

Chapter 11 - The Billionaire CEO's Runaway Wife

Sarah woke tired but refreshed. Last night had been amazing. It was almost laughable she had been so nervous. Seeing Ava and Tracy again and catching up with them made her feel satisfied and happy. She couldn't believe Tracy had finally gotten engaged. And seeing Ava, hearing about the kids and knowing another was on the way Sarah couldn't be happier for her. Ava always wanted a large family and she certainly had it now.

The only dark spot had been Madeline's appearance but even that hadn't been as terrifying as she imagined. At first she froze her mind going back to all her painful, lonely nights only to be greeted by Madeline's morning texts the next day. The shame hit her like a slap to the face.

Luckily Silas stepped in not only buying her time to recover but also reminding her she had nothing to fear from the likes of Madeline. While Madeline chased after a man wanting him to take care of her Sarah forged her own path and made her own life.

That's right.

She bought her own home, started a business and raised her daughter on her own all the while continuing to write her books. No one helped her or did it for her. Sarah was her own person and everything she had been four years ago was gone. She was stronger than Madeline could ever know and stronger than anyone there could imagine. She could stand on her own.

"It's all right, Si."

She had never called him by his nickname before but it suddenly felt right. In fact he even seemed just as surprised by it as she was but he merely nodded and allowed her to handle the situation.

And it felt so good!

She stood up to her tormenter on her own two feet. The look on Madeline's face was priceless and Sarah felt her tension melting away. This was her catharsis. She walked back to Ruth in triumph and it truly was a triumph based on Ruth's reaction alone but she needed another moment to process it so she accepted the suggestion to sit. Their little group retreated to a table and the rest of the night had gone like a dream. It was a perfect night.

As she lay processing it her bedroom door opened followed by the patter of feet and the jingle of dog tags. Her mattress shifted as a small form climbed onto the edge of the bed. Sarah pretended to sleep but she could feel eyes on her. Suddenly she snorted a deep snore causing giggles. Sarah waited for quiet again and felt the bed shift as the little body moved closer before she snored again for more giggles.

“Mommy, are you awake?”

Sarah finally opened her eyes to see the eager face of her daughter staring at her with bright greenish eyes. She smiled and Zoe lay beside her cuddling close as she usually did.

“Did you have a good time, mommy?”

“Yes. I did. I saw your Auntie Tracy and Auntie Ava last night.”

“You did?”

“I did and I told them all about you. They really want to meet you and so do all your cousins.”

“Yeah! Really! How many cousins do I have?”

“Well, let’s see... There is Sean, Alexis, Theo, Isaac and Ben.”

“That’s a lot!”

“And Auntie Ava is having another one too.”

“Really?”

“Oh yes. And we mustn’t forget your Auntie Macey. You have a bunch of cousins there too.”

“I have a lot of cousins!” Zoe declared.

“Yes. You do.” Sarah chuckled.

“Will I get to meet them today?”

“No, probably not.”

“Ah.”

“I thought you wanted to go to Central Park and the Statue of Liberty today?”

“Oh... Yeah! Let’s do that!”

“Well, let’s get dressed and have breakfast first. What do you think?”

“Okay!”

Zoe scurried off the bed and back to the floor to join the anxious Daisy who hadn't been able to hop on the bed. Sarah chuckled to herself before rising out of bed. She certainly couldn't keep the three-year-old waiting.

They washed their faces and brushed their teeth before getting dressed. For an outing that promised to make a long day Sarah dressed simply. There was no need to draw attention as she enjoyed the day with her daughter. By the time they were done a patient Daisy whined alerting them the pup was desperate for relief.

They headed out quickly taking it for a brief walk and letting it do its business. Zoe giggled as her mother bagged up the pup's poop to throw it away. The process fascinated her as it wasn't something her mother normally did at home. Returning inside they went to the hotel restaurant for breakfast.

It seemed word had gotten around there was a VIP with a corgi staying so they received very little hassle for bringing Daisy with them as long as she stayed on the floor under the table. Despite the looks they received it was an enjoyable breakfast.

“Did you like spending time with Grandpa Tailor?” Sarah asked.

“Yes! Grandpa Tailor is so funny! We made faces like fishes!”

“That does sound funny,” Sarah chuckled.

She remembered Tailor doing the same thing with her when she was little. Her brother thought it was silly and a waste of time but she enjoyed it. Tailor never tired of telling his fishing stories which seemed to grow even more outrageous as the years wore on. She no longer knew if any of his stories were true but perhaps that's where her love of storytelling began.

Adding a generous tip to the bill Sarah led the way to the ballroom where the Publisher's Fair had been set up. At first she had been concerned about the location given she and Zoe were staying at the same hotel but that was to be expected. Of course Ruth would want them to stay close to the action. She was, if nothing else, very efficient.

“Wow mommy! It's just like the Farmer's Market!” Zoe exclaimed as soon as they reached the doorway.

Sarah could only nod. It was her first time attending this event so she hadn't realized how big it actually was. Her grip tightened on Zoe's hand.

“Stay close, all right?” Sarah instructed. “No wandering off.”

“Okay,” Zoe agreed eager to explore this new kind of market.

They wandered through the first half letting their attention go where it wanted. There were publishers of all kinds: children, teen, adult, science fiction, fantasy, romance, erotic, historical, biography, nonfiction...It seemed to go on forever. The booths displayed posters of upcoming books along with release dates. They were handing out brochures, bookmarks, pens and other small items to whet the appetite of their readers for the titles they offered. Some even had advance chapters available in small, bound paperbacks to encourage readers and make them long for more.

On the phone Ruth downplayed the Fair much to Sarah's chagrin. Maybe her friend was afraid to scare Sarah off knowing she wasn't a huge fan of crowds. It was a bit overwhelming but Sarah told herself this was her new beginning. She wasn't going to be intimidated.

Briarwood wasn't difficult to find. As a major publisher their booth was naturally a dominant size with a large backdrop showcasing their publishing schedule. And of course Rosemary was at the center. It made Sarah blush but at the same time filled her with pride.

She felt Zoe tug on her hand straining toward a neighboring booth, "Zoe?"

"I want to see that book!"

Sarah looked to see Zoe had spotted a children's publisher. One of the books featured a little girl and her dog so naturally Zoe's interest was piqued.

"We'll look at that later. Let's go say hi to Auntie Ruth."

"But mommy, please? I'll come right back! You can see me the whole time!"

Sarah grimaced. She wondered if this was typical of three-year-olds. Were they always so independent? Didn't kids wait until they were teens to rebel?

Looking up Sarah saw Ruth had spotted them. With a sigh Sarah looked down at the eager Zoe, "All right. Grab a brochure and come right back. I'll be watching."

"Kay!" Zoe squealed happily hurrying to the children's stand with the dog poster. Daisy followed along happily.

Sarah chuckled heading Briarwood's stand.

"What am I chopped liver?" Ruth asked witnessing the exchange.

"Face it Ruth, you are nothing compared to anything with fur."

"Well...there are worse things."

"How's it going?"

“Are you kidding? Fantastic! I had to send Derek back to the office to print more flyers. We’re running low. Here, check it out!”

Ruth proudly handed her the Rosemary flyer. On it was the cover but in place of the title it read: Who is Rosemary? Sarah glanced through it. The flyer included a blurb about the new book and hinted at the mystery anchoring the plot. Alongside it were several old photos Sarah took for previous books dressed as Rosemary. On the back was a large advertisement for the book’s launch party. In addition to being a formal affair it was a masquerade and everyone was encouraged to wear a mask. At the end of the night Rosemary would reveal herself to the world.

“Wow, you really went all out, didn’t you?”

“Of course I did! It’s going to be the event of the year!”

Sarah couldn’t help but laugh at Ruth’s certainty. Surely it couldn’t be that big of a deal but maybe she was underestimating the appeal of meeting the author. Every now and again she checked forums devoted to Rosemary, trying to figure out who she was. Over the years she had seen some pretty outlandish theories but she hadn’t given it much thought. Perhaps she should have paid more attention.

“Mommy! Mommy!”

Sarah turned scooping up Zoe as she proudly waved the flier in her hand. Laughing Sarah blew raspberries against her cheek before looking at the advertisement in her daughter’s hand. Apparently Zoe’s wish list was growing.

“Hello, sweetie,” Ruth cooed. “Did you find a good book?”

“Yes! It’s about a mommy and a girl and her doggy!”

“That does sound like a good one!” Ruth laughed. “So what do you have planned today?”

“We’re going to the park!” Zoe declared. “We still get to go, right mommy?”

“Of course, I promised,” Sarah laughed. “And I have a special surprise waiting for you too.”

“Yeah!”

“Well, you two have fun. I’ll just be here...working.”

“Yeah, working,” Sarah rolled her eyes.

“Poor Auntie Ruth,” Zoe intoned. “I’ll have two ice creams just for you!”

Sarah and Ruth erupted into laughter. Shaking her head Sarah said, “That’s not how it works baby. Come on, let’s go. See you later, Ruth.”

“Later. Ooo! Dinner yes?”

“Right.”

Sarah agreed carrying Zoe out of the ballroom less she see any more books. Daisy trotted along on her leash excited to leave the crowded area picking up her pace when she realized they were headed outside.

Setting Zoe on her feet Sarah held her hand as they walked. The hotel was some five blocks away from their goal making for a decent walk and she hoped Zoe wouldn't exhaust herself just getting to their destination. Even if she did the surprise Sarah prepared would be worth it.

“Mommy, what did Auntie Ruth give you?”

Sarah had tucked both flyers into her pocket before starting out and hadn't thought Zoe noticed but her daughter's observational skills were as keen as ever. It was the reason Sarah never attempted to host a surprise party. It simply wouldn't work on the three-year-old as long as she was in the same state.

“Oh, it's a flyer for a party she's holding for Rosemary's new book.”

“Really? There's going to be a party?”

“Yep. A masquerade.”

“What's that?”

“Well, everyone wears a mask.”

“Like Halloween masks?”

“No,” Sarah laughed. “You remember that picture I took with Auntie Aubrey at Mardi Gras and we were wearing masks?”

“Ah-huh,” Zoe nodded. The picture sat on the mantel back home.

“Masks like that.”

“Oh!” Zoe suddenly became even more excited.

The masks were fancy covering only half their faces and were decorated in purple, green and gold sequins, feathers and lined with beads. In fact Sarah still had her mask prominently displayed on the wall near the picture. Zoe sometimes asked to wear it.

“Do I get to wear a mask too?”

“Of course. We’ll go shopping so you can pick out a special mask. It can be anything you want.”

“I want to have a mask like yours.”

“Then we’ll get matching masks. How’s that?”

“Yeah!”

Zoe gamely kept up with her mother as they walked on and eventually reached the park. As Sarah feared Zoe was getting tired. She could easily tell by how quiet the little one became but as they reached the entrance to the zoo Zoe perked up especially at the sight of a horse-drawn carriage.

“Ooo! Mommy, a horsey!”

“I know, let’s go say hi,” Sarah smiled.

“Hello, there,” the driver nodded as they approached.

“Hello, I really like your horsey!” Zoe greeted.

“Well, thank you little lady. You wouldn’t happen to be Zoe, would you?”

“How did you know?”

“Because I’ve been waiting for you.”

“You have?”

“Yes, according to your mom you like horses and would love to have a carriage ride through the park. Is she right?”

“Yes!” Zoe bounced up and down. “We get to ride in the carriage?”

“That’s right,” the man smiled pleased at her joy. “Big Red and I will take care of everything else.”

“Big Red?” Zoe asked. “Is that the horsey?”

“That’s right.”

“Can I pet him?”

“Of course.”

He chuckled even as Sarah scooped Zoe up and brought her closer to the large chestnut. Zoe giggled as she stroked the large stripe running down the horse's face. Sarah handed the driver her phone and he snapped a quick picture for them before helping them into the carriage. Zoe bounced in the seat as the driver climbed aboard and clicked his tongue cuing Big Red to move ahead on what was a familiar route for the equine.

Sarah smiled loving Zoe's excitement and glad she had booked this reservation. They followed Center Drive making a slow circuit through the southeastern end of the park. Their route took them past Wollman Rink and the Chess and Checker House where several people gathered to play in the fresh air. Zoe eagerly pointed out the Carousel and Sarah made a mental note to bring her back once the carriage ride was over. They skirted Central Park Zoo and circled the Pond before passing the Plaza Hotel on their way back to the starting point of the ride. All told it was a pleasant twenty-five minute ride allowing Sarah to relax while also amusing the three-year-old.

Saying good-bye to the driver and giving Big Red a treat they set off on their own walk through the park. The ride had refreshed Zoe and she was eager to explore the sights they had seen from the carriage. Sarah took her to the Carousel first and let her ride before they continued onto a large open field called Sheep Meadow. Giggling Zoe ran ahead before lying down and rolling down a slope. Sarah laughed snapping pictures while Daisy barked happily. The ride refreshed the canine as well.

"Where are we going now, mommy?"

"Well, there is something I wanted to show you," Sarah said. "And I think you'll like it. Shall we?"

"Kay."

They followed the trails enjoying the fresh air and relative quiet free from the noise and bustle of the city around them. Zoe was happiest among trees and natural settings. They paused only when Daisy stopped to relieve herself. Much to Zoe's amusement her mother had a roll of plastic bags in her pocket with which she stooped to pick up the dog's leavings tossing it into a convenient garbage can.

Zoe giggled watching it a second time before asking, "Mommy, why do you do that?"

"These are public trails. A lot of people use them so we have to keep them clean."

"You don't do that at home."

"That's because the woods we normally walk in are on our private property."

"Oh. Mommy did you use to ride Applejack here?"

"I did," Sarah said. "I boarded him at a stable and I took him out on the trails at least once a week."

“Did you pick up his poop too?”

Sarah snorted a laugh, “Aren’t you full of questions.”

She stooped down tickling Zoe until she was shrieking with laughter. Daisy spun circles barking and wanting to join in.

“Come on, we’re almost to the surprise I wanted to show you,” Sarah straightened.

Central Park had a number of famous statues scattered throughout and though Sarah thought Zoe would enjoy the Alice in Wonderland statue it was a little far for the three-year-old to walk. There was a closer one she knew Zoe would love. Eventually they reached their destination. This statue was of a proud sled dog standing on a rocky outcropping.

“Here it is!”

“A doggy!” Zoe exclaimed running up to the statue with Daisy in tow.

Sarah laughed kneeling beside her, “Don’t you recognize it?”

Zoe gave her a curious look. She had never been to the city before so how could she have seen it? On the other hand it did look familiar...A smile spread on Zoe’s face and she suddenly exclaimed, “Balto!”

“That’s right,” Sarah laughed reading the statue’s inscription, “Dedicated to the indomitable spirit of the sled dogs that relayed antitoxin six hundred miles over rough ice, across treacherous waters, through Arctic blizzards from Nenana to the relief of stricken Nome in the Winter of 1925.”

“It’s real!” Zoe giggled recalling the very same scene from one of her favorite movies.

“Yes, it really is,” Sarah said. Zoe loved everything about dogs. She had an entire movie collection devoted to canines from Balto to Lady and the Tramp to Homeward Bound. The only movie Sarah had not introduced her to yet was Old Yeller thinking it would be too traumatic for her daughter. “Should we take a picture?”

“Yes!”

Zoe danced in place as they stood with their backs to the statue. Sarah took out her phone holding it out so the statue could be seen behind them as they smiled and snapped a picture. Zoe giggled looking at the image.

“So what do you want to do next?” Sarah asked.

“The zoo! Then the Statue of Liberty then...”

“Wait, wait, wait. I don’t think we can do all of it today.”

Zoe frowned.

“How about we take Daisy back to the hotel and then we can choose either the zoo or the Statue of Liberty for today?”

Zoe thought about it before deciding, “The zoo!”

“All right. Let’s go,” Sarah stood taking her hand and leading her back the way they came.

Chapter Twelve

Chapter 12 - The Billionaire CEO's Runaway Wife

Lucas followed from a discreet distance as if in a trance. He simply couldn’t believe it. For four years he looked for her and now she was in front of him but she wasn’t alone.

