

Chapter 8 - The Billionaire CEO's Runaway Wife

New York traffic was as bad as she remembered but Zoe didn't seem to mind staring out the window with wide wondering eyes. Beside her Daisy practically rested in her lap unconcerned with the changing scenery. Sarah wished she could be as carefree.

Ever since they left Vermont she had been a bundle of nerves. No matter how many times she told herself no one was looking for her and no one knew she was coming she couldn't help but look over her shoulder. It was just like when she first left Lucas. No matter where she went she felt like she was being followed. That feeling had returned and she tried to push it out of her mind.

Ruth had been ecstatic when she said she would return for the book release. Nearly every day she called wanting to know when Sarah planned to arrive and whether or not she needed to reserve plane tickets. Sarah knew there would be no take-backs so she reluctantly made arrangements.

As expected Kyle had no issue taking care of the shop while she was away. Surprisingly he even offered to take care of the animals if he could stay in her guest room. It seemed his current lease was up and the landlord didn't want to renew it in favor of a young couple whose only reference was that they were heterosexual.

Normally Sarah cherished her space and didn't like it invaded but Kyle was a familiar presence and a good person. She even agreed to let him store his furniture in her shed to help him save on storage fees until he could find a new place. Before they left she showed him where she hid her emergency key and around the house so he knew where everything was located. She introduced him to their animal menagerie and how to mix their feeds. She added he was welcome to whatever eggs the chickens laid he just had to retrieve them from the coop.

As a city boy himself taking care of farm animals was a novelty and he seemed eager to do it well. He promised no parties while she and Zoe were away. Sarah considered leaving Daisy with him as well but Zoe insisted on taking her puppy.

Packing several weeks worth of clothes Sarah loaded up the Jeep and they headed out for their first real road trip. Since moving to Brattleboro they had only made a handful of trips including the occasional return to New Orleans but that was by plane.

After a four-hour drive they reached their destination and Sarah's anxiety rose exponentially. The GPS chimed with directions as she navigated New York traffic remembering why she always took Ubers and cabs while she lived there.

Pulling up to the hotel she put on large, round sunglasses and tucked her hair in a wide-brimmed hat before taking Zoe and Daisy out. Before they left Zoe had been told it was a business trip and to call her Rosemary if someone asked who her mother was when she wore her large glasses. Zoe was immediately enraptured with the extended game of pretend insisting she have special glasses as well which she now wore as the bellhop unloaded their luggage onto a cart and the valet parked their vehicle in the hotel's secured parking area. When her keys were returned she followed the bellhop inside to the front desk.

"Reservations?" the concierge asked.

"Briarwood Publishing, Thomas," Sarah said with practice ease. This part she was used to.

"Briarwood... Thomas..." the clerk suddenly froze staring at her wide-eyed. "...Rosemary Thomas?"

"That's right," Zoe happily chimed earning her own surprised look. Not to be outdone Daisy barked.

The clerk looked from them back to Sarah.

"I trust all arrangements are made?"

"Y-yes, Miss Thomas. Absolutely. You have a two-bedroom suite for you and..."

"I'm Daisy!" Zoe happily announced winking at her mother from behind the over-sized sunglasses. "And this is my puppy...Zoe!"

The corgi barked again.

"Welcome to the Conrad."

Sarah and Zoe followed the bellhop to the elevator riding up several floors to the suite Ruth arranged for their use while they were in town. The entire bill was paid for by the publishing company, keeping Sarah's name off the records should anyone come looking for her not that either expected anyone to. The rooms were gorgeous even coming with a kitchenette, wet bar and snack cabinet that would be checked and refilled daily if needed. Ruth really was sparing no expense wanting Sarah and Zoe to enjoy their first time in the city together.

Unperturbed by the height Zoe rushed to the large windows to look out across the cityscape as her mother gave the bellhop a generous tip and saw him out. Sarah smiled at her daughter's exuberance and fearlessness as she sent a text to Ruth letting her know they were checked in.

Collapsing on the sofa Sarah let out a sigh trying to release the tension that had been growing since they left Vermont.

“Mommy, can we go to Central Park?” Zoe asked.

“Sure, munchkin,” Sarah agreed. “We’ll even go to the zoo.”

“Yay! Can we see the Statue of Liberty too?”

Sarah chuckled, “You bet. We’ll act like real tourists and see all the fun places. We can go to Coney Island and the Ice Cream Museum too.”

Zoe clapped her hands. One of her friends had been boasting about visiting their grandmother in North Carolina and all the fun places they’d be going. Zoe couldn’t wait to tell them about all the fun places she visited with her mother.

