



BOOK ONE OF THE
FORBIDDEN HUSBAND
DUET

my
FORBIDDEN
husband

SHAYNE FORD

MY FORBIDDEN HUSBAND

FORBIDDEN HUSBAND SERIES BOOK ONE

SHAYNE FORD

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I SABELLA

NEW YORK.

THE BEGINNING OF SEPTEMBER.

THE WIND BLOWS in my face as I tilt my gaze up and scan my surroundings, relishing the stunning view of Manhattan on a glorious autumn day.

My eyes move slowly over the iconic facade of Grand Central station, the busy 42nd street, historic buildings on Park Avenue—an architectural marvel—and human river and car traffic flooding the streets.

Built on steel beams and concrete slabs, the skyscrapers are decked out in sheets of glass reflecting the sun.

It's perfect.

And it already looks like an unforgettable day, although it's not even eight o'clock in the morning.

With a cloudless sky, New York City has never looked more alive.

Standing in the shadow of a building, with my phone clutched in my hand and the strap of my shoulder bag gripped by my tense fingers, I take it all in.

“It’s amazing...” I murmur to myself, a crisp breeze blowing through my hair. “I’ve never seen anything like it.”

It’s hard to believe I’m here in New York trying to strike on my own after a long feud with my family and against my mother’s wishes.

The matriarch has never approved of my idea. Even my father, had he lived, would’ve sided with her just to spare himself the headache.

My adult siblings share my mother’s values and don’t approve of me either, except for Missa, the youngest, who keeps blabbering at the other end of the phone line, frustrated that she isn’t here with me while I set myself in motion, looking for a cab.

Like me, she’s inherited the wanderlust from our nana on our father’s side.

And I truly feel for her. It’s taken me a long time to muster the courage to plan out my escape.

It wasn’t that much of an escape or a plan, for that matter. I’d left home for college and never returned to live there again.

After struggling to find a job after graduation, I boarded a plane from Atlanta to New York, and here I am.

Mara, my best friend from college, offered me a place to stay and helped me find a part-time job in a clothing store.

I started working immediately, fully knowing my job would only be temporary. So today, I’m headed to a big career event, looking for a full-time position that ideally would cover my living expenses and allow me to rent a place of my own.

I’m thrilled at the prospect, optimism flowing through my veins, giving me a much needed boost of energy.

My sister keeps talking while I jump into a cab and give the driver directions, my hand clamped over my phone.

Within minutes, I arrive at the hotel where the event takes place.

Sharply dressed men and women carrying briefcases push through the glass doors and vanish inside.

“Okay, Missa. I’m here,” I say, paying the fare and climbing out. “Don’t tell anyone I’m in New York. I need all the luck I can get, so I don’t want to jinx it.”

“I’m not talking to anyone. And no one is talking about you anyway,” she mumbles.

“Heartwarming,” I murmur, making a beeline for the entrance.

She keeps babbling while I pull up to the doors and stop in front of the entrance to wrap up our conversation.

My gaze trails down, my attention wavering when voices dripping with testosterone resonate behind me.

I say goodbye to Missa and end the call, spinning around simultaneously and not paying attention to my surroundings when I accidentally clip a man’s elbow, my phone becomes airborne, and I crash into another man’s hard chest.

I lose it for a moment, my mind going blank as several designer suits rustle, shoes shuffle, and a few hard bodies surround me in a swift, smooth move.

My first instinct propels me forward to recuperate my phone when my bag slides off my shoulder, landing at someone’s feet.

This couldn’t get more embarrassing even if I tried.

One of the men picks it up and hands it to me while the others step back in a choreographed move.

The man I’ve bumped into doesn’t move as the one collecting my stuff picks up my phone and gives it to him.

After hovering vaguely over the hands of the man recovering my belongings, my gaze drifts to the silhouette in front of me.

The man holding my phone.

Wrestling with dread and unease, I aim my gaze indiscriminately at anything but him, dipping it first to the crimson rug trimmed with baroque golden details at the entrance before dragging it up over his frame in a reconnaissance mission.

Time stops as I move my eyes from his smooth Italian shoes, faultlessly pressed pants, belt lying flat across his lower abdomen, shirt stretching across his broad chest and sculpted shoulders, and arms filling his suit jacket tight to his diamond cufflinks shining ever so brightly, only to ultimately become obsessed with his magnificent face.

On cue, I turn to stone.

He narrows his striking gaze at me while I tilt my chin up to observe him better.

His eyes are like his diamonds—sparkling, haunting, and exquisitely rough—only this time twinkling in a shade of blue.

They remind me of a mountain spring glimmering in the morning light before rolling downstream.

Not a single muscle moves on his face, although his eyes express a flash of interest behind the deceptive light flowing in and out of them.

His perfectly drawn lips couldn't be more hostile to the idea of a smile, although the ghost of a smirk is woven in his stern expression.

The first thing on my lips is an apology.

“I'm sorry... Sir,” I murmur, my eyes levitating over his face in a deliberate attempt to read him. “I didn't see you.”

Maybe I didn't see him moments ago, but that has changed, and now I'm drowning in him, getting lost in the story of his face.

His features are arresting, to say the least.

Handsome, solemn, and fierce in his restraint, he is, by definition, the man you can't forget.

Chiseled cheekbones, a strong jaw, sensual lips, magnetic eyes, a muscular neck, jet black hair, and olive skin that is naturally a few shades darker than mine.

The edge of his pearly white teeth is visible now that he relaxes his mouth, spurring images of flesh ripped in passion and spluttering blood in my mind.

His men quietly surveil the street, two black SUVs waiting for them in front of the hotel.

“Are you a hotel guest?” the man asks, motioning with a slight tilt of his chin to the building, his voice roughened by perhaps smoking.

“No,” I murmur, still caught in his appearance.

A cloud of invisible aromatic bliss, a mix of sandalwood and bergamot, citrusy flavors, and things I can’t identify, floats through the air, caressing my olfactory sense.

His eyes stay on me for a second before dropping to my attire. I don’t look my best in that department, but I look all right for a job interview.

His expression relays nothing when he speaks again.

Spellbound, my gaze is glued to his lips.

“Looking for a job?” he asks.

My eyes move up.

“What makes you say that?”

“Your bag.”

And my clothes.

He doesn’t say it but most likely implies it.

“Yes, I am.”

“Well... Good luck.”

That’s unexpected.

The ending of our conversation feels rushed and forced and leaves me regretful that I can’t listen to his voice a second more.

He discreetly gestures to his men, and they all move like one, heading to the cars.

Swiveling slightly, he also signals he is about to join them as one of them holds the door for him.

Without a word, he returns my phone.

“Thank you,” I say.

His fingers brush over mine, and a flicker of heat flashes down my spine.

Still silent, he reaches inside his jacket and produces a red business card with a golden trim like the rug beneath our feet.

“In case you’re not getting a job today, I might have something for you.”

I take it and read the name out loud.

“Maximus de Lucca.”

“Max.”

“Max... “ I murmur, my gaze locked with his, a warm sensation lapping at my skin, melting it one inch at a time.

“What is your name?” he asks.

I catch him staring at my mouth.

“Isabella Carson,” I say, my head tilted up.

Despite my heels, he towers over me.

“Nice to meet you,” he says, holding his hand out.

I give him mine, tiny beads of sweat forming at my hairline when we touch.

“Nice to meet you too...” I murmur when he breaks away and rushes down the stairs, his dark suit hugging his athletic figure, flattering it in ways I couldn’t imagine possible.

The cars and men are long gone when I enter the hotel, the signs in the lobby guiding the crowd to the back rooms, suggesting I’m at the right place.

Although after that encounter, I’m no longer sure.



ISABELLA

THE MORNING GOES AWAY in a flash with preliminary interviews, coffee breaks, and shuffling employment applications around a large table with people looking for a job like me.

Mara has warned me many of these events are fruitless, but they occasionally offer opportunities not available otherwise.

I was anxious to find out on my own, and admittedly, she was right.

The excitement wears off as the day progresses, and the lunch break allows me to step out and breathe some fresh air.

After a short trip down the street, I find a small place where I settle for a Greek salad with chunks of cheese, sliced tomatoes, cucumbers, pitted olives, and hot peppers, all doused in olive oil and sprinkled with salt, pepper, and oregano.

I would've opted for a club sandwich instead—three slices of toasted bread, slices of cooked turkey, lettuce, tomato, and mayonnaise served with chips and maybe a pickle—but that would've ruined my lipstick and possibly stained my dress.

Later I make a trip to the restroom, check my clothes and hair, and reapply my lipstick.

The afternoon is a repeat of the tedious morning. Only this time, I am invited to a second interview, and I feel more optimistic despite the setbacks suffered at the beginning of the day.

I wait my turn in the lobby, staring blankly at the company's information, when the concierge clerk approaches me.

I suspect my interview has been postponed, but his presence here has nothing to do with that.

“Isabella Carson?”

“Yes,” I say.

He hands me a business card.

It’s identical to the one Max de Lucca has given me, showcasing the same design, only this one has a handwritten message on the back.

“Thank you,” I say, not looking at it.

He tilts his chin down and spins away before I flip the card over. Someone has scribbled down a room number, 1208, and Max de Lucca’s name.

My chest tightens.

I have little time to think about it when a woman who just finished her interview announces that I’m next.

I SABELLA

STILL AT THE HOTEL.

HOURS LATER.

THE ENTIRE DAY has been a bust.

Let's say it didn't go how I wanted, and the most promising job interview of all was a complete failure and left me with a bitter taste in my mouth.

I look down at the card and up at the hotel room number.

This is the place.

It's taken me some time to make up my mind and show up, and now I'm finally here, staring at the door, sucking in a strained breath, and knocking a couple of times, secretly hoping that no one is inside.

"Come in," a male voice answers, and it's not Max de Lucca.

Reluctantly, I push the door open, and a large space opens up in front of me.

It's a vast suite with a nice-looking sofa, two armchairs, a corner bar, a table, and a man standing in front of the window.

His back is turned to me, and his eyes are trained in the distance.

I don't blame him for ignoring me.

The panoramic view in front of him is mesmerizing. The Empire State Building's signature lighting looks like a sherry trifle—fruit-soaked cake, vanilla custard, and whipped cream.

Clearly, I'm hungry again.

The man has his hands clasped at his back and seems in no rush to turn around to face me.

His muscular frame fills a high-end suit, and he's tall like Max de Lucca and has his dark hair buzzed short.

“Who are you?”

My voice sounds brittle and hesitant as I advance toward the middle of the room.

He glances at me over his shoulder before pivoting to face me. Locking my eyes, he seems unimpressed with what he sees.

His face is partially dipped in the shadow, and his features, with an angular jaw and a scar across his upper lip, are on the harsh side, but his eyes glint warmly with a smile.

“I'm Nor. I work for Max de Lucca.”

He doesn't extend his hand, his gaze dipping below my chin, briefly checking my body, while a voice inside my head begs me to leave.

Ignoring it, I stay put and feverishly glance around the room.

“Will I see him tonight?” I ask.

My voice is nearly toneless.

“No.”

I center my focus on him. For some reason, he seems disheartened with my outfit.

What can I say? I'm not dressed to impress.

He must know I came here to this hotel to get a job that hasn't materialized. I wouldn't be here otherwise.

"Is this about a job?"

I'm slightly frazzled and just as disappointed, although for a different reason when a faint smile colors his gaze.

"Yes... You can call it that."

I knew it wasn't something serious, so I better excuse myself and walk away before getting even more crestfallen.

But I need to know more about this.

"Can you tell me what kind of job it is?"

He gestures softly.

"One step at a time."

Walking around me, he examines me, making me even more jittery.

The voice in my head keeps urging me to leave, but my curiosity wins out.

"What kind of job is it?" I insist.

I sound calm and in control, although I'm nothing like that, every drop of blood throbbing in my body registering with me.

"What kind of job are you looking for?"

I answer fast.

"One that pays well."

"You're at the right place, then."

He completes a full circle, stops in front of me, and folds his arms across his chest before he speaks again.

"Strip."

"Excuse me?"

His suit jacket stretches across the expanse of his shoulders, the bottom opening and pulling up a little, revealing a holstered gun.

He doesn't flinch when he notices the direction of my gaze while I crumble inside a little.

"You need to strip."

His voice is dry, no emotion flashing through his insufferably calm tone, while I try to conceal my fears and not clue him in on how I feel.

There is no gaping mouth, a furrowed brow, or widen eyes on my face. No shocked expression if he was aiming for that.

I look at him, frozen, as he dissects my expression with the precision of a scalpel. Giving him a humorless, frosted smile, I run my hand over my dress.

"I think there's been a misunderstanding."

He doesn't blink.

"You're here. I'm doing my job. What kind of misunderstanding are you talking about?"

"I don't think you understand... I'm not a sex worker."

"Who said you were?"

Uncrossing his arms, he walks behind the bar and pours himself a drink. "Besides, your dress gives it away you have nothing to do with that line of business."

He brings the tumbler to his lips and takes a swig while I ponder whether to take offense with his words.

I might not be wearing the sassiest dress, but still... Is this that bad?

Mara said I looked good.

For a career event, anyway.

I speak again.

"Let's forget about this whole thing and pretend we never met. I'll go now."

The scotch aroma travels with him as he heads back, puts his drink down, and pivots to face me.

“By all means. You can go...” he says, gesturing toward the door and shifting his focus away from me.

Showing me humiliating disregard, he scoops up his drink and takes another sip, the seconds ticking away in deliberate silence before I finally turn around and make a beeline for the door.

It’s hard to say whether he stares at my back, and my retreat is dignifying in the slightest, although a glimmer of heat trickles down my spine.

But that could be from anything, the exhaustion of a long day or the thermostat set too high in the room.

A random thought makes me halt in front of the door and spin back to him.

“Can you at least give me an idea what the job is all about?”

A morally wrong smile tugs at his lips.

“Of course, I can...”

He seems amused.

Despite the bad feeling gnawing at my insides, I saunter back to him, emboldened.

His expression is unpleasantly sardonic.

And I shake my head in disbelief.

“Oh... I see... I need to strip first.”

He gives me a soft nod.

“Why can’t you just tell me?”

A sinister smile makes it past his lips. Is that spurred by exasperation, resentment, or straight-out fury?

His answer fails to arrive while I run my gaze over him, trying to understand what this is.

He is a man in his early thirties or perhaps late twenties like De Lucca, and he’s seemingly had a rough life, working for his boss, I assume. And not being married—I also assume.

I see no wedding band on his hand.

“For one, striping is part of the deal...”

His rumbly voice stinks of boredom and patience that has already run thin.

“And secondly, this is part of my job, Isabella.”

A shudder of awareness rams through me, yet I crush my surprise.

His tone is dark, but the passion isn't there. Perhaps he's seen women like me before. Women who didn't make the cut for whatever this job is.

Maybe his boss is hard to please, unwilling to make concessions—he seems the type—and persistent in his pursuit of excellence, standing firm in his beliefs, and now him, Nor, has to deal with all that crap.

He must be De Lucca's right-hand man, which is flattering. To a point.

Although assigning him this job speaks of how important the task is, not how significant I am.

His glass clinks against the coffee table when he speaks again.

“Think about stripping for me like this... It's like a doctor's exam. Only I won't lay a finger on you.”

Like that would make me drop my panties in a flash.

“It's hard to imagine that since I've never been harassed in a doctor's office.”

A genuinely amused grin tugs at his lips.

“Trust me... I wouldn't harass you even if you wanted to.”

He tilts his chin toward me.

“That dress is hideous.”

I cut my eyes down.

“What is wrong with my dress?”

“What is right with it?”

He might be right.

Still.... I feel the need to defend my clothing choice.

“I was told it projected confidence and was the perfect choice for a woman of success, and I happened to agree.”

“The store clerk had obviously deceived you.”

He knows everything, this man.

“At any rate, you don’t need that kind of dress for this job,” he continues. “It screams insecurity and lack of passion. Do you want me to go on?”

I flick my finger up.

What does a man with a holstered gun under his suit jacket know about a woman’s dress?

“Got it. You’ve made your point more than once... You want me to strip? Fine, I’ll strip.”

“Perfect. Why was it so damn hard? I can’t wait to see what’s under that work of art.”

He doesn’t mean it, and I’m sure he’s rolled his eyes, but I refuse to comment, so I pull down my zipper, shimmy out of my dress, and reveal my silky, caramel-colored camisole and shorts.

I drop my beige dress on a chair and place my hands on my hips, nervous as fuck.

“Would that do?”

Awkwardness streams through my voice as I try to kill my nerves. Shoving his hands into his pockets, he tilts his gaze down again.

“Hardly. But we’ll have to make it work somehow,” he murmurs, his eyes rising slowly. “You can put that ugly dress back on.”

My blood boils.

“Listen—”

“Shh. I don’t need to hear anything from you right now. My life is complicated enough as it is.”

He motions to me, and I swiftly shut my mouth and put my dress on.

“It looks like a chute,” he mumbles, unwilling or unable to drop it.

“Excuse me?”

He makes a clipped gesture toward my dress.

“Your outfit.”

He picks up a white folder from a chair and tosses it on the coffee table in front of me.

“What is this?”

I ride my zipper up before smoothing my skirt with a trembling hand.

“The paperwork you need to fill out.”

“What happens if I fill it out and I don’t want the job?”

“I’d be surprised if you said no,” he tosses at me dryly. “Any other questions?”

Suddenly, he’s in a hurry.

“About?”

He looks at me expressionlessly.

Has it ever crossed his mind his life would be far less complicated if he revealed more information?

He flicks his head toward the folder.

“Oh...” I murmur.

Ignoring his disapproving silence, I take my time to open it.

There’s a questionnaire, a non-disclosure agreement, and the address of a medical office.

I peruse the first questions on the questionnaire.

It’s basically the same information I’ve disseminated at the career event the entire day.

And then...

My eyebrows lift in surprise.

“Do I like... men? Women? Both?”

I move my eyes to him, my mouth slightly open.

A faint smile claims his lips.

“Never mind. Put down whatever resonates with you.”

I think about it for a second before pushing the papers across the table as far away from me as possible.

“Am I seriously supposed to say yes before knowing what I’m signing up for?”

He looks deep into my eyes.

“You’re not saying yes to anything. Someone’s taking a chance on you. Do what he asks of you, and you’ll be handsomely rewarded. Can you decline his offer and leave? Yes. Of course you can. But then you’d be dumber than you...”

I stare at him, stupefied, and his expression changes.

“Listen, Isabella... I’m your friend. I really am,” he says, running his finger over my neckline, trying to flatten the fabric and make it look smooth and proper again. “And for now, I’m your... Let’s say, image consultant.”

“What will your boss pay me for?”

“If—and that is a big if—he approves of you, he’ll pay for your company.”

I SABELLA

MARA'S PLACE.

IT'S BEEN RAINING since I walked out of the hotel.

A curtain of tears falls over Manhattan, making the roads and sidewalks look glossy and gloomy, only the yellow cabs, streetlights, and lavish store windows killing the gray monotony as I travel home.

I ride a city bus since I don't feel like splurging on a taxi, and stiff in my seat, I review what happened today.

How I went from the optimistic tones of a sunlit morning to making acquaintance with a shady man that could be anything, from a paid assassin to a mobster.

Moments later, the bus slows down, and the next stop is announced.

I climb out, rush across the street, enter the neighborhood grocery store, grab a shopping basket, and walk straight to the produce section.

I toss in a handful of veggies, herbs, and fruit before buying a cake and stopping at the frozen section to pick up a bag of frozen southern-style biscuits.

Minutes later, I enter Mara's place.

Tucked on the second floor of a walk-up building, the updated studio apartment has freshly painted walls, hardwood floors, and a bonus room where I crash these days.

My hair is damp from the rain, and my shoes keep sliding off until I kick them off for good.

The bags of groceries end up on the kitchen counter before I move to the bathroom, shed my clothes, and take a shower.

Later I dry myself with a towel, toss my dirty clothes into the laundry hamper, and put on my favorite pair of sweatpants, a T-shirt, and warm socks before shuffling back to the kitchen.

I cook for about an hour.

A batch of freshly baked biscuits and a pot of soup are kept warm on the stove as I pour myself a cup of coffee and go to my room.

I hate to eat alone, so I wait.

Curling my fingers around my drink, I stare out the window.

The rain pitter-patters on the sill as I move my focus to the white folder in front of me.

In the end, Nor did the reasonable thing.

He had me sign an NDA, so I couldn't talk to anyone, my best friend included, and shoved the folder with the paperwork into my arms.

He asked me to think about it and text him when I was done figuring out what I wanted.

Having several opportunities to pull out if I change my mind before making a complete commitment renders me more comfortable with the process.

One thing is for sure.

He made it clear I wouldn't be forced into doing something I didn't want, and I chose to believe him. So now, I'm giving it some serious consideration.

I flip the folder open and pick up the questionnaire.

I skip the basic questions and go to the ones asking about my hobbies, sexual preferences, and personal take on life and relationships.

What is this man looking for? And again, who is this man?

I pick up my laptop and prop my legs onto the coffee table with the intent of running an online search on him, but unsurprisingly, I glance at the view again instead of moving forward with it.

My gaze slides over the trees and the dark wet leaves littering the ground like glittery paper scraps scattered by the wind.

Across the street, a woman sits at a desk behind a lit window.

She looks to her left, where a reading lamp casts a glow, and checks her computer before focusing on her phone.

The smile brightening her face makes me live vicariously through her, also reminding me I have my own stuff to do.

Having no other choice, I move my focus back to my laptop.

“It must be good...” I murmur, still thinking about her as I open my laptop, sign in, and type his name in the search bar.

“Max de Lucca...”

Several articles about De Lucca Industries surface immediately. He owns a hotel chain, wineries, several casinos, and other businesses.

Why does it sound like a mobster’s name?

Maybe because it is.

With my luck... I wouldn’t be surprised.

I crack a smile, although it’s not funny, and I’ll be the first to admit it.

Nor—Norman West—comes to mind. He didn’t sound Italian. Or Russian. Or Irish.

But what do I know about the mob?

A fleeting impulse almost makes me run an online search on that topic too, but I suppress it quickly, my attention shifting back to the search results.

I stare at them for a few more moments before abandoning the idea of digging into this man's life and simply going back to the paperwork I need to fill out.

I pick up a pen and then change my mind, open a new document, and type the answers I'm unsure of on my laptop first.

Some seem innocuous.

What are my passions?

Hmm... What am I passionate about?

My fingers hover over the keyboard, and what should be a shoot-from-the-hip-answer, an effortless compilation of ordinary passions, turns out to be an agonizing journey into things I mostly wanted to forget.

When was the last time I was enthralled with something?
Forged a new passion?

I loved things... The past tense is deliberately used.

Sports. I loved sports. Hiking. I was in love with hiking. And then painting. Singing. And I had a passion for butterflies.

Yes, I adored butterflies.

The Diana fritillary. Dianas, as I used to call them, were my favorites, and I knew how to spot them. The males have bright orange edges, and the females are larger and dark blue.

Then I grew fond of spending endless hours on the porch, watching the world go by.

Growing up on a large family ranch in the heart of Georgia, I had everything a kid could want.

Space, trees, and acres of land.

Horses. Grass. Light snow in the winter, but never enough to last. Amazing sunsets painted the woods, rooftops, and

porches in red and dazzling gold.

After my father's death, the property was converted to a guest ranch, and three of my siblings built their lives around my family's business while I strayed away.

Missa would likely do the same. If she'd be allowed.

In my case, a string of events had led to my departure, some known and some unknown to my family to this day.

I wanted to please my mother. Yes, I did.

Instead, I set myself on a path of rebellion, and the least likely member of the Carson family became a trailblazer—the soft-spoken southern girl with hair the color of ripe wheat, eyes dipped in moonlight, and lips sweeter than the ripe peaches in the orchards.

My rebellion was quiet, insidious, and mostly secret, buried in disobedience and unpredictable decisions.

I was the poster girl for stupid shit. Some done on purpose and some rooted in my inexperience.

Not much had changed by the time I rejected my mother's proposal of pairing me up with Mick Branson—a thirty-something-year-old man with a family business bigger than ours.

He liked me, and my mother liked the idea of an expanded estate.

I was nineteen and had already gotten a taste of men who couldn't tell a woman from a mare. Or maybe that was my luck.

I stayed untouched. And said no to Mick, my mother, and the idea that I'd be a pawn for the rest of my life.

I wanted something different. The problem was I hadn't been brought up to be that different.

And there I was, in the middle of nowhere, knowing nothing about real life. Like a sloppily written book, I had missed chapters, plot inconsistencies, and typos galore.

After endlessly butting heads with my mother, I earned my freedom, leaving with nothing and getting on everybody's nerves.

At least my mother paid for my college, mostly because she had no choice. My father had saved money for all his kids to go to college.

If it were up to my mother, she would've given me a sample of tough love and sent me out into the world to get a taste of freedom.

So... Going back to the question. I put down 'books and movies' before moving to the next section.

Do I like men or women?

Neither.

Okay. I like Mara, my best friend. I like people. But anyone in particular? Besides Mara?

No.

I have an okay relationship with my siblings, except for Missa, who is mesmerized with me. She is much closer to me than the rest of the bunch.

Do I like people sexually?

Yes. No. I've been attracted to men. It wasn't a good experience.

I had no feelings for them. No orgasms. We didn't go all the way.

I was told I was frigid.

I thought there were more important things in life to focus on than that.

My answer is brief and makes the following questions futile. But it's a standard format. The questions have nothing to do with me in particular.

Kinks? Enhanced pleasure? What is enhanced pleasure?

No. No. And more no.

Next section.

Do I like pets? Yes.

Children?

I have no idea.

I have nephews and nieces.

Yes, I love them.

I don't think the question is about them, though. My own children? How am I supposed to know?

I put the first piece of paper down and shuffle through the rest of them.

Is there a description of this job? No.

Sighing, I go back to the questionnaire.

So, do I like children? Yes.

I've never thought about having children, so this one is far-fetched, but it doesn't matter. I just need to be done with it before Mara gets home.

My favorite flowers? I love all of them, but I have a soft spot for wildflowers.

My favorite color?

Blue. Like the sky and the ocean. I love blue. I get carried away before flipping the page over and counting the questions.

I'm almost done.

There are a lot of simple yet very personal questions, and the more I go down the list, the more disheartened I get.

I feel less and less comfortable with this, but I answer all of them the best I can. By the time I'm done with them, I'm convinced this is not a job.

Why do they need to know so many things about me? Shouldn't I know things about Max de Lucca? I'm the one keeping him company. I should know stuff about him.

I type down the last few answers.

Do I have siblings? Yes.

A good relationship with my family? I lie. Yes.

Have I ever considered marriage?

I clutch my chest, grappling with discomfort. Why are they asking me that? And I thought... I check the piece of paper again. I thought I was done with it.

Apparently, not.

It's under the Family and Relationships section.

Fuck. Me. I hate this now.

I'm right in between, not entirely done, only a couple of questions left, when the lock clicks and the door creaks open.

"Mmm... This smells delicious," Mara says from the doorway.

I flip the laptop closed, slide the papers back into the folder, and tuck them into the drawer before heading to the hallway.



ISABELLA

I MET MARA IN COLLEGE, and we've been best friends ever since. We have similar views on life and share a common trait, loyalty.

She moved to New York this year, while I went back home for a brief period of time.

Not to stay, only to figure out my next move.

Despite the distance, she didn't give up on me, feeding my thirst for adventure with her New York stories.

She insisted on me moving here, and I did it, but now I want to get out of her way. To do that, I need a new job, which might as well be the one Max de Lucca has offered me.

Not yet, though.

Nor had warned me there were things I needed to do before we could discuss the next step.

And I so hope it doesn't involve sex because that scares the shit out of me.

It may be consensual, but what if I can't do it? Or even worse, what if I can't fake it?

I'm not frigid.

Some things turn me on. Visual things. Sexy things. Broody eyes. A husky voice.

Just not the things—read people—that touch me with sexual intent, breathe filthy things into my ears, kiss my secret places, and invite me to join them in their beds.

What if I can't fake it, and sex is part of my job? I worry too much. Didn't Nor say I'd have plenty of time to figure it out?

Yes, he did, so I whisk my worries away and dash out of my room, wearing a smile.

“Hey,” she says, smiling from ear to ear. “I'm so lucky to have freshly cooked food when I get home.”

Shedding her jacket, she searches my eyes.

“Tell me you had a good day,” she murmurs, reading my expression.

“It was good.”

What is there to say?

Mara is sharp, optimistic, and brilliant in many ways.

She is a no-nonsense girl, who usually picks up on the slightest clues, and tonight is no different.

“What happened?”

Her voice teeters on the edge of worry.

Without a word, I move to the kitchen table, set the bowls and spoons on the bamboo placemats, and heat the soup and biscuits—because they're not warm enough—before bringing everything to the table as if I haven't heard her question.

Later I slice the cake.

“Are you going to tell me?” she insists, washing her hands at the kitchen sink and giving me a side-eyed glance.

“Things were interesting.”

I grin to myself.

“I know that smile,” she murmurs, patting her hands dry with a kitchen towel. “It must be bad news.”

I laugh.

“When isn’t it bad news?”

She lifts an eyebrow, waiting.

I fill the bowls and sit at the table.

“You know what?” she says. “Give me a minute. I want to shower and change first before I eat and listen to your story.”

She disappears into the bathroom without me having a say.

By the time she returns, I’m done munching on a biscuit and checking the news on my phone.

“So, tell me.”

She slides into a chair across from me, wearing pink sweatpants and a matching hoodie. They go well with her blonde hair and French manicure.

Talking about getting it right.

Her job at a luxury hotel in midtown Manhattan is well-paid and comes with upward mobility. It was luck and excellent recommendations, and she also had a connection.

I could’ve probably gotten something similar had I not wasted my time going back home after graduation.

That moment of indecision cost me dearly.

Now that I think about it, she might know about De Lucca Industries, but it’s premature to ask her.

Halfway through our meal, we start to talk, but I’m not touching the whole Max de Lucca and Nor topic.

My head still buzzes from that experience, so instead of dipping into that, I go over what happened today and confess I'm a little disappointed with the results.

Wrapping my fingers around my glass of water and bringing it to my lips, I murmur. "I'll find something."

"I'm sure you will. And by the way, the upstairs apartment might become available next month."

"No."

"Yes."

She nods.

Wouldn't that be great? To rent an apartment in the building?

For that, though, I'd need to make some serious cash.

How hard could it be to keep company to a man? That man in particular. So far, it seems like a laborious process with paperwork, check ups, and going through several steps.

But I might do it. Yes. I'm positive I'll do it.

The news about the apartment upstairs gives me the final nudge.

What am I afraid of?

Yes. Truly. What could go wrong?

M AX DE LUCCA

“I’M LISTENING.”

My voice booms across the room as I enter the space and head straight to the bar.

The chamber is barely lit.