There had been times he wondered what it would be like to find her and she had found someone else. After four years she might have a boyfriend or even a fiancée, maybe even a husband. The thought made him run cold but he really didn’t have license to complain. He was the one who drove her away.

Yet in all his wildest fantasies he hadn’t dreamed of this. A child? When? How?

Well...

He knew how. One night...

He recalled Alan’s assurances that the chances of a pregnancy after one night were nearly impossible.

But the truth was in front of him. Sarah’s miniature couldn’t be more than three years old which meant she had to have been conceived on their one and only night together. But why wouldn’t Sarah tell him? There was no mention of a child in the divorce papers and no request for child support. Did she not know she was pregnant at the time? Was he wrong? Was she not his?

Lucas found himself shaking at the thought Sarah slept with another man after leaving him. A one-night stand? Sarah didn’t strike him as the type. Maybe she was just that mad at him?

But he didn't want it to be true. He wanted the little girl to be his. She had to be his. Did she know about him? What had Sarah told her about her daddy? Did she say anything to her?

The unanswered questions were driving him crazy. Only one thing kept him from falling apart and that was watching his wife and daughter. His daughter was all giggles as she walked down the street and eventually reached the park. Surprisingly a carriage was waiting and she was excited about taking a ride. She showed no fear of the rather large horse.

Lucas had to trot to keep up not wanting to lose sight of them for even a moment. He refused to listen as Alan tried to tell him the carriage would bring them right back to the start. When the carriage finally returned Lucas was out of breath and rather irritated with Alan who had sat down on a bench to wait.

But there wasn't time to argue with him as Sarah headed back into the park for a leisurely stroll. Their daughter was all giggles as she walked along wooden paths with her mother and canine. They paused at the Carousel and the meadow but continued on. Sarah seemed to have a particular destination in mind and the girl had energy to last hours though Lucas was hard pressed to keep up. He couldn't remember the last time he walked this much.

They finally paused at a statue that for some reason had his daughter dancing with delight. Taking a selfie in front of it the pair headed back to the hotel. At first Lucas thought they were going back to the Book Fair but Sarah handed her keys to the valet before heading inside. He trailed her as far as the elevator before he realized the truth. They were staying in the hotel!

Alan who had remained silent at his side headed to the front desk. He chatted amicably with the concierge who typed away at their computer before shaking their head. After a few minutes Alan returned to where Lucas stood watching the elevator.

"There is no Stanton or Tomlinson on their reservation list," Alan said. "Maybe she changed her name or used an assumed name...or she's here with someone."

Lucas jerked to attention and glared at him.

"I'm just saying it's possible. You can't tell me you haven't thought the same thing."

Lucas sighed. Yes, he did have the same thoughts as he watched Sarah and the girl. God, what was her name? He couldn't keep calling his daughter the girl. It was driving him crazy not knowing.

The elevators opened and Sarah stepped off with the little one this time without the puppy. Where were they going now? Lucas waited until they were a little ways ahead before falling into step behind them.

Outside a dark red, mid-sized SUV waited. Accepting her keys from the valet Sarah walked up to it without hesitation helping the girl into the child's seat in the back. Lucas belatedly realized the vehicle was hers and that they were going on another outing.

“Let’s go to the zoo!” the little girl exclaimed making Sarah laugh as she buckled her in.

The zoo?

Sarah circled to the driver’s seat and climbed in. In minutes they were driving away.

“Shit.” Lucas hurried to the curb as Alan requested their car from the valet but it would come too late. Instead Lucas hailed a cab saying, “Catch up.”

Alan blinked in surprise at his impatience and watched as the cab merged back into traffic trailing after the SUV. Smiling Alan could only shake his head. Unbelievable. After four years of ignoring his wife Lucas was suddenly wrapped around her fingers and pulled along like a puppet on a string. It was getting very interesting.

Lucas was on the edge of his seat as the cab crawled through traffic. When he first got in and told the driver the Zoo the driver had responded which one? He immediately panicked. It had been so long since he went to the zoo he forgot New York boasted five. Instead he pointed to the SUV demanding he follow it.

The driver merely shrugged and drove off. They managed to keep the SUV in sight as they navigated New York City traffic. It seemed Sarah did not intend to return to Central Park heading to the Bronx. According to the cab driver the Zoo there was second to none. Too many thoughts were running through Lucas’s head to pay attention to him. When the cab pulled up at the Zoo entrance he threw a couple hundred dollar bills at him before exiting. He had to turn around immediately to avoid Sarah spotting him as she and the girl approached after parking their vehicle.

Lucas hesitated but it seemed Sarah hadn’t noticed as she escorted the excited little girl to the admission gate. Paying they went on their way and Lucas trailed them tossing money at the clerk without counting or waiting for his change. Sarah and the girl paused at the sea lions with the girl clapping excitedly at the animals’ antics.

From there the pair seemed to wander at random using conveniently placed signs to direct them to particular animals. No matter what exhibit the girl took equal delight in the animals present. She even seemed fascinated by frogs and bugs which Lucas thought all girls thought creepy and gross. The only animals she didn’t seem all that interested in were apes. She liked the monkeys just fine but their tailless cousins didn’t elicit the same excited giggles. Lucas wondered why.

Nearing lunch time they paused at a food stand for hotdogs and Icees which seemed a big hit with the girl who proudly showed off her blue tongue. Lucas’s lips twitched with a smile at her adorable antics. And Sarah’s laughter rang in his mind like chiming bells. How did he live so many years without either?

His phone buzzed alerting him Alan was on site. He had sent the other a text from the cab when Sarah’s destination was eminent and apparently Alan finally managed to catch up. Tearing his eyes away from the scene in front of him Lucas gave directions based on the nearby animal

exhibits and waited as Sarah and the girl leisurely finished their lunch. Alan managed to reach him as they were leaving and continued their exploration.

“Damn, you are hard to find,” Alan sighed while they trailed the pair.

“What took you so long?” Lucas asked.

“I was getting information for you. Thomas.”

“What?”

“Her last name,” Alan said. “I found her vehicle in the parking lot and had a friend run her license plates. Vermont plates, by the way.”

“Vermont?” Lucas couldn’t believe it. He spent four years looking for her and she was less than a five-hour drive away? How was that possible? “Thomas?”

“Yeah. Sarah Thomas. She must have changed it legally.”

Why Thomas? He supposed it was close to her maiden name but most people were attached to their given names as it connected them to their family. Lucas’s brow furrowed.

Could it be she was not on good terms with her brother? But Lucas thought they were twins. Weren’t twins close? Julius’s twins were so in tune with one another they seemed capable of communicating without speech. Silas’s triplets could carry on whole conversations with only a glance or two. Was that not true of all multiples?

Once again Lucas was reminded of how little he actually knew about his wife. He saw her now so full of life and energy. With such an active daughter Sarah needed every bit of it. Lucas felt his own stamina flagging when they made it to the camel rides. Gratefully he sighed when it became clear they were going to wait their turn for a ride.

“What’s her name?” the girl asked when their turn came.

“This is Ruby,” the keeper informed.

“Hi Ruby!” she giggled. “You’re very pretty.”

Incredibly the camel responded by swinging its head around for her to pet. Even the keeper seemed surprised by the animal’s receptiveness but happily conveyed all sorts of camel facts as Sarah and the girl climbed aboard and sat quietly while the keeper led the camel along the walking track.

The girl was enraptured with the animal leaning forward to stroke its coarse fur. Lucas couldn’t help himself snapping pictures of them as they passed his location. When they reached the

platform again the keeper took Sarah's phone and snapped pictures as well before they dismounted and departed.

Eventually they made it to the children's petting zoo. They paused briefly at the bug carousel and the girl rode it long enough for a picture but it didn't seem to have the same effect on her as the camel ride. However her face lit up again in the Butterfly Garden and of course the petting zoo where she immediately bonded with the goats. An alpaca seemed to take particular interest in Sarah who laughed as she petted the friendly creature.

"Excuse me, mister."

Lucas suddenly stiffened and slowly turned to see the girl was standing beside him. How did she move so fast?

"Mister, why are you following us?"

Shit.

Lucas's mind raced. How did she notice him? When? Why confront him now? What was he supposed to say?

"Do you want to talk to my mommy?"

"I...Yes. I do." Lucas crouched down to her level for the first time able to study her closely. She looked so much like Sarah. But there were slight differences and a few characteristics he recognized every time he looked into a mirror. It was strange to see his features on such a feminine, round face but also fascinating. There was no longer any doubt in his mind. She had to be his daughter.

"Do you know my mommy?" she looked at him her hazel eyes shining with mirth waiting for an answer he didn't know how to give. "Should I yell for her?"

"No!" Lucas panicked.

She giggled.

God, did she have to be so cute?

"If you don't answer I'm going to scream."

Cute but vicious.

"Y-yes. I know your mommy," Lucas finally said twisting his wedding band. "I...used to be married to her."

She tilted her head suddenly serious as she studied him for a long moment before asking, “Are you my daddy?”

Lucas sucked in a breath. How was he supposed to answer that when he still didn’t know what Sarah had told her about him? But there was no doubt in his mind.

“I...I think so. Has—has she talked about me?”

“No.”

His heart sank and Lucas bowed his head fighting his disappointment. But what else did he expect? Maybe she never thought about him at all.

“My name is Zoe. What’s yours?”

Zoe. It was the perfect name for her. He hesitated before answering, “Luke.”

“Are you going to hurt my mommy?”

He winced at the seriousness of her question. Lucas looked at his daughter. Her eyes seemed a little browner as if reflecting her determined attitude. Gone was her childish mirth. She was very serious.

“No. No, of course not. I...” Lucas looked down at his wedding ring. “I hurt her before and I want to apologize. I want...I want a chance to be with her again.”

Zoe pressed her lips together deep in thought. He hesitated to guess what was going on in her mind. After another long moment she said, “Okay. But you have to promise not to hurt my mommy or make her cry.”

“Right.”

“Pinky promise,” Zoe held up her hand extending the pinky.

He hesitated before wrapping his much larger digit around hers.

“This is serious, daddy. You never break a pinky promise.”

Lucas blinked his heart practically jumping out of his chest when she called him daddy but it was tempered by the seriousness of her expression. This was no laughing matter. Lucas nodded showing he understood.

“I promise. I won’t hurt her and I won’t make her cry.”

Zoe narrowed her gaze as if scrutinizing his sincerity before nodding in satisfaction. Suddenly she raised her hands. He hesitated before embracing her for the first time. He was actually hugging his little girl.

“Zoe? Zoe, where did you go?”

“Over here mommy!” Zoe answered and Lucas almost dropped her as he straightened to face a panicked Sarah.

For the first time in four years he faced his wife with no clue what he should say. Her expression was not difficult to read: surprise, fear, uncertainty, panic. It was her fear that cut him deepest. He didn't expect their first meeting to be smooth but he didn't want her to be afraid. Anger would be easier to withstand.

“...Sarah.”

Her gaze flickered from him to Zoe who was calm in his arms despite the situation she caused. Zoe just smiled and declared, “Mommy, I found Edward.”

Sarah suddenly blushed but Lucas was confused. Edward? She already knew his name so why get it wrong on purpose and who was Edward? And why did Sarah react like that? Lucas glanced at Alan but he was equally confused.

“Sarah...I think we need to talk,” Lucas said watching her reaction carefully as her gaze wavered between fear and anger.

She kept looking at Zoe as if her daughter had all the answers. Finally she nodded. Lucas allowed himself a brief moment of relief. At least she didn't deny him outright.

Chapter Thirteen

Chapter 13 - The Billionaire CEO's Runaway Wife

Sarah chewed her lip trying not to look at the man seated in the passenger seat of her jeep. She wasn't sure if she should blame the alpaca for distracting her or for allowing herself to be lulled into a false sense of security by Zoe's obedience throughout the day.

Zoe's observational skills bordered on clairvoyance as was her ability to always know when her mother's attention drifted even the slightest. Thankfully Zoe seldom took advantage always staying close and not wanting her mother to worry. Sarah could count on one hand the number of

times Zoe truly stepped out of line but this was certainly the most serious. Even worse was the innocent look on Zoe's face when Sarah saw her in Lucas's arms.

She even called him Edward and after they had just discussed the importance of keeping Rosemary's secret. Luckily Lucas didn't seem to have a clue what they were referring to. But what was she supposed to do now?

The way Lucas held Zoe and carried her to the car it was clear to Sarah he knew she was his. Seeing them together the small characteristics she noticed in Zoe's appearance were heightened. There really was no doubting their shared connection.

More than once Sarah imagined what it would be like to see them together and the sight actually caused her heart to flutter. Even as the thought occurred to her she felt ashamed. What was wrong with her? How could she even entertain such fantasies? Did she not learn her lesson four years ago?

Clearly she had a lot to talk to Zoe about but how could she with him present? What did he want? Of all the places to have to confront him she hadn't expected him at the zoo. She always assumed she'd see him at an event much like Madeline the night before, not on the street. Why had he been at the zoo in the first place?

And why did he keep looking at her?

He sat in the passenger seat as she drove back to the hotel. His eyes never left her as if memorizing every inch of her, committing it to memory in case she disappeared again. In fact, she noticed it at the zoo too. He had been so pale like he was seeing a ghost. He seemed terrified and...hopeful? But why? She was certain he would have forgotten all about her after she left. What was he thinking?

Lucas watched her committing every movement no matter how small to memory. For years he had been starved and before him now was a feast. She was even more beautiful close-up than from a distance. He knew he was making her nervous and could practically see the wheels turning but he couldn't help it. He noted how she anxiously chewed her lip and struggled to ignore him, refusing to glance in his direction. If she looked at him now and smiled he just might praise the heavens but he knew she wouldn't. He had never once given her a reason to smile.

For her part Zoe remained quiet and content watching the traffic as her parents suffered an awkward car ride. It was perhaps mercifully short for them. As her mother handed the keys to the valet Lucas was already grabbing Zoe from the vehicle. They stood awkwardly facing each other on the sidewalk waiting for the valet's return. With her keys once again in hand Sarah led the way inside and Lucas followed like an obedient puppy. Alan pulled up behind them tipping the valet again to park the other car as well before catching up.

As they made their way through the lobby Ruth suddenly appeared carrying a large box of promotional material, "Oh Sarah! Let's have dinner in a couple hours. We can..."

Ruth suddenly fell silent at the sight of Lucas carrying Zoe. His expression seemed grim while Sarah was practically white as a sheet. For her part Zoe looked...happy. How? When? Where? The questions flooded her mind but it certainly wasn't the time to voice them as she glanced around the rather crowded lobby. There was still about an hour before the Fair was over so there was plenty of foot traffic with visitors rushing to catch it and publishers slowly cleaning up.

"...Okay," Ruth took a deep breath. "Let's go up to the room. Yeah?"

The elevator ride was awkward and quiet. Ruth set down her box taking out her phone and shooting off a quick text. Lucas assumed she was telling her staff to carry on without her. Stepping off the elevator Lucas followed quietly as Sarah unlocked the suite.

He paused staring at the exclusive, and expensive, room. It was certainly worthy of Sarah and Zoe but how did she afford this? This was not a hotel that catered to just anyone. As they entered they were immediately greeted by the corgi who bounced around them with happy yaps. Zoe giggled.

"Daisy! Were you a good girl?"

The corgi spun in circles as if chasing her non-existent tail. Zoe wiggled to be put down so Lucas carefully set her on her feet. She ran ahead with the dog bounding along beside her.

"Zoe! Shoes!" Sarah admonished, her motherly instincts momentarily overriding her shock at the situation.

Zoe paused long enough to kick off her shoes before leaping onto the couch with the dog right at her side. Lucas's lips twitched with a smile watching her and listening to her laughter fill the suite.

Sarah quietly picked up Zoe's shoes and set them near the door before taking off her own. She refused to look at Lucas ignoring his near six-foot height, an impressive feat in and of itself. Lucas's gaze peeled away from Zoe to watch Sarah as she quietly moved around the room. His eyes lingered at the round curve of her ass as she picked up the clutter that gathered wherever children spent their time.

