“I did. Yes,” Sarah said. “I left because I thought that’s what he wanted. Now he’s trying like hell to convince me to stay. I don’t know if it’s a case of absence makes the heart grow fonder or if Zoe tamed the beast. But it’s nice to have someone chasing after me for a change.”

Samuel grimaced. For years he had focused only on what interested him and what he wanted to do. People were illogical and unpredictable. Numbers and computer code made sense and were safe. For his own comfort he slowly cut out everything that didn’t fit into his little sphere and while that did make his world more predictable it came at a cost he was only just discovering. Samuel had no idea that Sarah had become a mother or that he had a niece. He didn’t have a right to complain. After all it wasn’t just Sarah who walked away...so did he.

“Have you spoken to dad lately?” Sarah asked.

“No. I don’t even know where he is now.”

“Reno.”

“How do you know?” Samuel looked suitably impressed and confused.

“Alice.”

“Missus Stanton? How would she know?”

“A better question is what doesn’t she know?” Sarah sighed. “So...Luke told me you were a big help figuring out what happened four years ago.”

“Oh that...that was nothing. Anyone could synchronize multiple camera feeds.”

“Well, thank you,” Sarah said. “You know, you should learn to take a compliment better than a complaint.”

Samuel stared at her a moment before laughing. No one ever knocked on his door unless they absolutely had to. Perhaps he could use some practice socializing.

“Luke asked if we could start over,” Sarah continued. “So far he’s done a rather impressive job proving he can do better. So...I’m going to make you the same offer.”

“...You forgive me?”

“No. Of course not,” Sarah shook her head. “But let’s start over and see how it goes.”

Samuel sucked in a breath and nodded. Shaking her offered hand he smiled. This was probably the best outcome he could hope for after everything.

“Come on,” Sarah stood.

“Where?”

“There’s someone I’d like you to meet.”

Sarah didn’t say another word as she led him out of his office. Several people stopped to watch as the pair walked by. They had never seen their boss with a woman before let alone such an attractive one. Sarah paid them no mind but Samuel couldn’t help but shoot them annoyed glares at their lack of decorum. Still he could hardly blame them. His sister was gorgeous. Lucas would have to watch her closely or someone else might try to win her heart out from under him.

“Um...Mister Tomlinson?” a braver subordinate approached as they finally reached the elevator.

Samuel paused.

“Is that woman, like, your girlfriend?”

Samuel snorted shaking his head, “She’s my sister.”

He left the stunned tech behind to join Sarah as she stepped on the elevator. They rode it in silence. Samuel fidgeted and he wondered just where they were going and who she wanted him to meet. Surely not a family counselor. Maybe Uncle Taylor?

The elevator doors opened revealing the executive level. Samuel looked around in confusion as Sarah stepped off and led him to Lucas’s office nodding to the secretary as they passed. Did Lucas need to see him about something?

Nearing Lucas’s office they heard a muffled cry, “Again? How do you keep winning?”

Opening the door without knocking Sarah surveyed the scene she had expected. Lucas and Zoe sat across from each other over the coffee table. A deck of cards was strewn between them as well as a plate of snacks and juice bottles. Alan chuckled as he watched the pair working from the desk Lucas vacated.

“That’s because I’m good!” Zoe declared. Daisy barked agreement from where she laid licking crumbs off the floor.

“Next round we’ll play Poker,” Lucas said. “At least that has rules I understand.”

“Poker you understand but Go Fish you don’t?” Sarah asked. “Honestly.”

“Oh,” Lucas sat up. “You’re back. That was fast.”

“Well, I don’t like to waste time,” Sarah said crossing her arms in front of her chest like a mother scolding a child. “I thought you said she wouldn’t be any trouble...that she wouldn’t be in the way of your work.”

“She’s not,” Lucas said. “Work is getting done.”

Alan snorted earning a glare. Sarah chuckled. Clearly they needed a lesson on boundaries.

“Mommy, who’s that?” Zoe asked pointing to Samuel who stood staring at her with a shocked, longing expression.

Sarah motioned for Zoe to join her as she knelt down, “Zoe, this is my brother Samuel. He’s your uncle.”

Samuel sucked in his breath. The introduction was rather blunt but that didn’t change the fact his niece stood in front of him looking like a playful sprite in a rainbow shirt, denim jacket and skirt. Her blonde hair was in pigtails with colorful ties.

Zoe studied him for a long moment before rushing up to him. She raised her arms and looked at him expectantly. Samuel looked at her in confusion. Lucas chuckled at his hopelessness.

“She wants you to pick her up,” he finally said.

Samuel frowned but stooped to pick Zoe up as instructed. Even before he settled her on his hip she wrapped her arms around his neck and kissed his cheek. Samuel straightened his face pale with shock.

Zoe smiled unaware of his discomfort, “Hello Uncle Sam! I’m Zoe!”

“...H-hi Zoe,” Samuel stuttered unprepared for the three-year-old’s openness and welcome.

“Are you coming to mommy’s party?”

“Party?” Samuel repeated.

“Oh, right. Your invitation,” Sarah said removing a small envelope from the pocket of her jacket she had left lying on the couch and handed it to him. “I had Ruth print a special one for you.”

Accepting it Samuel moved to the other couch and sat down with Zoe in his lap before opening it.

You are cordially invited to the masquerade ball celebrating

Rosemary Thomas’s new book *Thyme and Thyme Again*.

Please wear a mask and enjoy the festivities.

At the end of the night Rosemary will reveal herself.

Present this invitation at the door for you and your plus one to attend.

“A masquerade for Rosemary Thomas?” Samuel said. “Several of my subordinates were talking about this. So you are a fan too?”

Lucas chuckled.

“Actually...I am Rosemary Thomas,” Sarah said.

Samuel blinked expecting a laugh or just kidding but Sarah maintained a straight face. Lucas and Alan offered encouraging smiles and shrugs.

“You are Rosemary Thomas? For real?” Samuel asked.

“My mommy is the bestest!” Zoe declared. “Isn’t she Uncle Sam?”

He looked at the happy girl and couldn’t help but smile. Lucas watched from his seat feeling prickles of jealousy. It was hard watching anyone else get his daughter’s time and affection even if that someone was her uncle. Still, he could share. Certainly the three-year-old would be a good influence and he wouldn’t have to worry about anymore complaints over Samuel’s attitude.

“Are you coming to the party?” Zoe asked.

“Yeah, come on Samuel,” Lucas said. “It’ll be fun.”

“I’m not really good with parties,” Samuel hesitated.

“It’s a party, Sammy,” Sarah said using the childhood nickname he hated. “You just need to show up and relax. And if you need help learning how to have fun...Zoe will be happy to teach you.”

“Why don’t you come over for dinner?” Lucas said. “You can practice tonight. And this card shark can teach you how to lose at Go Fish.”

“It’s really not that hard of a game,” Sarah scoffed giving him a suspicious glance.

Lucas shrugged, “Maybe for some people.”

* * *

The Plot Thickens

the Eagle

Sarah Thomas, formerly Sarah Stanton, shocked New York with her sudden return. She has made several appearances since even gracing the DaLair Mixer and earning clear favor with the prominent family. The former Missus Stanton has also been seen rubbing elbows with the Prescotts making her a person everyone wants to know.