The obsidian leather couch and armchairs, the polished dark floors and solid hand-carved shelves, the lamps, and the man settled in his seat across from my desk are mere outlines in a world of shadows that smells like crimes, scotch, and guns.

I pour myself a drink before spinning around, tilting it against my lips, and welcoming the fire rolling down my throat.

Wincing, I set the glass down and remove my suit jacket and shoulder leather holster.

The sound of my gun sliding across my desk makes him tilt his eyes to me.

“I think she’s the one.”

A smirk creases my lips.

“You only think?” I drop sarcastically.

“I can work with her.”

He looks at me, unwavering, while I walk in front of my desk, pick up a cigarette from inside my jacket and look for my lighter when he pushes to his feet and offers me a light.

Running my fingers through my hair, I let the smoke flow from my lips before tearing the cigarette away from my mouth.

Holding it between my thumb and index finger, I push the rest of the smoke up.

Tense, dark, and volatile, I collect my drink, move to the sofa, and crash back into my seat. Undoing my neckline, I prop my legs on the table, cross my ankles and raise my eyebrows in expectation.

The second drag on my cigarette sharpens my focus.

Nor takes a drink, sets the encrusted crystal glass down, slowly reaches inside his jacket, and pulls out an envelope.

“I printed them for you... There’s a certain feel to them. And they do her justice.”

“I appreciate the gesture,” I say, leaning forward and snatching up the envelope.

He starts talking while I retrieve a dozen 8-by-10-inch photographs. There are big enough to get an idea.

“Where were they taken?” I ask, my cigarette dangling from the corner my mouth.

“In the lobby, while she was waiting.”

I lift my gaze, an eyebrow arched.

“I had someone taking them for you,” he says. “I spotted her earlier after you called me. I had lunch at the restaurant and met with a couple of people. She and I crossed paths around one. She had no idea.”

I move my gaze to the photographs.

Some are fanned over the leather couch while others sit on my lap.

“You were right,” he says.

I move my eyes over them, studying them with painstaking attention before I pick up the gold-plated ashtray from the coffee table and set it next to me.

I put my cigarette down and let it burn, giving my undivided attention to the woman in the pictures.

“Tell me about her,” I say, void of emotion.

“She’s an outsider, young and malleable, easy on the eyes.”

“Tell me something I don’t know. I need more than easy on the eyes for this to work. Nobody’s gonna buy it.”

“They will when I’m done with her.”

I flick my eyes to him, smiling faintly.

“Are you sure?”

“I’m positive. She’s stunning. And she’s, uh...”

He takes his time, so I move my gaze away from him and train it on the beautiful woman with striking eyes.

The silence thickens, making me shift my attention back to him again. Waiting for him to elaborate, I pick up my cigarette and take another drag.

This time, I exhale slowly.

It finally takes the edge off.

“She doesn’t care how she looks. Today she was dressed for a job interview. Which works for that, I guess.”

He shrugs carelessly while I study the barely visible scar on his face.

Calm and detached, he lifts his drink and takes another swig before setting it back on the table.

“She seemed lost. Displaced...” he continues. “Like she didn’t belong. She’d wasted her time, and nobody offered her a job. So I was right.”

“What kind of career event was it?”

“Business. Entry-level management positions. Sales and marketing. That sort of thing... I ran a background check on her,” he adds.

He reaches for his phone and reads me the information.

“Twenty-three years old. Studied economics. Born and raised in Georgia. Her family lives off their farm. Older siblings have families and kids.”

“She’s not exactly poor.”

“She is poor. She’s got nothing from them—a local source has told me. She lives with a friend in Manhattan several blocks away from here.”

He gestures over his shoulder, pointing uptown.

“Mara Benson. They went to school together. Good friends. Probably the only friend. The woman has a good job at a hotel.”

I suck in a long breath and lean back in my seat.

Absently, I pick up my cigarette without bringing it to my lips and go over the pictures again.

The woman who falls in and out of her surroundings seems consumed with something.

Maybe it’s nothing.

Maybe she looks absent because her mind is blank.

Her depth is irrelevant but her ability to comply is instrumental in making this work.

“Other than money, what else could convince her to go along with this?”

“It’s hard to tell... She’s curious. Partly interested. Somewhat scared. There’s not enough desperation in her. And her reactions are all over the place. Sometimes they’re weak and inconsistent. Unpredictable.”

I drop the pictures on the couch and cross my arms over my chest, my eyes locked on his.

“And that makes you think you can make this work?”

My voice drips with sarcasm.

This is a huge undertaking, not to mention the risks, and her having such a big family is a considerable liability. Even if it's her estranged family.

The people I'm dealing with don't care. They'd stop at nothing, and they have already proven it to me over and over again.

Their thirst for blood won't be quenched any time soon. Can't be stopped. Not even by my thirst for blood.

I may be hard to take down, but she might be a weak link, no matter how far away I keep her from my business.

But I'm getting ahead of myself.

For now, all I need is a warm body and a woman willing to follow my directions.

"Yes. Yes, I do," he says. "She'll play the part. And who knows, she might even enjoy it."

My cigarette has burned alone for some time, so I take a last drag and mash the rest of it into the ashtray before lifting my glass of scotch to my lips and emptying it.

"What does she know?" I ask.

"Other than your name? She knows a little about the nature of the job, and she got the paperwork done."

I'm more and more skeptical about this.

"She'll come through. I know that," he says. "She is different. Cold."

"Cold? As in...?"

"Hard to get to. And she'll do it for money."

My shoulders tense against the couch.

"What happened before won't happen again," he says. "No one will have that power over you. I mean... Look at me," he adds, opening his arms demonstratively. "I've learned my lesson, and it works for me. It will work for you too. And she'll be protected if that's what's holding you back."

“Nothing’s holding me back,” I rumble, spreading my fingers over her photographs. “I just don’t think she’s good for it. And for the people who need to buy into it, she looks like nothing I would pick.”

“You could use one of the women you know.”

“I can’t do that.”

“Exactly. You can’t because they’re not good for this. They are attention seekers, too impulsive and eager to please you.”

“You think she isn’t?”

“She wouldn’t know how to do it even if she wanted to.”

I don’t need to look at her pictures again. My gut tells me she’s not the woman that I need. While his gut tells him something different.

She’s motivated by money. Yes... We all are until we learn what it takes to earn that money. That’s what separates the people amassing power from the rest.

Some are born into power, like me.

It’s become my second nature, so I can’t do it any other way. I love danger as much as I love power and money, and there’s no turning back for me for numerous reasons.

Practical and philosophical.

But beyond all that, it’s what makes my blood shoot through my veins that fuels my taste for danger.

It’s not for everyone.

It’s not for every man I know.

And it surely isn’t for the women in our world.

But our women are usually stoic, loyal, hard, and resilient.

They run things in the background, plot with their husbands, know how to keep secrets, and sometimes, fall with their men.

Other times they go on while their husbands fall.

I don’t expect this woman to do that.

I don't expect any woman to do that.

That's why I need someone like her. A placeholder. Not an emotional attachment, a vulnerable point, and leverage for my enemies.

My life is complicated as it is, and I surely want to deceive my enemies and never have to watch my back.

That doesn't mean I'd put this woman in harm's way.

I will protect her with everything I've got, but she won't be a liability because I don't want to carry a big hole in my heart if something happens to her.

This is my plan, and for that, she needs to stick with me.

I shoot another glance at her pictures.

"How does she look under that dress?"

My voice is glacial, lacking emotion.

"Full round breasts, chiseled collarbones, flat stomach, toned arms and legs, nicely shaped thighs and narrow ankles and waist."

"And she's made of ice?"

"She's as cold as my car engine on a winter morning. You'll have no issues with her."

"What else?"

"She has the most beautiful eyes I've ever seen."

I know that too, but I don't remember seeing them in the photographs.

He keeps talking as if hearing my thoughts.

"The pictures were taken with a long-range zoom lance as she peered at some information. Her hair was slicked back the entire day. So there was nothing there to see. But she'll look like a new woman with a different hairstyle."

"You want me to say yes."

"You need to say yes. There's not enough time to get her ready as it is. You need to have her on your arm, and she needs

to be confident enough to do it. Then I can finally kick back and enjoy life.”

“You’re in the wrong line of business for that,” I throw at him before I pause and think about it for a moment. “Okay. You have the green light from me. We’re moving forward with her,” I say, pushing to my feet. “Let me know how it goes.”

He rises from his seat as well.

“Are you staying for dinner?” I ask.

He checks the time on his watch.

“I’m expected someplace else. I’ll call you later.”

“Sure,” I say, hiding my smile. “You don’t have to interrupt your evening. We can talk tomorrow. Enjoy your evening with...”

I make a soft gesture in his direction.

“Whoever,” I say.

“I will.”

We briefly hug each other and tap each other on our backs before he leaves the room. Later, his car revs up in front of my place before heading east. He’s going to Queens.

We always keep that a secret.

Who we fuck is no one’s business. He just said it. He doesn’t want that headache.

And I don’t want it either.

I don’t want to have someone close to me bleed out in my arms.

That won’t happen again. Ever.

I SABELLA

“YOU CAN GO NOW,” my coworker, a short woman with pink hair and blue eyes, says before replacing me on the floor.

“How was your lunch break?” I ask, collecting my shoulder bag and a small briefcase from behind the counter.

“Busy. The weather is fantastic, though,” she says, tilting her chin toward the front.

Groups of people pace up and down the street.

It looks perfect even from here.

Despite the chilly blue light pasted over the walls and the racks of clothing all around me, the golden glow dripping from the sky is what lodges into my memory.

I wave her goodbye and walk out of the store.

An unforgettable Indian summer awaits me outside.

Swiftly, I take my jacket off, fold it over my arm, and raise my hand to haul a cab.

Most cabs zip by with clients in their back seats, and waiting for one seems like a big waste of time.

Walking over there is by far a better choice, so I move at a brisk pace toward the restaurant where I’m supposed to meet Nor.

A trickle of sweat messes with my lipstick, and my cheeks burn from the exertion, my muscles getting sore as I increase my speed. My pumps hurt my ankles, and that's not what I was hoping for.

After four more minutes, I spot the eatery in the distance.

It's a modern space with wooden floors and seats at a long narrow table along the wall of windows for those who like to eat while watching the people go by.

A few small tables are tucked in the back, and as soon as I get in, I look for a tall, buffed-up man in a suit, maybe.

I quickly find him.

He raises his hand, acknowledging me before rising to his feet as I erase the space between us.

"It's crazy today," I murmur, trying to keep my nerves under control.

He stands out in the crowd, despite being surrounded by people dressed just like him—this is a favorite spot for the young executives working midtown, after all.

They come for the salad bar, gourmet sandwiches, cookies, and brownies made from scratch and baked in small batches, and the freshly brewed coffee dripping from the shiny espresso machines.

They come in pairs, groups, or alone, pick up their food, and sometimes like today, eat outside, sitting on the benches or the concrete steps.

I can't blame them. It feels like summer outside.

Despite that, many people are still inside, and I struggle to get to the man waiting for me in the corner.

He wears a dark navy suit, a starched white shirt, and a silver-gray tie with midnight blue stripes.

He looks so sharp and out of place with his unforgiving, stern expression.

"You've made it."

There's not the slightest trace of effusion in his voice, and the nuance registers with me, making me realize I need to watch my back.

I may make dealings with this man, and his boss, De Lucca, but they are not my friends.

As if to confirm that, his smile doesn't reach his eyes. They look like stones buried in a murky river when he pulls the chair out for me.

"Thank you."

At least his manners are impeccable.

I get settled while he slides back into his seat. His eyes dip, assessing my clothes.

I wear a tailored dress with princess seams down the front and back, a scoop neckline, a waistline highlighted by a narrow belt, and a hemline hitting above my knee.

The color, angel blue, sets off my eyes.

He can't take his eyes off me.

"Is it better?" I ask, interrupting his moment of contemplation.

"What?"

He's definitely lost his train of thought.

"My dress. Is it better?"

"Yes, it is. You look beautiful."

His answer is clipped and tossed in haste as he checks his watch discretely, as if anxious to get to the business matters that have brought us here.

"I'm sorry. I didn't realize you have time constraints. I need to get back to work as well," I say.

I reach down and dig inside my briefcase before retrieving the folder he had given me.

"Are you hungry?" he asks.

"Yes. But don't worry about me. I can grab a bite later."

He holds his hand up in disagreement.

“No. You have to eat.”

He’s already standing, ready to walk away and order some food.

There’s a line, and he speaks on the phone while waiting.

In the meantime, I organize the papers in the folder and have them ready for him when he returns with a tray of food for both of us.

Salad for him and me, although I’m sure he’s ordered it for himself simply to appease me—he looks more like a steak and potatoes guy—and creamy fruit yogurt topped with toasted nuts and fresh strawberries, hulled and quartered for me.

He also sets two bottles of water down.

“Thank you.”

I reach inside my purse to give him money.

“Don’t even think about it,” he says, half smiling. “We’re not doing this game.”

We both begin to eat.

“So, I’m glad you’ve made the right decision.”

“I’ll be honest with you,” I say, looking down at the pile of fresh spinach, arugula, blue cheese, and walnuts, all uniformly drizzled with pomegranate vinaigrette. “The only reason I’m here is that I trust you a little.”

I flick my gaze up and find him staring at me, enraptured, and I sort of take him by surprise. I’ve counted on that.

I’m average when it comes to reading people. I’m relatively good at picking up clues, but I could do better.

In his case, it seems easier, not because I know a lot about him, but because pretending is not the currency he’s trading in.

He has secrets—some dark, like the gun he carried the last time I met him—but pretending is not his thing.

It repulses him.

He'd rather stare at me blankly than lie to me.

"How come?" he asks, focusing on his food.

How come what? Trust him?

He's evidently not hungry, but I am and can't concentrate on my food. Everything passing my lips goes down my throat with a bit of a struggle, mostly void of flavor.

It's not that the food is not fresh and delicious.

It's that my mind is not there.

"Maybe it's stupid, but I believed you when you said I wouldn't be ambushed or forced into something I didn't want."

"You won't be forced. That's a fact."

Our eyes meet briefly after I wait for him to lift his gaze to me.

"So..." I say, pushing the papers toward him. "Why am I here with you instead of Max de Lucca?"

A slight smile curves his lips.

"Because there's a process you need to go through, and we haven't even gotten started."

"Can you tell me more?" I ask, lifting the cup of yogurt and sinking my spoon into the dessert.

"First, we need to enforce a few rules that have already been stipulated in the non-disclosure agreement—some of them anyway—and then we need to do a few things together."

"You and I?"

A shred of disbelief beams in my voice.

"Yes."

"What are the rules?" I ask before sliding the spoon between my lips and filling my mouth with a slew of blended flavors.

He picks up the questionnaire and scans my answers.

It's taken me forty minutes to copy them from my laptop and write them down.

He flips the paper over and moves his eyes rapidly down the page.

"Yes. The rules," he says, plopping it down and focusing on me.

There is no smile on his face.

"You talk to no one about this. No coworker, family member, friend, or acquaintance can know about this. Nobody. Do you understand?"

The corners of my lips slide down as I grapple with a weird feeling. I didn't expect to make this new adventure public—I understand it involves something unorthodox and immoral if not worse—but still.

I sense a change in his attitude. The veneer of honesty and straightforwardness, his chivalrous attitude, and friendly behavior toward me have cracked a little.

The veil of normality peels off, and underneath, I find a hard man. My bafflement registers with him, so he relaxes his stance and features with a smile that warms his eyes to an extent.

"It's for your own protection," he says.

"Why do I need protection?"

"You don't need it at this point, but we must be proactive about it."

"You're saying I might need it at some point."

He studies my eyes as if debating with himself whether to be truthful with me or not.

"Max de Lucca is an important man. The kind of protection I'm talking about comes built in it for him, and you will benefit from it."

"You said I'd keep him company. You mean... In public? Am I going out with him? Or will I be with him all the time?"

“It depends.”

“On what?”

“How far we get in the process. It’s premature to talk about it now. And it might never happen. He has the final say, after all.”

I have no reply for him.

“To get there, I need to teach you how to act and what you need to do,” he says directly.

My finger goes up.

“When you say you teach me... Does that have to do with how I think as well?”

Our eyes stay locked for the longest time before the flicker of a smile glints through his gaze.

“It has to do with everything. I won’t be able to change how you think. You will probably do it on your own. And everything else that will happen? It’s hard to explain... But you’re not a prostitute. And you won’t be one. No one will touch you. He’ll make sure of that.”

The tension stuck in my chest for a while dissipates to a degree.

“Why do I need to be taught, then?”

His gaze trails down to the folder.

“Because he has certain expectations. And you need to keep up the appearances. That’s all.”

He swings his gaze up.

“That’s your job. Nothing else,” he says,

My lips are parted, and I feel them dry and cracked.

“This is more than him going out with me.”

“Yes. But we shouldn’t talk about it now. As I said before, he still needs to be on board with this. Approve of you. That’s why it’s important to go through the preliminary steps. It’s all about looks and demeanor at this stage. Nothing else. Once we finish these steps, you two meet, and he’ll introduce you to his

circle if things go well. Hopefully, sooner rather than later since he needs to attend social events with you fairly soon.”

His last words are smeared with hesitation.

Circle isn't probably the right word, but he's censored himself for my sake. I may be inexperienced, but their circle is not my circle, Mara's, or my family's.

We have guns in Georgia, but we don't need to sleep with them under the pillow.

Which I suspect he does.

“Can you tell me more about him?” I ask, ignoring his warning.

The timeline he's given me might be important to him, but it does nothing for me. I'm in no hurry, and I want to know more— now that what he said has piqued my curiosity.

He might be time-pressed, but I'm not.

“I'm sure you've heard about him,” he counters. “De Lucca Industries. That's him. Wine, cheese, hotels. Ships. It's all him.”

He forgot about the casinos.

“A businessman?” I say, smiling, a pang of playfulness in my tone.

I know it's a lot more than that.

“What else?” he tosses back at me, cracking a smile.

“Why does he need to hire someone? I'm sure a lot of people are more than willing to keep him company.”

“Hmm... What do you know about money, Isabella?”

His question comes with a stare that digs deep into my soul.

“I know they come with sacrifices. Sometimes. All the time...” I say, putting the empty cup down and uncapping the bottle.

I drink water and press a soft paper napkin against my lips.

My lipstick must be gone by now, so I run my teeth across my bottom lip, working on a dash of color.

He watches my moves with undisguised fascination.

“Sometimes it comes with strings attached and risks,” I go on, as he doesn’t seem interested in offering me more information.

“Control,” he says, his eyes glued to my lips. “And expediency.”

A shiver zips down my spine, and goose bumps cover my arms when he pulls his stare away and glances out the window as if he’s said too much.

Was that glint a flash of desire? He categorically denied that possibility the first time we met.

I’m probably wrong, but everything else makes sense.

Control. Expediency. Convenience.

Max De Lucca wants me to present myself in a certain way, and his lieutenant here has been tasked with transforming me into that woman.

He doesn’t want to use this exact word, but that’s what this is.

And it doesn’t need to be me. Anyone would do. Although, not exactly. They would’ve found someone else had it been that easy.

How am I different than the other women?

I can’t imagine I’m the first one he goes through the process with.

Nor, I mean.

I wonder how far the other candidates have gotten. Not that far, I guess.

“And you think I’m that woman?”

He nods in response.

It’s a soft, confident nod.

“I knew it the first time I saw you.”

I wish he could tell me more. It’s interesting how we have a certain opinion about ourselves, and then someone new comes along and completely destroys it.

What could he possibly see in me? Especially on that day?

“Because I’m soft and submissive?” I go on, losing track of time, forgetting why we’re here.

“You’re neither.”

I laugh, flattered.

I wish I could believe him.

“This must be a pickup line you use with women. How can you tell how I am when we’ve only talked once before?”

“I know women,” he says. “I don’t need to talk at length with you to know how you are.”

“Interesting.”

I lower my eyes, positively blushing.

My cheeks burn like hell, and I can’t find my way back to holding his gaze.

We’re probably late. I know I am. And this is not the moment to delve into this matter.

“Maybe we should talk about this some other time,” I finally say, still not meeting his gaze.

“Yeah... You’re probably right.” His dry, pragmatic tone is alarmingly suggesting he’s lost his way in our conversation too. “We’ll talk.”

There’s no real substance to his words. He doesn’t mean it.

“So...” I straighten in my seat and suck in a long breath. “What’s next?”

He checks something on his phone while I study his preoccupied expression.

“What does the rest of the week look like?” he asks, averting his gaze. “I need you for an entire evening.”

Tomorrow?”

He slides his phone into his pocket and pushes to his feet.

I rise, my chair squealing against the floor as he pulls it out for me.

I pivot and stall, finding myself inches away from him.

“Tomorrow?” he asks again.

His question sounds like a reminder.

“Yes. Tomorrow is good.”

“What time do you finish work?”

“Eight.”

“Okay. A car will pick you up. The driver’s name is Rossi. He’ll drop my name, so you know you’re riding with the right man. He’ll take you straight to my place.”

“A hotel room?”

“No. My apartment.”

“Oh... Okay.”

“You’ll try on some clothes. That’s pretty much it. And maybe we’ll talk some more.”

He smiles at me without being convinced of his own words.

There was a moment when we both drifted, and he is now correcting the course, trying to keep his distance.

Because of the circumstances, I assume, and his boss.

“Is that all?”

He looks down at my briefcase and my bag while picking up the folder.

“Yes.”

He takes my briefcase while I collect my bag.

Later, he holds the door for me, and we both walk out.

The crowd careening up and down the street dizzies me for a second. The sun is up, and a soft breeze sweeps the streets of Manhattan.

“I’ll drop you off,” he says, scanning the street, ensuring no one’s watching us, I guess.

“Do you have a car?” I ask, knowing how difficult it is to find a parking space in this area.

“Yes. It’s a five-minute walk.”

I keep up with him, and moments later, he invites me to climb into his ride. A black luxury car with tinted windows.

It’s cold inside as he turns on the engine, and the AC comes on.

Sadly, the opportunity to talk to him vanishes quickly.

I wish I knew what made him think I was a good candidate?

Before I finish that thought, he steers the wheel, and the car makes a left turn and rolls to a smooth stop in front of the store.

“Thank you,” I say. “So you don’t need anything else from me... for now. Right?”

“No. You have the rest of the package.”

“Yes.”

I figure he’s talking about the address of the medical office. It hasn’t even crossed my mind to talk about it.

“We’ll get to that,” he says.

“Great. It’s been a pleasure.”

“Same here. I’ll see you tomorrow.”

His smile is clipped, and his eyes are distant when I shift in my seat, open the door and hesitatingly glance at him over my shoulder.

This time he has a smile on his face, and he feels somewhat closer to me.

“If it’s not about being submissive...” I murmur.

The ghost of a smile creases his lips. He thoroughly enjoys that I’m so obsessed with it.

“It’s the money. You’ll do stuff for money.”

There’s no emotion in his voice.

And there I have it.

He *does* know stuff about me.

With that, I wave and smile at him, and off I go.

I feel good when I set foot on the sidewalk, and I don’t even turn around as he veers his car away.

I SABELLA

THE NEXT DAY.

“YES, YES. I’LL BE LATE,” I say, holding my phone in front of me while waving at Ramona, my coworker, on my way out.

I get no answer from the other end of the phone line.

“Mara? Are you still there?”

I stop abruptly by the exit, noticing the limousine parked in front of the store.

“Yes, yes... Sorry. I just got a message from someone,” she says.

“Someone?” I smile, forgetting about our conversation for a second. “Who is that someone?”

She laughs.

“No one. Some guy I met at work. He’s bugging me with his stupid shit.”

“His stupid shit makes you laugh.”

“Yeah, yeah... He’s funny. And cute. And he knows it. Where were we? So you said you were going to be late?”

“Yes, yes. We’re going out for drinks, and maybe we’ll grab a bite to eat, so I’ll probably be late. Don’t wait for me.”

“Oh... Okay.”

Five minutes later, we end the call, and I’m in the limo, heading up north to Nor’s address.

I enter the lobby of his building and ride a sleek elevator straight to his apartment.

Speaking about living in style.

Honestly, this doesn’t look like living on a bodyguard’s salary.

His place is spacious and styled in good taste.

A woman greets me and introduces herself as my personal stylist before showing me to a room set up for me.

Friendly and straightforward, she’s showing me around, explaining what we need to do.

She’ll style my hair, apply my makeup, and help me select flattering clothes that match my body type and complement the color of my eyes and hair.

And then she’ll take a few pictures of me.

We work fastidiously to get everything done in record time, and later, she takes several snapshots of me posing in different outfits.

They are sassy and elegant, and I seemingly play my role well. She shows me the photographs on a computer screen before printing them out and placing them on the table.

With a furtive glance at the wall clock, she quietly suggests she’s ready to leave.

“Nor will be with you shortly. I’ll head out if you don’t mind.”

A tiny smile makes it to her lips.

“Sure. I’ll wait.”

“Great. It’s been a pleasure to work with you,” she says.

“Same here. Thank you.”

We shake hands, and I watch her reach the elevator before disappearing behind the sliding doors.

Sighing, I look around Nor’s place, dressed in one of the expensive outfits he has bought for me.

It’s a knee-length hourglass black lace dress with a scalloped neckline and hemline, a back zipper, an off-shoulder top, and a pencil skirt.

The stilettos are pure art, and although it’s taken me some time to get used to them, I’m comfortable walking in them.

I stroll across the room, my fingers brushing over the back of the armchairs, shelves, massive desk, and drapes.

French doors open onto a terrace.

The nocturnal panoramic view is magnificent.

Although present in the background, the hustle and bustle of the city is difficult to fathom here.

It’s fascinating how many people commute, work, live, and entertain themselves in a city that never sleeps, while spots like this offer rare moments of contemplation.

The whirring of the elevator, followed by a quiet ding as the doors slide open, makes me flick my eyes to the entrance.

Nor walks in, his stare rooted to his phone.

He taps the screen and pockets it immediately, and his hand is still tucked inside his suit jacket when he lifts his gaze.

His expression changes, shifting from intense preoccupation with whatever held his attention moments ago to surprise.

A smile broadens across his lips while his eyebrows lift with a thoughtful look.

Content with my so-called transformation, he studies my new dress, although I doubt this is only about sporting different clothes.

“Isabella... You look beautiful,” he says, extending his hand and locking mine. “Twirl for me, please.”

Keenly, I give him a view of my back.

“Perfect.”

He lifts his gaze from my *derrière* with a spark in his eyes as if I’ve checked several boxes on his list.

His satisfaction most likely stems from accomplishing what he’s been tasked with. A job well done, in other words, reflects well on him.

“The woman you hired left some pictures for you.”

I point to the table with a soft gesture and even half swivel, yet he can’t move his eyes away from me.

“Is everything okay?” I ask, shifting my focus back to him.

“Yes. Yes, it is... What did she do to your hair?”

“It’s darker, isn’t it?” I murmur, moving away from him and stepping in front of the full-length mirror propped against the wall.

We’re both facing it. He watches my reflection while I run my eyes over my tresses.

“She used some product,” I say, tugging at a strand of hair.

The contrast to my eyes is arresting, making my cheeks look paler. Although it may also have to do with the soft glow in the room and the street illumination.

His silent examination of my chest now encased in soft cups of delicate lace makes my pulse quicken.

“What do you think?” I ask.

He’s lost his train of thought again like he did when we had lunch yesterday.

“Nor?”

Our eyes meet in the mirror again, and the shift is immediate and final, giving me the kind of disengaged look I’ve become accustomed to.

He keeps crossing a line he is not supposed to cross, and whenever he does it, he immediately pulls back.

Seducing him is out of the question. So, no. It's not something that I've done.

My new look must be responsible for his fleeting absentmindedness and continuous struggle to maintain his focus.

He surprises me, though.

“Something's missing.”

He walks away from me.

Firm, confident strides take him to the other room. Seconds pass before he brings back a few shopping bags with new items.

He tosses the bags on the velvet sofa and retrieves a jewelry pouch.

Smoothly, a pair of diamond earrings, a necklace, and a tiny brooch surface.

“May I?”

The politeness in his voice puts space between us, a reminder that this is still a job for him and an agreement for me.

“Sure.”

I've become used to his mixed messages.

Lifting my hair, I allow for easy access to my neck, so he can fasten the necklace before I attach the earrings myself.

Having a hard time pinning the brooch, I ask for his help.

He stops in front of me and runs his fingers over the edge of my left cup, seeking the perfect spot to attach it.

“My fingers are cold. Just so you know...” he says before sliding his fingers inside my dress and lifting the fabric so he can put the brooch on without ruining the lace. “I think it looks great.”

He tips his gaze to my chest and the diamond-encrusted brooch.

“I love this particular dress,” I say in response, and he agrees with a casual nod.

“It looks great on you... Did you have dinner?”

Without waiting for my answer, he removes his suit jacket, drapes it over the back of a chair, and swaggers away, the shoulder gun holster still attached to his body.

I follow him into the kitchen.

Prompted by my silence, he spins around to face me.

“I guess not,” he says.

Our eyes lock.

“Are you his bodyguard?”

He smiles, amused.

“Sometimes.”

“Among other things?”

“Among other things.”

“Why does he need so much protection?”

He releases a quiet chuckle while retrieving a bottle from a cupboard, uncorking it, and pouring two glasses of wine.

He gives me one and keeps the other.

“Power comes with enemies. And power and money come with deadly enemies.”

“I see.”

“Food?”

I bring my drink to my lips.

“Yes. Food would be good. I’m hungry.”

“I’ll order something.”

“You don’t have to.”

He sets his drink down and lifts his finger in disagreement, holding his phone against his ear. The line is ringing already.

He orders at an Italian restaurant.

Stuffed artichokes, grilled steak topped with arugula, and fresh pesto, ravioli in fresh tomato sauce, pasta tossed with cauliflower sautéed with olive oil and garlic, and tiramisu.

My Italian is rusty, but I can still figure out what he's saying.

The owner himself takes the order, and Nor's Italian accent is glaringly perfect.

I wait for him to turn around and face me, my hand latched onto my hip.

He seems to like my pose, his eyes smiling, his mood matching his expression.

"What? I'm hungry," he tosses at me before pointing to the kitchen table, feeling the need to explain why he has ordered so much food.

I don't doubt he's hungry, and the perspective of indulging in good food—what he ordered sounded delicious—must be responsible for his good disposition.

I like him like that, so I'm not protesting in the slightest when he invites me to take a seat at the table again.

He picks up the glasses and also snatches up the bottle, showing dexterity while balancing the drinks.

I wash my hands first.

"I can help," I offer, my heels click-clacking against the floor.

"Those shoes are perfect for you."

I smile behind his back.

"Lights or candles?" he asks once I near the table.

"Do you bring women here often?"

"As you can see, I don't have much stuff here. I don't cook. So no."