Lucas swallowed as his gaze drifted down her supple legs hugged by her jeans. His hands itched to touch her. He was certain his advances would be rejected with a resounding slap and it might actually be worth it. At least then she would have to look at him. She had gone pale since he appeared losing the healthy blush that graced her face all day. He wanted to see it again.

If only she'd yell at him, curse him, slap him, anything to show him the spirited vision he followed all day was still there. It couldn't be that his presence was enough to destroy it. She was stronger than that. She had to be. If she wasn't she never would have been able to stand up to Madeline in that crowd of harpies.

“Auntie Ruth! We saw sea lions today!” Zoe happily chatted. “And tigers and monkeys! And we got to ride a camel!”

“Oh really?” Ruth chuckled setting down her box.

“Mommy, can I show her the pictures we took?” Zoe bounced off the sofa.

Wordlessly Sarah handed over her phone. Taking Ruth’s hand Zoe pulled her to the couch and cuddled in her lap as she swiped through the pictures. Despite the tense situation Lucas and Alan smiled at her commentary.

“This is Central Park,” Zoe said. “And this is Big Red. He took mommy and me for a carriage ride. And this is the Balto statue. Have you seen that movie, Auntie Ruth?”

“I haven’t, no,” Ruth shook her head. “We’ll have to have a movie night while you’re here so I can.”

“And these are the sea lions! Aren’t they funny?”

Without a word Alan handed Lucas his phone. Displayed on screen was a movie poster featuring a husky with the title Balto in bold lettering. So it was a movie but he was still confused about the statue. It would take a little more looking into but at least he had a clue.

Lucas looked again at the little girl giggling as if unaware of the awkwardness of the situation. He had been planning to confront Sarah after a little more time to prepare. But now he had been thrown into it and he didn’t have a leg to stand on. How was he supposed to do this? How did one talk to their wife?

“Hey Rosemary Thomas!” Alan exclaimed sitting on a chair and reaching for the stack of books on the coffee table. “You have them all. You must be a fan too. I love her books!”

Zoe snorted as he picked up a book and paged through it. Even Ruth seemed to be fighting a laugh glancing at Sarah who, to Lucas’s surprise, actually blushed. He had no idea why she was embarrassed by the books she liked to read but he was grateful to see color return to her face.

“You like Rosemary?” Zoe asked.

“Of course,” Alan gushed. “She has the most amazing adventures. In this one she goes to a rodeo. See here is the horse she actually rode.”

The back blurb included a photo of Rosemary in a sun dress and hat standing beside a dark bay wearing a red halter with a southwestern design. For the picture the horse also wore novelty sunglasses to mirror the large, round lens Rosemary always wore to hide her own face.

“That’s Applejack!” Zoe exclaimed.

“Hey! You know the horse’s name, huh?” Alan was pleased. “I guess your mom read the books to you.”

“She lets me ride Applejack all the time,” Zoe said. “See!”

She thrust her mother’s phone at him. The image displayed showed both her and her mother in the saddle of a dark bay. Alan blinked studying the image his eyes darting from the book to the phone.

Bay horses certainly weren’t rare; however, the two horses in the pictures he saw now had the same round, apple-shaped star on their foreheads and a teardrop-shaped spot of white on their muzzles that almost looked like a spade.

“Do you want to see mommy’s scuba pictures?” Zoe asked.

“Zoe!” Sarah suddenly exclaimed but fell silent as all eyes turned to her.

Lucas was confused. Since when did Sarah know how to scuba? But Alan’s eyes suddenly lit up in recognition.

“Thomas,” Alan muttered. “Thomas. Oh my god! You’re Rosemary!”

Sarah pressed her lips together growing redder by the second. Lucas’s brow furrowed looking from one to the other not understanding Alan’s excitement or Sarah’s embarrassment. Alan looked at him and seeing his confusion rolled his eyes.

“She’s Rosemary Thomas! She wrote these books!” Alan thrust the book into Lucas’s hands.

To Catch a Cattail by Rosemary Thomas.

Lucas turned it over to see the picture on the back. The horse meant nothing to him. Instead he stared at the woman. Her hair was black, most likely a wig. Her lips were bright red and large sunglasses hid most of her face from view. Yet...The shape of her nose, jaw, her lips stretched into a smile he had been memorizing all day. Lucas’s jaw dropped as he tore his gaze from the book back to Sarah.

She bit her lip, her eyes wide and her face flushed. Was she embarrassed for him to know? Angry? Why would she keep such an important detail to herself? Why wouldn’t she be screaming it to the world? It couldn’t be easy for an author to top the bestseller list.

“But...” Alan hesitated, “Rosemary always claims to write from experience. She’s been to Paris and rock climbed and sky-dived...”

“Mommy’s done all of that,” Zoe said. “She says she’ll take me sky-diving when I’m old enough.”

“You...you sky-dived?” Lucas finally found his voice. How was that even possible?

Sarah glanced at him angered he didn't believe her. But how was he supposed to know?

“Did you know?” Alan looked at Ruth.

“Well of course I did. I'm her editor,” Ruth snorted. “I've read every Rosemary story ever written even the short stories she wrote in high school. Who do you think encouraged her to submit a book to my father? I mean, the entire first book was based on her high school and teaching experience.”

Alan and Lucas stared at her. Put that way it did make sense. In fact it was glaringly obvious.

“Sarah spent five months in Paris with the proceeds from the first book,” Ruth continued. “That's how it all started. Traveling for experience and writing about it later.”

“But...why the big secret?” Alan asked. “The hair and makeup and glasses...”

“Because she didn't want her family butting into her business.”

“Ruth!” Sarah snapped.

“Oh...sorry. I know you don't like to talk about it.”

“Family?” Lucas repeated. “You mean your father and brother?”

“I don't have a father or a brother as far as I'm concerned,” Sarah glared at him.

Lucas stared at her. Her disgust and anger was hard to miss. It practically radiated off of her. What the hell happened between her and her family for her to turn her back on them? Before he could ask there was a sudden knock on the door. They both jumped at the intrusion unsure who it could be.

“Oh, that's probably Taylor,” Ruth announced. “I sent him a 9-1-1 text in the elevator. I figured he'd drop everything and hurry over.”

Sarah nodded still checking the peep hole before opening the door to reveal a lanky, middle-aged man Lucas instantly recognized. Taking two steps into the hotel room Taylor immediately embraced Sarah in a comforting hug before evaluating the scene in front of him at a glance.

“Grandpa Taylor!” Zoe exclaimed running up to him.

Smiling he scooped her up and hugged her as she threw her arms around him. Lucas was jealous. Just who was this man who earned his daughter's adoration and trust after single-handedly ending her parents' marriage?

“Mommy and I went to the park! And we rode in a carriage! And then we went to the zoo! We got to ride a camel!”

“My, my you’ve had a busy day haven’t you?” Taylor laughed. His gaze settled on Lucas gauging his response.

“Do you want to see pictures?” Zoe asked.

“Maybe later,” Taylor said. “I need to talk to your mommy first. Why don’t you sit with your auntie for a bit, all right?”

“Okay!” Zoe seemed a little disappointed but returned to Ruth.

“Mister Stanton,” Taylor acknowledged after he was sure she was preoccupied.

“Just who the hell are you?” Lucas demanded.

“As I told you before, I’m Sarah’s counselor.”

“My daughter just called you grandpa.”

Though Lucas declaring Zoe his daughter had to be a shock, Taylor gave no outward sign. As a lawyer he was used to hostile confrontations. With a sigh he merely said, “Shall we have a seat?”

Gently guiding Sarah to the table in the kitchenette Taylor helped her sit before taking his own seat. Lucas plopped into one across from them his gaze darting from Sarah to Zoe and back again. He had so many questions but with her lawyer present he wasn’t sure he’d get answers.

“Sarah’s father was my best friend,” Taylor explained. “Sarah and Samuel grew up calling me uncle and I was more than happy to take up the role. I never had children of my own, you see.”

Lucas sighed not really interested in Taylor’s life story.

“That being said I think of Zoe as my granddaughter so I’m quite happy to play the role of her grandfather as she will not know any other.”

“What about...” Lucas hesitated as Sarah flinched. He was certain her father was still alive but judging from her reaction it was not a subject she wanted to discuss. His brow furrowed. Was she estranged from her father? How? When?

Taylor cleared his throat. He looked at Sarah asking, “So how much does he know? Rosemary?”

Sara nodded not speaking.

“I see.” Taylor turned back to Lucas. “What exactly do you want Mister Stanton?”

“I want my family.”

“And what brought this on? You didn’t seem to care four years ago.”

“Don’t...” Lucas was ready to leap to his feet but held back not wanting to draw Zoe’s attention. He took a deep breath trying to calm himself and order his thoughts. “Four years ago was a mistake. I admit that. If I could take it back I would. I—I want to start over...with Sarah.”

His gaze went to her hoping she would see his sincerity but she refused to look at him. Taylor, meanwhile, kept a close eye on him reading every nuance. Four years ago he thought he had read Lucas quite clearly but now Taylor was puzzled by this change of heart. It really did seem like Lucas wanted to patch up their marriage. But why?

“I believe I should have a word with my client in private. Mister Stanton wait here please,” Taylor stood offering a hand to Sarah and directing her to one of the bedrooms. When Lucas moved to follow Taylor bade him to remain seated. “We’ll only be a moment.”

Chapter Fourteen

Chapter 14 - The Billionaire CEO's Runaway Wife

Safely out of sight Sarah’s nerves got the better of her and she paced back and forth, “What am I going to do? Why is he here? Why would he even want to see me? And Zoe...How am I going to explain this? She’s never asked about her father. Not once. And she called him Edward! Can you believe it? She was so proud too. Like it had been a scavenger hunt!”

Taylor watched her deep in thought, “Sarah, sit down, please. You’ll wear a hole in the floor.”

“Good. Maybe it will swallow me up. I knew coming back was a bad idea.”

“No. It wasn’t,” Taylor said guiding her to the bed and made her sit down. “You are letting your fears control you and that is not good. Not for you and certainly not for Zoe. Now deep breath.”

Sarah complied taking in a long breath and releasing it slowly.

“Has it occurred to you he may be sincere?”

She let out a strained laugh, “Uncle...him? You really think that? After everything he did...him and that slut.”

“Ah, there it is,” Taylor smiled. “There is the Sarah I know. Spirited and opinionated.”

Sarah let out a genuine laugh and felt herself relax.

“Sarah, speaking strictly as a lawyer, I have to ask what do we really know? All we have are text messages. They are circumstantial at best, not proof. We have no evidence, no pictures.”

“What about all those pictures in the magazines?”

“They are still just circumstantial. Shopping for dresses and jewelry looks bad but it’s not proof of them sleeping together.”

“So you think I should take him back?”

“No, of course not,” Taylor sat beside her. “But if he wants to he could take you to court for custody.”

“He’s not taking Zoe from me!”

“I doubt very much there is a court anywhere that would allow that,” Taylor soothed her. “But they may choose to protect his parental rights. That means visitation and holidays. Is that what you want for Zoe?”

Sarah sighed. No. She didn’t want Zoe to have to go through the strain and confusion of parents that were forced to cooperate by court order. Zoe would hear the rumors about how her parents’ marriage fell apart, vicious rumors about how her mother was unworthy of her father. What would she think then?

“So, what do we do?”

“I think we’re going to have to face facts and accept that he’s going to want to spend time with her...and you. But that also means we can control the situation.”

Sarah gave him a questioning look.

“We can make whatever conditions we want...for instance time and place, he’s not allowed to bring his mistress or family around Zoe...He also can’t tell anyone you are Rosemary Thomas. Anything we want.”

Realization slowly dawned on her finally getting what he was saying. Taylor grabbed a piece of stationery from the desk along with a pen as they discussed possible conditions. Sarah doubted it would be so simple. After all Lucas may insist on his own conditions but with this they could direct the conversation. Sarah finally allowed herself to relax. She wasn’t alone. Taylor and Ruth were on her side and that would be enough.

* * *

Lucas sat at the table quietly tapping his finger on the hard surface. Nothing had gone as planned...not that he had a plan. When Zoe confronted him at the zoo he didn't know what to expect. He still didn't know if he was being honest. She seemed so serious then in sharp contrast to now.

"These are the monkeys, aren't they funny?" Zoe giggled as she continued showing Ruth pictures. "And this is Ruby. She's a really nice camel."

"She looks sweet," Ruth nodded.

"And these are the goats from the petting zoo!"

Lucas listened. It was obvious how much Zoe loved animals. He would have to make an effort to learn her other likes and dislikes as well. She liked movies. And dogs. Maybe he should have Alan research children to get him started.

"All right, Mister Stanton," Tailor said stirring him from his private musings as they returned. Helping Sarah to sit Tailor took his own seat again. "What exactly do you want, Mister Stanton?"

"I want my wife...and my daughter," Lucas said simply his gaze settling on Sarah but she still refused to meet his gaze. "I want them to come home."

"That requires a follow-up question. Why?"

"Why what?" Lucas glared at him.

"For years you willfully ignored the woman you married, never once spent a moment in her company that was not forced. You told her to disappear. Four years ago Sarah gave you what you wanted. She disappeared. So what is the problem?"

Lucas felt his face warm as his words were thrown at him. Her lawyer certainly wasn't one to pull punches. He had so many questions but none of them that he wanted to ask in front of this man. Finally Lucas asked, "Why wasn't I told about Zoe? I don't recall anything in the divorce papers about child support."

"So you did read them," Tailor said earning another glare. "We didn't include stipulations concerning Zoe because Sarah was unaware she was pregnant at the time. She didn't find out until several weeks later. As for informing you...the divorce was finalized and we already included a clause barring her from seeking any monetary compensation from you present or future so she couldn't seek child support even if she wanted...so there was no need."

"No need," Lucas muttered his eyes going back to Sarah but she still refused to meet his gaze. "I want us to be together."

"Then I have to ask you again, why?"

“Does it matter?”

“It might. What if I said my client is afraid for her and her daughter’s safety?”

“I never...I would never hurt them,” Lucas declared his eyes darting from the lawyer to Sarah to see her fidgeting and biting her lip as if fighting tears. Wait...what was she thinking about?

Lucas frowned. His mind raced searching for any memory of raising a hand to her and found none. Granted he was never supportive and he had insulted her but he never caused her physical harm. Why then did she seem afraid of him?

Taylor watched him carefully gauging his response not just his words but body language as well. There was no doubting his agitation but his confusion seemed genuine. Could it be he didn’t know what his family had been doing?

“I swear, I will never hurt Sarah or Zoe,” Lucas finally said. “I’ll keep them safe. I just...want my family back.”

“If that is the truth then you won’t mind proving it.”

“What?” Lucas looked at him.

Taylor slid a piece of paper toward him, “Sarah and Zoe will be in town for the next two weeks until her new book launches. You have that long to prove your sincerity. Fail and you will relinquish any and all parental rights to Zoe and you will not seek them out again.”

Lucas’s heart beat in his chest at the lawyer’s declaration. What the hell was he talking about? Why would he give up his parental rights? What kind of proof did they require?

Sarah still refused to meet his gaze forcing him to read the paper he had been handed. There weren’t many provisions but what was written cut him to the bone.

First, he would make no announcements or official statements concerning the state of their relationship or of Zoe’s status.

Second, he would avoid any rumors that indicated the presence of a mistress or infidelity. [Wait, did Sarah believe he had cheated on her too? Was that why she left?]

Third, Zoe was to have no contact with any member of his family without the expressed consent of and under Sarah’s direct supervision. [What exactly did she think his family would do?]

Fourth, he would reveal to no one Sarah was Rosemary Thomas (present company excluded) nor would he participate in any rumors or debates concerning her identity. [Well, he didn’t care about that anyway.]