Sarah’s phone chimed, “Looks like your auntie wants to take us out to lunch. She’ll be here in about one hour.”

“Will it be real fancy?”

“I’m sure she’ll pick a good place for us to eat.”

They unpacked, took Daisy for a walk and checked out the room’s features while they waited losing track of time. Sarah was finally beginning to relax when a knock on her door made her jump. Looking through the peephole she was greeted with Ruth’s somewhat distorted face. Chuckling Sarah let her friend in and was immediately absorbed in an eager hug.

“Sarah! You’re here! I can’t believe it!”

“Can’t believe it? You made the arrangements,” Sarah said.

“That doesn’t mean I didn’t worry you’d chicken out at the last moment.”

“Keep it up and I just might,” Sarah warned.

“Oh no you don’t. You promised and you can’t break a promise, right Zoe?”

“Right,” Zoe chimed.

“Hello, sweetie, how are you?” Ruth cooed stooping to hug a willing Zoe.

“Hello Auntie Ruth!”

“You’re just too sweet!” Ruth laughed. “How do you like your first trip to the Big City?”

“It’s so big! But I haven’t seen any apples.”

“Apples?”

“On the ride down I told her New York is also called the Big Apple,” Sarah explained.

“Oh. Ah! Ha ha. Yes well...I’m not sure how it got that name actually.” Ruth chuckled. “Do you like your rooms?”

“They’re great!”

“Well, we should go. I have reservations at Good Eats.”

“What’s that?”

“A really nice restaurant. You’ll love it.”

“Do they make good food?”

“Yes. I promise.”

“Can Daisy come?”

“No sweetie. Daisy is going to have to stay here,” Sarah said.

“Ah.”

“She’ll be fine. Tomorrow we’ll take her for a walk and go sight-seeing. Okay?”

“...Okay. Daisy, you be good.”

The corgi whined as they headed for the door making it clear they were leaving her behind. Turning in circles Daisy watched them go before lying down and watching the door, a position she would maintain until their return.

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The restaurant was busy but they were shown a table quickly by the elderly hostess who gushed over Zoe. She giggled immediately liking the woman who introduced herself as Gretchen and forgot to be nervous about going to a nice restaurant. The atmosphere was friendly and lively not unlike the diner they sometimes went to back home. The menu was also familiar. Zoe was immediately content as their food came out quickly and she happily tucked into her chicken strips and fries.

Ruth chuckled at her niece's joy sneaking glances at Sarah. There was no doubting Sarah's anxiety being back in the city and Ruth's next announcement was only going to make it worse but she hoped to ease her into it.

"So how are you liking New York so far?" Ruth asked looking at Zoe again.

"It's pretty!" Zoe said between mouthfuls. "Mommy's taking me to Central Park and the Statue of Liberty!"

"That sounds like fun," Ruth laughed. "And you'll be coming to the publisher's fair too right?"

"What's that?"

"Well, it's a little get together us publisher's have to announce our upcoming books and get the buzz rolling. We'll be making a special announcement so I hope you both can come."

"Will you come to Central Park with us?" Zoe asked.

"No...I have to work."

"But we'll see you at the fair, right?"

"Right."

"Promise?"

"Promise."

Zoe nodded, satisfied much to the amusement of her mother and aunt. They shared a chuckle.

"There's something else..."

Sarah felt her stomach flip as she warily eyed her best friend.

"There's a party tonight. I want you to come with me."

"Ruth..."

"It's small but it's the perfect place to reintroduce you."

Sarah shook her head. She hated parties. Every gala she attended with Lucas was just another opportunity for public ridicule and pity. Was it any wonder she had become something of an agoraphobe since leaving him?

"No seriously, just hear me out," Ruth said. "If we want to eventually reveal you as Rosemary first we have to reintroduce you...just you. All people remember about you is how you were

when you were with...you know who. That's the person they think you are and they'll never believe you're Rosemary with that image. It's time they got to meet the real you...not that shadow."

Sarah bit her lip. Ruth wasn't wrong. Throughout her marriage she tried to make Lucas happy. He wanted her to disappear so she slowly tried to disappear. She really did become his shadow and a shell of her former self. More than that she was a far cry from the fearless Rosemary with a devil may care attitude worthy of a protagonist. No one would ever connect the two of them so for this stunt to be successful people had to believe the truth Sarah so carefully hid.

She glanced at Ruth with something of a resigned expression. Ruth smirked knowing she had already achieved an important victory. Finally Sarah asked, "What about Zoe? I can't leave her in the hotel room alone."

"I already asked Taylor to watch her."

"Grandpa Taylor?" Zoe asked.

