

The Billionaire's Twins Play Matchmaker Book One: Chapter 28



"I think you did very well," Franklin said. "It's very playful. It brings me back to when I used to crawl around my grandmother's garden just exploring."

"Good. I'm glad." Macey smiled pleased that her intention at least captured a few. She wasn't expecting the new series to be hugely popular given its subject matter but she hoped it drew a few in like Franklin.

Paul cleared his throat, "Now that the debate is settled let's see about refills."

"Yeah sure, I'll buy the next round," Franklin joked as the pair excused themselves and headed to the complimentary bar.

"You're still not off the hook," Victoria said giving Macey a mischievous grin.

"Right...well at least let's enjoy the night without drama, okay?"

"Fine. But I'm in town for three days and we will be getting together for coffee somewhere for some girl talk. You, me and Rose here and you're not getting out of it because we have four guaranteed babysitters. We'll make a day of it: go to the spa, maybe do some shopping."

"This isn't going to be like that time in Cyprus, is it?"

"What was wrong with that? I thought you enjoyed yourself."

"I wasn't expecting to have to strip to my underwear and sit in a pool while fish nibbled on me."

"First of all, bathing suits, not underwear. Second they nibbled the dead skin which is exfoliating. And third, if I told you in advance what we were going to do you wouldn't have done it. Besides even you have to admit it was better than the spa in Třeboň."

"Oh god." Macey shook her head.

"What's that spa known for?" Rose asked, intrigued by Macey's adventures in Europe.

"Very special mud," Victoria said, "very good for the skin."

"...Which you have to strip naked to soak in," Macey added.

"Darling, it's all part of the experience," Victoria said, "what good is life if you don't savor it?"

Macey rolled her eyes but she had to admit Victoria had a point and hadn't she just given Jude with similar advice a few days ago? Macey might have stayed in her apartment in Paris forever if Victoria hadn't intervened. Victoria certainly knew how to make life interesting.

"Next time we'll take Rose with us," Victoria continued. "You like saunas, don't you?"

"I have been in one," Rose nodded fascinated by the woman in front of her.

"I know an excellent one in Finland. We'll go together."

"So is that what you do?" March asked, "just hang out with other women...naked?"

"Women and men. There is nothing wrong that. Like I told you before, it's natural. You think you were born in that suit?" Victoria raised an eyebrow. "It's your body. Why not celebrate it a little?"

"So...ah, Victoria," Jude suddenly spoke up. "Have you ever been to a nude beach?"

"Oh yes. There's a really nice one at Cap d'Agde. I took Macey there. We had a great time."

Macey's face suddenly reddened and she shook her head at the memories of the village where nudists didn't just lounge on the beach. At that Julius raised an eyebrow watching her. She ignored his stare and silent inquiries. He hadn't minded the talk of spas or saunas as they were enclosed areas and private but a beach was different. And it wasn't just women who could be found there.

"Aren't men so adorable when they are jealous?" Victoria joked earning Julius's glare. "You know I could tell you exactly how that trip went...but I don't think I will. Best to leave it to your imagination."

"Aria, did you show your aunt what we saw earlier?" Macey asked hoping to change the subject.

"Oh! Auntie did you see the huge bowl of cocktail shrimp?" Aria excitedly clapped. Shellfish was Victoria's favorite food.

"Really? No. I didn't!"

"We'll show you!" Aria excitedly pulled her brother along. "This way!"

"Oh! Wait for us!" Victoria grabbed Macey's arm dragging her after the twins. While she couldn't get all her answers tonight she was definitely going to get some of them. She paused transferring her glass to her other hand before reaching out for Rose. "Are you coming dear? Girls bond best over shellfish."

Hesitating only a moment Rose took her hand and allowed herself to be led away much to March's shock.

"Ah...wait..."

"Oh, don't worry," Victoria laughed. "We'll just be over there. I'm sure your boys can handle yourselves for a few minutes."

Macey and Rose couldn't contain their giggles as they allowed themselves to be led away leaving the men to themselves. Julius was still burning with curiosity about the beach as he watched them go. March turned his attention to their father.

"Okay, so who was that?"

"Victoria Laurent," Augustus readily replied. "A famous wedding fashion designer."

"And she went to the same college as Macey?" March asked.

"Yes. Although technically they met before that," Augustus said. "When Macey moved to Paris she had to learn the language. She thought she'd learn better and faster with a tutor rather than remedial classes. Stephen found Victoria. She was a couple years younger and already in her first year of college but that didn't seem to bother either of them. They really hit it off."

"I'll say, all off," Jude chuckled.

Julius and March gave him disapproving looks surprised to see he was actually looking at his phone.

"What are you looking at?" March asked.

"Did you know Cap d'Agde is the largest clothing optional beach resort in the world?" Jude asked showing them the website he was browsing. "They call it the Naked City. It's a Nudist village and you can be naked wherever you want restaurants, stores, banks...the post office even."

Julius choked on his drink. Macey went there!? He glared at his father who was responsible for introducing Macey to Victoria.

