

Chapter Two

"Lucas...Luke! Hey earth to Lucas!" Alan practically yelled before gaining his friend's attention.

Lucas ran a hand through his wavy, brown hair and stared at the man in front of him. Alan had been his friend since primary school. Groomed to be an informative and indisputable researcher Alan proved to have incomparable skills both as a personnel manager and information gatherer. Lucas could think of no one better suited to help him carry on in his grandmother's place. So far they proved an indomitable team securing several key wins for the benet and expansion of the company. Perhaps he wasn't quite at his grandmother's level and maybe he was a step or two behind the likes of Julius DaLair and Silas Prescott but he was closing the gap.

"Yeah, what is it?" Lucas asked giving his friend a hard stare to remind him he was also an employee.

"A couple of things. Fredrick Church called...again," Alan said noting Lucas's scowl.

"And what does he want?"

"A loan."

Lucas snorted back a laugh, "Is he kidding? Next time he calls tell him I'd be a fool to help anyone who offended Augustus DaLair. He can take care of his own problems. What else?"

"The Fortune500 Mixer is tomorrow night."

"Oh, that again." Lucas sighed.

The Mixer was a casual, annual event to encourage the various elite of New York to mingle, trade ideas and invest in new projects. He forgot who rst set it up but it was an event his grandmother never missed so it wasn't one he could skip as her heir. The Mixer itself wasn't what bothered him. What bothered him was that he would have to attend with his dull, pale excuse for a wife.

Sarah Tomlinson. To this day he didn't understand his grandmother's reasoning. Sure she was easy enough on the eyes but she was a school teacher, a substitute, at that. There was simply no way she could compete with the likes of Macey DaLair, renown photographer M. Gray, or Avalynn Prescott daughter of Emerson Carlisle and restaurant entrepreneur. If he wanted to stand on an even keel with Julius and Silas he needed a woman capable of standing with theirs. He knew his grandmother was desperate for heirs but there had to be a limit.

Yet his agreement with his grandmother meant he also couldn't divorce Sarah without substantial reason to satisfy his grandmother. So he was stuck with his inadequate wife in a fast pace world that left stragglers behind without remorse.

"Fine. Contact my bride and let her know the time," Lucas sighed.

Alan grimaced at his callous attitude but obediently sent the message. It was several minutes before he received an answer. The wait itself was odd but the reply even stranger.

Seeing his frown Lucas asked, "What is it?"

"She says she's under the weather and won't be able to attend."

"Good," Lucas sighed relief. "I won't have to endure her company."

"Luke, if she's sick enough to stay home don't you think you should maybe take her to the hospital?"

"She can call herself an Uber if it's that bad," Lucas waved off his concern. "Let my sister know I'll need her to attend the Mixer with me. It wouldn't do to show up stag at this event."

"Right." Alan's frown deepened but he complied. He had a feeling it was going to be a very long night.

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Lucas stepped out of the car offering his hand and helped his sister out. Though they were a couple years apart they looked almost like twins. As always Lidia wore a stunning gown, sparkling diamond necklace and earrings and impeccable makeup. She was the epitome of heiress with an attitude and body to match. If only his bride were half as glamorous.

"Ah-em." A voice from the limo reminded him of his other passenger.

Lucas rolled his eyes but reached in to help Madeline out as well. Like Lidia she wore a sparkling gown and a sapphire necklace. Though her family didn't have the same means as Lidia she was seldom lacking when it came to dressing up. Though Lucas had only requested his sister somehow Madeline managed to tag-along as always. Since she was technically his secretary he supposed there was no harm.

Madeline threaded her arm through his left while Lidia took his right and together the trio headed in with a wary Alan tagging along behind. As always the Mixer was held in a large reception room. This one had wide windows giving them a fantastic view of the city.

The girls tagged along as Lucas made his rounds greeting people he knew. Lucas introduced his sister and secretary to any who asked though they were expected to remain calm and quiet unless addressed. This was a rule Sarah followed to the letter but not one Lidia and Madeline minded breaking much to the consternation of a few guests some of who gave Lucas curious glances he wasn't sure how to describe: revulsion, consternation, disgust.