He makes a small gesture with his shoulder, pointing to the minimalist design. The appliances look unused and spotless, most likely cleaned by a professional from time to time.

But there's also the table, where he puts everything.

"Candles," I say when he pivots away.

"Once in a while, we get a power outage. That's why I have a few candles."

I look at him curiously.

"We had a storm this summer," he explains.

I remain silent.

"When did you move to New York?" he asks, looking for plates in the cupboard.

"Recently. I live with my friend."

I'm purposefully scarce on the details.

Running a hand over the back of my skirt, I slide into my seat.

The street is visible from where I sit. It's not much different than my place, although the doorman and the elevator suggest a different price range.

This area is highly sought after, and the real estate prices reflect the demand. He slides the plates onto the table and brings the silverware and napkins.

"So... Where do you meet women?"

A corner of his mouth lifts with a crooked smile.

"Why are you grinning like that?"

He takes a seat across from me.

"You haven't spent much time around men, have you?"

I press my lips together in an attempt to look composed.

"What gives me away?"

My cheeks are warm as I center my eyes on my drink and curl my fingers around the glass.

“There’s not one thing...”

“Really?” I ask, lifting my gaze and bringing my drink to my lips.

Holding his eyes, I take a sip.

“Frankly, I’m not used to women like you,” he says.

“Something makes me doubt that.”

He laughs, entertained.

Considering how rough and unapproachable he looks at times, it’s a relief to see him enjoying himself.

“You’re very amusing,” he comments.

“I’ve been told that before.”

“By friends. Girlfriends, I suppose.”

“I only have one friend. The one I’m living with,” I say dryly, although I add a smile to my confession.

“It wasn’t men. I don’t think so.”

“You’re right. Partly. It was mostly strangers... Usually. Like you. Random men and women. I feel comfortable with strangers.”

His smile gets diluted in a flash and disappears, his eyes glinting with earnestness again.

Apparently, my words have just reminded him we are here to discuss business.

“That’s good,” he says. “It will help you do this thing.”

I search his eyes while he conveniently ignores my gaze.

“This... thing,” I murmur. “Tell me about this thing,” I say quietly, nudged by this unexpected moment of sincerity.

He stares blankly at his drink, my hope for an answer dying quickly.

It was a nice try.

Frankly, I didn’t expect him to tell me more.

“It’s not up to me...” he offers, regardless. “As I said before, we have to go through several steps.”

“And so far, so good...” I say in a lighter tone, observing his reaction.

“Yes. Things have been good so far.”

And his smile is back.

He brings his eyes to mine, and I’m about to ask him something else when his phone quivers.

He reaches inside his pocket and takes it out.

Simultaneously, he pushes out of the chair and slides his thumb over the screen.

A male voice makes it to my ears.

“Send him up,” Nor says.

I SABELLA

HE ENDS the call and uses the brief wait to replenish the wine in our glasses.

The bottle meets the sleek surface of the counter when the elevator comes to a stop and demands Nor's presence.

He walks out of the room and exchanges words with the delivery guy in front of the elevator while I shift my eyes to the window.

The smell of freshly cooked food travels inside before he enters the kitchen. It smells delicious.

He removes the bags and sets the trays on the kitchen counter, asking me if I have a preference.

"I want to taste a little bit of everything," I say.

He puts food on our plates.

"You're not in the habit of asking, it seems," I say as he sets them down.

He shoots me a questioning look.

"Tonight was the second time you didn't ask me what I wanted to eat."

"Was I wrong?"

“No.”

He claims his seat.

“Any particular reason you did that? What if I had food preferences? Likes and dislikes?”

“Did you?”

“No.”

“There weren’t that many options where we met yesterday, and I assumed you ate there regularly since you named the place. I picked what I thought was the tastiest food. Tonight, it’s a different story. All their food is delicious. These... are all winners.”

He points to the food.

“Eat,” he says. “It’s best served hot.”

The food is out of this world. The ingredients are fresh, and the overall taste is earthy, balanced, and full of flavor.

An unforgettable meal.

“Your Italian is perfect. I couldn’t pick up the slightest problem with your accent.”

“Do you speak Italian?” he asks in a New York-Italian accent.

“You have fun, don’t you?” I say, flashing an amused grin. “I didn’t think you were Italian,” I murmur, my eyes focused on the food in front of me.

“The people on my mother’s side were all Italian.”

Chewing slowly, I study his face.

“So you’re Italian-American,” I guess.

“Born in Brooklyn.”

“Interesting.”

I gently dab at my lips with a napkin.

“What about Max de Lucca? Where was he born?”

He tips his chin down, his eyes connected to mine.

“Long Island,” he says, chewing on his food.

My eyes slide over his broad shoulders, white shirt, and the holster that still hasn’t left his hard tight body.

It’s like he’s forgotten he’s wearing a holstered gun. I can’t imagine it’s a matter of security. And if he’s De Lucca’s bodyguard, who’s guarding his boss now?

More men like him, I guess.

His eyes hover over his plate while my thoughts remain unknown to him.

Done eating steak, he’s digging into the rest of his food.

“Italians would take issue with that,” I say, gesturing to our plates when he flicks his eyes up. “Mixing food like that,” I murmur.

“They sure would. My mother wouldn’t approve,” he admits, relaxed, enjoying himself, and not caring what Italians would say or do, or wouldn’t do.

“What about you? Tell me about your heritage.” I no longer detect an accent of any kind in his tone. “Do you speak Italian?”

“I can pick up a few words here and there. I know what they mean, but I’ve never studied Italian. So, no. I don’t speak Italian. And about my heritage... My grandparents on my father’s side were Scots. My mother’s lineage was more complex with a mix of Irish, Polish, and Sicilian.”

“Sicilian?”

He seems thrilled.

“Yes. Seemingly you find it relevant...” I murmur before putting a morsel of food into my mouth. “For this job,” I add.

He sticks his fork into his food.

“Smooth setup,” he comments. “I find it interesting when it comes to you. I don’t know if it’s relevant or not. It explains your ability to pick up words.”

“It doesn’t match my temperament,” I say, setting another trap for him.

He studies me, smiling and chewing on his food.

“I’m not biting. These things are between him and you,” he deflects.

“Why are we having this conversation then? And why are you wining and dining me? Why not him? Why the clothes? And everything else?”

My voice becomes animated without sliding into a different register. It’s even and smooth and still stuck in a lower register as it always is.

That’s how I’ve always spoken. Even when, occasionally, I’ve had an argument with someone.

“Two reasons,” he says, propping his fork against the plate and lifting his drink to his lips.

“I need to know what I’m telling him. And I have to show him something concrete so he can get an idea.”

He takes a swig of wine.

“There’s a third reason,” I argue. “There must be something else.”

“Yes, there is. I also need to get you used to this.”

“Why can’t he do that?”

“Because he’s the boss and has more important matters to attend to. He can’t afford to waste his time with something that might not work.”

“Charming. He must’ve wasted his time with other women.”

Reluctantly, he nods in agreement.

“You’re not the first woman considered for this job,” he genuinely admits. “But none of them have made it that far.”

“They’ve all got fired.”

His lips tilt.

“Something like that.”

“By you or him?”

“I can’t fire or hire anyone,” he clarifies. “He finds the person that he needs. And if it’s you, you’ll make a lot of money if you’re interested and capable of doing it.”

“I’m interested. I’m here...” I argue. “But I don’t know what I’m supposed to do. I suspect I won’t know much either way. Am I right?”

“For your protection, yes. You won’t know much.”

“Yet you’ve peppered clues here and there.” I tilt my chin in the direction of his gun. “You’ve made no secret out of that.”

“I needed to know if you were triggered.”

“By secrets, guns, or violence in general?”

“No one was talking about violence. If anything, you will be shielded from it.”

“Can violence happen?”

“I can’t say more than what I just said.”

I bite my lip and shift my attention to my plate.

“Why did I have to strip for you? Was that part of the process? Something he had requested? Or was it for your own edification?”

“There was a practical motive. I needed to pick up new clothes for you.”

Our eyes mysteriously communicate for a few seconds.

“He got a detailed description of your body, too,” he says in response to my inquiring gaze.

He doesn’t elaborate, and I move on.

“There’s also the address of that doctor’s office inside the folder.”

“About that...” he says, running his napkin over his lips and leaning back in his seat. “Once he gives me his okay—

which I'm confident he will— you'll need a physical exam.”

“What does he need to know?” I ask, intrigued. “Basic stuff, I assume.”

I doubt it's only that.

“He needs a clean bill health.”

“I find it intrusive.”

“This is probably one of the least intrusive things about this gig.”

“Explain to me.”

“He will explain it better than me.”

“He also wants to know whether I'm fertile. Or using contraception,” I throw at him, mostly out of frustration.

“Maybe both. He didn't mention anything in that regard.”

I set my elbows on the table and look at him.

“Let me see if I understand this correctly. He needs more than a woman's company or someone to go out with. He wants me to play a role. Convince everyone that I'm real and that what I have with him is real. And for that, he and I would need to believe that what we have is real at some point. Right?”

His expression is blank when he speaks again.

“The type of arrangement you two will have will be dictated by the circumstances. A lot of details are simply unknown. All I can say right now is, you'll get paid an obscene amount of money to do what he says, and it pays off to comply with his requests.”

“Provided he says yes to me.”

His eyes slide down and up in a swift once-over.

“I see no reason why he wouldn't do it. How you carry yourself and engage is instrumental in making his decision. I needed to spend some time with you to see if you were the right fit for him. While I can't obviously say whether you are that woman for him, the probability is very high.”

“What role will you play if I go along this?”

“I’m one of his men.”

“You’re his right hand.”

“I can’t comment on that.”

“I see...” I say, slightly disappointed.

A few moments pass.

“You also need this,” he says, reaching inside his pocket.

He retrieves his wallet and sets a shiny silver credit card on the table.

“What is that for?” I ask, no longer looking at it.

I empty my glass of wine, waiting for his answer.

“For you to cover incidentals. There’s no spending limit on this credit card. You can buy whatever you need or want, but he’ll know about those purchases. You two will function like a normal couple. You might get questions from him. Just so you know.”

“And this is separate from my pay.”

“Yes. Separate.”

“Huh...”

“Any other questions I can answer for you?” he tosses at me, sweetening his tone with a pang of humor.

“Yes. Where will I live?”

“At his place.”

My eyebrows shoot up.

“How am I supposed to keep it a secret then?”

“This, what we’re doing right now, has to stay a secret. Anything else will also be a secret. You having a man at some point in your life won’t be a secret. You can’t share the details of your affair, and you’re entirely forbidden to talk about his life and business. The final contract covers all those aspects.”

“Will he touch me?”

“That’s a question for him,” he says, holding my stare and waiting for me to continue.

“When will I meet him?”

“As soon as he makes a decision.”

I suck in a short breath before voicing my frustration.

“I find it unfair. You’re giving him so many details about me while I know nothing about him. Can you at least tell me what he likes?”

He ponders.

“He likes everything we’ve done this evening.”

“In terms of clothes and hair and everything else...?”

“Yes. And everything else.”

His eyes linger on my hair before he speaks again.

“I’ve purposefully selected a handful of clothes and lingerie to help you get an idea of what he’d like you to wear.”

“I haven’t seen the underwear.”

“It’s in my living room.”

I remember the shopping bags he brought from the other room.

“You can complete your wardrobe with whatever you wish once you figure out things for yourself. Everything else is up to you to discover. He won’t make a secret of what he wants from you. All you need to do is follow his instructions.”

I observe him quietly.

“Is that all?” he asks.

“Can I ask something about you?”

“Yes.”

“If you don’t see women here, where do you see them?”

“At their places.”

“You don’t have relationships, you mean.”

“No.”

“Why?”

He flashes a dark grin.

“It keeps them alive.”

I want to hear more, something to remove the bad feeling nestled in my chest.

“Tiramisu?” he asks, and my hope to hear it is completely crushed.

We enjoy the delicious dessert before he invites me to the other room to show me the sets of lingerie he’d picked out for me to wear for another man.

Because that doesn’t sound weird as fuck.

“I can’t show up with this stuff at my place. I’d need to give my roommate an explanation for all these clothes.”

“Keep what you want to wear on your first date with him, and I’ll send everything else to his place.”

I look down.

“This outfit, the shoes, and...”

I look at the sets of lingerie.

“The red lace one.”

“Good choice. I’ll have these shipped to you. You can say they are a gift from your... You make up something. I’m not going to teach you how to lie.”

“Thank you,” I say, touching his shoulder.

Taken by surprise, he tenses.

“Don’t thank me yet,” he says, fueling my worst fears.

M^{AX}

“IT’S LATE,” Nor argues. “I just returned home. Besides, I thought you were in Boston.”

“I got home an hour ago. And I’m waiting for you. If she’s not what you said she’d be, I need to know now.”

“I’ll be there in ten.”

I swipe my phone screen, drop my cell on the coffee table and push out of my seat, heading to the window.

The weather has started to change lately.

It’s still warm during the day, but the nights are longer and chillier, and piles of dead leaves line the sidewalks despite the leaf blowers roaming the streets in the mornings.

And then there are the yellow buses and the kids returning to school. The smell of smoke in the evenings and the crisp morning air.

The city has fascinated me my entire life.

Perhaps me more than anyone else in my family. Although I doubt I’m the only one who’s fallen for it.

The dark blood pumping through its veins and its tumultuous history captured in tomes thicker than my arms have fascinated me too.

We are the history of this place.

The people of this place are, and the stories, good and bad, talking about the great advancements and questionable setbacks of this city.

Tales of bloody greed, dark revenge, betrayal, and gray morality. Stories of men and women, all buried in the past or hidden in the present, witnessed by the quiet streets or crowded blocks.

The iconic buildings like this one. The architectural wonders. The clubs and theaters.

The back alleys, restaurants, hotels, and convention centers hosting social gatherings, bringing people together.

The best of the best—although the words lack spark, offering no nuanced meaning.

Good people. Bad people. All in one place. Cutting deals and using each other while pushing their agendas forward.

Some righteous. Some awfully corrupt. And some downright criminal.

The machine pulls everybody in and churns out stories of dark passion, money, blood, and, inevitably, horrible endings.

I've seen more men ruin their lives than I can count. Falling out of grace. Or power. Losing their money, families, minds, and sometimes their lives.

It's a treacherous world to explore and live in, and sometimes you're brought into it by birth and have no practical way out.

You can only move forward.

Always forward.

Always watching your back. Trusting no one. Not even your family or closest friends. Their lives come before yours, and they're often pressed to make a pick.

And with very few exceptions, they'll pick themselves.

You can't trust them.

It's a terrible way of living, and it's the only way.

Some take a risk I don't want to take. In the end, it may be all the same, but I still don't want to take it.

My father didn't pay attention and lost my mother. Almost lost me, and in the end, he lost his life.

I'm not him. But there are things I have inherited from him.

And one of those things is...

I'm sentimental about this city.

My heart beats for its soul.

Every corner, place, and building has a story for me.

Every sunset highlighting the skyscrapers talks to me. The bay, the boroughs. Long Island. The fall.

Manhattan in the winter.

The spring dancing on the streets of Queens and Brooklyn, and the summer exploding with color in the Hamptons.

This is my place, and it's one with me and many others like me. People who lived here before me. And people who'll live here after me for as long as the wheels of time keep spinning, creating the stories... *Of blood, passion, and revenge.*

The things that make men like me feel alive.

I tip my gaze down and notice Nor and my men, their quiet voices dripping into the night.

Smoothly, I pull away from the window and make a beeline for the couch, glancing at the old *Orologio Da Muro*—wall clock—that has been passed down through generations.

The clock ticks midnight as the doors open and Nor swaggers in.

His eyes slide quickly to the fireplace.

“Nice touch,” he says, tossing his suit jacket onto an armchair.

Sitting, I spread my arms on top of the sofa.

“You seem in a good mood.”

“I just dropped off your future wife at her place,” he says.
“Want something to drink? I feel like celebrating.”

He swivels to the scotch bottle and the crystal glasses on the tray.

“I’m good. You were bitching and moaning that it was late.”

He presses the rim of his glass against his lips and takes a swig before rounding the couch, extracting a stack of photographs from inside his jacket and giving them to me.

I grab them while he takes a seat across from me.

“I think she’s perfect,” he says.

I casually tip my stare down and turn to stone.

My reaction is not about her hair, her eyes, her lips, or the sophisticated dress highlighting her body.

Her expression has started to change like the weather outside.

Picture after picture showcases a woman that definitely looks the part but...

“She is interesting,” he says.

“I see that.”

I drop the pictures, telegraphing my displeasure.

His eyes glint with concern.

“She’s not good?”

“She’s too good.”

His brow furrows.

A sigh leaves his lips as he crosses his arms over his chest and leans back in his seat.

“It’s not like you’re planning to fall in love with her.”

I gesture dismissively without a comment.

“She’s great,” he says. “What is the fucking problem?”

“There is no problem. I’ll take it from here.”

I push to my feet, turn my back to him and pour myself a drink. I down it, facing the windows.

Nor continues.

“You wanted someone who could look the part and play a specific role in your life. You’re paying her to do that.”

“What did you say when you walked in?” I interrupt him, setting the glass down rather forcefully.

“Uh... The fireplace was nice.”

“Try again.”

I turn around slowly and prop myself against my desk. It’s an old piece that belonged to my father.

He’s done many deals sitting at this desk, and he almost lost his life twice in that chair. The bullet marks in the hand-carved wooden frame are a testament to that.

I purposely kept it like that, so I’d never forget.

“You said she was my future wife,” I mutter, our eyes locked.

He doesn’t flinch.

“It was a joke.”

“No, it wasn’t. I don’t know that right now. I’m not convinced going out with her will work. Let alone pulling her completely into my life. I want to send a clear message to my enemies that I’m not afraid of living after losing my family. It’s not like I want her to take a bullet for me. I’ll take a bullet for her if I need to. You know that already. Having said that, I can’t get attached to her. That was the whole idea. If I do, I’ll make mistakes. And mistakes will cause unnecessary loss of lives. And it won’t impact only my life. It will affect every distant family member who’s still alive, everyone working for me, you, and my estate. All my alliances. Everything will be on the chopping block. They thought taking out my father would destroy all that. A made man who took the *oath of*

omertà. They knew how important he was. And my father wanted me out of this. He wanted me to live my life as an honorable businessman, not a mafia boss. And his enemies didn't want that either, but here we are. They pulled me right back in. And now they're dealing with me. My father made a mistake. I don't want to make the same error. Why am I even saying all this?"

His face seems carved in stone, the light of the fire playing across his eyes.

"This woman won't be my ending. She might end up being my wife, but there's a long road to that, and even then, she won't really be my wife. And I hope you know what that means. My heart will never belong to a woman. So... Back to my plan. It's important for me to like her. We will—if we get to that point—be a couple for everyone looking at us. And I won't make a secret out of that when and if the marriage topic comes up. She'll know what she's getting into. It's the honorable thing to do."



ISABELLA

THE FOLLOWING WEEK.

ON TUESDAY.

TWO THINGS HAPPEN SIMULTANEOUSLY. Someone knocks on the door, and my phone buzzes with an alert.

I head to the door, glancing at the phone screen.

Nor: How does Thursday night sound?

I reach the door and look through the peephole.

"Who is it?"

“Delivery for Isabella Carson.”

I unlock the door and slide it open.

The delivery guy hands me a box and asks me to sign for it.

“Thank you,” I say before he vanishes around the corner.

I enter the apartment, lock the door, set the box down, and focus on my phone.

Me: Thursday is good.

My fingers shake.

Nor: You'll have dinner with him at a restaurant. The car will pick you up at eight.

I work that night.

I'd need to get home, shower, and get dressed. I'd need to leave work early if I did that.

Me: Eight is good.

But Mara might be home.

I barely finish that thought, and someone shifts the key in the lock.

Mara pushes through.

“Hey...” I say, enlivened. “What are you doing at home... in the middle of the day?”

My voice slows down considerably as I take her in.

Her beige trench is wet. Is it raining? I swivel my head and glance out the window. Yes, it is. Gray clouds line the sky, and gusts of wind unsettle the trees.

“What are you doing home?” she asks when I bring my eyes back to her.

I don't have the chance to talk.

Her gaze slides to the package while my eyes stall on her legs. Her stockings are torn around her knees.

“Don’t ask,” she says in response to my stare, limping to the middle of the room. “I fucking slid on the sidewalk and scraped my knees.”

“What happened?”

She removes her trench and shoes.

“I rushed out to grab a bite. Because you know... I had a meeting at twelve-thirty.”

It’s ten past one.

“You missed it, I figure.”

She gestured, annoyed, before heading to the bathroom.

I follow her.

“I fucked up,” she says, removing her skirt and stockings and cleaning her knees with soap and warm water.

I hold her skirt for her.

“I’ll wear something else,” she says.

“Are you going back?”

“I have to. My boss said I should take the rest of the day off. I can’t. There’s so much work to do. Besides, I’m fine. I only need to put on some pants instead of that stupid skirt.”

“I’m sorry.”

She grabs a towel, pats her knees dry, and looks at me.

“Weren’t you supposed to go to work today?”

“I’m leaving in half an hour.”

“Dressed like that?”

She’s pointing to my sweatpants.

“No. Of course, not.”

“What did you order?”

She tilts her chin toward the living room.

“What’s in that box?” she asks.

“In what box?”

My mind spins fast, searching for an explanation.

“A gift,” I say.

“From?”

Her eyebrows move up, a smile coloring her eyes.

“Some guy I met...?”

She laughs.

“You’re not sure? What guy? And he’s already giving you gifts?”

She signals me to move out of her way, and we both walk into the living room.

“I can give you a ride,” she says, strolling to her room. “If you’re ready in ten minutes. And you have to tell me everything,” she tosses at me over her shoulder. “A guy?” she murmurs to herself, very much entertained.

I collect the package and put it in the closet before removing a dress and a jacket from the hangers.

“Is it cold outside?” I shout.

Her answer arrives promptly.

“It is now. Put on something warm.”

I change my mind about the dress, and minutes later, I walk out of my room, wearing dress pants, a button-up shirt, and a wool winter jacket.

I gather my hair into a bun at the back of my neck and make sure I have everything I need in my purse.

“Good,” she says when I walk into the living room, and she runs her eyes over my outfit.

We’re dressed similarly.

The only difference is she sports a long coat.

Moments later, we exit her place, she locks the door, and we take the stairs to the lobby.

“I’ve already called a taxi,” she says when I notice the yellow cab waiting in front of the building. “So, tell me...

Who is this guy? Do I know him?"

A nervous laugh trickles across my lips.

"No."

"Where did you meet him?" she asks as I climb in first.

She slides in next to me, gives the directions to the driver, and the car rolls.

"He came to the store."

"Shopping for his girlfriend?"

Yeah, exactly.

"I don't know. I think he saw me on the street."

"A stalker?"

I'm terrible at lying. Besides, this is Mara, my best friend.

What if something happens to me, and she knows nothing about the new men in my entourage?

"No. He's not a stalker. He's a man who noticed me and wanted to talk to me."

"And he's already sending you gifts? It doesn't make any sense."

She shoots me a questioning look. My eyes move to the driver, who seems completely oblivious to our conversation.

"It's a job," I say quietly.

"What?" she tosses at me silently as well.

"I'll tell you more when you get home tonight. I can't talk about it now. And I shouldn't talk about it. I signed a non-disclosure agreement."

Her smile vanishes faster than I can blink.

Thick concern slides over her face.

"What are you talking about?"

"Don't worry. It's not dangerous. And I know what I'm doing."

Her expression beams with disbelief. I can't even argue with her. I sound like someone who has no idea what they're doing.

Why did I have to tell her that?

Luckily, the car comes to a stop in front of her workplace. She waves me goodbye, and I travel to the store.

I enter the place and talk to the girls on the floor before asking the manager if I can switch days with someone else so I'd be free on Thursday.

She says yes. My plan works, and I gain some confidence.

I regret telling Mara that I'd signed an NDA—that was a huge red flag—and I'll need to come up with a different story.

Later at night, Mara and I sit across from each other, having dinner, and she inquires about that story again.

I insist it's a job—because it is—and I'll be working as someone's personal assistant—which is so far from the truth.

But I continue.

This influential man attends social functions and requires all his employees to adhere to a particular dress code—hence the work-sponsored 'gifts' and strict rules.

I'm astonished that she's buying every word I say.

Things suddenly make sense in her head, and I mentally pat myself on the back for being so ingenious. At least now I can explain my fancy clothes, the credit card, and nocturnal outings.

I don't know if this charade will work in the long run, but it does for now.

Close to midnight, I lie on the bed in my room, thinking about everything that happened.

The wind picks up and starts whistling at the windows, so I push up and walk there to ensure they are closed.

Two days from now, I'll meet Max de Lucca again.

What if none of this will work in the end?

It doesn't matter.

If this doesn't work out, I'll try something different.

A smile sprouts on my lips.

I'll make my money one way or another.

This is a winning mentality, and for the first time in my life, I feel confident in my abilities to get what I want.

I SABELLA

THURSDAY NIGHT at Isabella's place.

I DISREGARD Nor's advice and opt for a different dress. They all came freshly cleaned and pressed, along with the shoes I wore that night and the jewelry.

It's not like I don't like the black lace dress. I do.

It's sexy and classy, but I think I need to present myself differently since this is a business transaction, and I must find my footing first.

The music plays in the background as I study my two other options. A black satin dress with an over-the-shoulder top, form-fitting design, and a knee-length skirt. And a blue powder dress with a bateau neckline, a sleeveless design, and a sewn-in short cape that falls below my *derrière*.

I love the color, but it's too pretentious for the occasion.

This is our first meet. We call it a date, but let's not fool ourselves. This has nothing to do with dating.

"Black it is," I murmur, tossing the satin dress onto the bed and picking up a red lingerie set.

The molding bra cups feature sheer lace, scalloped trim, and tiny bows. The panties are sexy without being flashy or tawdry.

No one besides me will see these panties tonight.

Tonight's meeting is not about... sex. That much I know. Nor has dropped this essential piece of information in one of his messages. I don't know why.

We weren't even talking about it.

He was trying to assuage my fears and make me comfortable with the idea that I'd have dinner with Max de Lucca.

I wondered if his boss had asked him to say that. I doubted it, and I suspected that many things Nor had eased me into were solely his idea.

Except the clothes, our conversations, the paperwork and pictures. That spoke of someone's obsessive attention to details.

Someone whose time was precious and who needed his imperative demands to be met.

I glance at the clock.

I've already washed my hair, gotten a blowout, had a snack—I don't want to go to the restaurant and be famished before the appetizers arrive—and painted my nails.

As strange as it sounds, I've never been on a date. Although this is more like a second job interview.

There is time, but I'm nervous, so I'd better get used to walking in these shoes before I leave.

A mixed scent of coconut, roasted almonds, and chocolate lifts off my skin while my hair smells like grapefruit.

With infinite care, I remove my robe and slide my panties on.

I spent my last money on a Brazilian wax, and the area is sensitive, the soft fabric spurring goose bumps on my legs.

I didn't want to use my 'credit card' for several reasons.

For one, a lady needs some privacy.

Secondly, I don't know if our deal is on.

And thirdly, I don't want to look desperate.

The last time I got a Brazilian wax was never. There was no point in getting one—not that it is now—and even this was more like a spur-of-the-moment kind of thing.

I thought it would make me feel more confident, as in... If I could get a Brazilian wax, I could surely handle a tough guy like De Lucca.

We'll see about that, though.

Tugging at my panties, I make sure they sit right and cover my slit and smooth folds. The bra fits my chest naturally without screaming for attention, enhancing my bust without making it look exaggerated.

Holding the black dress up, I examine it with a critical eye one last time before sliding it on.

It falls over my body with ease and without cutting into my flesh, bulging, or fitting too tightly, yet highlighting my silhouette in ways I never thought possible.

I spin around to face the mirror, and my reflection swiftly describes my mood. Dark, anxious, and enthralled.

Something triggers me, making me quiver inside. Something about this screams finality like I'm about to meet my fate.

Attempting to dismiss that irritating anxious thought, I try to compel myself not to take everything so seriously.

Another glance at the time.

Mara is late, and that works in my favor.

She might've bought my explanation about my 'possible' job, but this look... This look has nothing to do with a job.

In some respects, it has nothing to do with a date, either.

I slip on my diamond earrings—the ones Nor gave me—and decide against the necklace. It's too matronly and, again, not a good fit for tonight.

My eyes slide to the window.

Is it cold outside? Do I need stockings?

Seconds later, I open the window. The evening is strangely warm for September.

Reluctantly I pull away, leaving the window open.

I am organizing the contents of my purse when my phone shivers on the bed.

Mara: Are you still home?

I look at her text message again before putting my stuff back in the closet and grabbing my phone again.

Holding it, I go back to the window.

The car should be here any minute.

I type out a reply.

Me: I'm leaving now. Are you on your way?

My eyes go to the street when my phone chimes again.

It's an unknown number.

Unknown: I'm downstairs.

This is De Lucca's driver.

Relieved, I tip my gaze down and notice a dark limousine crawling down the street before I check my phone again.

Mara sent me an answer that slipped into the chat room without a sound notification.

Mara: I'll be late tonight. We're going out.

Smiling, I send her another reply.

Me: We?

Her text message arrives immediately.

Mara: It's not what you think. Work-related.

“Sure. Like mine,” I murmur, pivoting and moving away from the window.

Moments later, I send her another message.

Me: Be safe.

My phone vibrates again.

Mara: You too.

The idea of being safe occupies more space in my head than she can imagine.

I check the weather forecast on my phone to make sure it doesn't rain tonight before I exit the apartment, lock the door, and take the stairs to the first floor.

A *Rolls Royce Phantom Black* awaits in front of the building.

It takes my breath away.

It's not that I'm impressed. My knees seldom soften when I ride in a luxurious car.

I don't know much about cars in general, but this is not only about a car or a man trying to impress me.

I don't even think he's trying to impress me.

This is surreal and, above all... This is serious.

The man behind the wheel notices me, so he steps out of the car and opens the door for me while smoothly scanning the street.

There is not a soul in sight, the autumn wind rolling over the sidewalks in perfect solitude, faintly lit windows glowing above the ground.

Most people have dinner or binge-watch their favorite show on TV.

He introduces himself, Aaron Seckel, and ensures I'm safely tucked in before letting the door fall shut and retaking his place behind the steering wheel.

The temperature is perfect inside—not too warm to sweat or too cold to shiver.

I check my lipstick, faint blush, and eyeliner only one time when we stop at an intersection. Other than that, for the most part, I stare vacantly at the streets.

The busyness of the fall spills well into the evening hours, with groups of people heading to the shows and restaurants.

Cars and pedestrians swarm the streets before we turn onto a surprisingly quiet road and soon pull up in front of a townhouse.

Now that's a fancy restaurant.

Vibrant lights filter through the arched windows and royally lit entrance. Men clad in sharp suits and women wearing fancy dresses like me are greeted at the door.