"Yep. He's going to come over and watch you while me and your mommy go to a party."

"I can't go?"

"Sorry, sweetie. This party is only for grown-ups."

Zoe pouted a moment as she munched her fries but perked up at the thought of staying with Grandpa Taylor who she loved. He told the funniest stories and made silly faces.

"I don't have anything good enough to wear to a formal party."

"Don't worry. We can go to Saks after this for a little shopping spree and naturally Briarwood will pay."

Sarah rolled her eyes. Of course Ruth already had a plan. She still wasn't thrilled with the idea but Ruth certainly wouldn't let her back down now.

"That sounds fun, doesn't it Zoe?" Ruth asked. "We can help your mommy pick out a special dress."

"Yeah! Mommy will look so pretty!"

"Yes, she will. She's going to knock the socks off everyone!" Ruth winked at her.

Sarah shook her head but smiled. Sometimes Ruth was incorrigible and she realized how much she missed her friend. They chatted easily throughout the meal catching each other up on their lives. Ruth looked incredulous when she learned about their growing menagerie.

After lunch they headed to the department store where Zoe quickly took charge. She was determined her mother should be the prettiest person at the party even if she couldn't go with her. Sarah could only laugh as the three-year-old shot down every dress Ruth picked out.

“No that's too dark...”

“Too shiny...”

“Not shiny enough...”

“Too red...”

“Too flowery...”

“Too pink...”

When she originally planned this trip Ruth thought it would be easy since Sarah looked beautiful in anything but quickly realized her niece had strong opinions about what best suited her mother. Zoe went from one rack to another giving each dress a cursory glance but saw nothing that met her criteria. Ruth worried they might not find anything in time as the party was only a few hours away.

Suddenly Zoe let out a squeal, “This one mommy! This one!”

Sarah carefully removed the dress from the rack holding it up against herself, “You like this one?”

“Yes!” Zoe clapped her hands.

“Ooo, that one is pretty,” Ruth agreed. “You have to try it on.”

“All right,” Sarah sighed heading to the fitting room with some trepidation. This gown was far bolder than she had ever chosen for herself but she did like the color.

Stepping out of the changing room she modeled it in front of Ruth and Zoe who cheered so enthusiastically she blushed.

“That's the one,” Ruth declared. “It's perfect!”

“Do you like this one, Zoe?”

“Yes! You look really pretty, mommy.”

“All right. I'll get this one,” Sarah laughed unable to deny her daughter's joy in anything. She could almost forgive Ruth for this surprise. Sarah just hoped it wouldn't blow up in their faces.

Chapter 9 - The Billionaire CEO's Runaway Wife

Lucas sighed setting down his empty glass on the bar and waited for the bartender to give him a refill. He rubbed his brow and sipped the amber liquid but his headache lingered. Glancing to his right he saw he wasn't alone. Another young man sat beside him also nursing a drink with a forlorn expression.

"Nick," Lucas acknowledged.

"Hey, Luke."

"Still having a hard time?"

"Yeah. Five years. I still haven't been able to find her. My family keeps telling me to move on but...Damn, I just wish I'd gotten her name."

Lucas nodded sipping his drink.

"But look who I'm talking to. Four years and you haven't given up."

"What do you mean? I'm not..."

"Oh come on, you can't fool me. You're still wearing your wedding ring."

Lucas flinched glancing at his hand and the simple band he still wore. Sarah had left her wedding rings behind. It was her final statement and declaration that it was over but Lucas couldn't accept it. If he removed his own band then it really was over.

Nicolas stood patting his shoulder saying, "It's fine. Hey...Silas kept looking for ten years so we got plenty of time."

Lucas grunted as the other left. Ten years...that's right. Silas spent ten years searching for Ava never giving up on finding her despite his family pressuring him to marry someone else. Did he have what it took to keep looking for Sarah that long? Despite the odds Silas succeeded but would he? Did he even have the fortitude to try?

"Hey Luke."

Lucas looked up to see James Goodwell. For a decade James reigned supreme as New York's most unapologetic bachelor. He was a constant player always seeking his next bedmate and he didn't care if she was married or not. At one point he even set his eyes on Macey DaLair. It had nearly been the end of James's career with a raging Julius after him. The former still avoided events the latter was likely to attend.

Though James seldom claimed a conscience the incident waved him away from trying with Ava given Silas's reputation. Lucas was quite certain his sister spent the occasional night with James and the two remained close enough to be considered friends though Lucas didn't see how there could be any advantage in keeping James on good terms.

"I can't believe it!" James exclaimed with a hearty chuckle. "Who knew she had it in her? Am I right? But maybe you knew all along."