Those who have gotten closer to her say she is witty and charming, sophisticated and elegant. And it isn't just society who has taken notice. She has been seen numerous times with her ex-husband Lucas Stanton along with a three-year-old. Though no official statements have been issued by the Stanton Family many speculate the little one may in fact be Lucas Stanton's daughter.

While the Stanton's remain silent a spokesman for the DaLair's offered a simple answer, "If [Lucas] is smart he won't let [Sarah] go a second time." And we couldn't agree more.

Several pictures of the couple at the amusement park, the beach and shopping accompanied the article but Lidia couldn't stand it and threw her phone across the room. It hit the wall and bounced off onto the ground with a sickening crack.

"Would you be careful with that?" Patricia admonished as she entered the bedroom her hair wrapped in a towel. "And pick up your things. This room is a mess."

Lidia huffed glaring at her suitcases propped on the low dresser their contents strewn about. She had been looking for her black cocktail dress when her phone buzzed with the new alert. The thought of calling a maid to deal with the mess occurred to her before being stomped out.

They were no longer at home. They had been kicked out with only an hour to pack as much as they could without assistance and lug their bulging cases to Madeline's car. Arriving at a luxury hotel they tried to reserve a suite with a credit card only to be denied. Apparently Lucas's threat was all too real. They had no funds.

Madeline only had a small condo but offered to put them up in her guest room. The room was tiny and mother and daughter were forced to share a bed. Not only that but Madeline didn't have maids, just a housekeeper that cleaned once a week. Lidia supposed beggars couldn't be choosers but this situation was intolerable.

Lidia's gaze shifted to the table where they had laid out every scrap of jewelry they managed to pack. They had grabbed as much as they could but it was not even half of what they originally owned. What was more in their haste they hadn't bothered to make sure they had complete sets. In many cases they missed a bracelet, earring or necklace that was meant to be worn together. The value of incomplete sets would be vastly reduced if they tried to sell it

Her gaze went back to her dresses. Many were quite valuable and worn only once. Lidia pressed her lips together. They had no choice. They would have to sell as much as they could. It would probably only mean a million or two at most which would last them a couple weeks if they budgeted. They had to figure out something more permanent unless she wanted to get a job which was out of the question.

It was so unfair. They couldn't even complain to grandmother. She had tried to call the old bat but the butler who answered said Madam Alice was quite busy. Lidia didn't believe it for a minute but there was nothing she could do unless she wanted to crawl on her hands and knees to beg at the old woman's feet.

She looked at her phone. Public opinion was definitely on Sarah's side. Everyone seemed to support her and she was winning approval from New York's most prominent families: the DaLairs, Prescotts, Stantons...what next? The Worthingtons? Avery?

It wasn't fair. Lidia had scraped and scrounged for her position and now it was all in jeopardy because of some nobody? She had to find a way to turn this around. There was no way she was just going to stand idly by while that tramp waltzed around like she owned the city.

"Lidia! You'll never believe what just came in the mail!" Madeline burst into the room.

Patricia ticked her tongue at the rude entrance but could hardly complain as it was Madeline's home. Lidia sighed and looked at her friend with something of an exasperated look. In the past Madeline had always tugged at Lidia's skirt, paying her compliments and earning her favor. Though they were friends there was a clear hierarchy with Lidia first. She was a Stanton with all the privileges such a position afforded.

But now Madeline was in the position of privilege. Though her means were nowhere near Lidia's usual standards without the steady income of her job Madeline would soon be in the same situation Lidia now found herself in. Without a new beneficiary Madeline might be able to stay in her condo for a month, perhaps two, before she would be as homeless just as they were. They had to find a solution before then and no bit of mail was going to help.

"What is it?"

"An invitation," Madeline gushed and read it, "you are cordially invited to the masquerade ball celebrating Rosemary Thomas's new book...Isn't that exciting! It's supposed to be a super exclusive event."

"How'd you get an invite?"

"I don't know," Madeline said. "I'm always signing up for stuff. I must have gotten lucky!"

"Right," Lidia grumbled. That was just her luck. What did she care about Rosemary whatever?

Wait! Rosemary! That was the author everyone was gushing over!

Lidia hurriedly retrieved her phone. Ignoring the crack running through the screen she searched for Rosemary Thomas. Pages and pages of results flooded her phone. Apparently Rosemary was quite famous and hugely successful enjoying the bestseller list every year. With a tenth book coming out soon she had to be a millionaire, maybe even a billionaire. If Lidia could earn her favor they could at least buy time to figure out something more permanent.

"Is the invitation only for you?" Lidia asked.

"Umm...no it says you and your plus one."

“Excellent,” Lidia straightened. “Now we just have to find something to wear!”

Chapter Forty-Six

Chapter 46 - The Billionaire CEO's Runaway Wife

Climbing out of the limo Lucas reached to offer a hand to help his elegant date out. Sarah emerged her gown sparkling as she moved. Her hair was twisted and pinned at the back of her head keeping it neatly tamed. A black and gold mask hid half her face. As always she kept her makeup to a minimum.

Zoe exited next wearing a matching mask and her princess dress. Because it looked so much like Belle’s dress from Beauty and the Beast Sarah styled her hair like the Disney princess as well. As always Daisy hopped out alongside her on a leash and wearing a gold jester collar to match their decided color scheme. Lucas chuckled adjusting his own mask and straightening his gold tie before picking up the three-year-old as the limo departed. Offering his arm to Sarah they walked the red carpet together.

At the door security stopped them asking for invitations. Sarah withdrew it from her clutch with a smile. The guard nodded ushering them in. The invitations allowed for two adults while children were allowed in free as were dogs though it was likely Daisy would be the only canine in attendance.

“I can’t believe the author herself has to show an invitation to attend her own party,” Lucas joked as they made their way inside.

“No one knows I’m the author so...” Sarah trailed off.

It was all part of the charade. In a few hours it would be over and everyone would know who she was. She breathed deep trying to calm her nerves.

Lucas’s arm slipped around her waist as he whispered, “They are going to love you.”

Sarah chuckled.

“Oh, there you are good!” Ruth greeted hurrying up to them wearing a red and black gown with a mask to match. “I was worried you might chicken out at the last minute.”

“Really?” Sarah scoffed and rolled her eyes. Where did Ruth think she would go? “How is everything?”

“Perfect. Silas and Ava are already here with the kids. Tracy and Thomas are coming later. She’s been busy at the office.”

Sarah grimaced and nodded. She could only imagine.

“Oh...you know who is here too,” Ruth winked. “Both of them.”

“I was wondering if they would show up.”

“Why did you want me to invite them anyway?”

“Personal reasons.”

Ruth mischievously grinned, “Well, I can’t wait. Let me know if you need skewers for the spit you’re planning to roast them on.”

“Right.”

“Who are you talking about?” Lucas asked.

“Let’s just say I had a little something planned for a certain pair of pains even before you got involved,” Sarah looped her arm around his.

Lucas’s brow furrowed in confusion before he finally caught on to her meaning. He smirked, “You are vicious. I like it.”

“Shall we mingle?”

Lucas nodded all too happy to mix with the other guests as long as she was at his side.