Considering their discussion the stipulations were rather simple but they only left him with more questions, the second and third especially. Sarah was smart, surely she wouldn't be taken in by rumors circulating about him and Madeline. She couldn't believe they were true. Could she? And what did she have against his family? Sarah never spoke to his sister or mother. The only time they had contact was on holidays. Then why...

It just didn't make any sense. And he only had two weeks? That wasn't nearly enough time to convince her to stay especially as she wouldn't even look at him unless...

"I'd like to add my own stipulation," Lucas said.

Taylor raised an eyebrow but didn't protest. Lucas took his silence as permission to continue.

"I want Sarah and Zoe to come home and stay with me."

Sarah finally stirred staring at him with an expression of shock. Did she really think he wouldn't make this request? That he would tolerate them to stay anywhere else?

"I won't comment on our relationship but I will be her escort to any events she plans on attending."

Sarah shook her head ready to protest but remained silent as Taylor set his hand on hers. She gave him a questioning look as he quietly said, "I think you should consider this."

"What are you talking about?"

"Rumors are already flying about Rosemary staying in this hotel," Taylor warned. "It's only just started but in a week you may find yourself in an uncomfortable position: you and Zoe. And if you are staying with him you can be assured of number two."

Sarah bit her lip. Taylor did make good points. No doubt people would soon be looking for a woman and child with a dog. She certainly didn't want people harassing Zoe. Keeping Rosemary's identity secret was also imperative to the publisher. Their whole advertisement for the book hinged on the big reveal. But the very idea of being in the same room as Lucas...

"How are we supposed to stay in a cramped condo?" Sarah finally spoke.

"I don't have the condo anymore," Lucas said. "I live in the villa in Astoria. I have for years."

Sarah blinked. For the first time since he appeared in front of her she looked genuinely stunned. Her brow furrowed no doubt wondering why he chose to live there. Finally, she seemed to come to a decision.

"Fine. I'll stay in one of the guest rooms."

Lucas wanted to protest but held back. He had to be smart and not push her too hard. The fact she agreed to stay with him was a huge step forward. At least they would be under the same roof and he could be certain they were safe. Reluctantly, he nodded.

Taylor glanced from one to the other seemingly amused before saying, “Very well. I will add your stipulations.”

He took back the paper and made notations. Lucas watched him anxious about what that paper meant. He couldn’t lose his custody rights, not now, not ever, not when he had only just met Zoe.

“Do you have plans for dinner?” Taylor asked.

Lucas’s brow furrowed in confusion. Why was he asking that?

“Ruth was taking us out,” Sarah said.

Taylor nodded before looking at Lucas.

“No.”

“Then shall we all meet at Good Eats?” Taylor asked. “I will draft an official document for both of you to sign.”

Sarah hesitantly met Lucas’s gaze before nodding. He had no choice but to agree. Satisfied Taylor stood squeezing Sarah’s shoulder in comfort before seeing himself out. Lucas breathed easier but Sarah only seemed more rigid. He was beginning to understand the difficulties that lay ahead.

* * *

The small group remained in the hotel room for an hour before heading out for supper. An awkward wait turned into an awkward car ride as Lucas insisted on riding with Sarah while Ruth and Alan rode in the other car. Now that he had found her he was desperate to keep her and Zoe within sight at all times. At the restaurant Ruth apologized profusely to the hostess as they only had reservations for four and now required six seats.

Gretchen merely smiled recognizing Zoe in an instant and happily rearranged their reservation showing them to a table near the piano. As before, she gushed over the three-year-old. Zoe enjoyed the attention even more than before.

There was some hesitation as to how they should arrange seating but Lucas insisted on sitting next to Zoe and Sarah. Sarah would have preferred more space from him but gave up relying solely on Zoe who sat between them. Alan and Ruth sat across from the hesitant family watching with eager fascination. For the most part Zoe seemed completely unaware of the tension between her parents focusing on the menu selecting a hamburger and curly fries this time.

“What about fish sticks?” Alan asked noting the options on the children’s menu.

Zoe made a face and stuck out her tongue.

“You don’t like fish?” Lucas asked eager to learn about his little girl.

“No, she doesn’t.” Sarah shook her head.

While Zoe was not particularly picky when it came to food she didn’t like seafood. Shellfish in particular turned her off because it was cooked in the shell and maintained its form, like lobster. She liked the fresh fish fillets Tailor brought them after his fishing trips well enough but in general she shied away from it otherwise.

Lucas raised a brow wondering why but Sarah focused on the menu options. The conversation fell into an awkward lull as they waited for their food. Lucas’s gaze kept drifting to Sarah wanting to ask her all the questions that plagued him the last few years plus several new ones but she was back to ignoring him. Would they ever be able to have a simple conversation?

Luckily their food came quickly and they settled in to eat. With Sarah still ignoring him Lucas focused on Zoe.

“So...Zoe you like horses?” Lucas asked.

“Ah-huh. Horses and doggies and goats and chickens,” Zoe said. “Mommy says when I get bigger I can have a pony!”

Lucas glanced at Sarah but she remained silent and kept her eyes averted from him. What did he have to do to get her to acknowledge him?

“So you want a pony?” Lucas said. “That’s a bit bigger than a puppy.”

“It’s okay. We have a barn and Thistle and Rosy and Posy won’t mind.”

A barn? Lucas raised an eyebrow. Had they been living on a farm? Or was she talking about a local stable? Just how had they been living for three years?

“Thistle, Rosy and Posy?”

“Our donkey and goats! Mommy bought them for me!”

So, a farm.

“So, what is your puppy’s name?”

“Daisy.”

“Daisy?” Alan suddenly piped up. “That’s Rosemary’s daughter.”

Zoe gave him a shrewd look in as much to say, Well, duh! Out loud she said, “I know, silly.”

“Oh,” Alan cleared his throat. “So how long...have you known about your mom?”

“I’ve known forever!” Zoe proudly declared. “Mommy said it was a secret so I can’t tell anyone but I want everyone to know my mommy is the bestest!”

Lucas fought a smile as Zoe gushed about her mother. It was clear she thought the world revolved around Sarah, or at least that it should. He wondered how long it would take for him to earn such loyalty and adoration or if it was even possible.

“I wanted mommy to enter the rodeo with Applejack at the fair but she said she was too old,” Zoe said. “But she’s not old at all, is she? You think she could do it too, right?”

“I think your mommy can do anything she wants,” Lucas said. “I’d love to see her in the rodeo.”

“Me too!” Zoe practically bounced in her booster seat. “I want to see Applejack run. Mommy says he’s like lightning! Auntie Ruth, did you see mommy in the rodeo?”

“I did,” Ruth nodded glancing at Sarah. “I was there when she and Jack won at the county fair.”

Lucas’s gaze slid toward Sarah again noticing her cheeks had gone pink. Was she really embarrassed by her own accomplishments? How much did he not know about her? He hadn’t even known she could ride let alone competed in a rodeo.

“Auntie Sarah?”

They looked up to see a young teenage girl staring at their table with two little boys in tow.

“Alexis!” Sarah jerked to attention. “You’ve gotten so big!”

Chapter Fifteen

Chapter 15 - The Billionaire CEO's Runaway Wife

Alexis broke out in a broad grin her green eyes sparkling as she herded her little brothers toward the table and quickly hugged Sarah.

“Mom said she saw you the other night.”

“She did. I heard you’re going to be a big sister again.”

“I sure hope it’s a girl,” Alexis sighed. “It’s so tiring running after boys. Oh these are Isaac and Benjamin. Hey you two, say hi to Aunt Sarah.”

Sarah chuckled as the five- and four-year-old shyly greeted her. While Sean and Theo looked like mini versions of Silas, Isaac and Ben had their mother’s brunette hair and green eyes. Their round faces reflected more of Ava than Silas but that would change as they grew and the features they inherited from their father became more prominent.

“Isaac, you’ve gotten so big and handsome,” Sarah smiled. “I remember holding you when you were this big!”

Isaac blushed but said, “You remember me?”

“Of course, sweetie. How can I forget such a handsome boy?”

“Mommy, who’s that?” Zoe asked as she and the boys considered each other.

“Oh sweetie,” Sarah turned to her flashing an excited smile. “Remember I told you about Auntie Ava and your cousins? These are Alexis, Isaac and Ben. Alexis, boys, this is Zoe.”

“Hi!” Zoe happily chirped catching the boys off guard and making them blush awkwardly.

“Zoe?” Alexis smiled. “You are so cute! And you look just like Aunt Sarah!”

“I think so too!” Zoe happily giggled.

“Wait until I tell mom!” Alexis laughed. “Sean and Theo are going to be so jealous. Mom! Oh, how long are you going to be in town?”

“A couple weeks,” Sarah said.

“Oh good! You and Zoe have to come over to our house,” Alexis said. “There are way too many boys!”

“Can I bring Daisy?” Zoe inquired.

“Who’s Daisy?” Alexis asked.

“My puppy.”

“You have a dog?” Isaac and Ben’s eyes lit up.

“Ah-huh,” Zoe nodded.

“How old are you?” Isaac asked.

“Three.”

“That’s not fair,” Isaac said. “We asked dad for a dog but he said we had to wait until we’re older.”

“My mommy said I have to wait until I’m bigger before I can have a pony,” Zoe said. “But that’s okay because we have Applejack.”

“Who’s that?”

“Mommy’s horsey.”

“Lexi? Oh, there you are. I hope you three aren’t bothering our guests. Oh! Sarah!”

“Hello Ava. They aren’t a bother at all.”

“I know we said we would meet up but I wasn’t expecting...but who are—” Ava’s voice trailed off as her gaze took in Ruth, Alan and finally settled on Lucas. He could practically hear her mind churning. Surprisingly she didn’t seem angry at him, only confused by his presence. Her gaze drifted to Zoe. “And you must be Zoe! I’ve heard so much about you!”

“Are you my Auntie Ava?”

“That I am.”

“Hi!” Zoe smiled. “Can I bring Daisy and play at your house?”

“Daisy?”

“My puppy!”

Ava hesitated but said, “Of course, sweetie! We’d love to have you! You and your...puppy.”

“Okay. Does Uncle Silas not like doggies?”

Ava grimaced but said, “No, he likes dogs.”

“Okay. Good.”

Ava chuckled, “Well, I should get these three out of your hair so you can enjoy your meal. Sarah, I’ll call so we can organize a play date, yes?”

“Of course. I look forward to it,” Sarah smiled and looked again at the boys. “See you soon!”

Alexis giggled as her brothers blushed again before accompanying their mother away. Ava gave Sarah one final curious glance but she wouldn't say anything now. Sarah knew the questions would come later.

“Uh-oh. Not in town for a day and you already have two boyfriends,” Ruth declared making Lucas sputter into his drink.

* * *

Alexis's appearance had surprised him. Though Lucas knew Avalynn owned the restaurant he hadn't realized she made frequent visits or that today was one of them. Even more surprising was how willingly Alexis addressed Sarah as aunt. He wasn't certain Sarah's reaction was more or less surprising.

The stony expression she wore since they came face to face melted in an instant as she gushed over the two young boys. Was she like that with all children? Isaac and Ben had been noticeably shy at first but they seemed to open up to her. They warmed up even faster to Zoe who was all smiles.

As infatuated as he was by Sarah and Zoe Lucas didn't miss Ava's probing glance. She was certainly going to tell Silas and he didn't know what he was going to do then. He could only imagine the words Silas and Julius would have with him afterwards. Lucas breathed a sigh of relief when Ava pulled her kids away and headed out but his peace was shattered by Ruth's statement.

“Not in town for a day and you already have two boyfriends.”

In the middle of drinking Lucas sputtered out his soda and had to grab several napkins. What the hell?

“Ruth, really?” Sarah seemed equally aghast.

“Mommy, what's a boyfriend?” Zoe asked innocently sending Alan into a fit of chuckles.

Sarah warily eyed them both, “A boyfriend is s a boy who is your friend. That's all.”

“Oh. Then, I have three boyfriends. Isaac, Ben and Jamie!”

Sarah glared as Ruth struggled not to laugh alongside Alan who was fit to be tied.

“Mommy, what's wrong with them? What's so funny?”

“Nothing,” Lucas answered. “They are just being silly. Ignore them.”

This earned another snort from Alan. Lucas glared at him as he tried to marshal control over himself. With a frown Lucas shook his head and glanced in Sarah's direction. Surprisingly she was actually looking at him. More surprising than that was her expression. There was no revulsion or anger. If anything she looked...grateful? And maybe...amused?

Their eye contact was brief and she quickly looked away. Yet as brief as it was it made his heart skip. Certainly it meant something. Somewhere, somehow she still had feelings for him. She had to...he hoped.

"Grandpa Tailor!" Zoe happily exclaimed as the lawyer made his appearance.

Chuckling he sat down on the remaining empty seat glancing around the table, "Well, it seems you are having a good time."

"Ah-huh. We saw Auntie Ava."

"Ah, good. Good."

"Here you are," the server brought water setting it in front of Tailor. "Would you like to see a menu?"

"No. No. That won't be necessary. I'll have the fish fillet with rice and sautéed asparagus."

"Garlic or lemon pepper?"

"Garlic," Tailor nodded. "With sweet tea."

The server nodded before departing.

"You must eat here quite often if you know the menu that well," Lucas commented.

"Oh, I stop by once a month or so," Tailor said. "It's good to get out every now and again. And the food here is good."

The conversation stagnated until Tailor's food arrived and he tucked in quite comfortably despite the tension around the table. He looked at Zoe eating her burger contentedly between her parents who barely touched their own plates. Yet there did seem a bit less tension than in the hotel room. He wondered if Sarah was relaxing over time or if something happened in his absence. Zoe mentioned Ava making an appearance. That could only mean Avalynn Prescott. He wondered...

"Here you are, Mister Stanton," Tailor said after a moment taking a thin document out of his briefcase. "Read it carefully."

Lucas accepted the two-page document. In it the terms and conditions of the agreement were clearly stated along with all the stipulations including the ones he made. This would ensure he could spend time with Sarah and Zoe but it gave him a strict time limit: two weeks. He had two

weeks to somehow break the wall he had placed between him and Sarah. If he didn't somehow manage it he would lose everything.

It was all...or nothing.

With a deep breath he signed. He wasn't one to back down from a challenge. Tailor accepted the paper back with a nod before handing it to Sarah for her review and signature. She seemed to hesitate even longer than Lucas but also signed.

"Very well. I shall keep this in my vault."

"And Sarah and Zoe will come home tonight," Lucas looked at her hopefully.

"We...we missed checkout," Sarah hesitated.

"Actually, you shouldn't checkout," Tailor said. "As long as Rosemary is on the reservation books people won't look for her elsewhere."

"But...The publisher is paying for the reservation. It would be a waste of money."

"Oh. I wouldn't worry about that," Ruth waved off her concern. "For this stunt it's well worth it. Besides...Donna has been whining about needing a vacation."

"You mean she'll stay in the suite? Would that really be okay?"

"Of course. Just sign the Rosemary books for her and she'll be thrilled."

Lucas stared at Ruth in confusion. Was the appeal for Rosemary really that great? Was he underestimating how much people enjoyed those books? Perhaps he needed to do more research. Alan liked the books so he would start by asking him.

Sarah hesitated at the news. She seemed unnerved by her character's following. Perhaps she kept herself far enough apart that she wasn't used to fame?

"Then you'll come home tonight?" Lucas asked hopefully. "I'll have Ulima make up your rooms."

"...Ulima," Sarah repeated recalling the housekeeper.

At least it meant she couldn't be staying with him alone. Not that she was afraid he'd try anything. If their marriage was anything to go by he had absolutely no interest in her body...at least as long as he was sober and certainly not with Tailor keeping a close eye on him. And given the way he kept staring at Zoe it was very clear he was eager to know the daughter he only just met.

“I’ll help you and Zoe pack when we return to the hotel,” Taylor said. “And Mister Stanton can inform his housekeeper to have the rooms ready.”

Lucas nodded. Everything was decided but now he felt even more anxious.