Lucas frowned. He wasn't in the mood for James's antics as he was already nursing a headache.

"I thought she was just a dumpy housewife. Who knew she had a body! Damn, I'm getting hard just thinking about it. But look who I'm talking to. You got to tell me...is she a freak in bed?"

"What are you talking about?" Lucas snapped.

"Your ex," James said with a laugh. "Damn, she's fine!"

Lucas leapt to his feet grabbing James by the collar, "What did you just say? When did you see her?"

"Jeez, okay," James tried to shrug him off. "I just saw her."

"Where!"

"Here. Where do you think?"

"Here?" Lucas repeated so startled he let the other go. "What do you mean here?"

"I mean here," James straightened his suit. "She's right over there talking to that lawyer chick."

Lucas froze. He couldn't have heard right. It wasn't possible or...

Whirling away from the bar he pushed through the crowd. After years of searching it couldn't be her. His eyes desperately scanned the crowd. It couldn't be her. James had to be mistaken.

"Luke?" Alan tried to keep up but there was no stopping him. He had to know.

A ring of laughter brought him to a small but growing crowd. He made his way through and suddenly froze as his gaze finally found the object of his search.

She stood in the center of the group. Her plum-colored gown had an asymmetrical neckline that came off one shoulder. It hugged the swell of her breasts fitting her like a second skin as it followed the gentle curve of her hips before draping toward the floor. Rhinestones sparkled as she moved. Her hair had been crimped or else was naturally curly and tamed in a large alligator clip giving her a cascading style ponytail. Her makeup was subtle, sophisticated. Silver and amber earrings dangled from her ears and matched her choker.

She was...beautiful.

Sarah.

* * *

Sarah hesitated at the door to the venue staring into the room beyond at the well-dressed crowd as she nervously wrung her hands.

“Let’s go,” Ruth encouraged.

“Just give me a moment,” Sarah forced a breath willing her nerves to be quiet. Her heart still raced but she couldn’t put it off forever. This was it...the moment she dreaded most.

She nodded to Ruth and they entered together. Sarah moved slowly into the venue. It was a large ballroom and rather crowded but there was still plenty of room to move without constantly bumping into each other. She took her time acclimating. Ruth grabbed a champagne flute gesturing to her but Sarah shook her head. She wasn’t much of a drinker and she wanted a clear head.

Several people gave her looks, some even did double takes. It didn’t seem like many recognized her and a few seemed to be struggling to recall where they might have seen her before. She was beginning to wonder if anyone remembered her.

“Sarah? Oh my god Sarah!”

She turned and was immediately enveloped in a hug. Sarah froze slowly realizing who had her in such a warm embrace, “Hello Tracy.”

“Really?” Tracy stepped back with an incredulous look on her face. “You disappear for four years and all you have to say to me is Hello Tracy? You better do better than that!”

Sarah chuckled and started to relax. At least Tracy was the same as ever.

“How have you been? You look fantastic!”

“Thank you,” Sarah blushed. “I’ve been good. Busy.”

“I’ll say...And you’re a mother now. You have to tell me about the little one. What’s her name?”

“Zoe.”

“Oh! So cute! Did you bring her with you?”

“Not here, but yeah. She’s at the hotel.”

“I can’t wait to meet her!”

“Well what about you?” Sarah asked. “Ruth told me you got engaged.”

“Oh, yeah.” It was Tracy’s turn to blush as she looked down at the diamond engagement ring on her hand.

“So Thomas finally proposed,” Sarah said.

“Yeah, he did. I don’t know. I mean, I never saw myself getting married, you know?”

“You’ll be fine.”

“What if he gets weird and says I have to quit being a lawyer because it’s dangerous, or something?”

“He won’t do that,” Sarah rolled her eyes. “He’s a good guy and he loves you so just roll with it.”

“Oh...we’ve rolled all right.” Tracy sighed earning more laughter from the other two.

Sarah suddenly fell silent noticing the sparkling water Tracy was drinking, “Wait...are you?”

“Shh...don’t say it,” Tracy hushed her but it was already too late. Ruth’s eyes went wide as she caught on.

“Have you told anyone?” Sarah asked in a hushed voice.

“Just Ava.”

“But not Tom? You have to tell him!”

“I know. But I’m nervous. What if he doesn’t want it? We never discussed kids, you know?”

“He’ll be fine! Don’t worry so much,” Sarah laughed. “I thought you were a tough, New York City lawyer!”

Tracy joined her laughter despite being self-conscious. In fact she had been nervous enough to tell Ava. She really didn’t know how Thomas would react to the news.