"After all the harpies Macey had to endure Victoria was the breath of fresh air she needed." Augustus shrugged. Even he didn't know about half of their adventures only that they often took trips together attending each other's shows and exhibits.

Julius grimaced once again reminded of the suffering he put her through. He sighed letting his gaze return to Macey as she stood near the end of the table displaying a large bowl of dipping sauce surrounded by shrimps hanging off the edge. Victoria and Rose stood with her along with the kids as they chatted and snacked. It seemed Victoria was serious about bonding over shellfish. Macey looked at ease and readily laughed as the trio conversed, very different from how she used to be at formal events.

He recalled what his father said about Macey needing space to spread her wings and that she was stronger now. His father was right and Julius felt the difference all evening. Macey was confident as she discussed art with everyone who approached her. She didn't cling to him but stood comfortably alongside him. As his father said she didn't need him, but she clearly still wanted him and that thought brought a smile to his face.

It seemed Victoria was getting along with Rose too. Seeing Macey so carefree after the confrontation with Katherine in the bathroom gave him peace of mind. He still had to deal with her himself but he was proud how Macey handled her and put her in her place so beautifully. No one was going to be able to push Macey around...and she was an artist!

Julius looked to the photographs displayed around them. All of this was Macey's work, her vision. His gaze drifted to the newest work recalling Macey's inspiration. Bugs were certainly an odd subject but the way they were photographed did seem extremely playful and bright almost as if they were from a child's imagination.

"You knew Macey was M. Gray," Julius suddenly turned to his father again. "That's why you bought this gallery."

Augustus smiled looking at her work. He had always known she had talent just like her father before her. Carl's relationship with art was complicated. In basic training Augustus was singled out as one with natural leadership skills, made Sergeant placed in charge of a twelve man squad which included Carl. During their time in the Vietnam jungle he never sketched or did anything that hinted at his dormant talent. The only time he mentioned any creative endeavors was when he told Augustus his grandmother taught him to play piano but then Augustus never expected his men to share personal details with their leader.

Barely a month into their tour they found themselves caught in a deadly ambush. They were in a kill box, surrounded on all sides. Augustus still had trouble remembering that night. What he did remember was waking up miles away with Carl standing guard as they waited for their evac chopper. There were only three other survivors from their squad and the story they told was hard to believe.

In the heat of battle with their comrades dropping like flies Carl grabbed his knife and disappeared into the night. At first they thought he abandoned them until enemy fire suddenly began to fall silent. When Carl returned he and his knife were drenched in their enemies' blood. Slingshotting Augustus's inert body over his shoulder Carl led them to an open area large enough for a chopper to set down.

Augustus was honorably discharged and sent home after he recovered but Carl was placed in another unit. He tried and failed several times to reconnect to Carl after the war but it was like his comrade and savior disappeared. Then one day an old woman appeared at the DaLair office. She claimed to be Carl's grandmother and told him Carl was sleeping in the streets and begged him to save her grandson.

Augustus hadn't known his friend was even in the same city. He spent the next two months looking until he finally found Carl living in a box under a bridge. Carl acted as if he were still in the Vietnam jungle surrounded by enemy spies. It wasn't until Augustus resorted to giving him direct orders that he recognized her commanding he could get him home until it was clear Carl needed more help than a shower and a shave. Researching every communique he Augustus got Post Traumatic Stress Disorder Augustus found the best hospital he could to help his friend. There Carl met his future wife who was in charge of some of the therapy programs and slowly started putting the pieces of his life back together.

Painting started as therapy to help him express his confused emotions, thoughts and memories. The night terrors that plagued him slowly dissipated as he focused on expressing it through his art. Augustus visited every chance he could sometimes his presence was the only thing that comforted Carl as he occasionally slipped into moments of psychosis where he thought he was back in the jungle.

Eventually they were able to help him heal but not before his grandmother passed. Augustus took care of the funeral arrangements as well as clearing out their apartment. Only then did he find the box holding Carl's medals: a Purple Heart with three additional stars, a Bronze Star as well as a Distinguished Service Cross. He was surprised to say the least; however, no amount of inquiries to the military released the records of when and how the commendations were awarded and Carl either couldn't or refused to recall.

Carl was far more interested in the future than the past. Eventually he was discharged and he married but his life didn't really begin until Macey was born. Holding his little girl Carl broke down into tears and from then on she was his motivation to live. His art once only therapy became a way of celebrating the valor, honor and integrity of the American soldier. Though his techniques and themes were praised he never enjoyed true commercial success.

Augustus offered to help many times citing his connections but his friend refused handouts. Still he did what he could even buying the majority of Carl's paintings to help the family get by. Through it all Macey was the bright spot in Carl's life and the reason he got out of bed to try again every day. Augustus would be forever indebted to her for saving his friend.

This gallery was as much a tribute to her as it was to her father. Augustus wanted her to have all the recognition and success she deserved, that her father deserved, and quite shamelessly he hoped the gallery would keep her and his grandchildren close.

"Dad?" March prompted when Augustus remained silent.

"Of course I knew," Augustus finally answered. "How could I not?"