* * *

Ulima was understandably confused when Lucas arrived and instructed her to prepare two of the guest rooms. She looked at him as if he had suddenly grown two heads but complied. Her opinion didn’t improve as he nervously paced the hallway. The rooms were only just finished by the time their guests arrived.

Shaking her head Ulima answered the door only to breakdown at the sight waiting for her. Tears shimmering in her eyes she stepped forward pulling Sarah into a desperate hug.

“Cariño! I’m so glad to see you! You look beautiful! You must have gotten out of the city for awhile. I told you...fresh air. OH!” Ulima hesitated as her gaze fell on Zoe who studied her closely. “And this is?”

“Oh, this is Zoe. Zoe this is Ulima. She’s the housekeeper. She keeps everything tidy and does the cooking.”

“Hello!” Zoe smiled. “This is my puppy, Daisy!”

“Conejita!” Ulima immediately stooped and enveloped the little one in her arms. “You are as beautiful as your mother.”

Zoe giggled snuggling into her embrace. The older woman reminded her of Grandma Ya-Ya so she knew there was nothing to fear.

Ulima wiped away her tears realizing they were still standing at the door, “Oh, come in! Come in!”

She hurriedly ushered them inside. Sarah helped Zoe out of her coat and shoes casting a slow glance around the interior. It felt so strange to be back. The walls were the same neutral tone but artwork had been added. The furniture had been updated and changed. There was a lived-in feel with random items left out where they had last been tossed. The smells from the kitchen were fresh and appetizing.

Sarah noticed the lawn was well cared for as well. It seemed Lucas hadn’t been lying when he said he was living there now. In a way she was glad. The house was beautiful so it was nice to see it being appreciated.

Taylor helped bring in their luggage looking around the house with a nod. It seemed he had the same thoughts as her. With a gentle smile he hugged her, “Try to get some sleep. If you need me for any reason call me. It doesn’t matter what time.”

“All right. Thank you.” Sarah nodded still nervous.

“Come here, sweet pea. Give grandpa a hug.”

Zoe eagerly ran up to him throwing her arms around him as Tailor scooped her up with a laugh. He kissed her forehead before setting her down.

“Bye, bye Grandpa Tailor!” Zoe waved skipping into the living room with Daisy on her heels.

They both hopped onto the couch looking out the window at the rather large backyard for New York.

“Oh! Zoe, don’t let Daisy on the couch,” Sarah admonished after seeing Tailor out.

“It’s fine,” Lucas said from where he watched their arrival.

Sarah flinched hesitantly looking at him. He stood leaning against the wall trying not to look intimidating. She wasn’t sure how to describe the look in his eyes: fearful, desperate, unsure, longing...

It was so intense she had to look away. Her own contradictory feelings certainly didn’t help. For years she had done things on her own deliberately avoiding any thoughts to the life she left behind. She didn’t want to dwell on the past. She was determined to look forward but in looking forward she hadn’t really dealt with her past struggles, just ignored them. Now her past was staring at her seemingly desperate to hold onto her.

But why?

She needed someone to talk to but aside from Ruth the only other people who knew the truth and could offer sage advice were several hundreds of miles away.

“Okay, Zoe. Time for bed. Let’s go.” Sarah finally announced.

“Ah! Do we have to?”

“Well if you don’t want to see the Statue of Liberty tomorrow...”

“Okay! I’m coming!”

Alan and Lucas shared a chuckle at her enthusiasm.

“Oh, let me show you to your rooms,” Ulima gathered up their bags and headed upstairs to the bedrooms.

Sarah hesitated, “Zoe, go say good night.”

Zoe paused and ran to Lucas. Startled he knelt accepting her hug, “Good night, daddy. We’ll talk tomorrow. Good night, Uncle Alan.”

Then she ran back to her mother and headed upstairs. Lucas stared at Sarah in shock barely managing a wave as she headed upstairs after their daughter and the puppy.

“Mommy, before bed can I talk to Ya-Ya?”

“Ya-Ya? It’s getting late.”

“I know. But it’s important.”

“If you call Ya-Ya there won’t be time for a story.”

“Maybe Ya-Ya will tell me a story on the phone.”

“All right. I’ll see if she’s up once you get into your pajamas.”

“Well, this isn’t going to be awkward at all,” Alan sighed.

Lucas glared at him but couldn’t disagree. This wasn’t how he imagined Sarah returning home after four years but he was determined to make it work. He had to find a way to talk to her. He refused to lose her twice.

Chapter Sixteen

Chapter 16 - The Billionaire CEO's Runaway Wife

Lucas lay awake. His listless eyes looked at the light squeaking past the blinds. All night long he tossed and turned thinking about Sarah in the room across the hallway. She was so close yet so far. Somehow he had to talk to her. He had so many questions. But he didn’t want to bombard her or make her feel like she was being interrogated.

If this was strictly business he wouldn’t even give it a second thought. Closing million dollar deals was child’s play compared to what he was attempting to do. How did one talk to their wife...let alone convince her to give him a second chance after all the mistakes he made? He was so far out of his depth.

And then there was Zoe. He didn’t have a clue how to be a dad. His own wasn’t particularly attentive and passed away when he was young. Apparently his father had been so upset when his

grandmother refused to turn the company over to him he abandoned his family to seek his fortune and prove himself. According to his grandmother his father died penniless. It probably was just as well he had no memories of the man.

Zoe deserved better. But it left him in a quandary. Who did he know who was a good father? Two names immediately came to mind: Julius DaLair and Silas Prescott. Both were adored by their children and seemed complete naturals despite the years they were separated from them. Julius's children were five years old before he even met them and a full ten years separated Silas from his.

If they could do it, certainly he could...maybe.

He wished he could talk to them. After Sarah left DaLair and Prescott severed all business ties with Stanton and its associates. Naturally several companies abandoned Stanton in favor of doing business with DaLair and Prescott but there were still plenty of others willing to work with him. Lucas had to do some reshuffling and reorganize his business's projects but he made it work.

There was no denying Stanton Inc had fallen behind a few steps but it was nothing they couldn't make up eventually. Now though he was hesitant to contact either Julius or Silas. He doubted they would be happy to hear from him. Would they even be willing to listen to him after...everything?

With a sigh he sat up. Stepping into the bathroom he splashed water on his face trying to marshal the depressing thoughts that swirled in his mind. Still groggy he dressed in simple trousers and a t-shirt before heading down stairs for coffee.

As he descended the smells of breakfast drifted upward to greet him: eggs, bacon, and salsa. Reaching the kitchen he saw Ulma at the stove happily humming as she made huevos rancheros. At the table Zoe sat coloring alongside Alan who chuckled at her antics.

"How long have you been here?" Lucas demanded.

"An hour," Alan shrugged.

"And you didn't wake me?"

"She's much better company," Alan smirked giving Zoe a wink as she giggled.

"Morning daddy!" Zoe smiled.

Lucas froze mid-step. Whatever he was about to say was forgotten. Those two simple words sent his mind spinning and he trembled with a longing to hear it again.

"Psst...you can say hi back, dad," Alan said noticing his frozen state causing Zoe to snicker again.

She gazed at him with shining greenish eyes and a smile just as bright as she said, “You’re silly daddy.”

Lucas finally stirred approaching the table. Patting Zoe on the head he leaned down to kiss her forehead, “Morning, sweet pea.”

Zoe giggled.

“What? No morning kiss for me?” Alan asked.

“She’s cuter,” Lucas scowled at him which made Zoe giggle more.

“Señor,” Ulima gave Lucas his morning coffee.

He sipped it with a grimace. Zoe wrinkled her nose as she watched him. After a moment she said, “Daddy, coffee is bad for you. You should drink tea. Mommy says it’s healthier.”

“Your mommy really likes tea, doesn’t she?” Alan asked.

“Ah-huh,” Zoe nodded. “Mommy drinks tea every day. In the morning and afternoon and evening. She even has special teas. Teas for colds and aches and upset tummies.”

Alan raised an eyebrow glancing at Lucas in as much to say now was a good time to get information as any other. The gesture and intention was not lost on him. If anyone knew Sarah it would certainly be her daughter.

“Your mommy is special, isn’t she?” Alan asked.

“Mommy is the most special! We’re both miracles!”

“Oh yeah? How do you figure that?”

“Because we almost died,” Zoe said to the shock of her listeners.

“...Right. That’s just a figure of speech, I suppose,” Alan cleared his throat.

“No. It’s true. Mommy said I was born too early and had to be in an incu-thing until I was finished growing,” Zoe said matter-of-factly. “And mommy had comp—compli...”

“Complications?” Alan supplied.

“Ah-huh. She had a lot of bleeding and the doctors had a hard time stopping it,” Zoe nodded. “So you see...we are real miracles! Grandma Ya-Ya said so.”

Ulima quietly set the plate with tortillas covered in eggs sunny-side up with mild salsa and bacon in front of Zoe with a strained smile. Zoe happily picked up her fork to eat perfectly happy with

an ethnic-style breakfast. Ulima gave her a gentle pat and a warm smile even as her eyes shined with tears though she said nothing.

Alan grimaced and looked at Lucas. Lucas stood staring at Zoe with his forgotten coffee still in hand. He had gone pale as a ghost his hands trembling. It couldn't be... There had to be a mistake.

But if it were true...

He could have lost both Sarah and Zoe in one instant and never known. Just the thought of what might have been sent his mind into overdrive. If Zoe hadn't survived scenes like yesterday at the zoo would never have happened. How would Sarah have coped with the loss alone? Without comfort or anyone to share the burden and pain?

And Sarah... what if she hadn't survived? It was unlikely anyone would have told him. He would have gone on searching never knowing it was futile. What would have happened to Zoe then? Would Ruth have taken her in? Maybe the Grandma Ya-Ya she mentioned? Taylor? Would he even have been given a chance to meet his daughter and mourn Sarah's loss?

God! He was such an idiot!

Unaware of his inner turmoil Zoe happily hummed as she ate. Under her chair Daisy waited for any morsels she might drop. Despite her difficult entry into the world Zoe was full of energy. One would never guess she had been premature and struggled to survive.

Alan cleared his throat with a loud A-hem! Somehow it stirred Lucas from his thoughts. His gaze went again to the little girl happily eating her breakfast. He was struck with the desire to keep her within sight at all times. Whether it was fatherly instincts to protect his family or just desperation not to lose them again he didn't know but he was determined to keep both safe.

"Morning Señora," Ulima smiled as Sarah came down the stairs.

Lucas tore his gaze from Zoe to marvel at the new vision. Her attire was simple and functional: jeans, denim jacket and an orange, gold and red striped shirt. The colors popped against the faded blue denim. Yet despite the simplicity, Lucas was memorized studying her every curve tantalizingly hinted by the way the jeans and shirt hugged her. Did he really think her plain? How had he been so blind?

Though she tried to ignore him her gaze briefly met his before she looked away. A pink tinge came to her cheeks. Lucas wasn't sure if she was embarrassed by his brazen stare or if she had noticed his own toned form stretching the fabric of his t-shirt. He hoped it was the latter.

From a young age his grandmother instilled the need to be physically fit and healthy so he had always maintained a strict workout schedule though yesterday was a reminder he neglected cardio in favor of strength training. A situation he would rectify to ensure he could keep up with Zoe. If he planned to keep her in sight he couldn't let her run circles around him.

“Here, you are,” Ulima smiled handing Sarah a steaming cup.

Sarah accepted with a stiff smile aware she was still being watched. Bringing it close to her lips she hesitated sniffing it before taking a sip. Suddenly her stiff expression eased and she smiled genuinely.

“You remembered!”

“Of course I did,” Ulima was indignant that anyone thought she would fail her duties because she would forget something so simple. “You always liked to start your day with honey-lemon tea because you liked to begin with something sweet and refreshing.”

Sarah blushed but her expression remained soft and pleased. It seemed she and Ulima really had gotten along which made the fact Sarah let the housekeeper go even more bizarre. But it also highlighted again how little Lucas actually knew. They knew she liked tea based on the amount she stored in the kitchen but he hadn’t realized she preferred certain ones depending on the time of day.

“Mommy, Ulima made breakfast!” Zoe excitedly exclaimed. “She made eggs!”

Trying her best to ignore the men in the room who kept staring at her Sarah sat next to Zoe saying, “Oh huevos rancheros. It looks delicious.”

“Moment, señora,” Ulima announced.

Before Sarah could protest Ulima delivered a plate and set it in front of her. Ulima smiled enjoying the amazed and somewhat resigned look Sarah gave her. Without a word the housekeeper set a bottle of Tabasco in front of her knowing full well Sarah was partial to spicy foods. Shaking her head Sarah nonetheless sprinkled the sauce on her breakfast happy to once again enjoy Ulima’s cooking.

“Aren’t you going to eat?” Zoe asked looking at Alan then Lucas.

“Oh,” Alan hesitated. “We don’t really eat in the morning.”

“Mommy says breakfast is the most important meal of the day,” Zoe said. “You should always have one with plenty of protein and vitamins.”

“Your mommy’s a smart woman,” Ulima said setting a plate in front of Alan and another on the table with a pointed look at Lucas.

He hesitated but he didn’t want to set a bad example for his daughter. Lucas sat down glancing at Sarah who was back to ignoring him.

Baby steps.

With a sigh Lucas picked up the Tabasco and sprinkled it on his eggs and salsa.

“Mommy! Daddy likes spicy food just like you!” Zoe exclaimed.

“That’s why I never steal food from his plate,” Alan said with a shiver. “And why I always keep breath mints handy for after.”

Zoe giggled while Lucas glared at him with a silent promise to pay him back. The threat was mild as Sarah quietly chuckled. Lucas glanced in her direction feeling his cheeks warm. Normally he hated embarrassing situations but hearing her laugh in his presence he found he didn’t actually mind all that much. Sarah glanced at him and seeing he was watching her quickly looked away again.

Baby steps.

“So…you have plans today?” Alan asked trying to keep the mood light.

“Statue of Liberty!” Zoe bounced in her seat.

Sarah smiled, “I bought our reservations online this morning so as soon as we’re done eating we can drive out to the Battery. We can look at the memorials before we get on the ferry.”

“Yeah!” Zoe cheered.

“Ferry?” Lucas repeated his mind filling with images of rough seas and boats struggling to stay afloat. “I’m not sure that’s a good idea.”

“I’m sorry?” Sarah looked at him startled. “It’s an island so the only way to get there is by ferry.”

“Boats are dangerous. What about rough seas? They could sink.”

Sarah blinked not sure if he was being serious before saying, “I think we’ll be fine.”

“If you’re worried we can go too,” Alan said. “I’ve never been to the Statue of Liberty.”

“Really?” Zoe asked.

“That’s not necessary. I’m sure you have work to do.”

“It’s Sunday. I think I’m entitled to a day off,” Lucas said ignoring Alan’s smirk.

In truth he usually worked seven days a week. Sunday only had a skeleton crew of sorts so the office was quiet and made a good environment to catch up but right now nothing was further from his mind.

Sarah chewed her lip. Her eyes vacillated from uncertainty to surprise to worry. It seemed she was still unsure about his motivation and torn between wanting to keep her distance and honoring their agreement.

“Will we get to climb all the way to the top?” Zoe asked.

“Umm...no baby.” Sarah shook her head. “I’m afraid not.”

“Aww. Why not?”

“Well, you’re not big enough. You have to be at least forty-two inches tall. Remember the fair last year? You wanted to get on some of the rides but they wouldn’t let you?”

Zoe pouted, “I wish I was bigger.”

“You’ll grow up soon,” Sarah smiled. “I don’t want you to grow up too soon. I like having my baby little.”

“Mommy I won’t be little forever.”

“True but you’ll always be my baby.”

“So when are your reservations?” Alan asked looking at his phone.

Sarah hesitated then answered, “Ten-thirty.”

Nodding Alan and went back to his phone. A few moments later he looked at Lucas and nodded. Lucas breathed easier. He would be able to go with them.

* * *

After breakfast they piled into Sarah’s SUV with Lucas once again riding shotgun and Alan in the backseat with Zoe. Much to her disappointment Daisy had to stay behind but Ulma promised to take good care of the pup. Sarah’s phone chimed with directions to the paid parking area where they disembarked.