“Anyway, I hope you’ll be in town for awhile. I’ve been trying to plan the wedding but I’m so out of my depth. I need help and I thought what you did was so sophisticated. So please help me!”

Sarah laughed, “All right. All right.”

“Thank you!” Tracy sighed immediately feeling more at ease. “Oh Ava! Look who I found!”

Sarah turned following Tracy’s gesture. Ava broke off her conversation with another at the sound of her name. Her mouth dropped and she hurried over to embrace Sarah before she could disappear like an apparition.

“Oh my god, Sarah! I’m so happy to see you! I’ve been so worried!”

“I know. I’m sorry.”

“Oh don’t apologize.” Ava shook her head fighting back tears. “You did what you had to do. I’m just so glad you’re back! You have to tell me everything!”

Sarah chuckled at her eagerness. Ava was never one to hide her enthusiasm and was always interested in every aspect of her friends’ lives like a mother hen minding the flock. Given she had five children to wrangle it was probably an active skill set.

As always Ava looked sophisticated and elegant. This surprised some given her petite form. Another surprise for some was how well she kept her husband in line. Silas had made a name for himself for being ruthless and he was incredibly intimidating yet he was putty when it came to his wife who he shamelessly doted on.

There were some who took it as a sign to be afraid of Ava wondering how she could keep a man so devoted to her. Some thought it was blackmail or that she had to be ruthless under her demur persona. Sarah could only shake her head at such rumors wondering how anyone could be that silly. However, in the world of business, she supposed it was only natural for some people to misunderstand and misinterpret genuine kindness.

Studying Ava more closely Sarah said, “Ava, are you...you know?”

Ava suddenly blushed, “How did you know?”

“You always glow when you’re expecting,” Sarah laughed which was true. “But I thought you said you were done after Isaac...and Ben.”

“I was. We were but...” Ava sighed. “You know, things happen. And Silas really wants a girl.”

Sarah laughed imaging the ruthless business tyrant doting on a baby girl. He never had the chance with Lexi given she was already ten before they met though he treated her like a princess. Since their last two had been boys he had yet to hold a baby girl of his own though Julius

allowed him to hold Lyra for a few minutes. Fatherhood rather suited him and he would absolutely spoil this baby, boy or girl, but especially a girl.

“But tell me about yours,” Ava said. “Ruth gives me updates but it’s not the same thing. I want to know everything! And I can’t wait to meet her!”

“Her name is Zoe...”

* * *

Lucas stood transfixed. He couldn’t take his eyes off of her memorizing every curve. How did he not notice before? From the very beginning when his grandmother announced his marriage and he learned who his bride was he considered her a frumpy teacher, unworthy and unable to adapt to the social world he inhabited. He insisted she not embarrass herself or him and that she should just disappear but he was wrong.

She was a star. The way she chatted amicably with Tracy Lamont, a high-class lawyer, and Avalynn Prescott like they were old friends was impressive. Few people would dare to even approach them but Sarah seemed to have no difficulty. But when did she even become acquainted with Ava?

Lucas wracked his brain trying to remember if he ever introduced them and came up with nothing. Whenever they attended events together they always arrived separately. Sarah waited for him outside the venue so they could enter together. She always wore a formless black dress bare of any jewelry save her wedding rings and sometimes a watch she claimed belonged to her grandmother.

After entering they would take a lap around together until Lucas found someone he wished to speak to. Then he’d send her away with instructions not to cause a scene. He never thought of her again, never checked to see how she fared and didn’t even know when she left as she always took a cab home.

God, he was such an asshole!

Lucas swallowed a bitter taste in his mouth as he gazed on her now. Four years he searched and now that she stood in front of him he didn’t know what to say. He didn’t dare intrude. She looked so happy. Her smile, her laughter, it was intoxicating. He couldn’t look away. He didn’t dare blink less it all evaporated like a mirage.

Suddenly his view was blocked by a familiar brunette silhouette. He had come alone but his sister received her own invitation and naturally brought Madeline. The pair tried to stick close to him at first but he merely shrugged them off. He had forgotten either was still around and now he watched in horror as Madeline strutted toward Sarah like a lioness who just found its prey.

“Well, look what the cat dragged in!” Madeline taunted loud enough to draw everyone’s attention.

Sarah turned at the sound of the voice her smile fading but she didn't flinch and mentally congratulated herself for that fact alone. Of all the people she desperately wanted to avoid her ex-husband's lover topped the list but she wouldn't let herself be intimidated: not again, not anymore. She maintained what she hoped was a neutral expression as she coolly studied the other woman.