“Puppy!” Ben exclaimed as they neared the table where Silas and Ava had congregated the kids.

Lucas reluctantly set Zoe on her feet so she could play with the other kids and the dog. He watched her with a concerned gaze keeping an eye out for anyone who tried to interrupt. As he gazed around his eyes fell on Silas who smirked at his vigilance. Lucas frowned trying to remain serious but only held the expression for a beat before shaking his head with a sheepish grin. Four years ago he never imagined he would be in this position.

“Um...hello.”

Lucas turned to see Samuel hesitantly approach them. The latter looked exceedingly uncomfortable in formal wear not to mention the mask. Even so, Lucas had to give the other credit for coming to support Sarah.

“Hello Sammy,” Sarah smiled. “Try to relax and have fun.”

“R-right.”

“Uncle Sam!” Zoe ran up to him. “Do I look like a princess?”

The adults chuckled as she spun.

“Yes, you do,” Samuel smiled as some of his tension eased.

“Thank you!”

“Hope we’re not late,” Julius greeted as the entire DaLair family joined them.

In addition to Macey and the kids, March and Rose, Jude and Jessica as well as Augustus himself, shadowed by his assistant, were in attendance. The large group garnered quite a few double takes as it was unusual to see all them, especially Augustus, out together.

“Hello Zoe!” Lyra and Aria greeted with curtsies. Like her they were dressed in princess-style dresses in two different shades of green.

“Hello!” Zoe curtsied back. She was having a lot of fun with their game of pretend and earned more chuckles from the amused adults.

“It must be so nice to have a little sister to dress up with,” Alexis lamented. “Mom, I really hope you have a girl this time.”

“Don’t worry, Lexi,” Zoe said. “I already told you...Ya-Ya said you’ll have lots of sisters!”

“Ya-Ya?” Julius repeated.

“Ya-Ya is my college roommate’s aunt,” Sarah explained. “She’s a bit...eccentric, but very wise.”

“Ya-Ya is never wrong!” Zoe declared.

“Sounds like someone I should know.”

They turned to see Alice approach in her motorized wheelchair. Like everyone she was dressed formally with a mask. Several members of the crowd murmured at her presence. It was the first time she had been seen in public in almost a decade.

“Well, if it isn’t Alice Stanton,” Augustus greeted. “What rock did they dig you out from under?”

“Hello you old blow-hard,” Alice countered. “You still alive?”

“We’re not going to have to separate you two, are we?” March eyed his father.

“Of course not,” Augustus waved off his concern. “What’s a few playful jabs between old friends? Right Alice?”

“Naturally. What of the rest of the old guard? I can’t remember the last time I had the displeasure of Emerson’s company to say nothing of Richard,” Alice agreed.

“They’ll be along,” Silas smiled already anticipating the moment his father and father-in-law met the Stanton matriarch. “It’s quite a drive from the estate so they’ll be here later.”

“How is it with them?” Sarah said. “They used to be bitter rivals but from what I hear Emerson has practically moved in with your parents.”

Silas shrugged. Mergers made for strange bedfellows. Carlisle Enterprises was no more giving Emerson plenty of free time and he had to share his grandchildren with his one-time rival Richard. The pair seemed in competition to win the most affection from their progeny.

“According to my mother those two spend most of their time on the patio regaling each other about their business exploits,” Silas said. “She says it’s like listening to two fishermen telling their fish stories with just as many exaggerations.”

“Those two always made everything a competition,” Alice shook her head. “I don’t know how many times they almost drove their companies bankrupt trying to outdo the other. We’ll talk later. I’ve got stories that will curl your toes!”

Silas gave her a dubious look.

“I’d like to hear them for myself,” Augustus smiled. “Shall we have a nice chat?”

* * *

“I’m glad you came,” Sarah smiled as yet another socialite left after speaking with her.

She sipped her champagne glancing around the room. There were several people who seemed eager to speak to her and she hadn’t even revealed herself yet.

“How are you holding up?” Macey asked as she Ava, Rose and Jessica approached.

“It’s amazing how many people want to talk to me.”

Macey, Rose and Ava shared knowing looks and laughed. Jessica looked around nervously as eyes continued to follow their small group.

“What?” Sarah asked.

“We’re sorry,” Ava shook her head, “but it’s so strange to hear you say that.”

“Is it?”

“Have you not been reading the gossip columns?” Macey asked. “They are all abuzz with you and Lucas.”

“Really? But we haven’t said anything.”

“People have eyes,” Rose laughed. “What do you expect after your little beach getaway?”

Sarah blushed as the memory of that day ran through her mind.

“You two sure seem to be getting along,” Macey agreed.

“Okay, I know what you are going to say,” Sarah shook her head. “And it’s not like that. We’re just…friends.”

Macey and Ava stared at her equal parts suspicious and amused.

“Really,” Sarah insisted. “You know you two are the worst. The only one worse than you is Aubrey. Thank god she’s not here.”

Macey and Ava laughed heartedly. Sarah rolled her eyes and turned her attention to Jessica. Though she had heard about Jude’s new-found love interest she missed the opportunity to meet her at the Mixer.

“Are you having a good time, Jessica?” Sarah asked wanting to change the subject.

“Yes,” she blushed. “I just can’t believe I’m here with M. Gray and Ava Prescott. I mean, you two are famous. And I might actually get to meet Rosemary Thomas! What should I do if she says hi to me? Do you think she’ll sign my books for me? Would it be too unprofessional to ask? Maybe I shouldn’t. I never imagined this when Jude first asked me out.”

Macey, Ava and Rose struggled not to laugh stealing glances at Sarah who maintained a neutral expression. She had plenty of years of practice given how many times people talked about Rosemary around her.

“What do you think she’s like?” Jessica asked.

“I think she’ll be just as you imagine,” Sarah assured her, “only more so.”

“But she’s so worldly. She’s probably going to think I’m plain and boring,” Jessica said. “I mean, look at me. I’m not nearly as glamorous as any of you.”

“She won’t think that,” Sarah assured her. “Promise. She’s just an ordinary person.”

“And you would know all about being ordinary.”

Sarah turned to see Lidia and Madeline both dressed in small black dresses with masks covered in black lace. Considering the invitation called it a ball most women had opted for full-length gowns. In contrast Lidia's choice was wholly inappropriate considering how many children were in attendance.

"At least I'm not parading around with my ass hanging out," Sarah said. "A little desperate for attention, are we?"

"We'll see who is desperate when Rosemary calls us on stage," Lidia smiled.

"And why would she do that?" Macey asked.

"Well, we're best friends after all," Lidia loudly declared for all to hear. "And when she finds out what you did she won't rest until you go crawling back to your rock."

"Really?" Sarah struggled not to break her expression. "I guess we'll see how this night plays out."

"Yes we will," Lidia turned up her nose and walked away with Madeline in tow.

Macey, Ava and Rose broke out into uncontrolled laughter though Jessica remained apprehensive. Sarah shot them warning glances not to ruin the game.

"I'm not sure what is so funny," Jessica said. "I mean, they really could be friends with Rosemary Thomas. What if they are?"