Since they were early they took a little time to look around Battery Park stopping to take pictures at some of the monuments including the East Coast Memorial of a giant bronze eagle commemorating servicemen lost on the Atlantic during WWII as well as the Korean War Veterans Memorial and the Immigrants’ Memorial. Zoe was still a little young to understand all the history but she dutifully listened and maintained a contemplative look throughout.

Reaching the Castle they picked up their tickets and headed to the security checkpoint. They were still early enough that they got through rather quickly and boarded their ferry heading up to the third deck where they would have the best view of the Statue as they approached. Zoe bounced on her heels wanting to run along the deck even as it quickly filled. Fearful of losing

sight of her in the growing crowd Lucas scooped her up. After yesterday he was rapidly beginning to understand his daughter was a disappearing expert.

Surprisingly she didn't try to get away. Instead the higher perspective gave Zoe a better view of the ocean and the island that was their goal. Sarah snapped pictures giving Zoe plenty to show when she told everyone about their trip.

Reaching Liberty Island they disembarked and they headed for the Visitor's Center. After a brief discussion they elected not to join a guided tour but checked out a phone so they could listen to the audio tour as they wandered on their own. Though they couldn't climb to the Crown Sarah had purchased tickets that granted them access to the Pedestal allowing them several scenic views. Naturally Zoe wanted several souvenirs from the gift shop before they returned to the ferry to take it to Ellis Island and the Immigration Museum. Though informative the museum was not quite as interesting to the three-year-old she happily held onto her parents' hands giggling all the while.

On the ferry back Sarah's phone buzzed. Taking it out she found it was a text from Ava. She smiled, "Zoe, look Auntie Ava wants us to come over for dinner tonight."

"Really?"

"Yep. The boys are looking forward to playing with you and Daisy and..." Sarah frowned looking at Lucas. "She says you're invited too."

Lucas blinked in surprise. Even when he was on good terms with Julius and Silas they never invited him to their homes. He was rather nervous what Silas would say but as he was officially invited it should be fine...right?

Oblivious to his internal debate Zoe happily bounced in his arms excited about dinner and playing with her cousins she only knew from stories.

Chapter Seventeen

Chapter 17 - The Billionaire CEO's Runaway Wife

By the time they returned home Zoe not only wore out her excitement but had fallen asleep. Sarah gathered her up and carried her inside. Ulma greeted them as they entered but fell silent when she saw the little one was out. She had made sopapillas as a special treat but they would have to wait.

“Do you need help?” Lucas asked.

Sarah shook her head before heading upstairs to lay her down. Daisy yapped circling her feet and trailed after her. Lucas waited anxiously wondering if Sarah would come back down. Perhaps they could finally talk. When she didn't he quietly went in search of her only to find her lying on the bed beside Zoe also fast asleep.

As he peered into the room only Daisy stirred. Curled up beside Zoe the corgi raised its head, its large ears perked up. When Lucas didn't say anything, the pup dropped its head and went back to sleep.

Lucas gazed at the three-year-old and her mother both comfortably asleep. He leaned against the wall drinking in the sight. Both looked so content. He was glad Sarah could at least sleep comfortably even if being back made her anxious. Though the car ride out had been awkward Sarah relaxed during the tour. Her smile was less strained and she didn't flinch every time he stood beside her.

Baby steps.

He kept telling himself that but it wasn't easy. His arms itched to hold her to finally know whether or not she fit in his embrace the way he imagined. But she wouldn't allow that. She barely allowed him to be in the same room. Lucas had no choice but to take it slow but...he only had two weeks. One slip-up she could disappear forever with their daughter and he would have no one to blame but himself.

With a sigh he stepped out of the room quietly closing the door. What could he do?

“Never thought I'd see the day you were completely whipped,” Alan commented.

Lucas turned to look at him as he stood at the top of the stairs. He glared but couldn't argue. From the moment he saw Sarah at the party she consumed his thoughts. And Zoe...Lucas leaned against the wall remembering his words four years ago.

“...If she ends up being pregnant, get rid of it.”

How could he have been so stupid?

Sarah was a wonderful mother. Gentle, caring, firm but understanding. He was fairly certain she had no idea how beautiful she was when she smiled and played with Zoe. She was already beautiful, but with Zoe she was drop-dead gorgeous. God, he had been so blind.

“Luke?”

“I need to know everything,” Lucas said. “I don't care how...just get me the information. Everything about Sarah...and Zoe. Please.”

“Yeah okay,” Alan nodded.

No doubt Zoe’s statement from the morning still resonated. It had been quite a shock to all of them. With the advances of modern medicine one seldom heard about such complications during pregnancy or birth. Yet, that didn’t mean they didn’t happen and not everyone was as lucky as Sarah and Zoe who both managed to survive.

While Sarah and Zoe napped Lucas nervously paced the house. Suddenly everything seemed dangerous and potentially hazardous. How could he protect them from everything? Finally exhausted he collapsed on the couch. This much worry would be the death of him.

“Señor.”

Lucas jerked to attention as Ulima offered him a warm cup. With a nervous smile he accepted taking a drink before he really looked at what was in the mug. He frowned. The taste was similar to coffee but...not...

“Dandelion coffee,” Ulima said. “Señora taught me how to make it. It is very good and very healthy. Señora loves it.”

Lucase hesitated but drank it, “So you remember how Sarah likes her tea?”

“I remember a few things,” Ulima nodded.

“And food preferences?”

Ulima smiled, “Señora always liked it when I made something special. She used to say life is too short to eat the same boring things.”

Lucas’s lips twitched with a smile. So Sarah liked ethnic foods. He wondered when that started. Alan did say she went to Paris to do research for one of her books, perhaps then?

“You two seem to get along well,” Lucas said. “Why did she let you go?”

Ulima grew pensive before answering, “I think...I made a mistake.”

“Mistake?”

“Yes...I felt sorry for her...alone in this big house. I started to pity her and I think that was more painful to her than being alone,” Ulima cautiously said. “Señora didn’t want pity...and I don’t think she likes others to see her pain. She is a very private person. She prefers to suffer in private. She doesn’t like to bother others with it.”

Lucas grimaced. He understood that. He preferred to face his problems on his own too but he usually made them worse. If it wasn’t for Alan Lucas wasn’t sure he would have been able to

solve any of them. But Sarah shouldered everything alone: his neglect, society's ridicule, her pregnancy and raising Zoe, being an author. He didn't even know that kind of strength existed.

"Ulima, do you have children?" Lucas suddenly asked.

"Yes, two daughters. They are grown now."

"Does it ever get easier?"

"Señor?"

"I mean, do you ever stop worrying?"

"No, señor. I'm afraid not. You worry more."

"Terrific." Lucas sighed sipping the dandelion coffee.

"Señor?" Ulima hesitated. "You are not going to leave her alone again, are you?"

Lucas's gaze snapped toward her. Her face was a mask of worry. She truly cared for Sarah and Zoe. Considering the past he couldn't blame her for doubting him.

"No...never again." Lucas shook his head.

Ulima eyed him judging his reaction carefully before nodding. She returned to the kitchen. Apparently he was convincing enough for the housekeeper. Now he just had to persuade Sarah.

* * *

Lucas nervously stepped out of the car looking at the brownstone. He had never been here before so he was surprised by its rather ordinary façade. There was nothing about it that stood out from the others despite the family that called it home.

Sarah and Zoe climbed out after him along with the excited corgi. After being left behind earlier, the puppy was eager to join them this time. Alan gave him a wave of encouragement before driving away. Lucas sighed. He needed all the support he could get. This visit was not going to be easy.

He trailed after Sarah as she led Zoe up the steps to the front door. When they had climbed into the car Sarah rattled off the address to Alan with ease. There was no hesitation in her now as she neared the front door. He wondered how many times she visited in the past. Her knock was answered almost immediately as Duncan smiled and ushered them in.

"Hello!" Zoe greeted with her usual enthusiasm. "What's your name?"

He chuckled, "I am Duncan. I am the butler."

“What’s a butler?”

“I take care of the house and manage the staff,” he explained taking their jackets.

“Oh. So you’re like a housekeeper?” Zoe asked.

“...Yes. Something like that,” Duncan agreed.

“We have a housekeeper too. Her name’s Ulima.”

Duncan nodded with a pleasant smile. After taking care of Isaac and Ben he was quite used to small children and their questions but even the boys weren’t quite this chatty. It was rather refreshing.

“Ma’am,” Duncan nodded to Sarah. “It is good to see you again.”

Sarah smiled, “You haven’t changed a bit Duncan. Thank you.”

“Mister Stanton.” Duncan took his coat.

Lucas nodded. It was clear this wasn’t Sarah’s first visit. He wondered if Ava was the friend Sarah used to visit regularly. At first he was sure it was Ruth but maybe not. What if...

Screeching and laughter echoed as Ben suddenly emerged running from Isaac who wielded a foam sword. Stumbling into Duncan they fell silent as they saw their guests. Daisy barked immediately drawing their attention.

“Puppy!” Ben exclaimed.

“Isaac! Ben!” Alexis appeared. “You know you’re not supposed to run in the house. Oh. Hi, Auntie Sarah.”

“Hello Lexi.”

“Hi!” Zoe said. “This is Daisy.”

The corgi spun an excited circle straining on her leash to greet the equally excited boys. Ben scooted closer giggling as the pup climbed into his lap and licked his face.

“Eww, Ben don’t let the dog lick your face,” Lexi sighed even as she knelt to pet the happy puppy.

They had bugged their parents for a pet since Isaac was born but both seemed hesitant to agree. She was certain their father wanted to say yes but their mother wasn’t as comfortable with the idea and Lexi had a suspicion it had to do with her mother’s childhood, perhaps another traumatic experience induced by her sadistic aunt.

“Oh Sarah!” Ava emerged and hurried up to hug her.

“Hi Auntie Ava!” Zoe smiled eager for her own hug. “That’s Daisy!”

Ava looked at the corgi happily squirming among the kids. Growing up her father didn’t allow pets. The only dogs she ever saw were the guard dogs that patrolled the family estate. Her sister once tossed her into the kennels and locked the door leaving her to face angry, snarling Dobermans. Luckily the dogs were in their pens so they couldn’t reach her but it had still been a traumatizing experience.

Even thinking about it made her tremble but the puppy sitting with her children was pint-sized and...adorable. Hesitantly she knelt immediately drawing the corgi’s attention. As if sensing the need for caution Daisy approached slowly and gently licked Ava’s hand when she offered it. Ava managed a strained smile as she pet its soft fur.

“So how big will she get?” Ava asked.

“She’s almost full grown now,” Sarah informed knowing the trauma of Ava’s past. “Corgi’s don’t get very big.”

“Oh,” Ava relaxed. A little dog wasn’t so scary.

“Corgis are actually herding dogs,” Sarah informed. “Originally they were bred to herd cattle, believe it or not.”

“Cows? But they are so huge! And Daisy’s so small,” Lexi said.

“True but they are quick and can run circles around them,” Sarah chuckled. “They are fearless and have that herding instinct to round up even a bunch of rowdy boys.”

“Daisy likes to herd our chickens,” Zoe agreed, “but she’s not supposed to.”

“Where’d you get her?” Ava asked.

“One of our neighbors breeds them,” Sarah said. “They also have sheep so the dogs learn to herd like they were originally bred to do.”

Ava bit her lip. She wondered if a dog raised on a farm would do all right in the city. The idea that a dog would want to look after the kids and herd them away from places they shouldn’t be was an attractive idea. And Daisy certainly was sweet-natured. She needed to think about it some more.

“Mom, can we take her outside to play?” Lexi asked.

“Um, sure. Just don’t get too dirty. Dinner will be in an hour.”

“Yeah!” Ben and Isaac were immediately bouncing on their feet.

“Mommy! Did you bring it?” Zoe asked.

Sarah chuckled taking a tennis ball out of a canvas bag she brought along as well as a plastic arm that helped one throw it further. She stowed the leash in the bag alongside the bag of dog food they brought along for the pup’s dinner. Hopefully feeding her would keep her from begging for scraps. Daisy immediately started wiggling with excitement. It was her favorite toy. Zoe clapped taking the toys from her mother.

“I’ll show you how it works,” Zoe declared taking charge. As she was the only one with a pet it was her responsibility to teach them the best way to play with a canine.

Sarah chuckled as the kids took off for the backyard which was completely fenced in and secured. There they would be able to run off some energy before dinner. She was actually looking forward to how tuckered out Daisy would be afterwards as working dogs seemed to have boundless energy.

“Come on,” Ava hooked her arm around Sarah’s, “we need to catch up so you better be ready to answer some questions.”

Ava dragged her off toward the backyard where they could relax on the patio while the kids played. Lucas hesitated not sure if he should follow.

“Stanton.”

Lucas froze at the voice. Turning he saw Silas watching him from the stairs though he wasn’t sure when the other arrived.

“Let’s talk,” Silas said.

It didn’t look like he was going to be able to avoid it. With a grimace Lucas nodded allowing Silas to escort him to the office.

“Have a seat,” Silas nodded.

Lucas practically collapsed into one of the oversized chairs that faced each other across a coffee table. Silas sat in the other quietly watching him. Four years ago he had given Lucas his final word...or at least that had been his intention.

It had been difficult watching Sarah bear the strain of a collapsing marriage. Numerous times he wanted to step in but she always insisted he stay out of it. Worse, it seemed Lucas was content to continue the path of self-destruction. When Sarah finally left Silas was relieved. At least she wouldn’t go down with Lucas. Since then he dropped any interest in Lucas or Stanton Inc. Now that Sarah had returned with a daughter he couldn’t stand on the sidelines. He would not let either be hurt again.

“Say it,” Lucas demanded.

“Say what?”

“Say it. Say I’m an idiot for ever thinking my wife was anything but perfect and beautiful and amazing. Say I’m a fool for letting her walk away and missing my baby’s birth...and missing the last four years with them.”

“Well, yes. That about covers it,” Silas nodded.

Lucas choked back a laugh. Looking at Silas he was surprised to see an expression of pity and he realized their situation was not all that different. Silas had also pushed away the woman he loved and lost ten years with his family though he was certainly making up for that lost time now. Silas’s crimes were slightly less reprehensible than his own.

“I...I don’t know what to do,” Lucas finally admitted.

“Answer me this, do you want them in your life?”

“God, yes,” Lucas sighed. “Even since I saw Sarah at the party she’s all I can think about and when I saw Zoe...I just want to keep them in sight at all times. When Sarah said they were going to the Statue of Liberty today all I could think about was the ferry sinking.”

Silas nodded in understanding. He was very familiar with that kind of panic. It was why he insisted on guards even before he introduced himself. Even now Mike and his team continued to shadow Ava and the children wherever they went out despite Sean, Lexi and Theo insisting they were old enough to take care of themselves.

“Today I found out Sarah had complications during the delivery,” Lucas said. “Zoe was born premature and Sarah almost bled to death. They both could have died and I wouldn’t have even known.”

Silas grimaced. That was news to him. Ava told him Sarah had a difficult birth but she hadn’t mentioned details. He wondered if she knew.

“I...I don’t know what to do. I have no idea how to be a father.” Lucas shook his head.

“I hate to tell you this but there is no magic formula and unless you intend to bubble wrap Zoe there is no way to prevent her from getting hurt,” Silas said. “She’s going to scrape her knees and bruise her legs. She’s going to track in mud and come in covered in grass stains. And there is nothing you can do about it. So accept it now.”

With a sigh Lucas studied the coffee table and noticed a pile of books. He knew Silas enjoyed reading so that in and of itself wasn’t surprising. But looking at them he suddenly realized they were all written by the same author: Rosemary Thomas. Frowning Lucas looked at Silas who maintained a neutral expression but his eyes shined with mirth.

“You knew?” Lucas asked.

“Yeah. For awhile now,” Silas chuckled grabbing one of the books and paging through it.

“How?”