I'm not surprised there is a dress code—the lavish decor visible from the outside suggests that.

Aaron is already holding the door, waiting for me to connect my high heel shoes to the concrete.

I push out of my seat and pull my shoulders back, my heart beating at an alarming pace.

“Mr. De Lucca will be with you momentarily.”

And just like that, my heart magically morphs into a bird attempting to fly out of my chest.



ISABELLA

THE FEW MINUTES I spend taking it all in, getting greeted by the hostess, handing her my coat, and being led to the upper floor to a private dining room, make me forget why I'm here.

Only when I find myself alone in the room set especially for us on the second floor, it finally dawns on me what's going on, and my heart pitter-patters like a broken clock.

The atmosphere is solemn even without anyone being here with me.

It's different than the vibe I got downstairs, where men and women sat around the tables as I trailed the hostess to the stairs.

The noise originating downstairs seeps through the walls, muted and insignificant like an old memory. The decor contributes to this feeling that this is more than a night out.

The room is spacious and squared-shaped, with high ceilings and tall windows overlooking the street.

A thick scarlet rug sits in the middle, partially covering the polished espresso-brown floors.

The first thing that strikes me is the wall tables with tall Etruscan vases overflowing with fresh flowers. I've never seen so many flowers since my older sister's wedding. Erin's.

Colorful and sweet smelling, armfuls of roses, dahlias, lilies, violets, and hydrangeas are paired with ferns and moss.

Flashing shades of dusty rose, rich red, innocent white, smoky violet, and intense pink, they vibrate with life against the cream walls, perfuming the air.

Walking past the table, I study the photographs hung on the walls, the snapshots encasing bits of long-gone history.

Women draped in silk and rhinestones living a life hard to imagine today. And men sporting dark suits, driving cars in an era when everything seemed exciting and beamed with life.

I reach the end of the long table set for two and take a seat.

Away from the windows, the table is shielded from the prying eyes of outsiders, although I do have a view of the street.

The man who is supposed to occupy the seat across from me would surely be out of sight.

The distance between us would certainly allow us to talk, see each other eyes, and study each other's expressions without getting into each other's faces.

It's private and intimate without the dramatic effusiveness of touching and needless exposure to scrutiny.

Although, what else is this if not being closely examined?

Voices echo up the stairs.

Fleeting, I get nervous, but just as fast, I realize it's the servers bringing the appetizers.

My boss is fashionable late... It seems.

A man and a woman enter the space, and candles come to life under their deft fingers. A third person walks in with the appetizers.

Warm from the oven, they fill the room with their aroma. Fried zucchini, roasted eggplant caponata, and arancini with mozzarella.

I quickly regret eating before coming here. The sommelier pours a glass of Chianti Classico for me and smoothly retreats.

My first impression is that Max de Lucca can't be far away. The food is on the table, after all.

And what am I supposed to do? Wait for him? Or eat?

I'm not hungry—I wish I were—but the smell is so delicious, titillating my senses and nudging me to take a bite.

I sip wine first, and, mmm... What an experience it is.

A mouthful of flavors travels to my brain. An aroma of dry sour cherries mixed with herbs and a tang of tartness in the end.

Setting my glass down, I look around the table. The white tablecloth and napkins set a quiet background for the food that is still simmering. The eggplant is.

I tear a piece of ciabatta bread off and pop it into my mouth. It's fresh from the oven and soft. It would require a sprinkle of salt for my taste, so munching on it, I move my gaze around the table and reach for the saltshaker when I notice a tiny bowl with olive oil and herbs.

I tear a second piece of bread off and dip it.

“Mmm... This is even better.”

Next, I take another drink of my wine. And now, I’m practically eating small bits of bread coated in olive oil—savory, the way I wanted it—and drinking wine.

Going from that to dipping in eggplant caponata and delighting myself with fried zucchini and arancini is only a small step.

I unfold the pressed napkin and put it on my lap before indulging in the food, taking my time, chewing slowly, and making sure my lipstick stays on.

The food and wine remove my jitters, and it comes as a surprise that I’m actually waiting for someone.

His tardiness doesn’t score points with me, but I can’t hold it against him. Besides, I’m treated nicely, with people walking into the room, asking me if everything is good and meets my expectations.

“How’s everything?”

“Good. Thank you.”

I smile before the woman nods, retreats, and takes the stairs down.

Not before long, masculine voices ring outside, bringing my tasting of food and drinking of wine to an abrupt end.

My heart races again, and I get stiff in my seat, the fleeting moment of respite quickly becoming a memory.

First, heavy steps head toward this room, making the floors shudder, and they’re not coming from downstairs as I anticipated.

And then the men I ran into that day in front of the hotel seem to be all here tonight.

I also expect to see Nor when men dressed in black, all burly and rough, who’ve never heard of cracking a smile in their entire life, enter the room. But he’s nowhere to be found.

The men nod a greeting—some of them—and it’s mostly a brief introduction before they check the room.

To their credit, their surveillance mission ends as swiftly as it begins, although I almost expect them to pat me down since whatever they're looking for might be hidden in my underwear.

My awkward sense of humor does nothing to regulate my pulse rate. Once they're done, they walk out without a word while I remain seated, staring at the arched open entrance.

Words are exchanged outside the room before the silence, my old friend, returns, and the muted joyful noise of the crowd downstairs becomes the only thing that echoes in the room.

And then his steps...

One, two, three, four.

I SABELLA

I INADVERTENTLY COUNT his steps as if counting the seconds to my new life.

A mist sets over my eyes as I stare at the entrance without blinking. The doorway fills with his athletic frame, and I blink for the first time.

Initially, his gaze moves up from the floor like he was sunk in thought moments ago when he was making the trip here.

My conversation with Nor comes to mind, and my own thoughts spur some speculation.

This is not only a powerful, complicated, demanding man. This man is lethal.

Undoing the only button of his suit jacket, he opens it and makes a faint attempt to smile, not in the slightest a friendly, welcoming grin.

More like a bland, stripped-of-meaning kind of smirk.

I can see how selecting his dress shirts in the morning, being involved in all aspects of running his business empire, and dealing with unforeseen, perhaps dangerous circumstances would be his strong suit.

Grinning is definitely not his forte.

“Bella Carson...” he murmurs, his voice hovering around the room.

No one has called me that.

I’ve heard Isa, Ella, and even Belle Isa, but Bella has never stuck with anyone.

“Mr. De Lucca.”

His eyes glint with contentment at the sound of my voice, suggesting a deep sense of reverence for conducting myself with graciousness.

He nods in approval, and I feel giddy for a fleeting second.

“I apologize for the delay. It wasn’t in my plan to make you wait. How’s the food?”

I give him a smile, although the atmosphere is glacial with him in the room.

“The food is delicious. I hope you don’t mind me getting started without you.”

Our eyes lock, and I melt a little in my seat while he pushes back his well-concealed surprise.

I don’t know what Nor has told him about me, but... Did he expect a savage?

“I couldn’t resist,” I say.

“I’m glad you like it.”

He occupies his seat when a woman shows up in the doorway. She relays a message in Italian, and soon after, he signals to her, and she vanishes down the stairs.

As if he’s been waiting around the corner, the sommelier enters the room and refills my glass before pouring another one for Max de Lucca.

I use the opportunity to furtively observe the man in front of me. Honestly, I’m frozen and melting inside at the same time.

On the one hand, I realize this is more than a business dinner, a date, and a prelude to an agreement.

As special and breathtaking as this evening is, there are seven layers to this story. Or maybe eight or a dozen.

The men surrounding him at all times, the personnel moving around him with the silence and stealth of a cat.

They speak when they're allowed to. Or if they are spoken to.

Unlike me, they know exactly who they're dealing with, although I'm beginning to learn that too.

I don't expect a full, life-altering revelation to come to me, but a sense of who this man is starts to seep into my psyche.

Ravishing is the word to describe him tonight, and it barely reflects how the man in front of me looks.

His custom-tailored, three-piece suit, starched white shirt worn open at the neckline, and Italian shoes I got familiar with the last time I met him convey an atmosphere of drama, mystery, and nagging anticipation.

Looking calm and settled as the people around the table serve his food is only a veneer for what looks like a trap of astounding proportions.

The quiet voice of reason mumbles in my head.

What am I doing?

Right now? I can't take my eyes off him.

At ease, his gaze seems to focus on nothing in particular. It's like he's waiting for the servers to leave the room, so he can deal with me.

A few more seconds allow me to peruse his athletic shape, from his broad, muscular shoulders to his chest and flat stomach.

His forearms rest on the white tablecloth, and his wrists and hands are tanned and inked.

A masculine signet ring graces his finger, adding a magical spark to his appearance. It would almost look like a templar ring if it weren't for the huge sapphire resembling the color of his eyes.

And speaking of that. His eyes glint.

He might not be a champion of smiling, but he sure knows how to hide his smirks in his solemn expression.

Although I'm less tempted to buy into his stern expression now than I was that day in front of the hotel.

I know he likes being watched by me.

His eyes flick up when the woman asks us what we'd like to eat. She makes a few recommendations, and we both settle for ravioli with truffle butter as the first course—*Il primo*—and steak and roasted vegetables with herbs and olive oil dressing as the second course. *Il secondo*.

Once we're alone in the room, waiting for the first course, his demeanor changes.

His eyes come to life, twinkling with dim, distant thoughts and offering me unknown stories while questioning my motivations and trying to discover the real reason I am here.

Despite him masterfully bringing me here.

Distrust flows through his blood as much as fear of the unknown and curiosity run through mine.

He drags his gaze over my face and hair, taking inventory of every detail of my appearance, like looking at a painting and trying to find a use for it.

His gaze is direct and possessive, not in a romantic way, but more like how it is when you buy something, feel a glimmer of excitement, and a strong sense of accomplishment.

I have no idea how much of a done deal I am for him.

Buying me is not a foreign concept. He will buy me if our deal goes through. Is he excited about the idea?

His enthusiasm, if real, is no different than the one spurred by acquiring a fancy new car.

With this being said, I think I look my best, not that he can tell, but I'm quite happy with how I present myself.

“Am I what you expected?” I ask, looping my fingers around my glass and bringing it to my lips.

My question interrupts his examination, adding a bit of surprise to his look like he hasn’t expected me to phrase it that way.

“Am I?” he throws back at me.

Whoa.

Now that is unexpected, and it takes me by surprise just as I tear my drink away from my lips.

Unable to suppress a smile, I set my glass down and speak.

He has no reaction, making me enjoy my grin much less.

“You’re paying, so you have to be satisfied with your purchase.”

His eyebrows move up slowly in an expression of... *nothing?*

Surprise, disbelief, and even discontentment would be better than this. I can think of a few other things, but nothing actually shows on his face.

Humor...?

Yes.

Maybe.

He should be entertained. That’s the idea behind my attempts to break the silence. And break the ice.

But sadly, it doesn’t work on him, and I feel like I’m walking on a minefield, expecting something to blow up in my face at any moment.

It’s not my job to talk. And I don’t know how I’m going to do my job if I won’t be able to talk.

A shiver races down my spine while my shoulders feel suddenly frosted. Not even the extra mouthful of wine I push down my throat does much to raise the temperature of my body.

He leans back and folds his arms, looking at me with the harsh intent of a gun barrel.

I go silent as if I've sworn silence and avoid his eyes despite being under scrutiny. Good thing the first course arrives, and we eat for the next few minutes.

If this type of sober, quiet dinner is what he has in plan for me for I don't know how long, I better get mentally prepared to go through with them without losing my marbles.

I'm hardly a small talker, but exchanging words with other people at the dinner table is usually nice.

Truthfully, there is nothing for us to talk about since we are not in that kind of relationship.

"So, you didn't tell me," he says in a terse, caustic tone. "Am I what you expected?"

I chew on my food, using the time to tailor my response to the circumstances.

"As I told your..."

He lifts his gleaming, mysterious gaze to me, pinning me in my seat without making the slightest effort.

"Friend, Nor..." I continue before swallowing hard, although mostly thrusting down the tension stuck in my throat.

Maybe this will make him smile.

No. Not a chance.

I try to look unfazed.

"I, uh..."

My eyes wander to the food while I quietly poke at my food with the fork.

"Stop doing that."

His voice shoots across the table, and I drop my fork like it's poisoned.

"Talk to me, Bella."

His tone is significantly adjusted, but even so, it is impatient and tyrannical.

The strange thing is, other than making my hair bristle and my shoulders jolt, his voice rouses the strangest need in me. It's wild and inexplicable and has to do with how my flesh reacts to him.

"I'm talking," I shoot back, and this time he is calm and mildly curious about what I have to say.

He penalizes me, regardless.

"Watch your tone when you talk to me."

I can't comment on that, so I only nod.

"I told him it was unfair you knew so many things about me while I knew nothing about you. So to answer your question. You are what you are. I didn't have any expectations."

I run out of breath and clamp my mouth shut.

"Was it so hard?" he says in response, a shred of dormant atavism making him enjoy my clipped reaction.

He is hardly a primitive man in appearance.

Smooth and sophisticated as they come, he has that blinding aura of power that makes him irresistible.

Although in his case, his power is cursed, and I can see the blood dripping from his story, even though everything looks immaculate around him.

"No, sir."

"Eat now."

"Yes, sir."

I grip my fork and stick it into a soft pillow of dough, watching with satisfaction how the cooked ricotta cheese spreads all around it.

And all that while I'm still wrestling with an insidious cosmic fear.

I'm lost in my ravioli saga when his voice wraps rough hands around my neck.

“Have you been with a man before?”

My eyes fly across the table, and my lips pull apart, about to push out a dignifying... ‘Excuse me?’

But I think twice because I learn quickly.

“In what way?”

There is no innuendo or shred of humor in my voice.

“Have you physically been with a man?”

Why does he sound pissed?

If this was a multiple-choice question, I wouldn't be more torn about giving him an answer.

My cheeks burn as if solar flares disrupt my expression.

He knows the answer, or he wouldn't ask the question, and I daringly tell him precisely that.

“You wouldn't ask me that if you didn't know the answer.”

His eyes flicker with mild *amusement*. And that is a big word for him.

“You think it's funny?” I ask.

And then, the most unexpected thing happens.

Out of his impressive chest, a chuckle rises, dipped in deep nasal tones, genuine and troublesome at the same time.

What does that even mean?

“Is our deal off?” I ask, not knowing how to handle the situation.

His deceptive laughter comes to an abrupt end, and I freeze, looking at him as he shakes his head in disbelief.

“Is that a problem?” I insist, continuing the string of unanswered questions.

He takes a long breath, and that's an ominous sign.

“Let's establish some ground rules.”

He crashes his elbows onto the table and runs the hand bearing the ring through his dark shiny hair.

“You don’t get to ask me questions.”

I’m about to ask another one when his finger goes up.

“I’m serious.”

Even with no word uttered, the toughness in his look makes it no secret.

A thought spins in my head.

‘How are we supposed to talk?’

I bite my lip, though, and listen.

“Other than the usual stuff, like what you want to eat and drink and wear and anything else that’s basic, you never ask me anything.”

I guess comments are out of the question too.

“There is more than one reason you need to listen to me, Bella.”

Why the fuck are my eyes covered in mist when he says my name like that?

“This is about me protecting your life. And mine. Do you understand?”

Silently, I nod.

“I’ll be very honest with you.”

Color me surprised, an honest hoodlum?

I have no doubt he’s a gangster.

“I’m running out of time,” he says, and I blink again like I’ve lost my voice for good.

I SABELLA

WHY IS THAT?

He's young and good-looking. A plight of women must be waiting for him in his bed tonight.

Is he sick or something? Terminally ill?

The storm of thoughts makes me cold with sweat.

"I thought you wanted a job," he goes on. "And I said I might have a job for you. It's a dangerous job. Does that make sense to you?"

Our eyes stay locked tighter than a rope, and his stare feels like a dagger with blood spurting around the hilt.

"Yes, it does."

My voice is faint and covered in dew.

"You don't have to be sad about it. It's a fact of life. You just need to deal with it."

Easy for him to say. I'm not a grown-up like him. Don't sleep with daggers in my bed. Or have guns strapped around my shoulder.

"If you can't deal with it, you need to pull out now."

The second option gets me thinking, but it's still far from what I want. What would really be a good choice for me.

“Would you rather call it quits? If you're not up for it, we better go separate ways now.”

So much for charming me into this.

“Do you need some time to think about it?” he asks again.

I'm broken.

It's like a freight train has rammed through me and turned my bones to dust.

I've never been more overwhelmed. All my good feelings about this evening have been nuked within the past few minutes.

“I need to go to the bathroom. May I?”

“Yes. Sure.” He tilts his head toward the door. “Alberto?”

His voice snaps through the air like a mad snake.

A man with a head the size of a tire fills the doorway.

“Isabella wants to go to the bathroom.”

My leash is invisible, but it's just as tight around my neck as a real one would be. Am I going to have someone accompany me everywhere now?

I move my eyes to De Lucca, who flicks his head toward the door.

“You can go now.”

Did he think I'd make an escape by lifting my skirt and climbing out through the bathroom window? And then what?

Head straight to the local paper and sell them a story about a gangster buying a virgin girlfriend like she's a trendy pet?

Or is he easing me into what my life would look like if I said yes to him?

Probably the latter.

Clearing my throat, I toss my napkin onto the table and push my chair back before rising to my feet.

His eyes glide up from my legs to my face, glinting with quiet admiration, although he remains tactfully expressionless.

Putting one foot in front of the other, I stroll past him, his eyes invading every bit of me. Every inch of skin, strand of hair, and arched line. Every glimmer of color.

Once he stares at my back, I have no doubt he sizes me up with the eyes of a lustful man.

I can feel the ardor in his stare and the guilty pleasure spurred by the perspective of undoing me bit by bit.

“Alberto? Hi. I’m Isabella.”

If I’m dealing with brutes, let’s toss a wrench into the buzzing gears of their criminal machine.

Hopefully, their dumbfounded reactions to my politeness could spur some cheap yet equally appealing satisfaction.

The man says nothing.

He probably got the same speech about questions and answers and all that crap from his boss.

“Which way?” I ask, convinced he knows all the rooms, entrances, and exits of this house, now transformed into an iconic restaurant.

I follow him down a narrow hallway to the last door on the right. He opens it, checks the space first—go figure—and allows me to step in.

I hope he won’t be within hearing distance, although this is hardly about my bladder or me using the toilet.

Reaching inside my purse, I turn on the faucet to have some background noise before retrieving my phone.

What made me think I’d find an answer on my phone?

I have no new messages or missed calls. There’s nothing.

So... What am I supposed to do?

I glance at my reflection, find a few strands of hair at fault, and focus on fixing them, my mind momentarily going blank.

Later I straighten, slide my phone into my purse and scoop out the lipstick tube. I fiddle with it before touching up the color on my lips.

Eventually, I have to turn the water off as it impedes my ability to think.

This is not about the money as much as it's about a life and death situation. Money is scarce, but I could probably fix that.

It would be weeks, maybe days, before I'd find something suitable that could bring me more money.

When was the last time someone in my family cut a deal with the mob?

Never.

We're a well-off family from the south. Although I'm penniless now because of my choices and genuine revolt in the face of an arranged marriage.

But what is this if not an arranged thing? An arranged boyfriend, girlfriend thing?

The idea makes me laugh copiously.

There won't be anything of that nature between Max de Lucca and me.

Despite him looking to buy some type of replacement to keep up the appearances, or maybe get back at an old flame, or ensure an inheritance.

Who knows?

It can't be about the inheritance since he is the only heir of the business empire bearing his name, and his parents are no longer alive.

The internet searches I'd run concurred with that.

So, let me see if I got this right.

I got into a huge fight with my family because I didn't like Mick. And the idea of marrying a stranger horrified me so much so that I stayed away from men. And now I'm facing this?

It's like the universe is playing games with me, asking me to reconsider my stance on the matter.

Is that what this is? Is this my fate?

If it wasn't the man my mother had picked for me, now it's someone I'm choosing for money?

I may be a rebel, but my proclivity for mutiny is not that strong. I wouldn't do something to hurt myself just to prove a point.

Why would I go through with this?

And it doesn't even matter what it entails. I've already gotten a taste of what this is.

It happened this evening.

I've had my privileges stripped while being walked into a world of privilege.

So I'll sell my soul to the devil for what? Money? Money doesn't hold that kind of power over me.

Maybe Max de Lucca's calculations are inherently flawed.

Neither of them has seriously thought about how motivated I can actually be.

Sure, Nor had said I'd do it for money. But would I?

A loud knock on the door startles me.

"Is everything all right?" the caveman behind the door asks.

"Yes. I'm coming."

I tuck my lipstick into my purse and straighten in front of the mirror.

All things aside, I look good tonight, the realization creating a pang of regret in my heart.

Too bad no one can see that but me.

The black satin dress fits me like a glove. A cliché, I know, but it's true in this case.

Some clothing never seems to get it right, missing the waistline or the bustling by an inch, making everything look like I fell face forward into that piece and haven't had the chance to tug at it and make it fit right.

But not this garment.

Nor has a good eye and perhaps extensive experience in buying gifts for his boss' mistresses and girlfriends.

Although Max de Lucca doesn't strike me as someone who's keeping women around for long or long enough to spoil them with lavish gifts.

It's only logical his good looks come with benefits like female attention and sex, so why bother with everything else?

And why would someone like him, with testosterone cloying the air all around him, not bury himself in a woman at night just to take that edge off and forget about his dangerous life?

I run a trembling finger down my stomach before I spin around and glance over my shoulder at my back.

Yes. It does look good, the long seams trailing down my back, making it fit properly.

Not solving my dilemma in the slightest, I walk out the door.

The man regards me with suspicion as he checks my appearance briefly as if I could produce a gun in the restroom, and I'm now set on putting his gangster boss out.

One thing I find repugnant in this new life of mine is dealing with people's paranoia.

He keeps his distance as I make the trip back and lose him somewhere between the head of the stairs and the entrance to the dining room.

De Lucca's men are all over the floor, guarding the place and also the back exit, through which he must've arrived.

I enter the room and find two empty chairs, the second course on the table, and a delicious smell permeating the air.

On his phone, with his back turned to me and a hand tucked in his pocket, he speaks quietly.

Maybe he is engaged in a conversation with his mistress. Someone real, not like me.

I've heard these people keep several other women besides the official one. Which would be me.

Why would he be already secretive with me? I'm not on his payroll. Not yet, anyway.

Despite all that, walking to the table in a daze, I can still notice what a hunk of a man he is.

For certain, eager women get to slide their fingers through his thick dark hair and press their lips against his chest and groin.

I can see their red nails trailing a path down his V-shaped back, their fingers fanning over his muscular backside, and his hand on their head when they sit on their knees, pleasuring him.

How does a man like him even take a woman?

He ends the call and turns around abruptly, severing my thoughts and dimming my fantasy to an insignificant dot.

“We eat first. Then we talk.”

I live in a world where even my opinions on trivial matters are ignored, the thought taking me back to Nor, who had ordered food and clothes for me way before I figured out what I wanted.

He'd done it on purpose to help me get used to it.

Swaggering by, he takes me in from a different angle, his eyes moving swiftly over my legs and sexy, gravity-defying heels.

Would it kill him to say that I looked beautiful? That my dress did me justice? That my hair enhanced my looks?

A voice blabbers in sheer mockery in my head.

Yes, a compliment would suffice in real life, although I'm not holding my breath.

I appreciate that he wants us to indulge in the delicious food sitting on the table before going cold instead of engaging in a sterile conversation. Still, dining in silence when something so serious is looming makes my stomach twist.

I try to focus on my food, thinking that maybe this would be the entire De Lucca experience for me.

Him and I eating at a restaurant I'd never return to just to leave these memories unearthed.

Eventually, we reach the end of our quiet interlude, and he places his napkin on the table before lifting his drink to his lips.

I chew on my food, swallow, and lean in my seat, waiting.

I'm no longer in the mood for wine, and having my questions silenced pisses me off.

"So..." he says, his eyes flicking at me before he reaches inside his pocket, retrieves a cigarette, and places it between his lips.

It remains unlit, as he must've noticed my swift reaction to it.

"Do you mind?" he bothers to ask, talking around his cigarette.

"It's better if you smoke outside."

An eyebrow moves up in surprise, dark amusement glimmering in his eyes.

He's asked me, so that's my answer.

If I'm forbidden to ask questions, I'll use everything else I have, like giving him answers.

He might be allergic to my questioning, but he needs me to talk back at him. Although he'd never admit it.

It doesn't take a genius to understand it's a matter of survival in his world.

To be tough and straightforward.

To fight back.

That's why he asked me if I'd ever been with a man. Not because he wanted to know if I'd lost my V-card.

But because he wanted to establish whether I was used to being around men, listening, and being reliable.

Or putting someone in their place.

If I was easy to intimidate and manipulate.

And the list goes on and on.

He wouldn't tolerate me talking back at him with his expressed approval—that's why he put me on notice—but he wants me to grow a pair and react. And right now, I don't know if what I have is good enough for him.

Yet here I am... Already leaning toward being favorable to his proposal.

He holds his unlit cigarette between his fingers and taps the filtered end with his thumb a few times before tapping the table with the unfiltered end.

Humorlessly, he shoots me a questioning look, nudging me to talk.

"Let's talk about money before we go any further," I say.

My voice is clear and emotionless.

Learning fast from him, it seems.

He nods, and I'm waiting for him to shout instructions and Alberto walk back into the room with a written proposal or something.

Instead, De Lucca reaches inside his suit jacket that is now draped over the back of his chair, pulls out a folded piece of paper, leans over the table, and tosses it next to my plate.

I thought it would be something more ceremonious.

Playing it by ear, I pick it up from between my fork and wine and unfold it with shaky fingers.

Not only it's not a formal agreement, but it's scribbled down by someone. Him, I guess.

It looks like something my niece would mindlessly doodle if she got ahold of a box of crayons. Or something written by someone experiencing a brutal hangover, a throbbing headache, and a nauseating feeling after a night of partying.

I put some effort into smoothing the crumpled paper.

“Is that it?”

Shit, that was a question.

I SABELLA

I LIFT MY GAZE, expecting to be reprimanded. That would be a no.

I guess this is an administrative issue and doesn't fall under the 'no questions' rule.

"You didn't expect a letter with a header, did you?"

"No."

"I put it down on paper so you'd understand."

I'm not stupid, you know.

I bit my lip to push my retort back. Maybe I don't look very smart, although I beg to differ...

Never mind. I won't get into that with him.

The math is simple. I'd get 20K per month, plus living expenses, gifts, and a no-limit credit line for as long as I pretended to be his girlfriend.

In exchange, I'd hand him my life.

It doesn't say that in here, but it's surely implied.

"It's too little money," I comment.

I flick my eyes up, expecting him to call our deal off and start a hard negotiation with me.

Not a muscle pulses on his face.

“What kind of number do you have in mind?”

Hmm.

He’s open to negation?

That’s interesting.

“Considering my life would belong to you, I’d say six figures for what you want me to do sounds right.”

“100K a month?”

“Yes.”

If this is a blinking contest, we both win because neither of us blinks.

He leans back in his seat, his left hand still messing with that unlit cigarette on the table.

“You were looking for a job that was paying like what...? Sixty thousand a year? Maybe? For which you’d normally put in 50 hours of work a week if not more? And your life would belong to a corporation. And you think this is too little?”

Putting it like that makes me look stupid and greedy, and I’m neither.

He probably made 100K while we were having dinner, and now he’s looking for a bargain?

“With you, I could end up dead. With them, not so much.”

He narrows his gaze at me, arching a brow, pondering my request.

Letting him consider it, I go down the list.

He’d pretty much put a gag order on me, forbidding me to talk to anyone about anything related to my real life with him.

At the same time asking me to come up with some sort of plausible explanation for being with him.

We’ll need to convince people that we are together.

Although being together with someone in his world has a different meaning than in anyone else’s world.

“There’s the possibility of marriage...” I murmur, reaching the third point on the list.

“Yes, there is,” he says, deliberately impassive, his tone hollow like a cave.

“I gather that’s what this is. A preamble to marriage. I can’t imagine we’ll be acting like a boyfriend and a girlfriend for long.”

“Your assumption is correct. It’s mostly an introduction to marriage if our agreement works.”

“How do we know if it works?”

His intense, penetrating eyes make me hold his gaze in a state of helpless panic.

More and more, I feel pulled in different directions.

On the one hand, the more I learn about our agreement, the more convinced I am I won’t be able to wiggle my way out of it in case something goes wrong.

On the other hand, the more we discuss the matter, and he refers to us as ‘we’, the closer I get to the idea of ‘him’ and ‘us’, and maybe that’s what Nor had in mind when he said De Lucca would talk me into doing things.

It’s more than that.

The man’s hypnotic effect on me is undeniable, and it’s not like I’m losing my head over him—it’d be impossible with so little personal interaction—but there’s this strange feeling that my destiny is entangled with his.

How many times have I had that feeling before?

Twice.

It happened once when I perused a picture of New York after Mara had moved here, and I had a pervasive feeling this place would be in my future.

The second time happened when I visited my family’s place this past summer, and all the things I’d loved about the farm blurred into the background as if I knew I’d cut ties for good with the place I so much loved.

But I never felt this way with people. And in no way with men.

And I do feel like that with him, despite a million reasons why us together for real would be a terrible idea.

With great effort, I tear my gaze away from him and look down at the scrap of paper.

There's nothing else.

Three points. That's it. All the other details have been left out.

"It doesn't say much—"

"What would you like to know?"

Despondently, I drop the paper on the table.

I find it hard to look at him, so I rest my elbows on the table and press my face into my hands, my head tipped down.

"Look at me, Bella."

So much for doing what I want.

I flick my head up and give him foggy eyes and wavering focus. I don't know what to say.

I guess I'm not that good for him.

A woman with less to lose would probably be a better fit.

Someone used to living in his dark world, to put it mildly.

Someone with his morals, determination, recklessness, boldness, and lack of concern for consequences.

I can't say I'm the opposite of him—we must have something in common, or we wouldn't be here, even though I have a hard time identifying what it is.

Whatever it is, it's small in comparison to what I lack.

And yet, a part of me—I'd so much like to chide if I could—is mesmerized by the idea and also flattered.

That part of me would love to take directions from this man, misbehave at times, push his limits, and provoke him just for fun.

That part of me is clearly not my brain, and for sure, it could get me in a lot of trouble.

It's a smoldering fire that's been lapping at my resolve, nudging me toward a deal with this man.

The wiser thing to do would be to stay out of trouble. Say no to him and go home.

The money is arguably good, but without an exit strategy in place, it's merely a red flag, suggesting bad things might happen later.

My instinct, though, says something else, and frankly, it has no compelling power.

It's only a gut feeling.

Something that has to do with the man in front of me.

It's flattering that he sees in me more than I do, but then again... Maybe he only sees in me a woman who can be easily manipulated and brought into submission.