Madeline wore a revealing red gown with a v-line so deep it practically went to her naval. Unsurprisingly her neck was encrusted with a diamond and ruby necklace that seemed far too heavy for her slim neck. It somehow looked expensive and cheap at the same time.

"I just can't believe it," Madeline smirked. "I thought you knew better than to come crawling back here. You really can't let go, huh? No one wants you around. Pathetic!"

"Who says?" a deep, baritone voice suddenly demanded as Silas made his way through the crowd wrapping a protective arm around Ava. "One wonders how a mere secretary has the audacity to speak out of turn. Or have you forgotten your place?"

Madeline blushed hesitating at his harsh words as murmurs circulated through the crowd.

"Si, it's all right," Sarah said giving him a grateful smile. "I can handle this."

Silas nodded giving her the floor. Sarah looked again at her would-be rival. She could almost laugh at her old self for ever being intimidated in the first place.

"Frankly, I don't know where you got your information, Maddie," Sarah said knowing how much Madeline hated the nickname. "But I don't crawl and unlike you I don't have to pretend to be something I'm not. I was having a very pleasant time catching up with friends and I am quite certain none of us invited you to join. So who exactly is the unwanted one here?"

Madeline blushed as everyone watched her. No one came to her rescue as Sarah suddenly closed the distance between them with a grim smile and mischievous glint in her eyes. Madeline suddenly realized there was more than a small height difference between them with Sarah standing several inches taller.

"But let's set the record straight for everyone. I don't need anyone's permission to be here. Unlike you, I don't need anyone to hold me up. And, most importantly, you are no longer my problem." Sarah held up her hand displaying to all she wore no wedding band and she wasn't ashamed in the least. "Have fun while you can. He'll get tired of you eventually. They all do. Because you are forgettable...like a tissue."

Sarah chuckled at Madeline's dumbfounded look before turning away and rejoining her group. Ruth was practically bursting with excitement. Tracy and Ava were better able to hold their exuberance but there was no denying the delighted sparkle in their eyes. Thomas chuckled and Silas bowed to her, acknowledging her superiority in handling the situation as well as trying to hide his own smile.

Sarah breathed deep. She already felt a bit lighter. In fact she felt fantastic! No doubt Rosemary was smiling too.

Chapter Ten

Chapter 10 - The Billionaire CEO's Runaway Wife

Finding no supporters and now as red as her dress Madeline fled into the crowd but Lucas didn't spare her a thought. His gaze followed Sarah like a moth drawn to a light. Her expression and poise during the confrontation surprised him. Since when did Sarah have that kind of attitude?

And when did she meet Silas and know him well enough to call him by his nickname? Lucas could count on one hand the number of people close enough to Silas to have earned that right. He wasn't alone in his shock if the murmurs running through the crowd were anything to go by. How? When?

The small group moved off and Lucas struggled to keep up with them while avoiding attention. They sat at a table where they could relax and catch up. Thomas and Silas seemed equally enraptured with Sarah as she regaled everyone with stories of the last four years or so Lucas assumed. He was too far away to hear but Sarah seemed lively as she spoke and even had Silas laughing.

Lucas shook as he watched her. How had he not noticed her engaging personality? He always thought of her as demur and squirrely but it seemed she could spin a tale worthy of her audience. Lucas itched to get closer but didn't dare to disturb the scene in front of him. What should he do?

As he watched Madeline returned with Lidia at her side. Apparently she scurried away to secure herself an ally. But now Sarah was safely absconded with Silas in close attendance and neither dared confront her. They backed off and Lucas breathed easier until Sarah decided to call it a night with Ruth. Lucas trailed them all the way to the door watching them climb into the back of an Uber and disappear into the night.

He stood on the sidewalk his heart hammering in his chest trying to catch his breath as if he had just run a full marathon. She was alive. She was here. She was drop-dead gorgeous.

"Breath, Luke. Breath man," Alan encouraged seeing his friend on the verge of a panic attack.

"She's here. That was her."

"I know. I saw."

“Where has she been?”

“I—I don’t know.”

“What do you know?”

“Her friend is Ruth Clark and she’s the leading editor of Briarwood Books. She’ll be at the Publisher’s Book Fair tomorrow in the Conrad ballroom. Chances are Sarah will be there too.”

Lucas finally managed to calm himself as he took in the information. He breathed deep and looked in the direction the car had gone. She was here and so close. Tomorrow...he would get his answers tomorrow.

“Call the car,” Lucas said. “I need to go home.”

Alan nodded taking out his phone. He thought Lucas might try to confront Silas but it seemed he only wanted to see Sarah again. It was probably for the best.