“Sarah told Ava. Ava told me.” Silas shrugged. “And before you ask Julius and Macey know too. Actually Macey knew before any of us.”

“She did?”

“Apparently she helped Sarah with research for the second book.”

“The second?” Lucas thought back his mind trying to recall the conversation with Alan and remembered the second book was set in Paris. So Sarah met Macey back then? “Am I the only one who didn’t know?”

Silas chuckled, “No. Aside from her publisher and lawyer there are only a handful of us who know. You might have noticed Sarah doesn’t generally share personal details.”

Lucas grimaced. He had made no effort to gain her trust so why should she share any details with him?

“Actually once you know it’s Sarah who wrote these books they almost work like an autobiography...a record of everything she has ever done.” Silas tossed the book in his hand to Lucas who managed to catch it. “You should read them if you want to know about her.”

Lucas looked at him raising a brow but Silas looked in earnest. He looked at the book in his hands: Willow Remember Me?, obviously a play on Will You Remember Me?, which was actually quite clever. His gaze drifted to the other books: Foxglove Files, To Catch a Cattail, Sage Advice, Daisies in Bloom. It seemed they all were named after a flower or plant of some sort. Rosemary. Even her penname was an herb. He wondered if it was just a gimmick or if she really had an interest in plants. She did like tea so perhaps it was related to that.

“I don’t really have time to read,” Lucas said returning the book to the pile.

“Make time,” Silas insisted.

“I got enough on my plate,” Lucas stood nervously pacing. “Sarah hardly even acknowledges me. She won’t talk to me. I...”

“So it finally happened,” Silas sighed. “Better late than never.”

“What are you talking about?”

“Well, no one can accuse you of being bright. When you figure it out...make sure you tell Julius. He’ll love to hear all about it.”

Lucas grimaced. He had been nervous enough to face Silas. He didn’t know if he could handle Julius. Silas had been harsh during their last confrontation but Julius completely ignored him walking away with a look of disgust.

Chapter Eighteen

Chapter 18 - The Billionaire CEO's Runaway Wife

“...I didn’t cheat on Sarah,” Lucas announced. “I want you to know that.”

“I know.”

“You do?” Lucas looked at him. “How?”

“Ava.” Silas sighed. “As unassuming as she is most people don’t realize how sharp she is. Maybe it came from all those years her sister isolated her growing up but she is very observant. It’s probably where Lexi learned it.”

Seeing Lucas’s confusion. Silas explained further.

“Ava saw you on one of your shopping trips. She said it wasn’t just you and your secretary. Your sister was also there and you didn’t show either of them much interest. She also said you didn’t seem the type to cheat on a signed agreement. Even if you didn’t care for Sarah the marriage was still a contract you’d honor.”

Lucas felt as if a weight lifted off his chest. It was amazingly liberating to be believed. He’d never underrate it again. Now he just had to convince Sarah. Perhaps he should ask Ava to tell her but...no. Sarah would just assume she was being coached and he didn’t want to strain her relationships with her friends. There had to be another way.

“Hey dad!” Sean and Theo suddenly burst into the room.

“Finally my boys emerge from their gamer den to join the real world,” Silas greeted. “I should take a picture to commemorate.”

“Ah, come on dad,” Sean rolled his eyes.

“Yeah stop being weird,” Theo seconded. “Where is everyone anyway?”

“Outside playing with the dog.”

“We got a dog?” the boys asked in shock.

“No. Our guests brought it,” Silas said, “so if you want to play with it you better get down there before supper.”

They didn’t need any further encouragement taking off for the backyard. Silas chuckled shaking his head. For years the kids had been asking for a pet but Ava always said no and he would never contradict her especially considering her history with animals.

“Why didn’t you ever get the kids a pet?” Lucas asked knowing Silas never denied his children their wishes.

“Ava had a traumatic experience with dogs when she was young. She’s been terrified of them ever since.”

“Her sister?”

Silas nodded. It seemed everything always came back to Marilyn and the torments she inflicted on Ava. It was remarkable Ava conquered as many as she had over the years. It was a true testament to her inner strength and constantly surprised him.

“That’s unfortunate.”

“Well Sarah helped her with her fear of horses so maybe she can help with her fear of dogs.”

“Sarah? Really?”

Silas nodded, “Sarah boarded her horse in the city so she would take Ava to the stable every now and again. I guess they started with standing outside the stall with treats and progressed to grooming and such until Ava finally attempted to get in the saddle.”

Silas remembered her unadulterated joy at actually riding again after years of avoiding horses. She was so excited she couldn’t wait to tell him at dinner and burst into his office. Ava practically leapt into his arms, throwing her arms around him and passionately kissing him overcome by sheer giddiness and without a thought about who might see them. Sarah had been there with video in hand to show Ava riding Applejack around the riding ring. It still brought a smile to his face.

It was too soon to say it would be the same story with dogs but just watching Ava cautiously petting the corgi was promising. When it came to dogs German Shepherd, Golden Retriever or American Bulldog were among the most mentioned breeds from the boys but there were plenty

of smaller breeds Ava would be more willing to consider. Sarah said corgis were herding dogs so they had plenty of energy for five kids despite their small size.

Perhaps they could organize a few more of these play dates while Sarah and Zoe were in town to allow Ava time to get used to the idea of a dog. Then maybe they could consider it.

While Silas's thoughts wandered Lucas's were equally consuming. Sarah and Ava were closer than he imagined if they willingly shared secrets and fears. To think she helped Ava conquer a fear she harbored since she was a child. Would she ever cease to amaze him or remind him what an utter fool he had been?

They left the office to join everyone outside. Silas immediately embraced Ava kissing her temple bowing his head to kiss her neck as his hands rubbed her still small stomach while they watched the kids play. Sean and Theo now monopolized the dog's attention but Lexi and the younger kids had retreated to the large play set and played in the sand so all seemed to be enjoying themselves. Amazingly the corgi still had energy to burn and the pup gamely kept up with the older boys.

Lucas watched with a regretful smile. The love Silas openly showered on Ava was almost awkward to watch but at the same time Lucas wished Sarah would allow him to even hold her hand. Even now she pointedly ignored him focusing on the kids.

Lucas's gaze followed hers and he watched Zoe as she and the younger boys built a sand castle as well as roads for their toy cars. He frowned. Perhaps he should have a play set and sandbox installed in their own backyard. It was clear Zoe enjoyed playing outside. Maybe if he installed one Sarah would see he was serious about wanting to make it work.

"How are you feeling?" Silas asked hugging Ava close.

"Good. I have to admit Daisy is a cute puppy and the kids love her."

"We can come over again if you like," Sarah said. "Playing with kids her own age is good for Zoe too."

"I would love that!" Ava smiled. "When Macey is in Paris I don't have many people around I can call friends. Besides, we still have a lot to discuss."

Sarah gave her a strained smile. Lucas looked from one to the other wondering what it was they chatted about while he and Silas had their talk. He had a sinking feeling it was about him given Sarah's pensive expression.

"Excuse me, ma'am."

"Yes?" Ava acknowledged Duncan.

“Dinner is almost ready and I originally intended to serve it in the dining room but perhaps you’d like it alfresco instead?”

“Yes,” Ava looked at the occupied children. “I think we’d all enjoy that. Thank you.”

“Of course, ma’am,” Duncan bowed with a smile before retreating inside.

Moments later he reappeared, setting up plates and silverware on square patio tables pushed together. Duncan retreated inside once again only to emerge with another trolley this one laden with food.

Silas whistled sharply, “All right, let’s bring it in!”

Much to Lucas’s surprise the kids responded almost instantly. Lexi herded the little ones to the patio while Sean and Theo managed one more toss racing the dog to the patio to join everyone. Ava scooped up Ben while Silas gathered Isaac. Duncan was on hand with washcloths for them to clean up.

Zoe ran up to Sarah who hugged her tight and laughed at the sand and grit clinging to her. Duncan handed Lucas another washcloth with a smile. Awkwardly Lucas approached and wiped Zoe’s hands and face clean. Sand seemed to cling everywhere and Lucas was beginning to understand what Silas had meant. Once the kids were clean they sat down at the tables.

Silas and Lucas sat at opposite ends while Ava, Sarah and the kids sat along either side. Lexi sat between Ben and Isaac so she could assist her mother in taking care of them while Sarah inexplicably ended up next to Lucas with only Zoe separating them. Theo and Sean sat near their father impatiently waiting as Duncan served steamed vegetables and lasagna.

Starting from youngest to oldest Duncan worked his way around the tables until everyone’s plates and glasses were filled. Then with a bow he left them to eat. While they enjoyed their dinner Duncan offered a bowl of dog food and water to Daisy who happily inhaled it before seemingly passing out from exhaustion. The corgi didn’t make a sound throughout the meal contentedly napping in the last rays of sunlight.

“So does this mean we can get a dog?” Theo asked.

Ava bit her lip but didn’t say no outright. There was no denying how happy the kids were playing with Daisy and the pup was very cute and gentle.

“You think you’re ready for such a commitment?” Silas asked. “Taking care of a dog is a big responsibility. Duncan has enough to do without having to feed and walk and wash the dog. And you’ll have to clean up any accidents it might have in the house and the yard every day unless you want to step in it.”

“We can handle it,” Sean said.

“Yeah, besides we weren’t asking you. We all know mom has the final say,” Theo seconded.

“A man is the king of his castle,” Silas reminded them.

“Yeah, king, right below the queen,” Theo said holding up his hand and gesturing at their levels.

“Unless Grandma-O is here,” Sean reminded.

“Right. Then it’s mom, Grandma-O and then dad,” Theo gestured again.

“Don’t forget Duncan,” Lexi said.

“Right. Mom. Grandma-O. Duncan. Then dad.”

Silas glared as the boys broke out in a fit of laughter. Fighting her own mirth Ava patted his hand in comfort but from where Lucas sat Silas didn’t seem particularly upset even as he raised Ava’s hand to his lips to kiss it. Was this fatherhood?

“So are all of you excited Julius, Macey and the kids will be coming back soon?” Sarah asked saving Silas with a change of subject.

“Well Lexi sure is,” Sean teased.

“Yeah Lexi and Caden sittin’ in a tree. K-I-S-S-I-N-G!” Theo sang.

Lexi blushed bright red, “Real mature you two. At least Caden doesn’t act like a two-year-old. And he’s the only one who has any interest in music...unlike you uncultured swine.”

“Oink, oink,” Theo and Sean snorted to each other.

“Who would have thought Lexi was into younger men?” Theo laughed.

“We’re only two years apart,” Lexi argued. “And what about you and Aria? I heard you two Skyping pretty late last night.”

Theo suddenly fell silent blushing even deeper than Lexi.

Lucas glanced toward Silas to see he was rubbing his temple as if trying to prevent a migraine. Ava held his other hand for support though she was having a difficult time controlling her laughter. Sarah seemed equally amused almost shaking at the expense of a father whose children were growing up much too fast for his liking.

Lucas sipped his drink trying to maintain a neutral expression. Silas was an imposing figure in an office setting but apparently at home he was at the mercy of his children. Looking again at Silas Lucas saw his host glaring at him in as much to say: Laugh it up. This is you in a few years.

Lucas glanced at Zoe happily eating her dinner. How many years before she started thinking about boys? What was he going to do when she started dating? Perhaps he could make a no boys until you're twenty-five rule? Would that be too much?

* * *

"Thank you so much for coming," Ava said hugging Sarah tight as they got ready to leave.

Zoe danced as Lucas helped her into her coat. Ben and Isaac sat on the steps petting and kissing Daisy fighting disappointed tears and not wanting the puppy to go. Ava sighed as she looked at her sons. Apparently she was going to have to work through her aversion to dogs a lot more quickly than she did with horses.

"Come here and give us a hug, munchkin," Silas said to a bouncy Zoe.

Without hesitation she ran up to him accepting a hug as he picked her up. While the business world feared and respected him there was none of that in Zoe.

"Don't worry Uncle Si. I'll come back soon. Okay?"

Silas chuckled. His name proved too difficult for her to pronounce properly so he suggested his nickname. He rather liked his new title. With a smile he said, "I hope I have a little girl just like you."

After dinner Ava and Sarah mostly talked about the new baby. Lucas had been surprised to learn Silas and Ava were expecting another as Ben was supposed to be the last but maybe he shouldn't have been so shocked. They said the same thing when Isaac was born after all.

"Don't worry," Zoe said. "I already talked to Grandma Ya-Ya and know what she told me?"

"What?" Silas's brow furrowed.

"She said very soon you'll have more girls than you'll know what to do with."

"And who's Grandma Ya-Ya?" Silas asked clearly confused.

"Oh, I know!" Ava looked at Sarah. "She's your college roommate's aunt right?"

Sarah nodded.

"Grandma Ya-Ya is very smart. She told mommy I'd be a girl too," Zoe said. "She's always right!"

"Well, I hope so," Silas smiled humoring her. He planted a kiss on her temple before setting her on her feet.

Zoe happily returned to Lucas raising her arms so he would pick her up. Lucas held her close liking the way she fully accepted him even if he had missed three years of her life. Glancing at Silas he noticed the other was smirking. The expression was surprising enough but Lucas suddenly felt embarrassed as if he had been caught doing something bad.

“All right,” Sarah took the leash from her bag. “Come, Daisy.”

Daisy wiggled loose from her adoring fans trotting up to Sarah obediently and accepting her leash without protest. Ben whimpered quickly advancing to a whine. Ava scooped him up whispering words of comfort and promising Zoe and the puppy would come back to play another day. Yes, she would definitely have to work on her fear.

Sarah gave the boy a sympathetic smile and seconded Ava’s promise as they headed out to meet Alan waiting in the car. Silas and Ava followed as far as the door waving good-bye.

“Oh Sarah, as soon as Macey is in town we have to set up a play day for all of the kids.”

“Absolutely. It’s a date!”

Chapter Nineteen

Chapter 19 - The Billionaire CEO's Runaway Wife

Lidia pranced into the restaurant happy whenever she caught the eye of an admirer. She was well aware how good she looked in her cocktail dress. Smiling and winking at those she passed Lidia enjoyed the irritated glares of their dates almost as much as the leers of the men.

“Sorry, I’m late,” Lidia greeted as she joined the girls at the bar.

The others forced smiles some rolling their eyes when they thought she wasn’t looking. Though she knew these five for several years they weren’t friends. As socialites they couldn’t afford to be friends or even friendly with each other. The social world was dog-eat-dog and none of them were going to let themselves fall behind the others which was the only reason they got together for these girls’ nights in the first place.

“So glad you could join us,” Anne said. She was something of the group leader but that position was honorary and subject to change if she lost enough favor and support from the others.

Lidia never tired of trying to chip away at that support, “Traffic, you know.”

Anne raised an eyebrow but didn't challenge the poor excuse. She had far better ammo for testing Lidia. With a fake smile she asked, "So what's this I hear about your sister-in-law returning?"

"Oh, she wishes," Lidia laughed. "I always knew she'd try to crawl back but it won't do her any good. When my brother makes a decision it is final. He'll never take her back."

"Really? Is that what it looked like to you, Andrea?"

"They looked pretty close to me when they were at Good Eats," the brunette answered. "They were all cozied up at the same table."

"Maybe you were seeing things," Lidia glared at her. "My brother is in love with Madeline."

"It's been four years," Anne said. "He hasn't even proposed. In fact he hasn't taken her out even once."

"Well...it would look bad if he got engaged right after his divorce."

"Really?" Anne smirked nodding to Andrea.

The other took out her phone and showed the screen picturing Lucas seated next to Sarah. Between them sat a three-year-old looking very much like a miniature version of Sarah. But that couldn't be...

"He doesn't seem concerned to be seen out with them," Anne smiled enjoying Lidia's discomfort. "I wonder who the kid's father is."

Lidia's cheeks went red. Lucas never said anything about a baby. In fact he claimed he never touched Sarah, not once. Feigning confidence she said, "Must be someone else's. I know for a fact Lucas never slept with her. He would never touch her. There is no way that kid is his."