"You have questions. I'm here to give you answers."

His authoritative voice jolts me back to reality.

"There's not much else in your proposal..."

His shirt rustles as he tilts back in his chair with his arms crossed over his chest.

I can't take my eyes away from his tanned inked forearms and the ring sparkling on his finger.

"Is there a way out once I say yes to our agreement? Under what circumstances could I cancel..."

My voice trails off as I notice a glint in his eyes. It's dark, speaking of impatience and remorse.

I'm definitely not what he needs.

"Forget about it," I say, not waiting for his response. "Still, I need to know if there's an ending to this. A happy ending, to be exact."

I'm obstinately focused on this issue, although I know his answer very well. There can't be a happy ending to this.

“No one knows the future.”

How deep and philosophical of him.

“I need more than that,” I say.

He uncrosses his arms and sets his elbows on the table.

“I can’t give you more than that. This morning when I woke up, I wasn’t sure I’d see you this evening. And it wasn’t because you wouldn’t show up... That’s my life in a few words. It’s a ‘take it or leave it’ proposition. There’s nothing more than that.”

He goes silent, and my heartbeats rush, mirroring the passing of time. His effort to diminish the importance of our agreement is flimsy at best.

I’m signing my life away.

“What if something happens to you?” I ask.

His eyes become muddy like small windows into the future as he contemplates that possibility.

“If there’s any kind of loss, and you survive me, you’ll be protected by my men and financially rewarded for the time you’ve spent with me.”

In theory.

I push a sigh back that otherwise would speak loudly of my state of mind.

“And divorce is out of question? In case things don’t work out between us....” I add in response to his harsh look.

“You can’t ask for a divorce under any circumstances. And I won’t file for one.”

This sounds like a life sentence.

“Why would I enter an agreement with you then?”

His eyes glint again with no humor in them.

“Let me make something very clear. This is not a romantic union.”

I doubt he knows what that means, let alone how to be part of one.

“I’m paying you to be by my side.”

“You’re paying me to pretend I’m something that I’m not. I can’t be by your side if I’m kept in the dark.”

A cold grin twists his lips.

“Are you sure you don’t want to be kept in the dark?”

The men doing their rounds outside come to mind.

“No. No, I’m not.”

“Then why bother?”

“It scares me that there’s no way out.”

“Most things don’t have a way out. You just don’t see it. I’m brutally honest here. You know exactly what you’re getting into. And how much money you’re set to make if you agree to my proposal.”

“I don’t know how much money I’ll make once we get married.”

He mulls over my words.

“And I want a divorce clause if you want me to enter this agreement,” I state as clearly as I can.

No agreeable thought fleets through his gaze.

“There is no divorce clause, but I might consider letting you go.”

Oh. How generous of him.

“Under certain circumstances,” he says.

“What circumstances?”

I guess, him finding someone else?

Someone real, perhaps?

“I don’t know right now.”

“Something that fits your interest, I suppose.”

Darkly amused, he flicks his finger up.

“Or I could kill you,” he tosses at me, and I freeze.

Is this his idea of humor?

“Seriously?”

“Seriously. Yeah, that’s a possibility.”

Still, it sounds like a joke, although no one’s smiling, or maybe I’m in denial, or... He’s right.

Why would we discuss the ending of a contract that has no legal basis anyway and could be enforced whichever way he sees fit when he could easily just put a bullet in my head or make it look like an accident?

At least we are becoming brutally honest with each other.

A hell of a courtship, this is.

“Okay. I guess our meeting is over then.”

Without looking at him, I push out of my seat, toss my napkin onto the table, and collect my purse.

“Don’t bother with me. I know my way out. And I’ll return the clothes you bought for me on Monday.”

He says nothing and does nothing as I round the table, but as I stroll past him, he clutches my forearm and decisively pulls me toward him.

I almost fall over the table when he kicks a nearby chair under my butt, and I crash into the cushion seat inches away from him.

He shifts his position so he can face me, his knees touching mine, his eyes committing arson all over my face.

His fingers are still wrapped around my arm when his free hand goes to my face, and he touches me with care, yet still rough, in my opinion.

Maybe because his fingers are calloused and smell like manliness and smoke.

Or maybe because I can’t tame my feverish heartbeats, and my perception is now wildly out of wack.

Setting his palm straight on my neck, he brings his thumb to my chin and slowly brushes it over my skin.

A glimmer of fear falls through me, my heart sounding like a marching drum, my pulse slamming through my veins like a mad fist.

“I could pay anyone to be my wife, but for some reason, right now, I want you.”

There is so much to unpack in his words, and what he’s saying to me is so much more than what positively sounds like a bad omen.

It has nothing to do with him wanting the woman in me.

He’s brutally honest—yes—but he’s also unapologetically dreadful, and it horrifies me.

Right now??

What happens when I no longer serve a purpose? He wasn’t joking when he said he’d kill me.

“I don’t want anything bad to happen to you. I’m not that kind of man.”

Too little, too late.

How can he even say that to me?

“I want to make this as simple as I can.” His eyes pierce mine like two bright torches of conviction. “It’s not in your best interest to know a lot. Knowing things would make you a target. Despite what I just said, I will protect you with my life if I need to. But I’ll have no problem ending you if you betray me in any way.”

“What does ‘in any way’ mean...?” I murmur against his thumb, pinned in my seat, warm like a rag doll abandoned in the sun.

“Anything. It means anything...” he says, his eyes holding the faintest smile. “You’ll listen to everything I say and follow my instructions like your life depends on it. Because it does.”

I swallow hard, and his hand slides down to the root of my neck and even lower, but never close to my chest.

“How will we do it...?”

My voice is soft, unsteady, and filled with apprehension.

“The marriage part?” I ask.

“We’ll have to see when we get there.”

“You’re doing this for them. Your people. You’re not interested in being with me.”

My intuition seems spot on, as he doesn’t rush in the slightest to deny it.

“We’re getting ahead of ourselves,” he says, muddying the waters just when I started to get a grasp of what is going on.

Nor said the exact same thing.

I doubt these men don’t know what they want.

“Why do you need an arrangement? I’m sure women would love to play that part for you.”

His hand falls from my collarbone as he sags back in his chair and studies me.

“I need a certain kind of woman, and you happen to be her.”

“So far, the focus has been on my looks. Is that so important for you?”

“The looks have nothing to do with how you perceive it.”

“You need to make it believable.”

“Exactly.”

“Are you seeing other women?”

His eyes darken.

I flick my hand up.

“Got it. This is one of the questions I’m not supposed to ask. Okay.”

I grow irritated by the second.

“Are you going to be my husband? In the biblical sense?”

His face looks like an Italian sculpture, every detail painstakingly created in the block of marble with maximum accuracy yet still lifeless.

“I will take care of you.”

“That’s not what I asked.”

His eyes are dark and empty, like the bottom of the ocean.

“I can’t be your husband in any other sense, and that’s why I’m paying you.”

My eyes dive into his, looking for a different answer. And then I realize that somewhere along the way, I lost my will to regard this as a simple business proposition.

What he just said challenges me more than anything else that’s happened lately.

Like people on the last leg of their existential journey, I have a flashback of my past life.

Far from perfect, it wasn’t that bad. I loved the land, the orchard, and the horses back home. The dogs and cats and flowers.

I disliked my overbearing mother and was mad at my father that he’d left us so soon, although through no fault of his own.

I didn’t think of myself as a ruthless, money-driven person, yet here I am about to sell my life for a pretty penny.

“What’s next?” I ask, trying to bring the conversation back to something more mundane.

“We’ll act like any other couple. Meet, go out, and eat at the restaurant. Introduce you to my world. I’d say a couple of months in, we set a wedding date, provided you are well-adjusted by that time.”

He ponders a few more details before speaking again.

“You’ll get 200K for being my girlfriend. That’s roughly two months of work—as I said before. And then two million dollars a year, payable at the end of our marriage if *it ends in a*

divorce. If anything happens to you, the money will be paid to your family.”

I’m stunned.

“I’ll make sure nothing happens to you.”

“At other people’s hands,” I point out.

“You have nothing to fear if you don’t cross me.”

A few seconds pass.

“I’ll have no freedom.”

“No one has much freedom, and most people sell it for a lot less.”

He might be right, but there’s something else.

I’ll have no man either.

I SABELLA

“YOU’LL HAVE to teach me what I need to do,” I say.

Little by little, we move closer to a point of resolution.

“Trust me. You’ll learn fast. And you’ll know when you’re in the wrong.”

I can’t imagine what that means.

Punishment of sorts?

“Okay,” I say softly.

“You sure?”

“For now, yes.”

“For now?”

“I can’t give you more.”

I don’t think he appreciates me quoting him. Loosely.

He extends his hand out.

I give him mine.

He holds it.

“I imagine this will be a verbal agreement,” I murmur.

“You got that right.”

My hand gets warm from his, while his eyes have a cooling effect on me.

“There are things we need to do in public so people believe us. Physical things,” I suggest.

“We’ll do everything that needs to be done.”

I’m still holding onto him.

“What about my family? They’ll need to know at some point that I’m with you.”

“Everyone will know when the time is right. There’s nothing to worry about.”

I try to imagine my mother’s expression when I announce I’m getting married.

If I get there with him, of course.

She’d probably be ecstatic. Given his money, she’d look the other way if an armed crew of men pulled up in the driveway in front of our traditional southern home.

I’m getting ahead of myself.

How calmly and reassuringly he says there is nothing to worry about when everything is in the air.

And there is so much to worry about.

“I gather I won’t be staying at your place before the wedding. If the wedding happens.”

“Not exactly. I’ll have a room set up for you at my place. It will be ready next week. Staying with me is a matter of security.”

That, and he wants absolute control. He doesn’t seem the type at ease with giving his woman freedom. Not to mention how reluctant he’d be to the idea that I might just take off.

Although, at this point, that would be a death sentence, and I’m not even thoroughly involved in this story.

He studies my eyes for a few seconds before freeing my hand.

“Great. Let’s drink to it.”

He pushes to his feet, collects my glass, and pours wine for both of us before handing me my drink and sliding back into his seat.

We clink our glasses.

“What are we drinking to?”

“A long, healthy, and happy life together.”

His dark humor freaks me out.

Arching an eyebrow, he revels in my state of frozen panic.

“You’ll get used to it. It’s an acquired taste.”

“Are you talking about the wine, this kind of life, or yourself?”

“All of the above.”



ISABELLA

THE RAIN RAPS against the windows like anxious fingers seeking relief as I absently sink my dessert spoon into the creamy Tiramisu, chew on a mouthful and swallow mechanically.

I’ve been cold since the driver took me home and deposited me in front of Mara’s building.

Already peeled out of my fancy dress, red lingerie that served no purpose, and heels that are now tucked back in their box in my closet, I stare blankly at the delicious dessert, so frozen in panic that I can’t even process what just happened tonight.

Courage is ignoring your fears, they say... Well, I’m paralyzed with fear, and what I’ve agreed to is already haunting me.

A car pulls up in front of the building before voices echo on the street, and a door gets slammed shut.

That must be Mara.

The thought registers with me, yet I can't make myself glance out the window to make sure it's her.

I'm still immersed in my problem as the noise moves upstairs and morphs into quiet laughter in front of the door.

I place the dessert spoon down and glance at the entrance, expecting her to walk in at any moment.

She's not alone, I can tell—there's shuffling, and I hear silent, unintelligible words, followed by more laughter.

She has company, snippets of dialogue making it to my ears.

“No, we can't...” she says, laughing. “My roommate is home. No, no...”

She uses my presence here to tame the man's enthusiasm before eventually convincing him to wrap it up with a kiss and go home.

Sleep in his bed.

His steps echo down the stairs, the car gets in motion again, and the street turns quiet while Mara unlocks the door and sweeps the room with a wary gaze.

“Hey. I wasn't sure you were back.”

Right.

Frazzled, she looks pale, her mascara smearing her cheeks, no trace of color on her lips.

“You look spent.”

Kicking her shoes off, she laughs quietly.

“You'd look the same if you had someone eat your face for about an hour.”

I manage to push a laugh to my lips while she goes straight to the fridge, opens it, and reaches inside before retrieving a bottle of water.

Standing, she uncaps it and gulps down a considerable amount of water, her eyes dipping to the dessert.

“Have some. It’s delicious,” I say.

“It does look good.”

The bottle of water ends up on the kitchen counter while she pulls the drawer open, fishes out a dessert spoon, and swivels to the table.

“Do you mind if I eat out of the container?”

“No. Not at all.”

She takes a seat across from me while I relax in my chair, her gaze going down over my long-sleeved T-shirt and my sweatpants.

“You look good,” she murmurs, more alert, studying my hair.

I haven’t removed my makeup, and my hair and skin still smell like him, Max de Lucca, my future husband—how strange that sounds—although there hasn’t been any touching after he held my hand for a few moments, and I handed him my life with a few clumsily spoken words.

Still wearing her work clothes—a gray pencil skirt, a blue blouse, and a dark jacket—she looks good too but also tired, and I hope she’ll get some rest this weekend.

“What makes you say that?” I ask.

She points at my face and hair with her fork.

“Everything. I like your hair.”

“Thank you... I guess.”

She gives me a double look.

“How was your evening? Other than bringing home this delicious dessert? Did you get the job?”

I flick my eyes at her, confused.

“The job?”

“Yes, the job. You said it was all about a job. You’d signed an NDA because of it.”

She seems entertained by my sudden loss of memory. This thing is now completely distorted.

“I lied. It wasn’t about a job. And there is no NDA,” I murmur, lying again.

Chuckling, she sinks her spoon into her dessert.

“I knew it. I never bought that story anyway. But I know you. You always come clean... eventually. So what was it? A date?”

“Mm-hmm. A first date.”

“And how was it?”

I cast a vacant stare at the food in front of me.

“It was interesting.”

A voice screams in my head. *I met my future husband.*

“That’s it?”

I lift my eyes.

A faint smile creases her lips.

“The food was good. He took me to a nice restaurant. We chatted. Had wine.”

Her eyes glint.

“And kissed?”

My cheeks turn cold.

“No kiss. We only held hands.”

It’s true, yet slightly different than what most people mean by that.

“You’re taking it slowly.”

She puts her dessert spoon down and drinks more water while I breathe out a quiet chuckle.

“Yes. We’re taking slowly...” I murmur.

“What’s up with the melancholy in your voice?”

“Nothing.”

I look down.

“A lot of things will probably change from this point on...” I say.

“And you’re sad about that?”

Our eyes meet.

“Shouldn’t I be nervous about that?”

A smile lines my voice.

“I guess...”

She resumes eating.

“How is the man?”

“He’s all right.”

“Oh... Please. Don’t sound so enthusiastic,” she jokes. “You’re killing me. What’s wrong with him?”

“Nothing.”

She searches my eyes.

“Did he do something bad to you?”

“Like what?”

“I don’t know. Mistreat you in some way?”

“No. He was—“

“All right... I got that already.”

A few moments pass while she fills her mouth with coffee-soaked lady fingers and sweet, creamy mascarpone.

“Seriously, he’s fine.”

I can’t look at her while I speak.

“He has his own business.”

“Hmm... Money, money, money.”

My cheeks are flushed.

“It’s not my money, but still.”

“Listen...”

Her hand slides over mine.

“My grandma has a saying. Get in bed with money or passion, but preferably both, unless you want to end up with nothing.”

“Smart woman.”

Studying her face, I tilt my head toward the entrance.

“What happened out there at the door?”

“Oh... That?”

Her cheeks are crimson.

“I’ve never seen you blush like that. Is this the man you were talking about? The troublemaker, who’s cute and all?”

“He’s cute and stubborn and so damn persistent.”

“And you pushed him back... Just a little.”

Her eyes go down, her focus no longer on the dessert in front of her.

“I like him...”

Her smile fades.

“I like him a lot. And I don’t want to blow it by letting things move too fast. Right now it’s only lust. And that might be all that is in the end.”

“What’s your plan?”

“Not to string him along for too long. Even if it’s nothing, I still want to spend some time with him. He’s hot.”

Thoroughly enjoying her story, I forget about mine.

“You know how they give you sweet little lies, compliments, and stuff, and you know they’re fucking with you,” she says, studying my expression. “No, you don’t,” she adds, laughing.

“I know... Of course I do.”

“Sure.”

Gesturing dismissively, she puts the lid on the container.

“The idea is, he’s giving me some of that, and then he tosses something at me that leaves me breathless. And not in a good way.” She shrugs. “I don’t know. It’s hard to figure out what’s real and what’s not, especially in the beginning when it’s all sex and lust and a boatload of infatuation. I’ll figure him out. For now, I love, love the beginnings. When you know... They try a little harder, and their eyes are foggy with desire,” she singsongs, grinning.

De Lucca’s eyes come to mind. And how they reminded me of cold, treacherous waters.

How would they look flashing lust and the need to take a woman?

It’s not only improbable but also highly unlikely to see any of that in them.

My phone buzzes on the kitchen counter, prompting us both to flick our eyes in that direction.

“Who’s calling you so late?”

“I have no idea.”

Irritated that I forgot to silence it, I push out of my seat and snatch it from the counter. De Lucca’s name splashed across my phone screen makes my knees crumble.

Propped against the kitchen counter, I take his call.

“Yes.”

His signature raspy voice echoes at the other end of the line a few seconds later, the few waiting moments feeling like weeks, especially now that Mara’s eyes linger on me, reading my expression.

“Bella...” he says in his usual nasal, low, raspy voice that fires up a patchwork of nerve endings across my skin. “I’ll pick you up on Saturday. We’ll spend some time at Belmont Park. One of my horses is running in the final leg of the Triple Crown. In the meantime, Aaron will transfer your stuff to my place.”

Panic squeezes my throat, and I barely find my voice to talk.

“You said next week...”

“It’s done. You have the entire day tomorrow to pack up your things and let your friend know you’re moving out.”

I shift my eyes to Mara, who looks at me unsuspectingly.

How am I supposed to ease her into this story? I just changed it from finding a job to going on a first date with him.

“Can I talk to you tomorrow?”

“No. You’ll need to figure things out with Aaron. I’ll see you on Saturday.”

He hangs up on me while I keep my phone glued to my ear, wondering if Mara realizes I’m no longer talking to him.

“What?” she asks quietly.

I pull my cell away from my ear.

“He wants me to move in with him.”

I sound like someone who’s moments away from passing out.

“Excuse me?? The man you just had a first date with asks you to move in with him?”

I nod.

“And?” She shakes her head. “Are you excited? Yes? No?”

Her brow furrows. It was about time.

“Who is this man?” she asks.

“I told you.”

She doesn’t know half of what I know. And I know virtually nothing except for the things I know and scare me shitless.

“What’s his name?”

“Max.”

I’m surprised she doesn’t ask me his full name.

It’s even more surprising that her expression changes, and a smile flashes across her lips.

“Max? That’s a cute name.”

“Yeah... He’s quite cute.”

The nuance in my voice—a mix of dark humor and utter powerlessness—escapes her completely.

“Where does he live?”

“Somewhere in Manhattan.”

“You don’t know yet?”

“I’ll find out on Saturday. We’re going to Belmont Park. We’ll be watching the third leg of the Triple Crown,” I repeat mechanically.

“Mmm... Sounds exciting. New dress, I guess?”

A faint smile sprouts across my lips as my apprehension reaches alarming levels.

It’s like my life unfolds before my eyes without me participating in it.

“Yes, new dress.”

She moves her focus away from me, content enough with the new development to not ask more questions.

We both know me living someplace else makes her life much easier. I can’t be mad at her because I’d feel the same if I were her.

“Max,” she murmurs again before drinking water. “I can’t wait to see him.”

“Yeah... He’s a cute guy.”

My sinister joke sounds so serious that she doesn’t even think twice what I’m saying is untrue.

Cute is the last word I’d use to describe Max de Lucca.

He frightens me.

I SABELLA

I'M ALREADY SWEATING inside my floral dress in Mara's apartment while waiting for him to pick me up on Saturday.

It's warm outside, the air is unexpectedly dry, and a pleasant breeze rolls over the streets.

The weather is perfect, and my sweating has nothing to do with the meteorological conditions.

I even wear a wide-brim sun straw hat to give me enough shadow to feel comfortable. My shoulders are exposed, and my skirt is flowing.

There is nothing that doesn't make me feel comfortable, yet my blood simmers under my skin, and my heart jumps up and down, spinning like a crazy piñata.

I'm losing it, and this thing hasn't even gotten started.

The whole idea that I'd be living with this man drowns me in angst.

I'm not afraid of him—not in that way, although I should be—but the crippling fear of the unknown makes me agonize.

The few things I own have already been moved to his place.

I'm pretty much grabbing my purse and my phone and leaving Mara's place.

She's meeting that man today, and I didn't want to make a big deal out of my departure and ruin her plans.

She knows I'll be sleeping somewhere else this evening, and I think she's counting on that, so she can have dinner with her friend and maybe have him sleep at her place tonight.

I glance in the mirror one last time.

My hair flows freely down my back, and although I debate with myself for a long minute whether to gather it into a loose bun at the back of my neck or not, I decide against it.

The blue and white shirtdress has front buttons, a cold shoulder design, flare sleeves, and a flowing skirt that hits above my knee.

The equine print featuring light blue horses and riders on a white background is perfect for the occasion.

Lightweight and foldable with a wide floppy brim, my sun hat has a white ribbon tied in a bow at the back.

My shoes are white too. I look tall and delicate. And despite my demure clothes, I look younger.

"That's strange..."

Mumbling, I spin around and walk out the door.

Moments later, I step away from it somewhat mindlessly as if I'm not leaving my old life behind.

Five minutes later, I reach the bottom of the stairs, and the view of the street enters my line of sight.

A man dressed sharply leans back casually against a black luxury car. He has his fingers clasped together in front of his body and looks up the street, surveilling the space.

Sunglasses cover his eyes and partly his determined look.

His suit, fine shoes, and demeanor don't fool me.

Floating across the lobby, I can't even grasp the click-clacking of my heels against the tiles, my focus centered solely

on the car in front of me.

He notices me the moment I push through the door and swiftly straightens while I close the distance between us.

Moving past him as he holds the door for me, I slide into the back seat next to the man sitting relaxed in the opposite corner.

Max de Lucca wears a light summery suit—it looks like a fashionable blend of linen—white dress pants and a slim fit shirt, the matching suit jacket removed and draped over the back of the chair in front of him.

He looks out the window as I settle in my seat unable to grab his attention.

The car glides smoothly down the street before I snag De Lucca's eyes.

A fresh scent travels from his clean shaven face.

Obsidian black, his hair catches a ribbon of light sneaking in through the open window.

I can't figure out his mood, so I simply sit next to him, checking him out from time to time.

By the time we reach Long Island, I lose hope he'll address me or casually give me a once over.

This may be an easy job, but I need nerves of steel to deal with this, and now I'm starting to wonder if I can be that person.

Everything stays the same before we arrive at our destination. And then everything changes, but not so much for me or how we interact with each other.

Luckily there is a lot of other stuff.

The crowd, the horses, the open space, and the beautiful weather. The people knowing him tossing glances in our direction.

Something does change, though.

We walk next to each other, both wearing sunglasses—so conveniently—the people in his entourage following us around.

Since he has one horse in the race, the conversations revolve around that topic. Men and women approach him, some normal looking—like me—others rough looking—like him. Although ‘rough’ is not the word I’d use to describe him.

He is polished and sophisticated enough to fool a lot of people—and a lot of people know him, by the way—but if you look a little closer, you can see the danger flowing through his blood. Like the dark ink peeking from under his shirt at the neckline and across his forearms.

You can also note his slightly furrowed brow, stern expression, and lips pressed together.

Even so, they express straightforward sensuality and an undercurrent of sexual hunger that makes me think of a better use for them than conveying dismay.

Some people are more curious than others when it comes to me. For many, I’m just some pretty face. I can’t tell that there is no rhyme or reason for who he usually goes out with.

Most people don’t ask who I am, and he offers no information. We’re not at that stage in our ‘relationship’— I’d say— although I wouldn’t bet my money on him changing his attitude once we’re making it official.

For now, we’re only dipping our toes in. Me more than him.

This may be a test for me, but honestly, he doesn’t seem too interested in how I fare.

It’s probably irrelevant.

As much as most people are to him. But he takes a different approach with an older couple.

De Lucca introduces me to them, and they seem genuinely interested in knowing me. They ask questions about my family and me, and I mumble answers that should be more coherent and concise.

Strangely, Max doesn't seem to listen to me. If he does, he surely doesn't look at me, and his smile is devoid of emotion.

Maria and Giani are family friends—his parents' long-time friends—and that explains their curiosity toward me, my family, and my upbringing.

Cold sweat trickles down my neck as I realize these people are instrumental in making our ploy a success.

They need to buy our story, and Max spares no details when it comes to where I'm from, what I love about Georgia, and how determined I am to pursue a business career in New York.

We all learn I love horses, and I'm smitten with New York.

My focus is solely on playing my role, nodding when appropriate, and smiling in agreement, showing consideration for my future husband's words.

As strange as it sounds, I begin to believe the story myself, although it comes with a peculiar feeling that ropes wrap around my neck, like little pythons squeezing the life out of me.

Giani makes a joke that goes past my ears. I find it impossible to concentrate on anything other than the things I need to do.

Smile, flick a strand of hair that swoops over my eyes away from my face, and grin again. Ask a polite question and then provide an answer.

No one asks me how De Lucca and I have gotten acquainted with each other.

They go down a list of safe questions, and once they're done with them, they talk to Max. And then I realize they are inviting us to lunch on Sunday. And that's tomorrow.

A random thought pops into my head. Do I still have a job? Will I still go to work on Monday?

Time flies, and we get more of the same.

Stilted conversations, vacuous exchanges, and phony interactions. I learn to differentiate between the people who truly matter to him, like Maria and Giani, and the rest, who are only background noise.

For the most part, I'm playing my role well. Demure, soft-spoken, easy on the eye. I notice their looks. The older women try to figure me out and describe me in a few words.

Caring, polite, and compassionate. Showing respect to my man. Loyal and loving.

I feel like I'm under a giant microscope.

When the race is over, and Max discusses business with some men, I sit on a bench and take in the view, thinking about the thoroughbreds who have one chance to run this race in their life. When they're three years old.

I suddenly get pensive and feel for that colt everyone has high hopes for, as he can only run the most prestigious race of his life once.

What if I only have one chance to run the race of my life?

And what if this is the end, not the beginning of my life?

A few more moments pass before I feel the edge of a stare on the back of my head.

At first, I suspect it's a man—Nor comes to mind—but then...

To my surprise, a brunette with big eyes and even bigger curls shoots me a defying look.

Giving me a classic rival look, a smirk curled at the corner of her lips, her eyes narrowed and eyebrows lifted, she flashes a red strapless dress that fits her tightly, enhancing her hourglass silhouette.

Her bust and hips evoke love, fecundity, and a different flavor of femininity. She's different than me, like fire from water.

She's playful and naughty, while I'm quiet and mysterious.

She's upfront while I'm lurking in the shadows.

For now, she attracts all the eyes as she knows how to pose and draw everyone's attention, especially the men fawning over her.

Obviously, I'm not her target.

Max de Lucca is her target.

And he's probably more than a target as he tips his eyes up, sensing her stare as much as I have and giving her a soft nod.

Her eyes glint with satisfaction.

She obviously can't control that feeling, so she moves her eyes from him to me and back to him, alerting the man at my side that I'm privy to their exchange.

"Later?" she mouths to him.

He nods before she blows him a kiss.

I get a small cut across my soul, and that's also a reminder this is not my man, and my heart should never be on the line.

I straighten and take my sun hat off since the sun no longer shines so brightly and wait impatiently to go home.

My feet hurt, and I'm hungry, and the brunette nymph is no longer my concern.

She's played her card right, trying to make him jealous, although I don't know if it's fully worked on him or not.

You can't read a damn thing on his face, but I guess it has since he looks at her again.

The seductress flirts with a man at her side, and I wonder how that works.

De Lucca peels his eyes away from her.

Oh, I guess it didn't. Bummer.

He turns his back to her and ignores her completely, and the red of her dress fades a little.

She's trying hard to get his attention again and accomplishes nothing.

Eventually, she leaves with a couple of men who seem to be in the same line of business as De Lucca—gangsters—and I begin to think she was talking about later tonight, not later today when she mouthed those words to him.

Good.

I can't wait to eat dinner and go to sleep.

This would be my first night at his place, after all.

I SABELLA

WE ARRIVE at his place around six.

He introduces me to his staff, and I quickly learn I have a maid—the woman takes care of the bedrooms, his included, and will ensure I get everything I need to feel at home.

Lina is in her late twenties, and her face is covered in cute freckles. Marge, the housekeeper, is an older woman with coifed hair, dark clothes, a few lines around her eyes, and a stern look.

Max doesn't show me around the house.

Marge does.

It's a historical multi-story townhouse on the Upper Eastside, 10,000 square feet of livable area with an open courtyard in the back, a glass shielded conservatory, a rooftop terrace, seven bedrooms, seven full bathrooms, two half bathrooms, an interior stairwell, fireplaces everywhere, a dining room, a living room, and a reading room.

Nooks and crannies with soft armchairs and ottomans and love seats. Places where you can enjoy a drink, a cup of coffee, or a book. A tablet. Maybe.

Most of these private places face the courtyard, which gives them even more intimacy and, more importantly, a

sensation of safety.

I'm told De Lucca owns the adjacent building, so there are no surprises on who might inhabit that space, but I'm not told who actually—if anyone—lives over there.

There are sofas—modern and minimalist mixed with antique pieces—bookcases propped against the cream walls, a piano, shelves, art, wooden floors, and carpeted rooms.

You can find everything you want in this space.

Long-shaped, the kitchen also faces the courtyard, with sinks on one side by the windows and stainless steel appliances, cupboards, and counters on the opposite wall.

The walls, entirely done in white, are balanced out by shiny dark counters and matching tiles adorned with diamond-shaped, ivory details.

The spacious kitchen opens to a breakfast nook—a well-lit space with a round table in the middle, a few chairs, and a cushy bench.

To the left, a wall of glass ushers in the view of the courtyard and a large terrace.

I can imagine myself sipping coffee with the doors large open, the sun and the breeze sweeping my face.

I shake off that feeling and keep walking with Marge through the house.

The first floor is occupied by an impressive lobby, a living room, and a chamber with double mahogany doors that looks like a home office, but it's not.

His office, I'm told, is on the third floor, next to the reading room.

The dining room and kitchen are on the second floor, and our bedrooms are on the fourth. The upper level is closed for renovations.

She describes it for me, and from what I understand, it's comprised of a large room that it's usually used for gatherings—although there haven't been any this past year

since De Lucca's parents passed away, she says—the rooftop, which is great during warm weather, and another room that will be converted into a bedroom when Mr. De Lucca gets married.

The image of a matrimonial bed with him between the sheets gives me shivers.