* * *

Lucas woke early and was anything but refreshed. He was certain he hadn’t slept at all. All night long Sarah flitted through his mind like some fairy or witch consuming his thoughts. On one side was the willowy shadow he remembered and on the other the goddess she had become. Had she always been that way? How did he not see it?

He stumbled to the shower and stood under the water his mind swirling with images of her. The way she looked...the way she smiled...the way she engaged others...her laughter...he groaned looking down at his rather hard member.

“Yeah. I know how you feel,” he muttered gripping it and working it until he ejaculated with a moan. And still Sarah danced through his mind.

He stepped out of the shower still confused but with a somewhat clearer head. Today he would see her. Today he would get the answers to the questions that haunted him. That was his mantra as he stepped into the closet selecting a simple gray t-shirt and trousers for his confrontation to come. Adding a sports jacket he felt prepared. Today was the day. Ulina greeted him as he made it to the kitchen and he gratefully accepted the coffee she offered. He needed every bit of courage he could muster.

“Knock, knock,” Alan announced as he stepped in and was surprised to see Lucas was already up. “Damn, did you sleep at all?”

Lucas shook his head. Alan looked at him with concern but supposed it couldn’t be helped after the bombshell of last night. When he started looking for Sarah Alan figured they would be surprised when they found her but even he hadn’t expected such a dramatic change. Lucas drank

his coffee preparing for what was undoubtedly going to be a dramatic confrontation. Alan still wasn't sure what outcome either of them hoped for.

“Well, are you ready to see your ex-wife?” Alan asked.

Lucas glared at him but set down his cup with a nod. Breathing deep Lucas headed to the door before he lost his nerve. He still didn't know what he would say to Sarah once he was face to face with her but he hoped it would come to him.

Alan got into the driver's seat. Given the intensity of the situation he figured it was best if he acted as driver to keep witnesses to a minimum. After last night he knew rumors were already circulating about Sarah's sudden return. On the whole the comments were positive and she seemed to have made a good impression given the article he read though most were understandably confused.

New York Take Notice...She's Back!

Last night's charity gala was all abuzz and it had nothing to do with the substantial donation contributed by Silas Prescott. It was the sudden return of Sarah Stanton. That's right! Thee Sarah Stanton! But if you were expecting the same quiet wallflower you are about to be shocked!

She entered the venue stealing the attention of everyone she met and was warmly greeted by long-time friend Avalynn Prescott spending the rest of the night in her company alongside Silas Prescott and his close associates. Everyone who had the privilege to speak with her said she was charming and captivating. Though many wondered where she has been these last few years the Former Missus Stanton was unapologetic for her absence but eager to reconnect to long-lost friends.

[An image of Sarah in her plum-colored gown followed garnering a host of comments.]

“Oh my god! That is not Sarah Stanton!”

“Oh. It is. That's definitely her.”

“What happened? Did she get a face lift? Boob lift?”

“Did she always look like that?”

“Where has she been?”

“Maybe she's possessed by a demon? She seems like the kind of person who would sell her soul.”

“What the hell are you on?”

“Typical man. Just because a woman is confident in herself does not mean she is possessed.”

“I notice she’s not wearing a wedding ring. So the rumors of the divorce must be true.”

“Oh, that’s why she’s so happy. She’s rolling in the money!”

“What moron would let a woman like that go? Was her husband crazy?”

Alan hadn’t shown Lucas the article yet and thought it best to keep it under wraps for a while, at least until after their first meeting in four years was over. He couldn’t remember the last time Lucas looked so nervous sitting in the passenger seat twisting his wedding band with a pensive look on his face. Alan didn’t think either of them was ready for this.

Parking proved difficult but luckily the hotel had a valet. Alan slipped the driver an extra hundred to ignore the fact they weren’t guests and park the car for them. They headed into the spacious lobby. Lucas paused at the prominent sculpture of a blown-up pool swan with a woman reclining on it. He stared at it with some confusion before allowing Alan to lead him away. They followed signs to the hotel ballroom where they found it transformed into a convention space.

Booths formed a crowded maze each one manned by a different publisher. The books they offered ranged from children’s picture books to adult romance all arranged randomly with no rhyme or reason as far as genre or subject matter was concerned. It was a reader’s paradise but there was only one he was remotely interested in.

Briarwood Books was not difficult to find. As one of New York’s major publishers it had a rather large booth easily twice as big as any other. Lucas found a place across from it where he could view all sides as he waited for Sarah to appear.