Making his rst lap of the event space Lucas was surprised to see Julius DaLair in attendance along with Macey. This was not their normal event. The pair usually stuck to gatherings that were more child-friendly so they could bring along their growing brood.

Though he was surprised to see them he couldn't miss the opportunity to greet them as meeting Julius was dicult since so much of his time was spent in Paris.

"Julius, good to see you," Lucas greeted.

"Lucas," Julius smiled though his expression immediately became contemplative when he noticed Lucas's company.

"This is Lidia, my sister, and my secretary, Madeline."

"Charmed, I'm sure," Madeline cooed earning a glare from Julius.

"Did Sarah not come with you?" Macey asked choosing not to acknowledge either young woman.

"Who? Oh, no. She was ill so she stayed home," Lucas said.

"I hope she's all right. I was looking forward to talking with her. It feels like ages since we last chatted."

"Why would you want to talk to that boring hag?" Lidia laughed.

"Is that anyway to talk about your sister-in-law?" Julius glared.

"It's not like she's anyone important," Lidia shrugged.

Julius looked at Lucas expecting him to admonish his sister but Lucas merely shrugged. Macey frowned sharing a concerned look with Julius before saying, "Well give her my best and tell her I hope to see her as soon as she's well."

Lucas vaguely nodded as Julius and Macey took their leave eager to distance themselves from the unusual trio. Though Julius had entertained business proposals from Lucas in the past he saw no reason to do so now or in the future. It was best to distance DaLair business interests as far from Stanton as possible and he made a note to share his concerns with March and their father.

Eventually Lucas made it to the bar and ordered his customary drink before choosing his next route. It was going to be a long night and he had to make the most of it sending Lidia and Madeline off to mix with the other wives to establish wider connections. Lidia was adept at this sort of thing so Lucas was assured she would aid his endeavors...much more so than Sarah ever could.

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"London Bridge is falling down, down, down," Lucas sang as he stumbled outside.

The only thing that kept him from walking into trac was Alan's quick reexes. He yanked Lucas away from the road and held him steady as he waited for the limo. When it nally arrived he practically threw Lucas into the back before turning to the driver.

"Where the hell were you? Taking a leak? When I say we need the car I mean we need it now!"

"S-sorry sir. It's my rst night..."

"I don't want to hear excuses."

"Sorry."

"And no apologies."

"Sor—Right. Umm...what's wrong with Mister Stanton?"

"Nothing. He's just a little drunk. Look, take him home, make sure he gets inside. I don't need him making a scene or getting arrested for indecent exposure. Got it?"

"Yes sir."

"Good."

"Sir, what about the women?"

"Don't worry about them. I'll make sure they get home. Just take care of him."

"Yes sir."

Alan sighed rubbing his temples after the driver had gone. Hopefully he had acted quickly enough to prevent any res from starting. He had been wary about bringing Lidia and Madeline and his concern was not unfounded. All night long he listened to the gossip quietly circulating around Lucas wondering why he had brought his secretary of all people.

"If that woman is a secretary I'll eat my shoes," one guest joked.

"She probably doesn't even know what paper is, let alone a pen."

"The only pen she's ever handled is his, if you know what I mean."

"You really think so? What about his wife?"

"Have you ever seen her? She's elegant enough, I'll give you that, but there is obviously no romance between them. A man's got to get his ll somehow."

"I suppose. Makes me feel bad for his wife."

"Oh, she probably doesn't have any idea. All women care about is having enough spending money to buy pretty things."

"How many times have you been married?"

"Three."

"Seems to be a pattern, don't you think?"

"What do you mean?"

"Julius has only been married once and he seems quite happy, Silas too."

"Well..."

"And I don't think the wife is as dubious as you think she is. I don't think she's sick at all."

Though Lucas used the excuse of Sarah being ill most believed it was a fabrication to keep her away from his mistress. The appearances only strengthened in his wife was common knowledge and her infrequent public appearances had no strengthened the assumption he was carrying on an affair. Madeline certainly didn't help matters by hanging off Lucas all night like a leech.

On top of that many witnessed Julius's snub when Lucas rst arrived and they now considered Stanton poisonous fruit. If the DaLairs weren't interested then it was good reason to stay away. Unfortunately that led to Lucas drinking more than usual which led to the current results. Alan sighed. It was going to be a long week.