"No sweetie," Rose squeezed her shoulder. "This is only your second event. After a few more you'll start realizing not everyone is genuine. In fact many are consummate fakes."

"But how do you know?" Jessica asked. "It's not like we know who Rosemary is."

Rose hesitated.

"It's very simple if you think about it," Sarah said. "The invitation said masquerade ball which implies a certain dress code. Now would a real friend of the author come to this event dressed like them?"

Jessica thought it over, "I see what you mean."

Sarah gave her an encouraging smile and squeezed her shoulder.

"This is really hard and confusing," Jessica complained. "I thought these were just parties."

"If it helps think of these events like battlefields," Macey said. "Everyone is trying to take as much ground as possible with their little circles."

“And the winner isn’t always the one with the largest group,” Ava added. “You also have to consider the individual members. The more prestigious they are the more ground they automatically have.”

“Then what about us?” Jessica asked. “We have two DaLairs, one of which is M. Gray, and Ava Prescott.”

“Exactly,” Sarah said. “And technically we have three DaLairs.”

“Oh, but I’m not...”

“You came with my son,” Rose smiled. “That makes you one and a lot of people are going to approach you because you are.”

Jessica took a gulp of her champagne, “I don’t know if I can do this. What if I do something wrong?”

“I used to worry about the same thing,” Ava said. “But there is one thing to always keep in mind. You are a DaLair so nothing you do is ever wrong.”

“But...”

“No, she’s right,” Sarah agreed. “Even if you make a mistake you are never wrong. Society will forgive you of almost everything.”

“Just because I’m associated with the DaLairs?”

“And the Prescotts,” Ava added. “And the Stantons.”

“I’m not a Stanton,” Sarah corrected.

“Yet,” Macey and Ava said in unison and laughed at her exasperated glare.

Chapter Forty-Seven

Chapter 47 - The Billionaire CEO's Runaway Wife

“What’s on your mind, Samuel?” Lucas asked.

Beside him the nervous tech looked across the sea of people. He wasn't fond of crowds but he was determined to stay for his sister's big reveal. His gaze sought her out and he watched her laughing easily with Macey and Rose DaLair as well as Avalynn Prescott. She seemed completely comfortable talking with anyone daring enough to approach. But she was always more gregarious than him.

Samuel's attention shifted to Zoe who sat in her great-grandmother's lap as she munched hors d'oeuvres. At the same table Augustus DaLair, Richard and Opal Prescott and Emerson Carlisle all sat with various grandchildren in their laps talking easily with each other despite the bitter rivalries they used to share. Like her mother, Zoe seemed perfectly at home among the New York business giants.

"Samuel?"

He jerked to attention looking at Lucas. Samuel hesitated not sure how to express his thoughts without offending considering he stood in a group consisting of Julius, March and Jude DaLair, Silas Prescott and Lucas Stanton.

"A bit surreal, isn't it?" Julius offered.

"Yeah, a bit," Samuel agreed. "My sister was always a natural though. She never allowed anyone to see her sweat."

"She's a strong woman," Lucas said. "She's had to do a lot of things on her own...but not anymore."

Samuel nodded. His sister would not be alone anymore. She would have help and support.

"There you are!"

They looked as Thomas and Tracy finally arrived.

"We were beginning to wonder about you," Silas said.

"I know. There is just so much to prepare," Tracy sighed. "I can't even imagine how difficult this is for all the victims but several have asked for counseling so I'm hoping this will turn out to be a good experience for them."

"They have the support of some very strong, amazing women," Lucas said. "If James isn't afraid now...he will be."

The others nodded in agreement. Once the case went to trial it was sure to put all of New York on notice.

"Where is Sarah?" Tracy asked.

They gestured to the other group where the women had staked their claim. Kissing Thomas on the cheek she immediately headed over to the other group. Silas chuckled even as Thomas blushed under his mask.

“Seems I missed something,” Tailor said as he arrived. “Samuel, is that you?”

“Uncle Tailor,” Samuel stood straighter. “I didn’t expect you here.”

“And miss your sister’s big day? I think not. Besides, I’ve hardly spent any time with my grand-niece. Her father had been hogging every minute.”

Lucas smirked, “Well, now you are going to have to fight her great-grandma for attention.”

Tailor followed his gesture to the table of grandparents and grandkids. He seemed suitably impressed to see so many together all seemingly amicable and in good humor.

“Well, that’s a sight I never thought I’d see,” Tailor said. “Quite impressive how people can come together over their grandchildren.”

“You’re not wrong,” Silas agreed eyeing his father and father-in-law. While there were still some awkward moments between the triplets and their grandfathers due to their bad first impressions, Isaac and Ben fully accepted both.

“How about we have a seat, Samuel?” Tailor suggested. “There’s a lot for us to catch up on.”

Samuel nodded as Tailor clapped him on the back and they wandered off to find a table for themselves. Though he was nervous about facing his uncle it was better than facing the crowd. Lucas watched them go hoping this interview would go well for both. The holidays would certainly be a lot less awkward if they all found middle ground.

“Is that Alan?” Thomas suddenly asked.

Lucas turned eagerly looking for his friend and assistant. Alan warned he would be late for the event though he wouldn’t explain why. Now Lucas understood. Alan hadn’t come alone. Alongside him was another gentleman in a suit with a matching mask. They were too far for Lucas to be certain but he was pretty sure it was Kyle.

“Something you want to share with the class?” Julius asked seeing his smirk. “Anyone we know?”

“Probably not. I’m pretty sure that is Kyle,” Lucas said. “He runs Sarah’s antique store. They met when Alan and I went to check it out. I guess they hit it off better than I thought.”

“Nice,” Julius nodded. “You going to say hi?”

“Nah. He’ll introduce us when he’s ready,” Lucas shook his head. “Alan’s been so busy trying to keep me on track he deserves his own time.”

“Hey Nick, you lost?” Silas asked catching the attention of a young man as he walked by.

He turned seemingly surprised that he had been recognized. Unlike everyone else who came as a couple, Nicolas had come alone. He normally didn’t like attending events because many women used it as an excuse to approach him. By now his family’s ongoing competition was well-known and he always found himself approached by women who wanted to get closer to him. However, a masquerade had the appeal of anonymity so he had agreed to take his sister’s invitation.

“...Oh Silas,” Nicolas fell into their group. “And...Julius, Thomas...Lucas? Hi. I wasn’t expecting to see all of you together. It’s like the great trifecta.”

The others chuckled.

“But I’m glad you’re here Luke. I’ve been meaning to congratulate you,” Nicolas said.

“Me?”

“Yeah, we were just talking about finding the women of our dreams...you found yours. Congrats.”

Lucas blushed as the others looked at him. That’s right. They did have that conversation. In fact, it was the same night Sarah made her debut. He had forgotten everything else.

“Thanks, Nick,” Lucas said. “You’ll find yours.”

“Yeah,” Nicolas sighed. “I just don’t know anymore.”

“I do,” Lucas said. “No one deserves it more than you. Believe me.”

“Thanks.”

* * *

“Oh Sarah, there you are,” Ruth said approaching the group. “It’s time.”