What makes me quiver even more is that he's already announced he's getting married.

With every second, this new reality I'm immersed in inches closer to materializing.

And if I know anything about De Lucca—it's probably one of the few things I know—he'll speed up the process without even asking me.

He's already gotten me to his place ahead of next week—as it had been originally planned.

If we continue like that, he'll announce the engagement in a few weeks, and we'll be married before Christmas.

I try not to think about it as I walk through the rooms, that each looks like a timeless piece of history.

Built in 1900, the house went through several renovations—I'm told—and more than one historical figure had owned it before him.

My favorite room, I quickly decide, is the reading room on the third floor with two glass walls, a couch in the middle, a cushioned bench with storage, a long desk separating the bookcases stretching to the ceiling, and a large painting hung above the fireplace mantel.

A man and a woman pose as a couple in that painting.

It doesn't take long to make the connection between their dark hair, olive skin, the man's blue eyes, the woman's beautiful features, and the current owner of the house.

The painting must've been inspired by a photograph—something tells me—and for a moment, looking at them, I wonder if they'd approve of me being his wife had they been alive.

It's probably not about that. Their son is merely buying a wife, like probably everything else in his life, including the favors of that brunette at Belmont Park. Even though she might actually be someone he didn't pay for.

Despite not being about a real marital union, I'm still impressed with the legacy they left behind.

And it's easy to see why the history they share with my future husband affects me so much.

Everything around me feels so real that it's impossible not to think about the moral repercussions that might come with our flighty arrangement.

Although, the truth is, I shouldn't be thinking about it.

Despite my best efforts, another thought comes to mind.

What about my parents? Would they approve of this possible marriage if they knew the truth? If my father was alive?

No one can know the truth about De Lucca and me.

My mother would surely see the benefit of me marrying into money, while my father would be more leery about the whole situation.

It would be harder to lie to him if he were here in front of me. He'd look into my eyes and ask me if this was what I wanted.

And I wouldn't be able to tell him the truth.

The whole truth...

That I wasn't that lucky to find someone I truly liked while growing up, and my experience with men wasn't that good.

Despite having a good role model in him, my father, and knowing what to look for in a man, I quickly learned reality was different. And my expectations were probably off.

Whatever it was, it shut the doors on finding someone.

And while De Lucca is not exactly the beginning of a great love story for me, he isn't the crass disappointment the other

men were.

On top of that, this is only a transaction, so the idea of having set expectations other than the monetary ones is completely removed from my mind.

On the fourth floor, a large hallway connects several rooms. Marge pushes one of the doors open, and I step into my bedroom.

Oh... This is beautiful.

The sun is already gliding toward the horizon, and the shadows are long over the city, the light mixed with faint tones of dark, but even so, it's easy to fall in love with this room.

A corner chamber, my space has a large bed and a cushioned bench by the window that is great for sitting, reading, and even napping.

A small corridor connects the room to a white and blue bathroom with a shower booth, a clawfoot bathtub, stacks of towels, and an abundance of toiletries.

The windows here face the courtyard.

Marge turns on the lamps, and a warm glow spreads around the rooms.

A sizable walk-in closet is attached to my bedroom. There isn't much inside. A couple of suitcases, my old clothes and the new ones I've purchased since I met Nor.

Long curtains frame a set of double French doors that lead to a small balcony with a wrought iron table and two chairs with cushions.

Coffee in the morning here while checking my messages and reading the news?

Sign me up.

Who am I going to talk to? No one. Obviously.

"For anything bedroom related, talk to Lina. Everything else, you bring it up to me."

"Okay."

I imagine there are also rooms for the staff and De Lucca's men.

In many regards, this is like traveling back in time.

Despite the laptop and tablet in the reading room, and the modern furniture mixed with collectible pieces, the walls of this house have witnessed so much history.

Also, there is no TV in any of these rooms. What are these people doing for fun?

Voices echo outside my bedroom.

“Okay. I need to go now,” Marge says. “Dinner at seven. Dress casually but not frumpy. You can wear that dress if you want to,” she adds, pointing to my outfit.

I feel like changing my clothes, though.

A few moments later, I'm alone in the room. My shoes hit the floor first, and then my back lines the mattress as my eyes focus on the ceiling.

The mattress is perfect, offering support while being soft like a cloud.

I'll sleep like a baby. And after everything that's happened today, I could probably drift off to sleep immediately without even having dinner.

I close my eyes and indeed fall asleep.

A few moments pass—maybe a few minutes—before I jerk upright, panicked, my heart beating fast.

Shit.

Hopefully, I'm not late.

Frantically, I reach inside my purse and check the time on my phone.

There is time.

With one gesture, I peel off my dress and head to the walk-in closet, wearing only my underwear.

The few hangers on the right give me an idea of my few options.

Then I remember my blue dress, one of my all-time favorites. It's a summer outfit with a sleeveless design, a small ruffle at the neckline, and a length that makes it look dressy but also sporty.

I pick it up and lay it on the bed. Next, I dig out a pair of flats and collect my robe before going to the bathroom.

You know how it feels when you spend the night at a hotel and truly like it, but it's still not home.

That's how I feel.

Everything is exciting. The place looks magnificent. The fact that there are people who cater to my every whim is an unexpected bonus, but I can't shake off this feeling that I'm a guest.

I expect to wake up from this dream and learn it's all fake. That this beautiful place in Manhattan is not my new home—although it could be at some point—and the man I'll have dinner with is not my future husband.

I don't have time to take a bath, so I remove my underwear and enter the shower booth made of frosted glass.

As soon as the water falls over me, I focus solely on how good it feels to step out of character for a moment and be alone.

Half an hour later, I take the stairs to the dining room, wearing my blue dress and cute white flats, my hair bouncing down my back.

My steps quietly trail a path down the carpeted stairs before turning right and entering the large dining room adjacent to the kitchen.

The fire crackles in the room, a large mirror lining the wall, and a calming sound of voices drifting from the kitchen.

Pots and pans clink, and a stream of water hits the sink. It smells like roasted tomatoes, herbs, and grilled food.

De Lucca is not in, although the table is set for two. Normally, twelve people could easily dine at this table.

I claim my seat just as the raspy voice of the man of the house echoes outside.

He talks to his people, and those men follow him inside the dining room.

When he realizes I am here, waiting for him, he cuts his conversation short and slides into a chair across from me.

His men leave the room.

“How are things?” he asks, quite rushed.

Is he suddenly in a hurry?

My eyes dip to his attire.

It pains me to admit the tailored waistcoat makes him look so damn good, highlighting his torso, the low plunging neckline emphasizing his chest, while his white dress shirt and cuffed-up sleeves reveal enough of him to make me swallow hard.

“Things are good.”

Someone brings a platter of appetizers from the kitchen, and another person comes with a bottle of wine.

Surprisingly, he leaves his seat.

“I’ll do it.”

The women set the food on the table next to the lit candles rising from metallic holders and a fall-themed floral centerpiece with sunflowers, roses, mums, and magnolia leaves, while he pours red wine into two tulip-shaped glasses.

He asks them to bring all the food to the table so we can dine alone.

Moments later, we indulge in our appetizers.

“How do you find your room?”

“My room is perfect,” I say, chewing softly and slicing my food into tiny bits.

Roasted red peppers marinated in olive oils and herbs. Grilled fish. Roasted potatoes.

“The food is delicious.”

My comment is met with silence.

I raise my eyes.

He rests his elbows on the table and has his fingers locked together as he studies me briefly.

“What do you think overall?”

His focus goes back to his plate.

“I think we need to do more to convince people we’re together.”

I watch him from behind my glass.

Surprisingly a faint smile tugs at his lips.

“What makes you think they’re not buying it?”

When his gaze comes to mine, reflecting the trembling candlelight, I almost choke on my wine, and I have to put my drink down and make an effort to suppress the tickling in my throat.

I shrug.

His eyes hover over my hair, expressing contentment. He seems pleased with how I look.

“I don’t know. Are they?” I ask.

“Yes, they are.”

He resumes eating, his eyes dipping to his food.

“Maria and Giani?”

“Mm-hmm.”

“What about the brunette who was making eyes at you?”

His grin drops like I’ve wiped it with a sponge.

He raises his eyes.

“What did I tell you?” he tosses at me, dark as night.

I raise my hand.

“It’s not my business. But still, you said you wanted to make everybody buy our story.”

“I’ve told you they buy it. As long as you’re with me, everyone buys it.”

Sure.

His voice is stern and sinister, like his words, basically saying there is no code of honor. And if there is, it doesn’t include the woman at his side.

‘In life, you have to choose your battles,’ my mother used to say, and this is too big of a battle for me.

And why should I get saddled with it?

Besides, this is not my battle.

I’m paid to do whatever the hell I’m paid to do. I can live in his house and act like I don’t care. And I don’t, yet I run my mouth again.

“You could’ve paid her to do what I’m doing.”

Interestingly, he seems amused.

“I told you I wanted you.”

“And yet, you’re seeing her tonight.”

“How do you know?”

He’s cold, no longer amused, although he probably is.

Otherwise, he would’ve gagged me and locked me in my room by now.

“You’ve never been accountable to anyone, have you?” I murmur.

His brow furrows, his gaze tipped to his plate.

“What was your first clue?”

His sneering does nothing for me, so I go on.

“She talked to you. And then your clothes...”

His eyes come to me.

I point to his attire.

“What about my clothes?”

He looks down.

“You’re dressed up. You must be going out.”

His gaze slides back to me.

“I *am* going out. And that is not your business.”

“It’s not. I totally agree.”

He looks at me with renewed interest. Like he’s bought a toy that comes with a new feature.

I don’t know what’s new to him—I can assume it has to do with me using my mouth for more than smiling and uttering platitudes.

I ponder an idea.

“So you’re saying I can still change my mind about all this before you announce our engagement...” I murmur.

“Are you sure I’m announcing our engagement?”

His sarcasm is not lost on me.

“Why wouldn’t you? It’s like we’re practically married and already dealing with marital problems,” I toss back at him.

I don’t think he expected me to give him a taste of his own medicine.

“I’m only paying you to pretend you are my wife. Not to actually be my wife.”

“Things wouldn’t be much different, would they?”

“No.”

I only nod as in... ‘*I didn’t expect anything else from you,*’ and empty my glass of wine in a gulp.

“I thought you were shy,” he comments, again strangely amused.

“Nor lied to you.”

“It wasn’t Nor. I saw it with my own eyes. What happened to the woman I encountered at the restaurant that first evening

we met?”

“Nothing. That’s how I am. Some days I’m soft and quiet. And some days, I don’t like brunettes.”

Not a muscle moves on my face, and my gaze is locked onto his, although it feels like it’s clinging to a sword.

“You’re lucky you’re funny,” he says humorlessly.

He runs his napkin over his lips, tosses it onto the table, empties his glass of wine, and pushes to his feet.

“Don’t wait up.”

This is his way of getting back at me with a dark joke.

“I have no intention to. I can’t wait to take a bath and hit that nice bed of mine. You didn’t answer my question.”

I swivel in my seat, looking at him while he swaggers past me, leaving a cloud of dark masculinity behind.

“No questions are allowed,” he throws at me over his shoulder.

“It was about changing my mind about our agreement.”

“You can do whatever you want, but you have to figure it out fast, so I can kick you out of my house and bring over that brunette.”

Nothing in his intonation speaks of humor. The ability to joke must’ve been removed from his DNA, yet that’s what that was.

He uttered the words on his way out, not looking at me.

And now his steps echo downstairs before his hoarse voice summons his men, and they all walk out of the house.

I shift back in my seat and stare at the rest of the food, smiling.

Hmm...

I continue eating before one of the women exits the kitchen, clears Max’s side of the table, and tips her gaze to me.

“Would you like dessert, Miss?”

“Yes. Thank you. Can I have it upstairs?”

“Sure. Would you like coffee or tea with it?”

“What kind of dessert do we have?”

“Lemon ricotta cake with almonds.”

“May I have two slices, please, and orange tea with honey and cinnamon?”

“Sure. I’ll bring them upstairs.”

I eat alone for the next few moments, listening to the silence in the house, only occasionally perturbed by the voices in the kitchen or the men chatting downstairs.

As the light dims outside and the warm glow around the house becomes irresistibly soothing, I realize this place has a soul.

Too bad its owner doesn’t.

I SABELLA

SPRAWLED ON MY BED, with a plate of dessert and a cup of tea on the nightstand and a lamp barely illuminating my room, I pick up my phone.

Missa: Where are you?

Oh, shit.

I send her a reply.

Me: Home.

Missa: I just talked to Mara.

Mara??

I call Mara.

She answers immediately.

“Hey. What’s going on?”

She sounds like she’s running.

“Are you home?” I ask.

“Yeah.”

A smile tinges her voice.

“Why are you short of breath?”

“I’m stretching.”

“You’re panting from stretching?”

“Don’t ask.”

“I thought you were with your friend.”

“I was. He had to go home.”

“Why?”

She laughs.

“Since when are you so nosy?”

“I thought you’d spend the night with him.”

“I wanted to, but his parents are in town and, um... That’s that. What’s new with you?”

I crash back into my pillow.

“I barely left your place. There’s nothing new with me.”

“How’s your new place?”

Missa’s messages keep coming.

“Wait,” I say, typing a reply.

Me: I’m on the phone. I’ll call you when I’m done.

“Who’s that?”

“Missa. She wants to know where I am. What did you tell her?”

“The truth. That you’re spending the night at your boyfriend’s place.”

“Shit.”

“Not good?”

“I need to come up with a story for her.”

“Why?”

She seems sincerely intrigued.

“She’s curious and won’t give up until I give her all the details.”

“And?”

“Nothing. Okay, so... You were saying about your friend...”

Silence comes from the other end of the line, suggesting my ploy to switch the topic has failed.

“What’s wrong with you?” she asks.

“Nothing.”

“Are things okay with this man?”

“Yes. They are. Of course they are.”

“Where is he?”

“Working. He’s in the other room.”

Stuffing my face with food, I keep talking and chewing.

“We had dinner. It was delicious.”

“That sounds good.”

And now she seems more relaxed.

“We had a great time today, and I’m a bit tired. Let me talk to Missa, all right? Catch up tomorrow... Maybe?”

I know I’m abrupt, but I need to talk to my sister.

“Yeah. Sure.”

I hang up and call Missa.

She doesn’t answer before another message arrives.

Missa: I can’t talk. Mom is here.

Oh, shit.

I put the phone down and push it away like it’s my mother.

Trying to explain my life to Missa is one thing. Dealing with my mother is an entirely different issue.

I don’t expect my mother to call me even if she’s talked to Missa about my life.

Giving me the silent treatment is my mother’s specialty, and I hope to get some of that right now. It would truly work for me.

Just when I fear the worst, my phone rings. Fuck.

I snatch it up from the bed and push upright. My mother wants me on a video call. Not going to happen.

And by the way... This is worse than I thought.

Missa must've talked.

Even if she only told my mother that I live with Mara or no longer live with Mara, and I'm looking for a job, it's still enough to make my mother curious.

I reject the video call.

That won't deter her from harassing me, so I call her.

She answers right away.

"What's going on?" the matron asks without an introduction.

Turned to stone, I keep an eye on the door and listen to the sounds of the house, trying to figure out if anyone inches closer to my room.

Luckily, everybody is downstairs, and I'm alone on this floor. De Lucca's bedroom is at the other end of the corridor, which I'm truly grateful for.

I don't want to know what's going on in that room when he brings people over. And by people, I mean women.

"Hello, Mother."

"Spare me," she says in her usual sarcastic tone. "What are you doing in New York? Missa said you were looking for a job a week or so ago. Did you find anything you liked?"

"I have a job."

"I'm not talking about your retail job. Something on par with your education."

My education? What does she know about how far a higher education can take you these days?

"I'm, um... I've been hired by someone on a trial basis."

"Trial basis?"

“Yes.”

“What about healthcare insurance? Are you getting any benefits with this ‘on a trial basis’ thing?”

“I’m getting an entire package... of benefits.”

“How much does it pay?”

“Enough.”

“Isabella?”

“I thought you didn’t want to talk to me.”

“I thought that if I didn’t talk to you, you’d understand you were doing something wrong and possibly change your mind.”

“What’s so wrong about being financially independent?”

“Are you?”

“I’m well on my way.”

A heartfelt laugh echoes at the other end of the phone line.

“Why would you think barely making ends meet is such a brilliant plan for the future?”

“It’s a start. If things go well, I’ll make enough money to be set for the rest of my life.”

“Uh-huh.”

Her skepticism when it comes to my abilities makes my stomach twist.

No one can make her happy, no matter the accomplishments or circumstances, not that this is such a huge achievement.

Someone slams a door downstairs, and I jerk up, my pulse racing.

“What was that?”

The suspicion in her tone is more than telling.

Still, I can’t believe she’s heard that.

“It was me...” I jump off the bed and open the door to the terrace. “I was going to the balcony.”

“Where are you exactly?”

“On the terrace.”

The night breeze blows up my nightgown, covering my legs in goose bumps.

“That’s not what I asked. Missa said you weren’t at Mara’s place.”

Fuck.

Why did you have to tell her everything, Missa?

“I’m at a friend’s place.”

“Friend? What friend? A male friend? In New York? You didn’t even tell us you were going to New York.”

“Like it was so hard to figure it out. You knew Mara was in New York,” I try to downplay everything. Laughing, I buy some time. “It’s a new roommate, Mother. “

“What does he do for a living?”

I imagine her crossing her arm over her chest and listening to me, hunched over her phone.

“Who said my roommate was a male?”

“You didn’t deny it, so... What are you doing at a man’s place?”

The concern in her tone only spirals up.

I take a deep breath, trying to come up with something to make her back off.

“Mara’s place is very small. It was inconvenient for both of us, so I planned to leave as soon as possible. And now that I got this new opportunity, and it’s a bigger space with lots of people, I just moved out. It’s easier for everyone.”

“I need your new address.”

No way in hell that would happen.

“Sure. I’ll send it to you.”

“How long do you plan on staying there?”

“I’m starting a new job, and, um... I’ll be here for some time. I think.”

“For the life of me, I can’t figure out what’s in your head, Isabella Carson. Why would you need to go there when you could’ve been home with your family? Mick is still asking about you. It’s not too late to come back. He plans to build another house on his property. His business is booming, and ours is not too shabby either. It’s not too late to reconsider marrying him. He’s waiting for you.”

I hope not.

“But he won’t do that for long. Mellisa Stone is interested in him. And he might warm up to the idea of her if you’re not here to claim him.”

“I’m not going to claim him, Mother. He’s not a lottery ticket.”

I can almost hear my mother grinding her teeth in frustration.

“No. Because it’s so damn good to sleep on other people’s couches or work for other people. What exactly do you do at your new job?”

Shivering, I drag my gaze over the evening traffic below. The buildings across the street look like concrete giants.

My teeth chatter.

“I’m an executive assistant to the CEO of a corporation.”

A chuckle echoes in my ear after a few moments of silence.

“Like a bona fide secretary?”

“It’s more than that.”

My voice is strained, my shoulders shaking.

“Way to go, Isabella. Why did you go to school then? To bring some coffee to an asshole in the morning? You really needed a college degree for that?”

She huffs in my ear, and I quietly retreat from the terrace and close the door. Thankfully the house is quiet, so whoever slammed the door didn't make it upstairs.

My mother keeps blabbering while I tune her out the way I used to when she got on my nerves for less significant issues in the past, like the dress I wanted to wear or the boy I wanted to meet.

Eventually, her tirade catches up with me.

“Your father would be outraged by this. Why bother to send your kids to school if nothing of value comes from it?”

I doubt he'd think that, and I'm used to her guilt shaming me into thinking I'm the scum of the earth for making my own decisions, so it kind of goes past my ears.

I can't believe that for a second there, I thought she and I could reconcile and reach an understating. She'd accept I'm an adult and need to learn from my mistakes.

This, what I'm doing with De Lucca now, might be a huge mistake, but in light of what I'm hearing from my mother, it might also be my dearest mistake.

Living with him, despite feeling like a captive, is preferable to this.

“Okay... I'll let you know how it goes,” I say morosely, having no intention to talk to her again.

For a while, at least.

“Let me talk to Missa,” I say, being done with her.

Without a word, she hands her phone to Missa, and I hear her mumbling words in the background before it all goes quiet.

“Is she gone?”

“Yes, she is,” my sister says quietly. “She's pissed.”

“That's like telling me she's breathing. Of course she's pissed. Why did you have to tell her?”

“Because she harassed me. She knew I was talking to you. I'm sure she'd figured out you were in New York. She knew

Mara was in New York. What was there to do?”

My poor little sister. It’s not fair to have her caught in the middle. I know how vicious and persuasive my mother can be.

And unlike me, Missa is dependent on her good will.

“Don’t worry.”

“I’m not... I’m not.”

She’s frazzled and nervous as hell, and it’s not normal for a seventeen-year-old to be like that.

“I can’t wait to finish school.”

“Finishing school is not the answer, Missa. You need more than that.”

“Do you think I’ll wait a few more years? No way.”

She’s tense but quiet, which makes me believe my mother or someone else from the family might be nearby.

“You did it, Issa. You’re gone. I can be gone too as early as next year.”

“Don’t talk like that. It spooks me to hear you say you want to be gone.”

“Not, *gone* gone. You know what I mean.”

“Yes, I do.”

“I’ll be eighteen in April. Next summer, I could be in New York. You’re going to help me, right?”

She’s always been impetuous and never great at thinking things through.

We’re probably the same in that regard, although I graduated college first and then went astray.

“Think about finishing school, and then—“

“No, no. I mean... I’ll finish school first, but then I need to leave, or she’ll try to talk me into marrying Mick.”

Shit. That’s never crossed my mind.

“Would he be interested in doing that?”

“Why not? He wanted you, but I guess anyone in the family would do. I see how she’s looking at me, our mother. And how he’s glancing at me when he’s here.”

“How often does he come there?”

“Every weekend. And sometimes during the week. He’s here for lunch. Tomorrow. You know our mother. Sunday lunch is a big deal, and he’s coming.”

Her desperation gives me shivers.

“She can’t force you to marry him.”

“Of course she can’t. She couldn’t do it to you, and that’s why you left—one of the reasons anyway—but she can be so annoying and make my life a living hell. Especially now that she’s failed to convince you to stay and be with him. I’m her only hope. There’s no one left.”

My sister’s words make me shudder.

Preoccupied, I sit on the edge of the bed.

“Listen. There’s nothing she can do to you. And he won’t force himself onto you. He’s not that kind of man.”

“That’s not the point. I want to leave next year,” she says under her breath. “And I want you to help me.”

“I will help you.”

I try to sound convincing, although the reality is I have no idea what the future will bring for me, let alone her.

“Calm down, all right?” I say, trying to reign in my fears. “We’ll take care of this. Things are not that bad.”

“How are things with you? Mara said you have a boyfriend.”

I swallow hard.

Luckily, she didn’t say that to my mother.

“It’s more like a friend.”

She laughs. That’s Missa going from zero to one hundred in a second, from doom and gloom to laughing like a kid.

“A friend with benefits?”

“There are no benefits. Other than the financial benefits.”

“Are you really working for him?”

“Uh-huh.”

“I don’t believe you. Can you show me pictures of your place?”

“I can’t. Not right now. Besides, I don’t want to make a target out of you and have the rest of the family on your back. You’ll see it next year when you come here.”

Who knows what will happen next year?

My ploy works, she gets distracted, and soon we hang up.

I crash back onto the bed, almost lifeless.

I SABELLA

A NOISE AWAKENS ME.

Heavy steps, a door closing. I jerk upright, washed with panic.

The *benefits* of sleeping in a stranger's home.

It takes time to get used to a foreign place. Despite how comfortable and pleasant this space is, it's still not my home.

Was that him?

I push to my feet, pick up a short robe, toss it over my nightgown, and scoop up my phone from the nightstand.

It can only be him.

It's one in the morning. I lift my chin, swivel my head toward the door and listen.

The hallway is quiet.

The wind whistles in the room, and I quickly realize I left the door to the balcony open.

Moments later, I secure it and return to the bed. The empty plate and cup are on the nightstand.

I see it as a good pretext to go downstairs and leave it in the kitchen, maybe get a clue on what is going on.

My phone goes into my pocket before I set the cup on top of the plate, and holding them together, so they don't clink, I head to the door.

One glance at De Lucca's door shows me no trace of light. He's not back yet. The floor is spooky, considering it's only the two of us on this level, although there may be someone else in one of the staff rooms in the back.

I don't remember Marge telling me where Lina sleeps.

I take the stairs down, ensuring I make no noise. The house is quiet and seems empty of people, and I don't know whether that's good or bad.

I reach the kitchen. The dining room is clean, and the mellow fire illuminates the room.

The kitchen is spotless.

I wash my plate and cup and set them on a kitchen towel on the counter. I'm pretty sure I'm not supposed to do that, but I don't know the rules in this house.

A moment later, I change my mind, dry them off with the towel and place them in the cupboard. That's better.

My eyes fly to the wall of windows and the dimly lit courtyard.

It must be nice in the morning when the sun hits the shrubs and trees and the small fountain in the middle.

It's the opposite of the open space I grew up in but equally charming.

I make the trip back without running into anyone.

It looks like no one is in the house, and if that were the case, this would be a bit frightening.

Once I reach my floor, I enter my room and slide back under the covers, but I quickly realize I can't sleep.

Thoughts spin in my head and flashbacks from the past few days present themselves with annoying promptitude.

I wonder if this will work. Yes, I do.

Like many times before, I'm painfully aware of the risk I'm taking by entering this agreement.

And after talking to Missa, I'm more determined than ever to make it work for her and me without incurring any losses.

I'm not stupid.

I know what this man does for a living. He is not some rich guy with a boring ass company who lives a boring ass life and needs some eye candy on his arm. All his rules, which otherwise barely make sense to me, mean something.

That's why he has them.

I twist and turn, and before two o'clock, I swipe my phone screen with my finger and send a message.

Me: Can I still get out of it before the agreement becomes final?



MAX DE LUCCA

THE AIR IS thick with smoke, and as I look around the poker table, the men smirk without an ounce of sophistication, their eyes heavy with alcohol, the women leaning over, doing everything in their power to distract them.

Nor reaches inside his jacket and pulls out his phone while Verona laughs with another woman at my side, unaware of the game, a glass of wine in her hand.

Her free hand grips the edge of the table, her butt propped against it.

Johnny winks at me, tilting his chin and motioning toward the fiery brunette.

“Can't she just sit? I can't focus,” the man says, talking around his cigarette, a glass of scotch next to him on the table.

“Tell her yourself,” I retort, setting my cigarette on the ashtray and briefly tilting my gaze to my cards.

Verona doesn't catch the exchange while Johnny takes her in with hungry eyes.

Obsessed with wearing red, she's decked out in a piece that makes the men around the table hard.

They all think I purposely bring her here, so she can mess with their attention and I can win every time.

As if I needed her to do that.

Her dress is open down to the small of her back, emphasizing her butt.

“Stare some more, and you'll eat your cards, Johnny.”

He gets my humor and laughs, his mouth open like a clam shell.

“You wouldn't mind, would you? Rumor has it you have someone new. People started talking about marriage and crap.”

Verona catches that.

She shifts slightly and grips her hip, her breasts almost spilling over.

Johnny chuckles again, satisfied, while the game continues, and the servers bring more drinks.

“I've seen her,” Verona says, shooting me a languorous look. “That won't stop De Lucca from being De Lucca and won't put me in your bed, Johnny.”

Her flirting makes the people around the table chuckle, and Johnny doesn't mind it at all, receiving even more attention from the redhead at his side.

Nor checks his phone again.

“Who's texting you?” I toss at him under my breath, winning another hand.

He tugs at his neckline, not looking at me.

“Your bride.”

His answer doesn't make it past my ears.

It's only for me.

"So fucking late? What happened?"

He doesn't smile.

"I don't know. You tell me."

Now he looks at me, and within seconds, I motion him to follow me and invite Verona to take my place and play my hand.

Collecting my cigarette, I rise.

Some big mouth from across the table makes a comment.

"No fucking way."

"Don't think she'll have a problem taking your money," I throw at him while Nor pushes out of his seat and trails me to the other room.

"Close the door and hand me your phone."

Moments later, I read Bella's messages.

"You seemingly didn't close the deal," he comments.

I drop his phone on the coffee table and slide into an armchair. The leather is cold and smells like smoke.

I put my cigarette out and chew on a mint to remove the taste from my mouth that's suddenly too much.

"We had some banter before I left, but it can't be that."

"What makes you say that?"

"She enjoyed it. We both did. I told her she wouldn't get to ask me any questions. And I wouldn't be accountable to anyone."

"What was the banter all about?"

He leans against the furniture while I tilt my head in the direction of the door.

"Verona. She quickly picked up on who she was and said she didn't care, but she did. That's why we went back and

forth about it.”

“What did you tell her?”

My eyebrows flick up.

“Nothing. There’s nothing to tell. I’m not doing anything different than what I’d planned to do. She is aware of everything,” I underline with slight irritation in my voice. “It’s not like I lied to her.”

His stare makes me shoot him a questioning look and then a warning one.

“I don’t think she wants out,” I say. “She’s tossed the same thing at me. Barely rattling the cage. You were right. She wants the money. Who wouldn’t want that kind of money for doing nothing? I’m not even fucking her.”

“You don’t like her?”

“I’m not fucking her, Nor. I don’t need that kind of complication. Of all people, I thought you’d understand what I wanted and wouldn’t ask me that. I’m not having a relationship with this woman. For her is the perfect arrangement. She’ll have everything she’s ever wanted without giving anything in return.”

“Except for her freedom.”

“Are you her advocate now?”

Someone knocks on the door.

“Not now. Go away,” I thunder.

The aggravation in my voice is denser than the mahogany desk Nor is propped against.

“Are you?” I ask.

He looks at me like he could bite my head off.

We go way back. And he saved my life many times, or he wouldn’t leave this room alive.

“You said she’d do it for money. I happen to agree,” I continue.

“If she walks on you, we’ve wasted your time and other opportunities grooming this girl.”

I sag back, a hand sliding through my hair.

“I know all that. I’m not trying to make things difficult here. All I’m saying is that she’s texted you, complaining like a baby.”

“She hasn’t complained. She asked me a question.”

“She’s asked me the same question, and you know what the answer is? She can’t leave. I know I said what I said, but I didn’t just run my mouth and let everyone know she’s someone important to me so she could walk on me.”

I shift my eyes to him.

A knowing smile tilts his lips.

“What’s your fucking problem now?”

“You’re ambushing her. Fucking ambushing her. You’re doing exactly what I told her you wouldn’t do.”

I gesture at him.

“Don’t bother lecturing me. I’ll talk to her tonight or tomorrow. She won’t leave. And that’s that.”

“What makes this thing so difficult? I don’t understand. She doesn’t expect you to sleep with her. And you can do whatever the hell you want. So what else is going on?”