"Really? Because he looks quite happy with her," Anne said as Andrea displayed another picture of Lucas carrying the three-year-old. He did look quite happy with the little one in his arms.

"I don't know what kind of trick she's up to but I got rid of her once I'll do it again. She doesn't have a backbone to stand up to me."

"Be careful you don't cross the line," Anne warned with a frown.

"Oh please. I'm untouchable!" Lidia laughed.

Anne smirked, "You know Marilyn thought she was untouchable too. So did Katherine and Jenna."

"Who?"

“Katherine Trent, Marilynn Carlisle and Jenna Ryker,” Anne said. “They all thought they were untouchable...until they crossed the line.”

Lidia frowned. The names sounded familiar, especially Carlisle. She shrugged, “So what happened to them?”

“Well...Katherine busses tables and works at a grocery store part-time to take care of her man-child boyfriend who can’t hold a steady job to save his life,” Anne said. “Marilynn’s father cut both her and her mother out. I heard they moved in with her mother’s family somewhere on the west coast. She’s still waiting for her big break. And Jenna...she’s doing ten to fifteen for fraud, tax evasion, embezzlement and drug charges. If you don’t want to end up like them I suggest you be careful.”

“My brother won’t let that happen. Besides a few text messages and she’ll be gone.”

“Are you serious?” Anne scoffed. “How dumb can you get?”

“Excuse me?”

“Did you use a burner phone?” Anne asked, “at least they wouldn’t be able to trace the messages back to you.”

“What? I deleted them.”

“Yeah, from your phone. What about hers?” Anne asked. “If Sarah kept them you’re screwed.”

Lidia bit her lip. Sarah had never responded to any of her messages so she assumed the other simply deleted them after reading. Who would keep them? Unless...Unless Sarah intended to drag them all through the mud. What if Sarah kept her mother’s texts too? Or Madeline’s? Lucas would blow his top to say nothing of a lawyer if Sarah decided to make a case of it.

Shit...

Anne smirked at her expression and Lidia felt her face heat up again. Compounding the problem was what happened at the party. Madeline had confronted Sarah expecting the latter to shrivel up and retreat. Instead the likes of Silas and Ava Prescott stood up for her and Sarah turned the tables openly mocking Madeline in front of everyone.

Madeline had no choice but to retreat and seek out Lidia for support. They planned to double-team her as they used to but by then Sarah was seated at a table with the likes of Silas leaving them sorely outnumbered. What was worse was the gossip about her dress, how gorgeous she looked, praise for her outgoing personality and how close she appeared to be with the Prescotts.

These were not rumors Lidia could ignore or allow to spread and now there was a child? What did Lucas think he was doing letting himself be photographed with the kid in his arms? What if Sarah showed him the text messages?

Whatever Lidia did she would have to do it quickly.

“Oh, have you heard?” one of the girls suddenly asked changing the subject. “Rosemary Thomas is finally going to reveal herself to the world!”

“I love her books!” another said. “Do you know when?”

“At the end of the month the publisher is going to have a book launch party for the tenth book. They are making it a masquerade so everyone will be wearing masks and at the end of the night Rosemary will reveal herself.”

“I love it! You know Rosemary had to have pitched them the whole idea. She’s so creative. I wonder if I can get an invite.”

“I heard it’s really exclusive. The publisher only sent out like a hundred VIP invites but I guess they also sent out a bunch of special tickets for people to win. Like their website is hosting a Rosemary is my favorite author essay contest.”

“I heard on the radio they got a couple of invitations they’ll be giving away at the end of the week.”

“What radio station? How do you enter?”

The conversation continued as they searched on their phones for more information. Normally Lidia would have joined them. She wasn’t much of a reader but she hated missing out when it came to events. At the moment, however, she was consumed with what to do about Sarah.

Four years ago Sarah disappeared and Lidia was certain she would never return. There had been no word, no rumors and no contact. There was no reason to suspect she would ever be seen again. And yet, now she was back and not just back.

Sarah was a completely different person. The dress she wore at the party was bold and gorgeous. The Sarah Lidia remembered wouldn’t be caught dead in something like that. What was more she wasn’t afraid to stand up to Madeline. The old Sarah never talked back. She always quietly faded away. What happened to her to make such a dramatic change? In fact Lidia wasn’t certain her old tricks would work on the new Sarah.

And what about the child?

That was something that couldn’t be ignored.

They absolutely had to get rid of the kid. It couldn’t be that difficult to fake a paternity test, could it? If Sarah was using the kid to get child support she would have to prove Lucas was the father. Lidia would have to figure out what hospital she used then pay the technicians to fake the test.

Yeah, that would work.

Maybe Lucas already thought of that. Maybe he was planning the same thing. She would have to talk to him. It wouldn't be good to interfere with his plans with her own. If they worked together they could get rid of Sarah that much faster before she revealed any compromising information.

But first thing was first...

Lidia took out her phone to send Madeline a text.

We need to talk. We need to make a plan for how to deal with that bitch. I'll let you know when I'm on my way.

Chapter Twenty

Chapter 20 - The Billionaire CEO's Runaway Wife

Lucas sighed as they rode the elevator upward. It had been a roller coaster of a weekend and though he wanted nothing more than to stay home another day with Sarah and Zoe he had work to catch up on. He was back in the office but his entire perspective was changed. Certainly Alan must have felt it too.

That morning he woke up to giggles and saw Zoe's face peering at him from the edge of his bed. Her hazel eyes sparkled as she gazed at him waiting for him to wake up.

"Morning daddy," Zoe said. "Ulima says breakfast is almost ready so you better get up or I get to eat yours."

Even now her smile and playful threat echoed in his mind. Lucas was not a morning person but he wouldn't mind if all his mornings started like that. In fact, he wouldn't mind breakfast every day if it meant he could spend time with Zoe and Sarah first thing in the morning. Sarah was still trying to ignore him but every now and again her expression softened as Lucas and Zoe joked around the table making silly faces.

Never in his life did Lucas think he would enjoy such a bizarre pass time but it seemed to come naturally. Anything that made the three-year-old laugh was worth it. But it was strange.

He only met Zoe two days ago yet she was firmly in his mind and heart. Was it natural to feel such an immediate connection? To want to spend every waking moment in their company?

When he said he had to work today Zoe was disappointed. His mind started racing with every possible excuse he might use to avoid leaving but Alan was quick to point out they were now two days behind. Lucas asked Sarah about their plans hoping perhaps they could meet after lunch only to receive the vague answer, just sight-seeing. He wanted to ask for specifics but didn't want to push Sarah too hard.

Like it or not he had to take it slow. When he asked her to be careful and call if she needed anything Sarah actually smiled and nodded. It was a hesitant smile, almost shy, but it sent his heart racing.

Baby steps.

“Alan you've read all of the Rosemary books right?” Lucas suddenly asked.

“Ah...yeah.”

“What happens in them?”

“Oh, well Rosemary investigates and solves crimes. The first book was as sort of murder mystery.”

“Really?”

“Yeah, you see this homeless man was found in the school's boiler room that Rosemary happened to be working in. So she investigated the murder and uncovered this whole smuggling ring,” Alan said.

“And how does she do that?”

“By contacting the bum's spirit. She's a medium. And the spirit, Harold, forms a spiritual attachment to her so he keeps popping up at different moments to warn her when there is danger or if she's close to an important clue.”

“So...he talks to her?”

“Yes and no. He can't communicate unless she's using the Ouija Board but he's kind of a poltergeist so he moves objects to get her attention. Oh! In Blackberry Spirits Rosemary was trapped in a basement. The bad guys locked her in and set the house on fire to cover up evidence and get rid of her. Harold turned the lock on the cellar door so she could get out and save the evidence.”

Seriously? Lucas frowned. Why would Silas think the books were autobiographical? Was he joking? What was he missing?

There was no denying Rosemary mirrored Sarah. They both had daughters and it seemed Sarah used her own adventures as fodder for Rosemary's. But there were still so many differences.

“What about Rosemary’s family?”

“Oh, well, her father was a drifter. He left before she was born and never met her. Her mother passed away from cancer when she was twelve and her aunt raised her. Her aunt is also a medium and taught Rosemary how to control her gifts.”

“Siblings?”

“None.”

That also didn’t track. Lucas knew full well Sarah lost her mother when she was young but her father and brother were very much alive. Why then did she treat them as if they didn’t exist? Sarah hadn’t asked about her brother once and she knew full well he still worked for Stanton Inc. Though Zoe had no issue calling Alan and Silas uncle she hadn’t once asked about her actual uncle. Perhaps Sarah never mentioned her family. But why?

Reaching the top floor the elevator doors opened but Lucas didn’t step off. Instead he hit the door close button and selected a new floor much to Alan’s surprise. Even more surprising was the floor selected. He had a feeling he knew exactly where Lucas was going.

Once the doors opened again Lucas stepped off and marched through the maze of offices. The few people wandering the halls came to immediate halts surprised to see their boss as Lucas wasn’t known to visit in person. Usually Alan was sent in his stead. They watched nervously as Lucas proceeded to the office of the head of their department: Samuel Tomlinson.

Entering without knocking Lucas seated himself in one of the chairs at the desk. Samuel didn’t immediately acknowledge him as he stared at the lines of code on his computer screen reflected in his glasses. Lucas used the quiet moment to observe.

Samuel Tomlinson was a man of average height but thin and lanky making him look taller than he actually was. Unlike Sarah who had a healthy glow he was pale and languid from lack of exposure to the sun and fresh air. One would never guess they were brother and sister let alone twins.

Typing on the computer Samuel fixed a final line of code before acknowledging his visitors, “Can I help you?”

Lucas almost smiled at his callous attitude. Hardly a day went by that he didn’t have to field complaints about Samuel’s attitude. He had a knack for rubbing people the wrong way as he often, rightly or wrongly, assumed he was the smartest man in the room.

“I wanted to ask you some questions about your sister.”

Samuel finally looked at Lucas giving him undivided attention, “Why? You are her husband shouldn’t you know everything about her?”

“Ex.”

“Pardon?”

“Ex-husband,” Lucas frowned hating that he had to say it.

“Oh.” Samuel shrugged. It wasn’t any business of his.

“Do you not talk to your sister...at all? I thought twins were supposed to be close.”

“We were, when we were little,” Samuel acknowledged.

“What happened?”

Samuel frowned recalling, “I guess it changed when we were twelve or thirteen. That’s when we transferred schools. The kids picked on me, calling me nerd, that sort of thing. I was an easy target for them. I thought it would be different at our new school...but it wasn’t. If anything they were more...aggressive. Anyway I got knocked down during one of their little surprise circles and they broke my glasses. I think someone actually stomped on them.”

Lucas raised an eyebrow. Where were the teachers? Didn’t every school have a no-tolerance policy in place for bullies?

“Anyway, Sarah stepped in. Told them to stop but they just turned on her next. She was always writing stories in her notebooks so she was an easy target too.”

“And what did you do?”

“I went to the nurse’s office to get my glasses taped back together.”

Lucas blinked, “I mean about your sister.”

“Nothing. Why?”

“Your sister stepped in to protect you from bullies and you just walked away? Left her outnumbered? You didn’t call for a teacher to break it up?”

Samuel shrugged. He had never been an intimidating person and useless in a fight. Finally he said, “I saw her later. She seemed fine...but after that she stopped talking to me.”

Lucas pinched his nose as if staffing off a headache. And Samuel wondered why his sister stopped talking to him? He glanced at Alan to see the same incredulous look on his face. Alan suffered serious bullying in the past due to his sexual orientation so he understood the seriousness of that sort of ridicule and scorn. He would never have stood back and allowed someone else to suffer as he had. No wonder Sarah never attempted to contact her brother.

“What about your dad?” Lucas asked. “Were you two close with him?”

“No. He was always at the office. We barely saw him except at dinner. Mom insisted we eat together. But things changed when we were fifteen. Mom had an appointment so dad had to watch us. He took us to work. I loved it. It was like a candy store for me but Sarah pretty much stayed in the break room writing her stories.”

Lucas nodded. It seemed Sarah had always been a writer.

“When it was time to go we went looking for dad. We found him in his office, with his secretary bent over his desk.”

Lucas blinked, “Your father was having an affair?”

“Nothing like that. He explained it later. Anal doesn’t count as cheating.”

“And you believed that?” Lucas asked.

“I was fifteen. What did I know about adult relationships?” Samuel shrugged. “But Sarah...she threw a fit, started screaming at him. She said he was the worst dad in the world and that she wished Uncle Tailor was her dad and a bunch of other things. Dad got so mad he slapped her. After that...Sarah never spoke to him again. She totally ignored him acting like he wasn’t even there.”

“And your mom? What did she say about it?”

Samuel shook his head, “She got sick shortly after that and passed away. I don’t know if Sarah even told her. After the funeral Sarah packed a bag and said she was going to live with her friend, Ruth something-or-other. She never came home again. I only saw her at school but she never even said hi.”

Lucas sighed. He had no idea Sarah had suffered so much. She never mentioned it, never hinted at it.

“I tried to get her to come home once after graduation. I told her dad wanted to celebrate together as a family. He was even going to cook a special dinner. And he did...I mean he burnt the pasta but he tried. Sarah never showed up. She went off to college and never came home for holidays.”

And he actually wonders why?

Lucas couldn’t help but shake his head. No wonder Sarah had no problem walking out on him and leaving without a trace. She had plenty of practice with her brother and father.

“I didn’t see her again until dad made the deal with Missus Stanton,” Samuel said. “He tracked her down somehow and told her she had to marry you...She threw another fit. She said she didn’t want anything to do with his dirty deals and to leave her out of it. I guess your

grandmother talked to her privately and convinced her to go along with it but I don't know the details."

Lucas nodded. No one knew what was said during that interview except two people and neither was a person he felt comfortable asking.

"Sarah wanted a fall wedding. Autumn is her favorite season but the deal wouldn't be finalized until the marriage was complete so dad insisted on a spring one. He said he'd pay for the venue but he didn't have any money left so she would have to make due on her own for the rest."

"What?" Lucas suddenly sat up. "The contract my grandmother signed specifically stated she would give your father five million advance payment for the wedding. Your father brought her receipts saying they went over budget so she gave him an additional two million. The Tribeca isn't cheap but it's not seven million. What the hell did he do with the money?"

Samuel looked suitably surprised. Evidently he had no idea about the agreement between Nathan Tomlinson and Alice Stanton.

"How the hell did Sarah pay for the wedding?"

"Out of her own pocket, I assume. She never asked for my help at least. She made all the decorations herself. She and mom used to do all sorts of craft projects with the stuff they bought at garage sales so she was used to it. I even took one of the centerpieces because it reminded me of the fun we used to have as kids."

Samuel stood walking to his bookshelf and picking up a glass mason jar filled with a string of lights and decorated on top with faux sunflowers with a burlap bow. Bringing it to the desk he turned it on to show how the lights made it look like the jar was filled with fireflies.

"Mom loved this sort of thing," Samuel smiled. "Sarah's dress was our mother's, altered a bit, though I think she had a friend help her with that."

Lucas stared at the lighted jar. He remembered the wedding, the décor of faux flowers and fall leaves. Apparently Sarah was determined to have her autumn wedding one way or another. At the time he had snorted at the cheap decorations in disgust taking it as confirmation the marriage was all just an act. He never knew Sarah had poured her heart and soul into it. And she wore her mother's dress? He felt like such an idiot.

"So you went to the wedding?" Lucas asked after a moment.

"Yeah. Of course. Dad thought he would walk her down the aisle but Sarah told him to sit. She would walk herself. She didn't need anything from him. He didn't go to the reception at all. When the DJ called for the father-daughter dance I'm pretty sure she danced with Uncle Taylor."

"Did you dance with her?"

“No. I can’t dance. I didn’t want to ruin her night by stepping on her toes. But you danced with her.”

One dance.

That was all he had allowed for propriety’s sake. Lucas could kick himself for missing such an opportunity. He abandoned his bride at her own wedding. God he was such an ass...but it turned out Sarah was used to dealing with such people.