Sarah sucked in a breath. She glanced at her watch and realized how late it had gotten. Nervously she sought out Zoe only to see her ensconced with Alice. Her gaze then picked out Lucas who stood with the other men. In addition to Julius and Silas she also recognized Thomas along with someone she didn’t know. As the men talked Alan approached the group with someone new...Kyle?

That was new and a story she definitely wanted to hear. She finally spotted Samuel at a table talking to Tailor. Everyone was here.

“Sarah.”

Jerking to attention she faced Ruth again. Nervously smiling Sarah excused herself and followed after her editor. Jessica was confused by her sudden departure but Macey, Ava, Rose and Tracy merely smiled. There would be quite a few people surprised at the reveal to come.

Ruth escorted Sarah behind the stage they had set up with a small make-shift changing room. There Sarah found a flowy, yellow dress. Its bottom hem was uneven and layered, not quite full-length like her current gown. They chose it because it fit Zoe’s chosen color scheme as well as Rosemary’s eccentric persona. Also in the room was her black wig and makeup kit.

Sarah changed slipping out of one dress and into the other. She fiddled with the thick wig. Her hairstyle tonight was done specifically to make it easy to fit the wig over her natural hair. Sarah adjusted it turning her head to make sure her blonde hair was properly hidden. This was one thing she wasn’t going to miss. The wig was hot and heavy and when she sweated in warm weather it was rather itchy. She couldn’t wait to say good-bye to it.

Normally she used plenty of blush and eye shadow when becoming Rosemary but because of the mask she skipped it tonight. She did use her lipstick to paint her lips bright red as usual before giving herself a final look in the mirror and was pleased with the results.

Tonight would be the last time she had to dress up to become Rosemary. It was kind of sad in a way, like she was saying good-bye to a long-time friend. But in reality she and Rosemary were becoming one. Finally she could shed the cocoon and fly on her own.

With a deep breath she stepped out to join the waiting Ruth. Ruth smiled excitedly clapping at her transformation. It was time.

“Are you ready?”

“No. But let’s do it anyway.”

“All right. Here we go!”

* * *

The lights dimmed except for the ones above the stage drawing everyone’s attention. Conversation slowly died down as everyone made their way closer to the stage aside from those at the tables as they already had front row seats. Macey and the others returned to their partners’ sides sharing looks of anticipation. Zoe vacated her grandmother’s lap seeking her father who scooped her up and eagerly waited alongside the others.

Lucas scanned the crowd. He picked out a few people he knew before his gaze fell on Lidia and Madeline pressing as close to the stage as they could. Scowling he had half a mind to throw them out but wouldn’t take away Sarah’s moment. She intended to put them in their places herself.

Ruth quietly stepped out onto the stage to stand in front of the microphone. Next to her was a large board showing a blown-up image of the cover of the new Rosemary book as well as a table with the new book on display. She smiled at the eager crowd.

“Welcome friends, family book lovers...we are here not just here to celebrate the tenth book of an amazing series we are also here to celebrate an amazing career of an amazing woman...

“For years Rosemary Thomas has regaled us in stories that boggle the mind and so fast-paced they leave us breathless, wanting more. Every year people clamor for the next book eager to read the next adventure...

“This eagerness is due in part because of Rosemary herself who, despite making several public appearances and book signings, has kept herself secret, hiding her identity and encouraging all of us to learn about her through her books. As she has claimed in the past many of her stories are based on fact...

“It should come as no surprise to anyone that her warm and generous nature is no fabrication. She did really go to school to become a teacher and she really did teach in an actual classroom. She has been to Paris, hob-knobbing with famous artists. She has been to Madrid, London, Berlin, Rio, Sydney...just to name a few places...

“She has gone rock climbing, sky-diving, scuba diving...She has seen mysterious lights over the desert and danced in the streets during Mardi Gras...She’s competed in the rodeo and skied the Alps. She is everyone and no one...

“In fact, some people think she is a fabrication, a persona made up to sell books. But she is very real. I know this because she is my best friend. So allow me to formally introduce...Rosemary Thomas.”

The crowd clapped as a new figure emerged from behind the curtain. Several people murmured at the sight of the tall, elegant figure clad in gold. Her black hair seemed to shimmer under the lights as she smiled to the crowd and took her place at the microphone.

Chapter Forty-Eight

Chapter 48 - The Billionaire CEO's Runaway Wife

“Hello everyone,” Rosemary said as her gaze swept the crowd picking out important figures. “Thank you so much for coming and showing your support. I’ve been a writer for as long as I can remember. It’s all I’ve ever wanted to be...”

“I can’t tell you when Rosemary first came to life. She has appeared in so many adventures. She has been a princess, a fairy, a race car driver...My mother offered me this advice: write what you know. Perhaps it was fate then that Rosemary would eventually become a teacher...in addition to other occupations.”

She paused as the crowd chuckled.

“I have had many adventures of my own. Some of you have read about...others are yet to come. There are times it becomes hard to separate myself from the character since we share so many experiences, though none so strongly as when we both became mothers...”

“There are a lot of rumors about me and Rosemary. Many wonder whether we actually exist. Well, I’m here tonight to set the record straight. I really do exist and I really have had a lot of adventures. But there are a few things that are made up. For one...I don’t have black hair.”

Sarah pulled off her wig and dropped it on the ground. She reached up and undid her hair shaking it so it hung naturally. A gasp ran through the crowd at her blonde hair.

“And my name is not Rosemary...It’s actually Sarah.”

She removed her mask as her friends cheered. Macey whistled sharply as a lot of the crowd stared in disbelief.

“And I look forward to meeting all of you!”

Hugging Ruth Sarah headed for the steps to see Lucas waiting for her with Zoe in his arms. He offered a hand helping her down kissing her temple and whispering congratulations as he escorted her back among the crowd. Reaching their group she saw Jessica staring open-mouthed.

“Are you okay, Jess?” Sarah asked.

“Are you really...”

“Yes, I am. I told you not to worry, didn’t I?”

Jessica blushed but she looked happy even as she turned to swat Jude’s shoulder, “Did you know the whole time?”

“She’s sort of my aunt, so yeah.”

“Why didn’t you tell me?”

“Well, it was supposed to be a secret,” Jude shrugged.

“All of you knew?” Jessica looked across the people she knew.

“I knew before most everyone else,” Macey winked. “Who do you think the famous Parisian artist she was hanging out with was?”

“American-Parisian,” Julius corrected earning a kiss.

“Sarah?”

She turned to see Kyle staring at her, “Hi...surprise?”

“Oh my god! I can’t believe it!” Kyle exclaimed turning to Alan. “And you knew?”

“Only for the last two weeks,” Alan said. “I was as surprised as you. Honest.”

“Is this some sort of joke?”

Sarah looked to see Lidia and Madeline had moved closer and stood with expressions somewhere between shock and rage. With a smile she said, “I guess all those stories I wrote in school weren’t a waste of time after all, were they?”

Lidia blushed a deep red. She could hear the crowd murmuring behind her. She had spent the last hour bragging about how she was old friends with Rosemary Thomas and now her obvious lie was crumbling. Sarah’s satisfied smirk was more than she could take. She wouldn’t stand for this humiliation. Lidia wanted to slap that smile off her face but her gaze slid to Lucas who coldly eyed her, daring her to make a move. Shaking with rage she spun around and fled dragging Madeline with her.