He truly has a hard time understanding.

“She’s jealous.”

“Jealous? Why the hell would she be jealous? She knows nothing about you and didn’t even have time to feel something for you?”

I shrug.

“Learned behavior? I don’t know. Why do I do what I do? Because I learned it from my father. Was I born into it? Yes, I was. I don’t think she knows why she’s doing it.”

I go silent, thinking about the woman I have at my house, debating with myself whether this is still a good idea.

It's the best I've had, so I can go on with my life, doing what I'm doing while minimizing the risks. I don't want a woman at my side that could become leverage for my enemies.

She'll be out of their reach, and for sure, I will be out of her reach.

"Do you like her? Really like her?"

I look at him.

"What kind of question is that?" I ask.

"I don't know. You need to have lunch and dinner with her at a minimum on a daily basis. And also ride with her in a car, go out with her. You have to have some type of relationship with this woman. I think it's better to have an ally in her than an enemy. You have enough enemies as it is."

"She's not my enemy."

"No. She wants to run away. What does that make her? Not your friend, for sure."

"I doubt it. She's sending a fucking message. That's why she's texted you."

"And what exactly is that message?"

"That she wants more. She's already bargained with me for more money. She's not as innocent as she looks despite her not..."

I stop abruptly.

"Despite what?"

Someone knocks on the door again.

"Move away from that fucking door, or I'll break your neck," I shout across the room, sounding like a broken record.

The corridor goes silent.

"What the fuck is wrong with these motherfuckers?"

"Despite what, De Lucca?"

"Fuck with me now, West. It's not the greatest time to do that."

I push to my feet. And steps rush onto the corridor when he and I lock eyes, the noise not distracting us in the slightest.

“You probably know that...” I start when the door bursts open, and Verona walks in, her cheeks flushed, blood dripping from her hand.

“There’s a scuffle,” she says, and we instantly draw guns, already pushing past her.

“Just another fucking day in paradise. What the fuck did I say?” I mutter, running to the other room.

“Nobody fucking moves,” I thunder, looking around the room. Men and women freeze, cigarettes and drinks in the air, while Johnny and one of the new men tumble on the floor.

I pick one up, and Nor grabs the other.

We both cock our guns and press the barrels against their heads.

“Drop your fucking weapons.”

I kick Johnny’s gun from his hand.

“Who started it?”

Six of my people stand around the table, guns out too.

“The fucker cheated,” Johnny says. “Verona saw him.”

“Verona??”

“He’s right.”

The woman walks in, cleaning her hand with a piece of cloth.

“Where is that coming from?” I ask, pointing to her hand.

“This one has a knife.”

He kicks the new man in the stomach with her shoe.

“Too much alcohol meets stupidity,” I mutter. “Okay. Everybody out. Now,” I order.

Rustling and shuffling follow as they all head to the door.

“You too.”

Verona looks at me.

“Yeah. Go home. Monty will give you a ride home.”

Disappointed, she purses her lips, but I don't have time for that right now.

Without having a choice, she spins on her heel and moves again.

“Close the door,” I shout before it's only me, Nor, my men, and the two jerks groaning on the floor. “Now let's show them how justice is done in my house.”

I SABELLA

IT'S EARLY when I tip my gaze to the window, and grayish light flutters across the room.

Clumps of fog hovers over the street.

It looks like winter has pushed the sunny fall days away and taken over Manhattan.

Propped on my elbow, I check the time on my phone. It's not even six in the morning.

Nor didn't get back to me, and frankly, I didn't expect him to. Not in the middle of the night, anyway, but still... It would've been nice to talk to someone.

Voices ring downstairs before steps move up through the house.

Settled, paced, like the voice barking orders in the kitchen.

My heart does a little dance, clapping its imaginary hands.

We're so early in the story, and I'm already enthralled with my captor. And technically, he's not even that, and I'm hardly a victim here, but some new feeling I haven't taken into account seems to be posing a problem for me now.

I'm like a pack animal without a pack—since I have no one I care for close to me—and he is the closest and most

important person in my life right now, despite still being a stranger to me.

His steps reach the floor and halt, and I fall back into my pillow and pull the covers up to my chin.

I imagine him thinking about something, maybe checking his phone. Perhaps it crosses his mind to check on me and see if I'm asleep.

The silence prolongs, and I don't know what to think. Has he gone to his room already? What is going on?

He sets himself in motion again, and this time, his footsteps resonate closer, moving toward my door.

Did I leave it open? Is it closed? For sure, it's not locked. I don't think it can be locked. It's his house, after all.

Damn it. I wasn't that intimidated in the beginning, and now I'm drowning in panic.

I barely have time to roll onto my side, partly hide my face under the covers, and close my eyes when the door creaks open, and his shoes meet the polished wooden floors.

All I can think of is that my heart beats so hard he might actually hear it in the unforgiving silence of the room.

He's checking on me... There's not much time to think about it as I see nothing but hear everything.

The faint sound of his hand brushing over his fancy pants as he slides his phone into his pocket.

The crisp sound of his shirt as the fabric rubs against his body while he moves.

He smells like whiskey, smoke, and something metallic. Is it blood?

If only my heart stopped spinning like crazy, and my blood ceased pummeling my veins with fury.

If only I could crack an eye open and take a peek.

It's impossible, I think.

I feel his stare on my face, so intense that sweat trickles down my neck and my chest, and my fingers clutch the covers as if holding onto a safety raft.

What is he looking at? What is he thinking of?

I count several long, painful moments before he turns around and swaggers away, and I crack an eye open and get a glimpse of his V-shaped back, smooth pants, and the red stains on his otherwise perfectly pressed white shirt.

He doesn't look wounded, but his shirt does.

Moments later, he vanishes out the door, strolls down the corridor, and enters his bedroom.

Shortly after, he walks into the bathroom, and I know that because the water starts running in the shower.

I imagine him peeling off his clothes and letting the water run over his muscular chest, sculpted arms, washboard abs, and athletic legs before removing the blood from his shirt and the smell of sin from his skin.

My fingers are no longer latched onto the edge of the covers, and my eyes are wide open, hurting from the fixed stare glued to the French doors.

They earnestly await for the morning light to tumble onto the terrace so they can invite me to have my morning coffee at the table.

What taste would that coffee have? And would I think of him? My future husband?

Would I forget the smell of blood?

And would I create a dumpster in my brain where I'd discard the inconvenient truths this man would send my way from this point on?

Truths like what happened last night. The blood. That woman. Who knows what else?

How would my disposition be? Good? Pensive? Heavy with doom and gloom?

A few moments pass.

I clearly have no idea what I've gotten myself into.



ISABELLA

LATER.

MY ATTEMPTS TO fall back to sleep fail miserably, so I leap out of bed, slide my sheer robe on, struggle with my belt, and put on my slippers before darting out.

The staff cooks breakfast downstairs for everyone in the house, I assume.

I don't know about him—he just got home—but I won't need more than a cup of coffee and some fruit.

Strangely, I find their lively existence comforting because it reminds me of my childhood home.

The house smells good this morning, the scent of fresh sheets and linens, cleanliness in general, and flowers and freshly cooked food removing the memory of blood and smoke.

First, I plan to go to the kitchen.

And then, the light at the end of the corridor snags my attention, and after a short debate with myself, I conjure up the courage to tiptoe my way to De Lucca's bedroom.

For long seconds, I only listen. Then I press my ear against the door and listen some more.

The water drips in the shower. Or maybe he's taking a bath.

A mixed aroma of body wash, shampoo, and aftershave tickles my nostrils.

He must be still in the bathroom, so I try my luck and push the door open.

I wish I had checked his bedroom when he wasn't home, not that it would've felt any better.

It would've still felt like an intrusion.

At least now, he's home.

His bedroom is twice as big and darker than mine.

Tucked in a nook, so it's nowhere close to the windows, his bed is a piece of art in itself with a majestic headboard, plump pillows, and sheets that look like freshly sifted snow.

The floor creaks, and I jump back like I'm tasered, instinctively gripping the neckline of my robe.

“What are you doing here?”

His voice slaps me like a gust of wind soaked in rain.

I shuffle back, almost hitting the wall, while he rounds the bed, wearing only a towel around his waist, low on his hips, tucked in securely, giving me a full view of the man behind the suit.

His body is a powerful machine, a canvas for stories, some written in ink, others in ragged scars. Tattoos, faded wounds of the past, and the slightest dust of dark hair on his forearms catch my eye before I give him a swift once over.

His muscular frame is even more impressive than I thought, and now I realize his fancy clothes are only a convenient, very polished way to hide the killer underneath.

He shoots a look at me in response to my incorruptible silence.

“I was on my way to the kitchen and heard a noise. I wanted to see if you were home.”

Instantaneously, he moves his eyes away from me, telegraphing he doesn't believe me.

I don't believe what I'm saying either.

It was more than that. I wanted to peer inside his lair and see if he was all right.

If he still smelled like blood.

The air in his bedroom is imbued with the aroma of pine, lavender, and wood.

“I’m here.”

The dismissive intonation in his voice is nauseating but not a big deterrent for me.

“We need to talk.”

Soft yet firm, my voice makes him turn around.

He walks toward me, and I feel like pressing my back into the wall and maybe, somehow, disappearing.

He stops inches away from me, slowly destroying me with his eyes. And he doesn’t do it with powerful determination or hunger or desire. Not even with a pang of curiosity, a boatload of frustration, or immense fury.

But rather with the crushing weight embedded in his soul from years of living dangerously, never knowing life without death or how to plan for a better future.

He’s a rough beast wrestling with life every day, even when facing someone harmless like me.

“Talk,” he says, crossing his arms over this tattooed chest.

His biceps bulge, and a vein pushes against the skin on his neck as he narrows his eyes at me and lifts an eyebrow, inviting me to speak.

“Given that you live a dangerous life, and anything could happen to you at any moment...” I murmur, watching his expression change.

“Where did you get that idea?” he tosses at me, testing me more than anything else.

“I have eyes.”

His gaze glints darkly.

“And what exactly did you see?”

Without tearing my eyes away from him, I jerk my hand toward the bathroom.

“There’s a blood-stained shirt in a laundry hamper somewhere in there.”

His eyebrows push up with a questioning look.

“I know you were in my room,” I continue. “I also smelled the blood.”

A stern expression glides over his face.

“Go on.”

“I want us to get married as quickly as possible. And I want my money at the beginning of each year. Not at the end. And not if we get divorced, or something happens to you... Or me.”

Surprise hardly describes the look on his face.

He’s amused.

“It’s nice to know you have faith in me.”

“I’m just practical,” I retort.

A nasal laugh signals how entertained he is.

“I’ll be damned. I thought you wanted out...”

The blood drains from my face, and he likes my reaction.

“You thought I wouldn’t know,” he says, slowly shaking his head. “Nor was right after all. You’d do anything for money.”

His smile fades as he studies every inch of my face.

“What else would you do for money?”

I keep my lips pressed together to prevent myself from saying something stupid.

He uncrosses his arms and brings his calloused hand to my face.

It feels like a storm falling into a field of flowers.

“Would you kill for me, baby?”

He brushes my cheek with his thumb.

“For the right amount of money... Would you?”

Hypnotized, I move my lips, speaking words that make no sense to me.

“I probably would.”

My voice is so quiet he asks me to repeat what I just said.

“Yes, I would,” I say in a stronger tone.

“You would... Huh... What else would you do?”

“You already have my silence. And you don’t want my body... So I’m out of ideas.”

He chuckles.

“Interesting.”

His fingers break away from my lips, his free hand flicking his towel open just in time to let it fall before he spins around and heads to the bed, naked.

I gawk at him for too long.

Despite not having sex, I’ve seen men naked for a variety of reasons, but not men like him.

Nothing that looks like an artist’s wet dream. And nothing as chiseled, strong, and dark in nature as him.

As much as I study him, running my gaze over his body, I can’t find anything wrong with him.

In my eyes, he’s perfect because I already see him through a lens I can’t define.

Is it sexual attraction? No. It can’t only be that.

Is it more? Probably.

I marvel at him, overwhelmed by his presence, although he’s not even paying attention to me.

Why was he in my room, anyway? And what was he thinking of? When he was there?

He spent quite a bit of time watching me.

Why was he in my room, and now that I’m here, he’s not even glancing at me?

My eyes move over him, looking for fresh wounds or signs of sex. A woman's scratches on his back and marks on his butt or chest.

The stains on his shirt must be from someone else's blood.

There's not a hint he's lost blood.

And sex, if it happened, must've been a bit vanilla—although I don't think he likes it that way.

Or maybe he's forbidden them to leave marks on him, and not because of me, but because men like him meet violence with violence.

Or so I've heard.

He has no problem walking to the bed, butt naked, and shifting slightly toward me when he addresses me again.

“You can go now if you have nothing else to say.”

My eyes shouldn't slide down, but they do.

Frankly, I didn't think I'd see my future husband naked. Not tonight. Not so soon. Not under these circumstances.

He's semi-hard.

Thick and big.

The sight of his unapologetic manliness makes me shake inside a little.

Normally, I'd just ignore him—I'm used to not being impressed with men shoving their hard dicks into my face—but I can't disregard him.

It's impossible, and he knows it.

My eyes are glued to his now bouncing hard shaft as I study its perfect head and girth.

He's neatly trimmed down to the insertion of his manhood, his shredded abs half covered in ink to his groin.

Flushed with blood, his hard length points down, but even so, it makes me feel things I've never felt before.

And yes, they're all tinged with fear—the inexplicable, ancestral fear harbored deep in my psyche that he could destroy me in some way.

I've always had mixed feelings about sex, and that's why I've given up so easily on it. To me, it's a bit confusing, like a nebula, and apparently, I won't be able to clarify it now.

Not with him side-eyeing me with a smirk on his lips.

He must feel something too—even if only cruel pleasure and wicked amusement—or he wouldn't tease me with his impressive dick.

I finally find my voice.

“You didn't give me an answer to my request.”

Determined to get my answer, I walk toward him, holding his magnetic blue eyes before he turns his back to me and palms his cock to make it point down.

Is that because of me?

Am I responsible for his erection?

I seriously doubt it. I'm not even sexy in any way.

Okay, my nightgown is short, my legs are bare, and the outline of my breasts is visible through my robe, my puckered nipples pushing against the fabric—because I'm cold, no other reason—but still, this is not me being seductive.

Plus, how attractive can I be if I just rolled off the bed?

He studies my eyes.

“We'll get married soon,” he says. “And I'll think about the money. What's the rush?”

“I have things to take care of.”

My eyes dip to his lips.

“Suddenly?” he tosses at me.

“It's a private matter.”

He lifts an eyebrow.

“You think I don't want to know?”

“It has nothing to do with you. It’s personal.”

“How personal?”

“It’s about my family.”

“I need to know.”

“No, you don’t. You wouldn’t have known about it if I didn’t tell you. It means nothing to you. Trust me on that.”

His stare breaks away from mine before he flips the covers and lies down.

The sheet covers his bulge while he folds his arm under his head and closes his eyes.

I’ve never seen something so beautiful in my life.

The tattoos creep down the back of his arm and shoulder before spilling over his chest.

His features are finally untouched by the dread of the day.

“We’ll need to get together with your family,” he says.

That’s not what I’d hoped to hear.

“Why?”

He flicks an eye open and looks at me like I’ve grown a second head.

“That’s what people do when they get married.”

“Not all people have their families on board with the idea. Can’t we just overlook this aspect and do it without them?”

“Is there a problem?”

Damn, he is so sexy when he cocks an eyebrow at me.

“I don’t know. You tell me.”

He closes his eyes again, and I feel the urge to sit on the bed and touch his face. Run my fingertips over his lips.

Without giving it much thought, I lower myself on the bed—without touching him, of course, yet even the slightest dip in the mattress makes him open his eyes.

He's not taken aback by my presence or that my hip presses into his thigh, and my hand hovers over him, and the slightest miscalculation on my part could probably make me touch his package by mistake.

I can see my fingers slide over his semi, although right now, it looks like a full erection.

He palms it again, so it doesn't make a tent under the sheet when footsteps ring out outside.

I shoot a wary gaze at the door while he observes my face when Marge's voice echoes in the hallway.

The woman speaks to him through the slightly open door.

"What time do you need the car, sir?"

"The usual. No change."

"Okay, sir. Breakfast is ready."

Her footsteps fade.

I move my stare to him, and the reaction on his face tells me his chemistry is affected by my eyes.

"I'll think about everything you said. The family reunion is non-negotiable. I want this to look legit. I don't care what they think or how you cope with it. We'll probably do something else about the money. I'll give you an answer when I have one. Besides, that's what will keep you motivated."

"That's not what will keep me motivated."

He tilts his head, flashing an incredulous smile.

"What else, Bella?"

"Not losing too much too soon."

His smile fades away like a glimmer of light swallowed up by a cloudy day.

"You can't just be talking about me when you say that," he murmurs.

"No."

His eyes flicker with questions.

“What then? If anything happens to me, you’ll be all set anyway.”

“I don’t want anything to happen to you. If it does, chances are something will happen to me too.”

“Not necessarily.”

I laugh incredulously.

“I may look naive, but I’m not stupid. You didn’t just look into an arranged marriage because you wanted someone you could control. That may be *a reason*. But you also wanted someone who meant nothing to you in case... You know... Shit happened.”

He looks away and promptly lies.

“Nothing will happen to you. You’re protected.”

“As well as you’re protected. That’s why you came home with a blood-stained shirt.”

He flicks his eyes to me.

“That was something else.”

I tilt my head to the side, telegraphing my disbelief.

He talks again.

“I had to take care of something. No one died tonight.”

I bite my lip.

“Don’t do that,” he says, irritated.

I stop, my parted lips drawing his eyes when he continues.

“Look—” he starts.

“I want to know the reason you’ve decided to go with an arranged marriage instead of just marrying someone you had feelings for,” I say, cutting him off rather abruptly.

His eyes pour ice into mine.

“Your answer is right there in your words, little girl. Now get the hell out of my bedroom.”

His voice is cold, leveled, without an ounce of emotion.

“Fuck you...” I say quietly, my voice mirroring his in some regard as I shift slightly to go away.

I push to my feet yet fall back to the bed just as fast, his grip locked around my wrist, my hand tingly cold and numb from the squeeze, tears pooling in my eyes from the sharp pain.

Despite all that, I don't flinch.

Sitting upright, he glowers at me, his free hand clenched around my neck.

A flashback of my short life flickers in front of my eyes as I quickly realize he could kill me, and no one would ever know.

“Say that again...” he growls quietly, his breath splayed over my lips.

He's waiting for my answer so aggressively in my space I struggle with two equally strong feelings.

Sheer terror and sexual arousal.

The crisp sheet has slipped, revealing his perfect erection. He can't even pretend he's not turned on.

I always knew brutes felt sexual pleasure when killing someone.

And he is no exception.

The only thing different about him is the layer of sophistication fooling so many people.

He allows very little air to flow into my lungs, and dizzy, I prop myself against his frame, move my hand to his left, and lean against the bed as well.

The other hand needs him too, so I curl my arm around his and spread my hand over his shoulder.

Clinging to him, I speak.

“I said... Fuck you for calling me a little girl.”

My breath falls over his neck, and as I tip my head down, the smell of body wash and crime intoxicates me for a second.

“I’m not a little girl...” I whisper, tears forming on my lashes, an anomaly since they express nothing.

I sniffle and try to straighten to wipe my nose with the back of my hand.

My eyes and nose are wet. And my lips are wet too.

It happens that I tilt my head back to stop my nose from running, and it appears like I’m looking down my nose at him.

The ominous glint in his eyes relays to me how swiftly he could kill me in a variety of ways, one more painful than the other.

It also tells me the man in him would love to break me open and have his way with me before making me bleed all over his perfect sheets.

For a dark moment there, it also says he’d like to slide his wicked tongue into my mouth and sink his teeth into my lips.

Make me bleed everywhere, from my mouth to the soft wet spot between my legs and, eventually, my entire body.

Within seconds, he calms down, the brief moment of dark pleasure extinguished by rational thoughts.

“You don’t talk to me like that, Bella... Am I clear?”

The threat in his voice is as obvious as a splint on the finger.

It hurts just the same, or maybe it’s his hand around my neck or his fingers around my wrist.

“I know it might not mean much in your world, but my skin is sensitive, and I get bruised easily,” I say.

His fingers de-tense.

“I’m sure you know how to use foundation.”

“That’s not what the foundation is made for.”

He lets it slide.

“You’re not new to this,” I comment.

His hands fall off me, his back hitting the pillow.

“You and I will live in peace if you watch your mouth.”

I swear his hard cock just twitched.

It rests on his lower abs with impunity. Any other observation regarding his erection would muddy the waters for us, so I drop it.

He grips the edge of the sheet and pulls it up, barely covering his swollen cock.

“Since you’ve already introduced me to the marital bliss, I’ll make myself scarce now.”

“Not so scarce,” he says, rolling onto his side, showing me his chiseled back and the cute dimples sitting just above his butt.

I can’t imagine ever touching this man with the passion a woman would normally have for her husband.

“Pick a nice dress for church.”

“Church??”

“Go.”

He’s getting sleepy and grumpy.

I move away.

“What about lunch? Aren’t we supposed to go to Maria and Giani’s house?”

“We’ll go there from church. Now leave me alone.”

A second later, he’s asleep, snoring softly, his features relaxing. If only he weren’t so mean, I’d spent my life watching him sleep.

I freeze by his bed, studying every bit of him, when the staff chatting in the hallway makes me dart away and retreat in a hurry.

I SABELLA

I SPEND some time getting ready for breakfast and church, going through my clothing options, and struggling with a scattered brain.

Why can't I focus, for fuck's sake?

How do I want to look?

Demure, of course, but also attractive.

Why attractive? Why not attractive? The church is not the place to look attractive.

But it's not about that.

I didn't say sexy. I said attractive.

It doesn't matter.

I pick up two dresses. And two more. Flat shoes and heels. Everyday lingerie—soft cotton fabric—and the sexier version—lace and frills.

Lost in an ocean of options, I run blank eyes over the clothes spread all over my bed while all I see is the man at the other end of the corridor.

Who is now snoring quietly, most likely still lying on his stomach, maybe sporting an erection, his tattooed body partly exposed, his cheek smushed against a pillow.

I try to imagine a woman's body trapped under that beast. I try to imagine myself trapped under him.

How do I feel about it?

I don't know.

Generally speaking, I've never been intimidated by the idea of having sex, which is odd, considering I'm still a virgin.

The opportunity was there, and there were no psychological blocks of any kind.

It was just one of those things that had been botched from the get-go.

A few guys had given it a try, but I couldn't pretend I had fun. No wonder they got angry and said something was wrong with me.

Why didn't I pretend? It beats me.

Come to think of it, my expectations were average.

I didn't think I'd elope with the first guy or the second or the third. As much as I didn't think I'd have a vaginal orgasm from my first encounter. Or any orgasm, to be fair.

I don't know what went wrong. Whatever it was, it made me skeptical about the whole idea, so I avoided it all together.

Knowingly. Unknowingly. The outcome was the same.

I was labeled a waste of time for anyone who wanted a quick lay, and frankly, there were plenty of other opportunities for them in college, just not me.

Another thing that's happened since this stupid shit started to hover over my head...?

I've gotten somewhat nervous about my first time.

About losing it, not losing it, and having intimate contact with a man.

In a way, not having sex served me right, keeping me away from trouble all these years, but it's a terrible thing to always have in the back of my mind.

What if there is something wrong with me?

And what if nothing turns me on?

Well, he turns me on. My future husband does. So that myth has been debunked.

Fuck this.

I'll go with the gray dress.

Holding it up, I cast a critical eye over it. It can't get any plainer than that. Boring design, round neckline, back zipper. Tight on my body.

I could wear stockings and heels to make it look sassier.

Hanger in hand, I move to the windows and peer outside.

The weather got better.

The sun shines over the rooftops, and the promise of a gorgeous day is there. The crisp air is perfect for nylons and a jacket. The white one, maybe?

I put everything on, look in the mirror, and get quickly disappointed.

I look washed out with my pale face, gray eyes, and hair that doesn't know what color wants to be.

A darker shade would set off my eyes, and I've been thinking about it for a while, but I've never mustered the courage to do it.

For now, I remove my clothes, irritated, and dig into my closet again.

I pull out a black dress and a light gray jacket, like my eyes, and snatch up a tube of red lipstick.

The contrast is striking when I put some dark eyeliner and mascara on.

"Damn..." I murmur, painting my lips.

I pull back and study the result.

The dress molds on me like a second skin. Long-sleeved, with a scoop neckline, a metallic back zipper, and a skirt that hits inches above my knee, it looks more like a cocktail dress.

Although the color is appropriate, the design sets off my shape and cleavage.

I go back to the closet, and from an unpacked suitcase, I fish out a red scarf. I tie it into a bow at the root of my neck.

Despite covering my skin, it gives me more sass than I need.

I'll keep my short jacket on and pop the collar. With that, I put all my things into a small purse and slip my heels on.

My hair struggles with gravity, sliding over my face, so I constantly flick it back.

Later, I leave the room after spritzing perfume on my wrist and neck.

I can't tell whether he's still sleeping or not. I'm just doing what I'm supposed to do. What I was told to do.

How much sleep could he get anyway? The service is at ten. If he is indeed sleeping.

The kitchen greets me with a smell of freshly brewed espresso and baked pastries.

I tell them I want to eat breakfast in the nook across from the terrace, and Marge shows me to the table.

The glass doors are open, and the sun hits the tiles outside with the sharpness of a perfect autumn day while the wind makes the shrubs rustle.

The city noise buzzes in the background.

Marge sets a small espresso cup and two croissants in front of me.

Collazione.

“Would you like something different? Eggs? Pancakes?”

I appreciate the question.

“I'm good. Thank you.”

She nods and walks away.

I sip coffee, staring blankly at the view, indulging in its beauty.

I'm having breakfast alone while three people in the kitchen prepare the food for the rest of the day.

Why would they cook lunch for us if De Lucca and I were invited to Maria and Giani's place?

Whatever the reason, the women wash and cut the vegetables and prepare to bake some bread.

The process is laborious and includes nothing of the shortcuts you'd see in modern-day cooking.

This is tradition more than anything else.

My focus shifts back to the croissants in front of me. They look delicious, dusted with powdered sugar and adorned with toasted sliced almonds.

And they are still warm as I touch them.

Quite an effort has gone into baking them, so I need to taste them.

Careful not to smudge my lipstick, I rip off a tiny piece, pop it into my mouth, and chew on it. It melts in my mouth, therefore I'm sold.

I finish the rest of it, drink coffee, and dig into the second one.

I'm almost finished, chewing on the last bite of food, completely losing track of time when clamor ensues in the kitchen.

Firm footsteps ring away from me as several men enter the dining room. The women set the table for them, and it dawns on me a lot of food has been prepared for them.

Trepidation sweeps through me as they take their places at the table and start eating.

Big, noisy, mixing English with Italian. Some cursing.

Marge signals them they're not alone, and some whip their eyes in my direction.

The long kitchen separates us, but I understand Marge's concerns. Although I didn't know they weren't supposed to curse or speak loudly in my presence.

Maybe it has to do with today being Sunday and all of us getting ready to go to church.

I have a feeling everyone will go, the staff included.

Peeking at the women's aprons, I notice they have their good clothes on. The Sunday clothes.

My heart still moves into a bit of a quiet swirl, throbbing at a rushed pace when everybody goes silent.

All eyes pull to the entrance to the dining room as the man of the house—their boss and my off-limits husband—enters the place with his raven hair slicked back, clean-shaven face glowing, and sharp clothes highlighting his athletic frame.

Aware of the respectful silence his people greet him with, he invites them to continue eating while one of the staff members pulls the chair out for him at the table.

He doesn't seem in a rush to join them and for sure doesn't look for me. Turning his eyes to his phone, he asks that particular staff member something.

It may be related to food or something else. I can't read his lips since his back is turned to me.

One hand tucked in his pocket, the other holding his phone, he speaks to that woman.

As always, he wears dress pants and a slim-fit waistcoat. His dress shirt is starched and pressed, but the cuffs are not rolled up as he usually wears them.

His clothes fit him tightly without being ostentatious.

Far from dressing to look sexy, he is as sexy as they come without even trying.

When he casually glances over his shoulder and spots me in the breakfast nook, my lungs and my heart surely collapse.

Our eyes meet, and my first thought is that he looks rested, despite sleeping only a few hours at best and spending most of

the night doing who knows what.

He talks to the woman before shifting his gaze to me again. I never take my eyes off him.

Despite the significant distance between the breakfast nook and dining room and the kitchen creating a buffer zone, I understand this moment means something to me.

If I ever get to a point where I wonder when I have fallen in love for the first time, this day must be it.

Something must've happened since I met this man in front of the hotel that day.

Beyond his looks, something else must've gotten to me.

Something I've been completely unaware of.

He didn't do anything in particular and made it clear to me, more than once, that a relationship between us was highly improbable.

How he'd like our fake marriage to look is something we'll discuss at some point before our nuptials. We might go over some details but nothing else.

I don't expect much from him.

Surprisingly, he collects his espresso and heads my way.

From Lina, I've learned he typically has breakfast in the dining room, but for now, he walks across the kitchen and stops next to me.

"Move over," he says, and I make room for him on the bench.

He could've used one of the chairs, but the view is right in front of us, so he places his drink down and sits next to me.

As if I've become a giant sensor, I feel invaded by him. His scent tickles my nose, and his heat crawls up my legs, his presence wrapping around me like a thick wool shawl.

He doesn't even look at me, and my head is filled with him.

His shirt smells clean, like something that has just been pressed, and a fine scent of aftershave drifts off his skin.

He observes me, too, his stare making me press my knees together and point them away from him, my shoulders pulling back slightly.

His interest in me is brief, like a glance tossed at a book he doesn't care to open and read.

Despite his cold indifference, he brings his fingers to my scarf and tugs at it, undoing the bow with ease, his eyes dipping to my cleavage.

My heart beats so fast that my pulse becomes a blur.

“You don't know how to dress for church, do you?”

“Is there a dress code?”

His eyes flick up from my chest, and I melt like an ice cream cone abandoned on the sidewalk.

Zero irony beams in my voice, and I feel like groveling.

“Is this not good?” I say, looking down and pointing to my dress, running away from his piercing stare.

I didn't think he was so handsome.

We're talking serious stuff, and my mind is in the gutter.

Swallowing hard, I drag my gaze up.

I find his dark blue stare in the same place, waiting for me.

“It's good, but the other wives will hate you. Just something to think about.”

Is this his strange sense of humor again?

He doesn't smile, but you can never tell with him.

“Too revealing...?”

My voice trails off, obviously disappointed, while he seems intrigued and also fascinated with my lack of knowledge in this wife business thingy.

He lets me boil for a few long seconds, weighing his answer.

“There isn’t just one thing. You’re good. Just tie your scarf around your neck and make sure you wear your jacket.”