Three people manned Briarwood’s booth eagerly answering questions as people passed by stopping when something caught their eye and grabbed flyers for books that interested them. One of the people at the booth was a pretty brunette Lucas vaguely remembered from the night before. She had to be Ruth. To think he had been searching for Sarah all this time when that woman probably knew exactly where she had gone.

“Oh, no way!” Alan suddenly exclaimed leaving Lucas’s side briefly to retrieve a brochure from the Briarwood stand before returning.

“What’s that?”

“The new Rosemary Thomas book is coming out.”

“What?” Lucas asked.

Alan rolled his eyes, “Rosemary Thomas only tops the best seller list every year. This year is her tenth book.”

“Oh. What are they about?”

“Well...I guess you'd call them mysteries since she's always solving a crime or investigating something but they are also mystical.”

Lucas raised an eyebrow.

“You see Rosemary is a medium so she talks to spirits and they help solve the cases she's investigating. A couple books back she finally got a love interest. He turned out to be a prince who was already engaged so she left him, but she ended up pregnant so she has a daughter now with the same gifts.”

Lucas sighed as Alan rambled on. He had never been much of a reader but Alan loved books and read at least one a week though Lucas didn't know where he found the time.

“Oh no way!”

“What!” Lucas jerked to attention thinking Sarah had appeared.

“They are actually going to reveal who Rosemary is!”

“What?”

“The author. Whenever Rosemary has a book signing she always wears these big glasses so you can never see her face...and she might actually be wearing a wig too. But anyway, no one knows who she is.”

“Wait, I thought Rosemary was the character.”

“She is. She's also the author.”

Lucas blinked, confused.

“It's a penname,” Alan rolled his eyes. “And the books are written in first person so it's like Rosemary is talking to you, telling you the story.”

“Oh.” Lucas nodded his attention wandering.

“Anyway Rosemary, the author, does extensive research for her books to make sure they feel real. The first book takes place in a school and the author claimed she worked as a teacher for authenticity. The second book takes place in Paris where the author said she lived for a time. The third book centered around a rodeo...”

“And the author alleged they lived on a ranch,” Lucas surmised.

“Exactly. Rosemary's been skydiving, rock climbing and scuba diving, Mardi Gras and Carnival. And the author claims its all real life experiences...but really who could travel like that and do that much? Actually there is a whole online community that debates different theories of who she

is and there was one thread claiming she is actually a bunch of different people. Like each book was written by a different author and they hire an actor for book signings.”

Lucas sighed hoping they were nearing the end of the conversation.

“And now they are finally revealing the real Rosemary! I have to go to the release party. I don’t know when it is but I’m going to need the day off.”

Lucas shook his head and ran his hand through his hair. Leave it to Alan to completely lose the reason why they had come in the first place. He didn’t care who Rosemary was or how many books she sold. There was only one reason he was here...and there she was.

Lucas suddenly came to attention as his gaze fell on Sarah. She wore faded blue jeans that hugged the supple legs her gown had hidden. A blue-gray cardigan was thrown over a simple white shirt and she wore a matching wine-colored knitted cap and infinity scarf. Her clothing might be more casual now but she was no less elegant or beautiful.

As she came up to the booth the brunette stood to the side so they could talk. Lucas cursed his luck. He was too far away and the ballroom too noisy to overhear. But Sarah was all smiles laughing at whatever her friend said.

Lucas felt his throat tighten as he watched her. He had never been intimidated by anyone before so why now? Why was it so hard to approach her? What could he say to her? Would she even listen to him?

“Cuse me, mister.”

Lucas stepped aside as a toddler scooted by him with a corgi on a purple leash, “Sorry.”

The little girl dressed in bedazzled jeans and denim jacket gave him an impish grin before trotting away with the dog whose blonde fur nearly matched her own. Lucas’s lips twitched with a smile at her audacity.

“Mommy! Mommy! Look what I found!” the little girl announced as she reached the booth.

Sarah turned immediately scooping up the little girl and blew raspberries on her cheek to the child’s delight. Only then did Sarah look at the brochure the little one delivered for a new children’s book about a little girl and her puppy.

“Wow!” Sarah exclaimed loud enough for him to hear.

“It’s going to be a good one!” the little girl declared making Sarah laugh heartedly.

Lucas stood with his jaw practically on the floor. It couldn’t be...it just couldn’t...but there was no denying Sarah’s perfect miniature. He felt himself go cold as he broke out in a sweat. The

first and only night he spent with Sarah came back and hit him like a ton of bricks as did Alan's assurances the next day that the chances of a pregnancy were almost impossible.

"Luke? Are you okay? What's wrong?" Alan asked looking up from the Rosemary brochure. His gaze followed Lucas's. "Oh..."