“Sarah! That was awesome!”

Sarah turned not believing she had heard correctly. There was no way the voice belonged to the person she thought it did. They were thirteen hundred miles away from here.

Standing a few feet from her was a tall, African-American goddess. Her hair was piled up in a messy bun and a broad smile graced a face half-hidden by her Mardi Gras mask which she pulled off revealing a smooth face worthy of Miss America. Her purple gown was elegant and shimmered silver as she moved. Beside her was a four-year-old boy looking quite dapper in a suit and mask.

“Oh my god! Aubrey!” Sarah exclaimed hurrying to embrace her. “What are you doing here?”

“Oh please, girl,” Aubrey scoffed. “As if I would ever miss your big day!”

Sarah laughed. She hadn’t even known Ruth sent an invitation but she probably should have guessed. After all it had been Aubrey’s idea to go to Paris to research the next Rosemary Thomas book.

“I’m so glad you are here!”

“Jamie!” Zoe excitedly hugged the little boy as soon as her father put her down. “Come and meet all my cousins!”

She dragged him to the table to meet the DaLair and Prescott broods. Perhaps Lucas was reading too much into it but Coda, Isaac and Ben didn’t seem particularly happy with the new addition that was certain to be a rival for Zoe’s attention now that he was there.

“Luke, don’t take this the wrong way,” Julius warned, “but I think you’re going to have to keep an eye on that little charmer of yours.”

Lucas shot Julius a disgruntled look. Perhaps he wasn’t reading too much into it after all.

“When did you get here?” Sarah asked seemingly unaware of the drama swarming around her daughter.

“Last night, red eye. Ya-Ya would have come but you know how she is about flying.”

“That if people were meant to fly they would have been born with wings.”

“Yeah.” Aubrey rolled her eyes. “You can’t tell that woman anything. So are you going to introduce us?”

“Oh sorry,” Sarah turned to their group. “Everyone this is my college roommate, Aubrey. Aubrey, everyone. You already know Macey. That’s Julius, March, Rose, Jude, Jessica, Augustus. You know Caden and Aria. That is Coda and Lyra. Silas and Ava, their kids Lexi, Sean, Theo, Isaac and Ben. That’s Thomas and Tracy. Richard and Opal and Emerson. Alice. Alan and Kyle. You know Taylor. My brother Samuel...and this is Lucas.”

“Oh, so you’re Lucas,” Aubrey eyed him. “You and I are going to have a very long talk...so prepare yourself.”

Lucas paled as the others chuckled. There certainly was no mirth in her gaze as she studied him. She was definitely serious.

“Mommy, is Auntie Aubrey and Jamie staying with us?” Zoe asked. “I want to show him my new play set.”

“Of course, baby.”

“Oh, we couldn’t impose,” Aubrey shook her head.

“Don’t be ridiculous. We have plenty of rooms, don’t we?” Sarah looked at Lucas expectantly.

“Sure. Of course,” Lucas nodded earning more chuckles from the group.

“Well, at least you have your lines down,” Aubrey eyed him with a smirk.

“I like her,” Alice declared.

“It’s you!”

Aubrey jumped at the voice behind her and slowly turned.

In front of her stood a tall man in a fitted suit, which was a dime-a-dozen in this crowd. However, the man in front of her had impressively broad shoulders with the build of a linebacker. Unlike most of the others in the crowd he wasn’t clean shaved but instead sported a trim beard, but she preferred her men scruffy. He stared at her as if he was seeing a ghost.

“Um hello?” Aubrey greeted. “Do we...know each other?”

“You don’t remember?” he took a step closer. “Five years ago. Swift Hibernian Lounge. St. Patrick’s Day.”

Aubrey’s gaze widened remembering. She had flown to New York for an art show. Sarah was having difficulties with her marriage so she and Ruth took her to the St. Patrick’s Day Parade. Following a fellow parade goer’s suggestion they ended up at the Irish pub for some live Irish music. While she was dancing she bumped into another patron: a tall man with broad shoulders and a five o’clock shadow. And then...some of the best sex she ever had. The next morning she woke up late and had to rush to catch her flight home.

Could it really be?

“Your name,” he said. “Please, it’s been driving me crazy.”

“...Aubrey.”

“Aubrey,” he smiled saying her name like it was a blessing. “I’m Nicolas.”

“It’s nice to meet you,” she smiled even as he pulled her close pressing their lips together in a kiss full of passion and longing she almost couldn’t breathe.

“So maybe she won’t be staying with you,” Julius nudged Lucas with a smirk.

Lucas could only stare not sure if he believed what had just happened in front of them. For years Nicolas had earned something of a reputation as he obsessively searched for a woman he claimed stole his heart. He turned away all others much to the disappointment of his father and many wondered if the woman actually existed. Had he truly found her?

“I can’t believe you’re here,” Nicolas whispered pressing his forehead to hers. “Finally, I’ve been looking for you for five years.”

“You have?” Aubrey shivered. “Really?”

“You are all I’ve ever wanted.”

“Mommy? Who’s that?”

Aubrey turned to look down at the little boy who had been her world even before he took his first breath. Beside her Nicolas stared no doubt mentally trying to calculate his age.

“Um, baby,” Aubrey crouched down pulling the little one into her arms. She didn’t know what she would do if Nicolas walked away from them now. “This is your daddy. Nick...this is Jamie.”

Nicolas stared at the little boy with a matt of curly black hair, wide brown eyes and his mother’s mocha-colored skin. Clearly this was not a day either expected. Was this really happening? Did he really just find the woman of his dreams and a son he never knew? Dropping to his knees Nicolas fought back tears even as his hands trembled with anticipation.

“It’s nice to meet you Jamie. When you’re ready...I hope you’ll call me daddy.”

Jamie stared at the man in front of him. Every time he asked his mother about his father she was always vague as if she herself couldn’t recall exact details. Over time he stopped asking but he never stopped wondering. Was this really his daddy? He wasn’t sure what his mother or this man expected but there was one thing he always wanted to do. Jamie hesitated a moment before stepping forward to hug him.

He was immediately enveloped in a gentle embrace as Nicolas held him close unable to hold back his tears any longer. He was actually holding his son. He had a son! He was a father!

Tears blurring his vision he looked to see Aubrey’s gaze was also glossy. Holding Jamie close Nicolas stood and stepped up to her to embrace both of them. This was it. This was all he ever wanted. Finally.

Looking toward Lucas, Nicolas saw the other smiling broadly and raising a glass to toast his success. The others followed suit acknowledging the newly reunited family. Sarah stood with her hands covering her mouth struggling with the emotions coursing through her as she watched the scene. With so many surprises it was definitely a night to remember.

* * *

The Trial of the Century

New York Times

Today James Goodwell, prominent businessman, on indicted with nine counts of Statutory Rape and attempted Sexual Assault over the past decade. Leading the charges was Sarah Thomas, formerly Sarah Stanton, recently revealed as the famed author Rosemary Thomas, who boldly accused him of attacking and attempting to rape her after drugging her. Though her attack was

interrupted eight others, including the family of a victim who committed suicide shortly after her attack, claimed similar assaults.

Though Goodwell's lawyer attempted to have a closed courtroom he was overruled allowing the public to hear the disturbing testimonies of his victims painting a very different picture of this notorious womanizer.

When asked if she feared how this might affect her reputation as a prominent figure and famous author Sarah Thomas replied, "Why should I be afraid? He's the one who should be afraid...him and people just like him."

In a surprise move counsel for the victims Tracy Lamont also pressed allegations of complacency and conspiracy on Lidia Stanton alleging she was Goodwell's accomplice. The recently disgraced heiress's trial date has not yet been set.

Fin.

Chapter Forty-Nine: Bonus Chapter One

Chapter 49 - The Billionaire CEO's Runaway Wife

"There she is! Bout time!" Kyle exclaimed as Sarah entered the antique shop.

What was supposed to be a two-week vacation had quickly become a month-long stay once the trial started. James's lawyer dragged it out by questioning every bit of evidence.

He even tried to drag Lucas through the mud during his testimony claiming he used excessive force but fell silent when Lucas quipped, "And just what is the right use of force when a man sees the woman he loves and the mother of his child being attacked by another? Your client is lucky I only broke his nose!"

A cheer had actually sounded through the audience and even one or two members of the jury clapped despite needing to stay neutral.

It hadn't been easy hearing the other testimonies as, one by one, his victims took the stand as well as the father of the woman who had committed suicide. He held her picture the entire time as he recalled finding her body as well as the diary detailing the cause of depression and self-loathing.

It didn't take the jury long to reach their verdict. James had remained stoic throughout the trial fully expecting to be acquitted. He didn't breakdown until the judge handed down the sentence: ten years for each count without the possibility of parole.

Sarah hoped this would bring his victims some closure. Tracy was already preparing for the civil case to try to get compensation for the victims. Though Sarah didn't need or want it she was ready to help in any way she could to ensure the others received their dues. But that would come after Lidia's upcoming trial. Surprisingly it was the one trial Sarah least looked forward to but she was determined to see it through to the end. It would be the final nail in Lidia's coffin and the sooner it was done the sooner Sarah could forget about her.

"Yeah, I'm sorry," Sarah apologized.

"It's fine," Kyle chuckled, "just as long as you autograph my Rosemary first editions."

"Of course," Sarah laughed.

"So...are the trials over?" Kyle hesitantly asked. After the book party they had a long discussion and Sarah explained everything about who she was and what she kept hidden. To say he was surprised would put it mildly but he remained as steadfast and supportive as ever.

"Lidia's starts next week," Sarah said. "After that there is still the civil hearing."

Kyle nodded, "How are you and Lucas?"

"We're taking it slow, but we're good," Sarah nodded. "We had our first date. He took me out to dinner, Woorijip. I think you and Alan would love it. It was...nice. We're still working out how to manage two households, one of which is a farm, but for now Zoe and I are going to stay here. He'll visit when he can get away."

"So have the two of you...you know..."

Sarah blushed crimson.

"I take that as a yes?"

She swatted his shoulder, "I swear, gay or straight, all you men only think about one thing!"

"Well thinking about it is usually indicative of a lack of occupation with it," Kyle shrugged.

"Is that so?" Sarah shot him a playful glance. "So have you and Alan...you know?"

It was Kyle's turn to blush. Sarah raised an eyebrow before they both laughed. They were so preoccupied they didn't hear the door open as a new client entered.

"Finally! I was beginning to think you weren't coming back!"

Sarah's laughter stilled instantly as she looked at the new arrival, perhaps the only person she didn't want to see, "Hello Dale."

"I'm glad you're here. There's a dance tomorrow night. We can go together."

"I don't think so."

"Why not?" he demanded. "I already told everyone we are going to go together."

"That's not my problem, is it?" Sarah glared at him. "I've told you before I'm not interested."

"What about the deal I gave you on your brake pads?"

"What does that have to do with anything? I didn't ask for it. I didn't promise anything in exchange for it. You aren't entitled to anything because of it. You want sex for compensation find yourself a hooker."

"Now you listen to me," Dale grabbed her wrist. "I won't be made into a fool."

"You're doing a good job of that on your own," Sarah replied. "Now let go of my arm or you'll be picking your balls up off the floor."

The door opened interrupting his answer but he let go of her. Zoe's voice proudly declared, "I told you so daddy!"

"Yes you did," Lucas laughed carrying her in. He dropped Daisy's lead letting the corgi wander the store on its own. "Rhubarb is officially my favorite ice cream."

Zoe giggled licking her cone. Lucas wiped her cheeks having already finished his on their walk along the storefronts. The three-year-old was eager to show him everything about her hometown. Setting the little one on her feet and paying no mind to his audience he slid an arm around Sarah and kissed her temple.

"Everything all right?" he whispered making her realize he had seen everything.

"Hmm." She nodded leaning into him grateful for his concern and presence.

"How's it going, Kyle?" Lucas asked.

"All right."

"Alan said he'd be up later tonight."

"Oh" Kyle felt his face warm as he tried not to appear over-eager. Sarah wasn't the only one struggling with a somewhat long-distance relationship. While New York certainly had its appeal he did prefer the quieter life of a small town.

“Daddy! Read me a book!” Zoe said from where she knelt in front of the kids’ corner.

“All right, princess,” Lucas went to her side. “Which one? This one? Goldilocks and the Three Bears. I hate to tell you this but the butler did it.”

“He did not!” Zoe exclaimed. “There is no butler!”

“Really? Maybe that was the Three Little Pigs.”

“Daddy, you’re so silly!”

Lucas chuckled picking her up and settling in the rocking chair. Opening the book he read as Daisy made herself comfortable on the floor at his feet.

“Who is that?” Dale demanded through gritted teeth.

“Lucas,” Sarah answered. “He’s Zoe’s father...and my ex-husband.”

“He doesn’t seem to be much of an ex,” Dale gave her a suspicious glance.

“We’re working things out...Giving it another try.”

“Are you serious? What makes you think it’ll be different? People don’t change.”

“I used to think that too,” Sarah said. “Sometimes people surprise you.”

“You’re a fool...a damn fool. And we’re done. So don’t come crawling back when he shows his true colors.”

Throwing up his hands Dale stormed out. Sarah watched him trembling with anger but refusing to cause a scene in front of Zoe. Dale had better hope they never ran into each other again.

Across the room Lucas watched his would-be rival depart. Next time they met he would make sure to pay back the other for laying a hand on Sarah. For now he turned his attention back to the story. Eventually everyone in this town would know Sarah was off limits because he wouldn’t be making the same mistakes twice.

Chapter Fifty: Bonus Chapter Two

Chapter 50 - The Billionaire CEO's Runaway Wife

Sarah returned to the living room with a steaming cup of tea. She sat down and was immediately drawn into Lucas's arms as he encouraged her to snuggle against him. Zoe knelt at the coffee table coloring. Up until a few minutes ago she had been enjoying the quiet after-dinner talk between her parents and Alan and Kyle. Once Kyle started yawning it was the signal for the pair to depart heading out to Alan's hotel room in town.

"I don't see why they had to leave," Sarah said after a moment. "Especially to a hotel. All of Kyle's stuff is still here."

"I didn't know he lived with you," Lucas said.

"He didn't, doesn't," Sarah explained. "He lost his apartment right before our trip to New York. He agreed to house sit for me while I was gone. It was only supposed to be a couple of weeks, not a month. Still, they could have stayed."

"Well...I'm sure Alan has some ideas for activities that are best not performed under the same roof as one's boss...not to mention a three-year-old."

"What are you talking about? What could..." Sarah trailed off as she recalled her conversation earlier with Kyle before Dale interrupted. "Oh."

"Where did Uncle Alan and Kyle go?" Zoe asked her interest suddenly piqued.

"They had to go...they wanted to play a special game," Sarah said as Lucas struggled not to smile.

"I like games. What kind of game?" Zoe asked.

"Umm...no. It's not something you like."

Zoe frowned giving her a dubious look.

"They are playing Monopoly," Sarah said at a loss for another explanation.

Lucas snorted trying to hold back a laugh.

Zoe stuck out her tongue, "Candyland is better."

Lucas suddenly convulsed unable to hold back his laugh completely. Sarah swatted his arm. He was no help at all.

"You know what? It's bedtime," Sarah suddenly declared. "Let's pick this up and get going."

Despite grumbling Zoe obeyed. After her crayons and coloring book were put away Lucas scooped her up and headed upstairs. Daisy followed darting ahead as they reached the top of the stairs preceding them to Zoe's bedroom door.

Inside was a lavender-colored room with plump little animals running along the walls jumping over picket fences like a perpetual game of counting sheep. The color scheme had obviously been chosen when Zoe was still a baby. Later the nursery was converted with a big-girl bed and toddler table though the walls were left as they had been. Perhaps it was time to update it but that was a discussion for later.

As was their custom they tucked Zoe in together and kissed her good night before slipping out of the room while she cuddled with the corgi pup. Lucas's arms slipped around Sarah as he held her close enjoying her nearness. Quietly they headed to their bedroom.

It had started as a way to help Sarah feel secure and safe so she could sleep without nightmares but somewhere along the line it became normal. Even though they were now in the comfortably familiar setting of Brattleboro Sarah didn't even consider having Lucas sleep in one of the guest rooms.

Lucas paused at the door slowly taking in the warm, golden-colored room. Burgundy curtains added depth and toned down what might otherwise be a loud color. The furniture, it was no surprise, were refinished antiques that added another touch of warmth and care. Lucas could already see their bedroom in the Astoria house done in a similar color scheme.

He looked at Sarah to see she had gone still and quiet. Her furrowed brow as she chewed her bottom lip signaled she was over-thinking something. Taking her into his arms he held her feeling her tension.

“What's wrong, Sarah?”

“...Today when I was talking to Kyle and we were joking around he asked if we had, you know, I blushed and he took that as a yes even though we haven't...”

Lucas tightened his embrace. He knew it was still a sensitive topic and he avoided it whenever possible. Others might find it strange they slept together every night but that only included late night talks and actual sleep. He had made so many mistakes in the past he was determined not to repeat any of them and the biggest was pressuring her to do something she was not ready for especially after her attack.

During the trial her nightmares had briefly returned and she finally took his advice and Tracy's offer to talk to someone professional. Luckily all the counselors Tracy had lined up were women. Sarah wouldn't feel comfortable talking about any of this to a man which she supposed was Tracy's idea as well.

In addition to trauma counseling her psychiatrist had also become an impromptu relationship counselor as more and more of their talks centered on her and Lucas's growing relationship. Sarah was cautiously optimistic this would work out but one topic still terrified her: sex. After her first horrible experience she had abandoned all thoughts of it but now that she was with Lucas it loomed over her. Unfortunately her counselor couldn't give her any definite cures for her aversion. The best advice she could give was to give it time and trust her partner.

Lucas felt Sarah's unease while he held her. Things between them had stabilized and he was hesitant to rock the boat. He didn't want to take any steps back but his desire to be closer with Sarah was getting harder to ignore and his longing to be intimate harder to hide in the morning when his body betrayed him. Maybe it was time to try?

"If you want to...we could give it a try," Lucas finally said.

"...I don't know..." Sarah hesitated. "I mean, I want to but...the first time...it just hurt so much and I don't..."

Lucas's embrace tightened, "I'm so sorry. Your first time should have been special and I took that from you. And I can't deny I would have been jealous of anyone who tried later but I never wanted you to be afraid of it hurting again. If you are willing to let me...I'll show you it can feel good too."

Sarah sighed. Aubrey had said as much to her too. Maybe it would be okay to try? But...

"What if it hurts?"

"I promise, if it's too much, if it hurts, if you don't want to just say the word and I'll stop," Lucas said. "You are in complete control Sarah. Nothing will happen that you don't want."

Sarah shivered. Her therapist had suggested the same thing. Take control but Sarah wasn't nearly as sexually confident as Aubrey. Maybe this was a compromise?

"Okay...let's try..."

Sarah turned to face him but her insecurity was evident and she couldn't look him in the eye even after making her decision.

Gently cupping her face in his hands he raised it to look at him. His lips were warm and soft, coaxing her. Lucas's hands slowly moved to caress her slipping under her shirt to touch her skin. She shivered but didn't pull away. This much they had done before.

"Shall I continue?" Lucas whispered waiting for her assent before kissing down neck and gradually working her shirt up before removing it completely.

He paused to give her a moment before letting his gaze drop.

"Thank god," he said.

Sarah gave him a questioning look.

"Front clasps. I hate the other kind," Lucas said even as his hands moved to her bra. She blushed but didn't interfere as he undid it and tossed it to the side as well. "Your turn."

Sarah hesitated not sure what he meant until he guided her hands to the bottom of his shirt. Trying her best to mimic him she let her hands slide underneath touching his torso and tracing the toned lines of his muscles before peeling off his t-shirt and leaving him bare.

He kissed her shoulder holding her close and letting their bodies move against each other. His hands stroked her with a feather-light touch that teased and stimulated her. She did her best to reciprocate earning a soft moan as he leaned into her touch.

“Should we keep going?” Lucas asked. He was more than ready but it was her decision. Her choice, not his.

“Y-yes.”

He kissed her. Sliding his tongue in to coax and sooth her as he fiddled with her jeans before pulling them down and letting his hands caress her legs unimpeded for the first time. Sarah hesitated but followed his example to loosen his pants. Guiding her to the bed he gently laid her down before pulling her jeans off the rest of the way. She lay bare to him save her panties which he left until she gave him the final permission. He left his briefs on for the same reason as he mounted her and continued his careful examination of her body.

She moaned as he found a particularly sensitive spot. He played with the top of her panties, teasing and coaxing her. Sarah squirmed as he slowly enticed and stimulated. His hand pressed against her entrance through the thin fabric of her underwear making her suddenly shudder and something inside clench as a wave of pleasure flowed through her.

“Lucas, what was...”

“That, my love, was an orgasm.” Lucas chuckled kissing her.

“Oh.”

“Your first?” he asked raising an eyebrow.

She hesitated blushing.

He nodded seeming to understand without her explanation, “Should I keep going?”

“Will that happen again?” Sarah asked.

“As many times as I can coax it from you,” he chuckled.

“Okay.”