I was planning to do that anyway.

I wish he could talk to me more, but his men push their chairs back in the dining room, and he signals them he’s ready.

He finishes his espresso in a gulp and sets it on the table.

“Let’s go,” he says, touching my thigh briefly before rising to his feet and swaggering away.

There’s a delay in my reaction to his touch.

My eyes are glued to his back, analyzing his broad shoulders and confident walk as if it’s pure science, while the soft shivering of my heart is a muted reminder his hand has been on me.

How carelessly he walks away while I still harbor the undeniable effect of his touch.

I’ll be ruined by this man if I don’t pay attention.

And the thing is, I don’t even know what to pay attention to.

I SABELLA

THE NEXT FEW hours go by in a blur, like many other things in my life. The only detail registering with me is the nice weather outside, maybe because that's the only safe aspect of my life.

I'm not used to large gatherings of people, and here I am. Living my life surrounded by so many people. Mostly strangers.

During the service, I try to occupy as little space as I can, not moving my gaze around the church or locking eyes with anyone.

De Lucca and I never touch. Not willingly, anyway.

Sure, from time to time, his elbow rubs against mine, and at one point, we bump into each other by mistake. But nothing more than that.

All I do during the service is stay hidden behind him. Not literally, but I sure would love to be able to just vanish.

It's not like there's pressure on me.

Not excessive pressure, I mean.

There are enough eyes on me, mostly glinting with curiosity because this community is like a huge family with lots and lots of people.

I also spot the traffic-stopping brunette from yesterday.

Sitting demurely in a pew, she has her hair pulled back into a chignon and a green dress on. It's less revealing than mine, although it's hugging her tightly.

Next to her sits an older woman, who wears a suit with an elegant brooch pinned on the lapel of her jacket, and a younger man.

I wouldn't be surprised if he was the brunette's brother. He's strikingly handsome, and that's my clue.

For the most part, I haven't caught her looking at us, and De Lucca seems oblivious to her, even though something tells me they've spent the night together.

Or at least they were in the same location.

My suspicion grows when I notice a discreet bandaid on the woman's hand.

Was that her blood on his shirt?

I shake like a leaf.

Was it?

I glance at him before looking at her again. He ignores me while she turns her head to us, not so much to look at him as to observe me.

She wouldn't be here if they had an altercation, would she?

Strangely I don't sense animosity between them. No tension whatsoever. If anything, he is completely unaware of her presence.

The same way he was with me this morning in the kitchen.

Later, when we leave the church and make several stops so he can talk to people, she tries to sneak out with her family.

There's a third woman.

Her younger sister, I assume? And an older man. I can't believe she's here with her family.

And there's surely a connection between De Lucca and her.

Why would her family go along with this?

My head is spinning.

Is she with him?

Is she his mistress? His girlfriend?

That's what I get from watching all these people around us. It's like everybody knows the truth except me.

A pyramid of power is deftly concealed behind their smiles and pleasantries. And De Lucca sits right at the top with me next to him.

What is his plan, really? An arranged marriage without being in a marriage? Without consummating it or having children?

In this world? Is he nuts? Or is he taking it step by step?

It seems like it. We have to go through each step and learn what lies ahead. It's like a stupid game.

Only it's not so stupid, and it's not a game.

If him losing his life is a real possibility, and me losing everything is another one, what if we make it alive? And I'm still with him? What if the things he factors in right now no longer matter after a while, yet we're still married? How will this end?

Or does it end at some point?

His hand meets mine, and my knees shudder.

Why has he taken my hand?

And then I know why.

Her family stops in front of us like we're royals.

They exchange words that don't lodge into my brain except for one.

Her name is Verona.

Is this some weird thing in their world where the mistress is introduced to a man's future wife?

Or is he testing me? Or her? Or is he putting her on notice?

They're either great actors, or my perception is completely off, but nothing reads on their faces.

It must be the attraction that we, the women, both have for him that runs interference and messes with my brain.

How else can I explain that he looks even more desirable?

He must know our eyes are glued to him—and other people's, to be fair—and maybe he just doesn't care.

Regardless, my ovaries are about to explode.

The woman in front of me is in control, squeezing my hand in moderation, pretending I didn't catch her mouthing flirty stuff at him yesterday.

She must know I know he's spent the night with her.

What she doesn't know is the dollar signs—invisibly—tattooed on my lips keep my mouth shut.

I have no business to care, although that might soon become a bigger problem than it already is.

Slowly the power shifts away from me, even without him laying a finger on me.

The fact that I'm officially his girlfriend registers with Verona as a banal fact.

There is no change in her expression. I'm sure she got the news last night.

How eager to please him she must be to accept it without reacting or making a comment?

What did he tell her?

'I have this new woman in my life, and you are my number two?'

The woman is not stupid. She knows what this is.

And I don't think De Lucca and I are fooling anyone. It's just that the power he has over people stops them from talking.

And in the end, what is so unusual about this? Arranged marriages are nothing new.

Although this is not exactly that.

This is as fake as they come.

Sure, they have no idea where I come from, and that makes me interesting in their eyes for a while, but even that... How much longer can that hold their attention?

Verona looks for his eyes.

A woman is a woman, and when her heart bleeds, her pride takes the back seat.

He doesn't give her the acknowledgment she desires, and that's that. She has to leave. So she does, walking away with her family, a few other men joining them.

Soon they climb into their cars and vanish.

Before long, clouds gather across the sky, the temperature drops, and the wind starts blowing hard.

It's fall, and the weather is capricious, making people guess what to wear and where to go.

Max signals me to wait in the car, and I pull away reluctantly, still not comfortable with this world.

It's going to take some time to get used to it.

By the time I nestle in my seat, raindrops fall, the wind spins leaves above the ground, the sky is dark, and the last few people make a beeline for their rides.

My phone rings while my eyes are trained on Max. He talks to a few men, and one of them is Nor.

I doubt Nor knows I'm here. Even if he does, he doesn't look in my direction, so maybe he's not allowed to talk to me.

He didn't answer my questions last night.

My phone rings.

I fish it out from my purse, still peering at Nor.

"Yes?"

Answering without looking, I'm in for a big surprise.

Missa's frantic voice makes me shift my focus away from Max and Nor and concentrate on her.

"Slow down. I don't understand what you're saying. What is it about our mother?"

"She's coming to New York."

"What??"

The driver flicks his eyes to me.

I palm my phone so she doesn't hear me.

"The partition wall, please."

Pressing a button, he gives me the privacy that I need.

"Please explain to me what's going on. And why are you talking so fast?"

"I'm running. I'm outside."

"Why?"

"Because Jill can't wait to rat me out. It's supposed to be a surprise. Our mother coming to New York."

"They can check your cell phone, stupid. They know you're talking to me."

"I don't care. You need to know they're ambushing you. Our mother talked to everybody at the dinner table last night. Suddenly you're so important. I think she's pissed you've found a man, and Mick might marry someone else. Please don't be me."

"I've found a man...? What kind of nonsense is that? And no. It won't be you. Chill. Why is she so concerned all of a sudden?"

"You tell me. She said something about a gut feeling."

Oh, don't I know?

My mother has a flair for doing stupid shit.

Something must've triggered her, and that something will surely bring her here.

Fuck.

What am I supposed to say to her?

Where do I live?

I can't bring her to De Lucca's place.

And what am I supposed to tell him?

Oh, this is bad.

"Is there any way she might not come here?"

"She's already bought a ticket. She'll be there on Tuesday."

"You're shitting me."

"No."

"What does she want?"

"To see where you live and who you're living with. She said she doesn't trust you and needs to know who the man you're living with is."

"I'm not living with anyone."

"You said you lived at someone's place."

"Ugh. I can't believe this. Okay. Thanks for letting me know. Please keep me posted in case she arrives earlier than Tuesday."

"She said she was looking for an earlier flight, and she might be in luck."

"Okay, bye."

I tap my phone's screen and toss it into my purse.

Sighing with frustration, I look out the window.

It rains quietly like the sky is crying.

We were supposed to have lunch at Maria and Giani's. And Nor and Max are nowhere to be found.

Have they gone back?

I grow anxious as no one else is outside.

Eventually, the car starts moving with only me inside, and I'm grappling with cold sweat.

Has the lunch been canceled?

I hope nothing bad happened.

To Max.

Or Nor.

"Hey..."

I knock on the partition wall, and it swiftly goes down.

The driver meets my eyes in the rearview mirror.

"Why are we leaving?"

"Mr. De Lucca's instructions."

The man's eyes move back and forth between the road and me.

"Is he okay?"

He nods.

I take it he has no idea.

Why would Max text him—I didn't hear the driver talking on the phone—and not say a word to me?

Frustrated, I give up, and crash back in my seat.

We arrive home around one.

For the first half an hour, the house is empty, and it unnerves me to no end, but Aaron, the driver, assures me everyone will be back and *I should be safe here*.

I don't like his phrasing.

Tormented, I go straight upstairs, close the door, and take my clothes off.

Minutes later, voices echo in the house, men and women, and judging by their laughter, I figure nothing bad has happened to their boss. So I enter the bathroom, let the water run, and lower myself into the tub.

My plan to make this work is up in the air. I need to learn how to deal with uncertainty before doing anything else.

I thought moving to New York and finding a place to live, and a job was challenging enough.

I had no idea how challenging my life would be with him.

The warm water, mixed scent of begonias and Concord grapes, soft dim lights, and misty windows lined with the first real autumn rain help me drift off to sleep with my head propped against the edge of the tub.

Before long, I dream of summer and the arms of a blue-eyed, dark-haired man who talks to me quietly.

“Bella... Bella, baby.”

He smiles at me, unlike De Lucca, who almost never does, and runs his knuckles across my jawline, and I grin stupidly until something tickles my nose, and I keep swatting it away without success.

Eventually, I jerk out of my sleep and find a man hovering over me, his hand fanned over my cheek. And I scream and push out of the water, naked, when he catches me in his arms, grabs the back of my hair, and presses my mouth against his shoulder.

“Shut up,” he says, laughing. “You’re going to bring my men up with their guns pulled out if you keep screaming like a lunatic.”

I zip it, panting like crazy, water dripping from my hair, my chest heaving, my wet lips staining his shirt.

He keeps holding me in his arms while his clothes are drenched because of me.

Oh, shit.

I’m completely naked. Am I shaved?

Yes, I am.

How can I be so silly? And how long has he been staring at me? Was my mouth open? Saliva dripping?

What is wrong with me?

Looking down, I break away from him slightly, his arms still around me, and run the back of my hand across my mouth.

“I’m so sorry. I fell asleep.”

He picks up a towel from a shelf and runs it across my front and back, without much focus on my private parts, mainly to soak up the water.

One arm draped around my back, he finishes and drops the towel on the floor.

“Are you all right?” he asks in his usual voice.

Solemn, hoarse.

A bit scary.

“Yes. Yes, I am.”

I wish he could hold me longer, but the moment is gone, and I can’t stay forever in his arms.

His hug felt all right.

Strong, protective.

“Thank you,” I murmur, my gaze trailing down.

He hands me my robe and helps me to put it on, holding it, so I can slide my arms into the sleeves.

I tie the belt, the neckline plunging to my waist, my nipples visible through the fabric.

“You should dress. We’re expected at Maria’s.”

Our eyes meet.

It’s the first time since I dreamed I was with him.

“I thought you’d canceled it, and that’s why I had to leave.”

“It was something unexpected, and I didn’t know how it would go.”

What was unexpected?

He never says that.

“May I ask you a question?”

“Yes.”

He leans against the edge of the sink, his arms folded on his chest.

“Is Verona your girlfriend?”

His reaction is mild, with no anger in his eyes.

“No.”

That might be a lie, but I move on quickly because I like his answer too much, and I’m a bit of a coward.

“I have another question.”

Not a muscle moves on his face.

“Were you in danger at the church? Or last night?”

He ponders.

“I’m always in danger. That’s why I asked Aaron to take you home.”

I want to tell him that I’d like to hear from him directly, but then again, I love his answer.

And I’m a sucker for answers like these and the fact that for the first time ever since we’ve officially been together, he’s laid off the growling and given me permission to ask him questions.

Maybe it has to do with finding me naked in the bathtub and tickling my nose.

So far, we’ve made some progress.

I know how he looks naked, and he knows how I look naked.

We’re well on our way to marital bliss. Irony inserted.

“All right.”

He pushes off the sink and heads to the exit.

“Dress nicely. I want to show you off,” he tosses at me on his way out.

I SABELLA

LIVING with him is like a multiple-choice quiz with no correct answers.

What does *'dress nicely'* mean?

I throw my hands up in the air and walk to the closet.

Okay, so he's seen me naked and had the chance to run his gaze over my breasts and legs and stomach and, most likely, my slit.

Yes, I was in the tub and somewhat covered.

There were bubbles, but... Didn't I jump out of the water straight into his arms? Didn't I press my body against his clothes?

And he didn't say a thing.

He could've been mad, mad... And now he wants to show little old me to other people? Why?

The outfits Nor had bought me come to mind.

The lace one. No. The black satin one. No. I've already worn that one once.

I go straight to the hangers.

He'd packed a few more.

Yes, there were a few more that night when I talked to him at his place.

Propping my brow against a shelf, I laugh.

What has the world come to? I'm wearing dresses picked up by my future husband's lieutenant.

Shaking off that feeling of amused uneasiness, I grab a couple of hangers and set my eyes on a beautiful floral dress with long balloon sleeves, cut-out areas on the sides above the waistline, and a flowing skirt that stops above the knee.

The see-through sleeves, neckline stretched down to my waist, and bands of fabric crisscrossing my stomach and highlighting my chest and hips make me look... sexy?

Is this what De Lucca had in mind?

The colors—a tropical coral pink print pattern splashed over a blue teal background—bring my features to life.

My eyes borrow color from it, and my cheeks seem flushed like the warm pink of my dress.

To top it off, it fits me perfectly.

After digging into my closet for a few more minutes, I find a simple pair of white lace panties and the nude stockings I was looking for.

The blue-gray heels complete my look.

I wear no jewelry except for a thin silver ring I bought at a vintage boutique in Savannah, Georgia.

According to the shop owner, the ring belonged to a woman who'd fallen in love decades ago.

What happened after that, nobody knows. It didn't stop me from buying the ring.

I finish dressing, putting on my makeup—very little eyeliner, mascara, and nude gloss—and brushing my hair.

It has volume and falls down my back in layers.

My entire look is the opposite of the weather outside.

If fall has taken over the streets with cold weather, dark skies, and rain that makes you want to stay inside, I'm like a carousel of colors.

I drape a blue jacket over my shoulders and walk out.



ISABELLA

“THEY ARE WAITING FOR YOU OUTSIDE,” Marge says.

I toss her an intrigued look.

“They?”

“Go,” she says. “You’re already late. Aaron is waiting for you with an umbrella.”

Didn’t I say? I can’t get it right, can I?

Why am I late now?

Because he never told me what time we were supposed to leave. He asked me to put on some nice clothes, and that was all.

I need him to be more specific in the future.

It’s cold when I step onto the sidewalk, and to my dismay, not one but four cars are waiting outside, so I’m the villain now.

Making everybody wait.

Aaron holds the door and the umbrella above my head before I slide into the back seat of a black SUV.

The scent of smoke and cologne cloys the air.

De Lucca flicks a cigarette butt out the window. Nor occupies the front passenger seat.

They both look at me, De Lucca breathing the smoke out before rolling the window up and Nor shifting his position in the front seat.

A third man, the driver, sets the car in motion. I haven't seen him before, but I haven't seen a lot of them before. De Lucca has a big crew.

At any rate, I was under the impression it would only be the two of us, maybe a few more people, not an entire brigade.

"Hey," I say, running a hand over the back of my skirt, so I don't wrinkle it.

Both men run their gaze down.

Self-conscious, I become one with my seat, my thighs pressed together, my heels perfectly aligned.

I've already removed my jacket, so I don't crumple it and placed it next to me. The cold air smelling like Max meets my skin, giving me goose flesh.

"Nice dress," he says, checking my legs and chest.

His eyes move quickly to Nor, and I realize the comment is for him.

"One of my girls has done some shopping for her..." Nor explains.

De Lucca raises his hand, uninterested in the details.

Without meeting my eyes, Nor swivels back in his seat and faces the road.

I swing my gaze to Max.

"I thought it would only be the two of us," I say under my breath.

He flicks an eyebrow at me.

"Bella doesn't want you to have lunch with us," he says out loud.

Oh, he didn't just do that.

My cheeks catch on fire when Nor moves in his seat again, so he can look at me.

"Is it true?"

He jokes, of course.

I just want to disappear. I didn't know De Lucca was such a jokester.

Revolted, I shoot him a stern look.

“That's not what I said.”

“Explain to him. I don't have time for that,” De Lucca says, rubbing a hand over his face.

He seems tense and amused at the same time, and I'm sure it's because of different reasons.

“That's simply not what I said,” I reiterate, looking at Nor, who is busy reading my eyes.

It's so obvious that he stares at me, even De Lucca notices.

“The road is over there,” Max says, leaning forward and jokingly pressing his palm against Nor's cheek, who gets the message, and, laughingly, turns his gaze away, at the same time gesturing warningly at De Lucca.

What is that supposed to mean?

Too late to matter, De Lucca's explanation comes, delivered in his usual solemn voice.

“We're a big family. You'll get used to our gatherings,” the man next to me says, peering outside.

The rest of our trip is quiet, and we arrive in Bayside at two.

This is a lunch party, I quickly glean, and it all makes sense. Except for whatever caused the delay at the church.

Maria is the Italian grandmother I've never had, and also the soul of the house.

Her adult children and their families are here, so cousins, brothers-in-law, sisters-in-law, children, us, and other guests sit around a large oval table in the dining room.

There's an abundance of delicious food, wine, and desserts. Trays of cookies, cannolis, and chocolate cakes.

Here, Max is in his element.

There's something that escapes me, but if I were to guess, this is how he grew up.

With larger gatherings, lunch, and dinner parties, with people who belonged together.

This is about sharing the same values, believing in the same things, and indulging in the same food and drinks.

For the first time ever, I see De Lucca smiling and not frowning, and although I'm doing it discretely, I can't stop gaping at him.

He is completely disconnected from me or his everyday life, but that doesn't fool me.

His killer instinct is so strong he'd react to threats so quickly and decisively he'd take everybody by surprise.

I notice admiration and respect for him in people's eyes.

He has everything going for him, although something is missing, or he wouldn't have hired a fake to replace the woman who should've normally sat by his side.

Any woman around the table—and I mean the eligible ones, my group age and older—could've been his wife.

Not to mention the brunette with honey eyes, Verona.

The woman who has gladly accepted to live in my shadow, compelled by the idea that she has him and I don't.

I'm absolutely positively convinced that's what makes her keep her mouth shut and his existence drama-free.

She knows her place, and I know mine, and right now, we are both losing, neither of us having leverage. I doubt anyone in his circle has leverage, except for De Lucca himself.

His eyes move around the room from time to time, making sure things are the way they are supposed to be.

This is his realm, outside of his business empire and his underground kingdom.

Laughter rings around the table, the kids enjoying the lively atmosphere the most.

I feel somewhat misplaced, mainly because this is different from my experience as a kid.

We're a big family, so that is not new to me, but my mother's machinations have polluted the dynamic at our house throughout the years.

She wanted something like this, but for practical reasons only. To consolidate our estate.

My father wasn't on board with it, yet she got free rein to do whatever she wanted once he had passed.

And she's been successful at that ever since. Mostly.

All my older brothers and sisters are married and living on the property.

I was the only one who got away. And Missa is probably on her way out.

Shit.

I completely forgot about my mother's trip to New York.

Appetite ruined, I set the napkin next to my plate and ask the woman on my right where the bathroom is.

Maria notices the exchange and directs me outside the dining room, down the corridor, past the kitchen, and to the last door on the right.

I follow her instructions and find myself inside the bathroom in front of the mirror, staring blankly at myself.

My dress and hair are just as spectacular as they were an hour or so ago, but my eyes are blank and scary looking.

What am I supposed to tell my mother?

That I have a boyfriend? That I work for him? That I...? What? What am I supposed to tell her?

The questions she'll have for me... It would take me a week to give her the answers. And I have no answers for her.

She would be furious and reckless, and she'd do anything in her power to destroy my arrangement with De Lucca.

I don't think he'd care, in the sense that he wouldn't be affected by her, but she'd probably go a step further and use her connections to make a story out of this and even get it published.

Yes.

She's done it before when she needed to push someone's buttons. And no one wants to push De Lucca's buttons.

Oh, shit...

What am I supposed to do?

Lacking ideas, I use the toilet before I return to the sink, wash my hands, check my makeup and hair, straighten my back, and use a paper towel to dry my hands.

What if she won't be able to find me? She's counting on taking me by surprise. Let's say I'm not answering my phone.

What if I'm answering my phone, meeting her, and telling her the truth? Some of it, anyway.

The man who's graciously offered me a room at his place is also my boss, and he is a very private person. Unannounced visits are not allowed.

Do I want to talk to De Lucca about this?

Something brushes against the door, and my heart jolts.

"Is anyone there?" I ask. "I'm almost done. I'll be out in a moment," I drone on, turning the faucet on and letting the water run for a few moments.

I hear that noise again, and it's definitely a hand brushing over the solid wood. Nervously, I turn off the water, straighten my back, and head to the door.

I swallow hard before grabbing the knob and unlocking the door.

Frankly, I expected one of the guests, maybe Nor—for sure Nor—or perhaps one of the kids.

The door cracks open, and the last man I thought I'd see pins me with his stare.

His elbow rests on the wall next to the door, his body slightly tilted forward as he takes me in.

“Do you need the restroom?” I ask politely, unaware of any other reason for De Lucca to be here.

With a smooth gesture, I open the door and invite him in.

“I’m done,” I say.

He seems distracted by my dress and unable to focus on our conversation—mine mostly—so he tips his eyes down, brings his hand to my waist, and touches my skin.

At first, his fingertips dance on me like the imprecise touch of a pensive tipsy pianist. And every stroke makes me even more aware of him and more curious about him.

And anxious to feel more.

I watch him soaking me in, no telling expression on his face—as always—although something flickers through his eyes.

It’s like he’s getting into a new story, considering the possibilities in front of him.

More than ever, I’m convinced the arrangement hasn’t been thought through or planned out carefully.

He’s taken into account different scenarios and decided to give it a go and later, maybe, determine if he needed to adjust his initial plan.

All his life has been designed like this, and so far, it’s been successful. He’s here with me, alive. And this is the only metric that matters.

I sink my teeth into my lip to suppress a reaction while he keeps testing me. And then, something else happens.

The exploration part draws to an end, and he sets his hand straight on the only bare part of me, and his touch feels different.

It’s like assessing something that belongs to him.

His hand rests on my body, his palm molded around my flank, his thumb pressing into my flesh as he gradually squeezes.

Never going past my pain threshold, he changes his mind and slides his hand inside my dress at my back, and my nipples pucker.

I wish I could say something witty and funny, yet it's like my voice has been plucked out of my throat.

When he raises his gaze and looks into my eyes, I'm pretty sure I've left my body.

"You need to cover more next time," he says, his voice touching my skin with the precision of a violin bow.

"Yes. I'm sorry... I tried to—"

His free thumb presses against my lips, bringing me the distinct smell of his skin.

"You did good. It works for me. I'm talking about future gatherings. You saw the other women..." he says in a monotonous raspy tone.

He sounds sleepy and with good reason.

He hasn't had much sleep, and for once, I'd love to have his head in my lap and watch him take a nap, if only for a few moments, so I could tend to him and make sure nothing bad happens to him.

"How they were dressed," he continues, moving his hand over my body and his fingers away from my mouth down to my neck.

"I like your cleavage," he murmurs, his eyes sliding lower than his hand, "but there are kids at these parties, and they are not used to seeing this."

His forefinger travels from my collarbones to the mole between my breasts and then lower, where the fabric twists over my stomach.

"I understand," I say apologetically again, little explosions of pleasure popping up all over my skin from his touch.

“You’re a good kid, Bella.”

He says my name nasally, his voice stroking every vowel.

What does he even say by that? Is he regretful I’m not different? Would it be easier for him had I been bad?

I’m not even sure I’m as good as he thinks I am.

I’m a runaway kid, sort of, on top of being a good kid.

And I wasn’t that good in the beginning.

I had my moments when I thought I’d put my foot down, and maybe I had, but lately, since I live in his home and I’m closer to him, a different part of me has come to life.

I know he is bad.

I know it even without seeing it.

I can feel it in my bones.

And him being very protective of me appeals to the good kid in me. Maybe being a good kid also confers me some protection from him. Deters him from doing bad things to me.

Whatever it is, I love our dynamic, and I rarely love anything.

His hand falls from my body as he walks past me and enters the bathroom. He goes straight to the sink without asking for privacy, and I wait for him to dismiss me.

He only washes his hands, runs a paper towel over them, and pivots to me.

“Let’s go back, or we’ll give them the wrong idea.”

“Is that it? You came here to wash your hands?”

“Yes. One of the kids spilled their drink over my hand.”

It should’ve been sticky. Or should’ve smelled.

He notices the direction of my gaze.

“It was lemonade. Come.”

He’s already by the door, taking my hand.

I stop him, grabbing his wrist.

“Wait. We need to talk about something.”

He locks my eyes.

“Now? Can’t it wait?”

I think about it briefly.

“Yes. Yes, it can. But it’s kind of urgent, although it’s nothing serious.”

Me trying to downplay it only makes him curious.

“Is it or is it not? What are we talking about?”

“It’s about my mother. She’s planning a surprise visit to New York to check on me. She doesn’t know about you.”

He de-tenses considerably.

“That’s it?”

“Yes.”

“When does she plan to come?”

“This coming Tuesday.”

He gives me a soft nod.

“Don’t worry. I’ll take care of it.”

He moves, and I’m connected to him. And I try to stop him again.

“This is my mother. You don’t know her.”

He flashes a smile.

“Trust me. I know her. There is nothing to worry about.”

My lips are still pulled apart in awe when he nudges me out of the bathroom, and I follow him back to the dining table, having no idea what he has in mind.

I SABELLA

TUESDAY IS A SHITTY DAY.

I don't know if it's the weather, the idea that my mother is on her way and I expect to hear from her at any moment, or the fact that I'm swamped at work.

Ramona is sick, and two other girls have taken some time off, so when my phone rings around four and I see my mother's name flashing across the screen, a migraine starts pummeling my head.

"Yes?"

I clear my throat and try again.

"Mother?"

My voice is more than telling.

She probably knows that I know she is here.

There is no surprise in my voice, no excitement. Nothing.

"Where are you?"

My mother talks to someone in the background while asking me that, and I figure it's her driver.

"Work. You?" I retort.

“I’m sure you know by now I’m in New York. That little snitch must’ve told you. But it’s not what she thinks. I’m here with business.”

I roll my eyes.

“I know you’ve rolled your eyes, but it’s true. I’m having dinner with Melinda, and she’s invited me to stay with her.”

My migraine gets worse.

I thought she’d be in and out.

“I’m pretty sure there’s no room at your place for me,” she says.

Presumptuous as always.

“You got that right.”

“No need to be nasty.”

“What did I say?”

My boss notices me juggling two things at once, stocking the shelves and talking on the phone.

Her gesture is clear, so I wrap it up.

“Listen. I can’t talk. My boss is here, and she’s about to fire me.”

“What time do you leave work?”

“Late.”

“How late? And don’t you have a break or something?”

“I thought you were here to discuss business with Melinda?”

Whoever Melinda is.

“Yes, I’m here for that and also to see you.”

“All right... I’ll make this brief. We can meet. And no. You can’t just show up at my place. Yes, Missa told me you were on your way. I work until eight. I’ll have a break at five. Let me know if you can make it. We can meet... somewhere. If not, we can meet for lunch tomorrow before I go to work. Let me know. All right?”

Silence comes from the other end of the line.

“We’re entering Manhattan. Just give me the address.”

Oh, fuck.

I give her the information and hang up just as my boss walks away from the register and heads my way.

I shoot my hand up to show her my phone.

“It was an emergency. Sorry.”

Later, she goes back, and I shift my focus to organizing fall dresses and winter coats by color and style.

My mind is pretty much blank for the rest of the afternoon, and minutes before five, I exit the store. Aaron flashes his lights, guiding me to where he’s parked.

Max has been adamant about me being accompanied everywhere I go.

He insisted this was not about him controlling me but more about me being a vulnerable target because of him.

He never elaborates on these things, and I never ask for details. It’s probably bad enough, even without me knowing everything.

Besides... Not knowing works well for everyone.

So, I walk quickly to my driver, and once I get settled in the back seat, I ask him to take me to the intersection where I’m supposed to meet my mother.

A park sprawls out in front of the coffeehouse located on that block.

Once we reach our destination, I ask him to wait across the street, by the park.

My plan is to get a feel of my mother’s mood before buying her a cup of coffee and sitting and chatting on a bench.

A cold breeze chases away the clouds, and soon a sparkling blue sky vaults above the city.

I bet these are the days people fall in love with Manhattan.

Oversaturated colors paint the leaves, the sky, and even the gray shades of the buildings.

The chromatic contrast is breathtaking, like nothing I've seen before, enhanced only by the energy of the place.

The promise of a new exciting life plays in front of me as I look up and down the street, wearing dress pants, a white blouse, and a pink jacket.

I wish I knew where she's coming from.

She was here moments ago when we talked on the phone, so she can't be too far away.

Eventually, a blonde woman sporting a trench and three-inch heels climbs out of a taxi. Knowing my mother, she has booked a hotel room and must've checked in already.

Melinda was a ploy to make me talk.

I'm not saying she's not meeting that woman.

Perhaps they'll even have dinner, and my mother will spend some time with her, but I doubt she'll rely solely on her.

My mother is a creature of habit. She likes things to be a certain way and, for sure, to have her own place wherever she travels.

She's a queen. She's always been a queen.

How does she fly from Atlanta to New York and still look fresh, like she just left the hair salon?

I have no idea.

She waves at me, and we meet in front of the coffee shop, our eyes unable to connect, our smiles unable to conceal the lie.

We haven't been close since my father passed away. I was eighteen back then.

The animosity between us had started earlier when the first signs of disobedience had made it clear I wouldn't follow her plan and be like my older sisters and brothers.

It wasn't like I didn't respect their choices. I wasn't them, and my mother had refused to see it.

With great effort, we try to erase the tension between us or at least make it look like we aren't affected by it.

The thing is, she seems confused by the new me.

Deep in her heart, she never thought I'd go through with my plan and walk a different path.

An ardent believer in runway fashion, she moves her eyes over my clothes, quickly identifying the brands I wear.

"How was your flight?" I ask, opening the door to the coffee shop and inviting her in.

"Eventless," she says, scooping her phone out and checking a message.

A scent of freshly brewed coffee wafts over us as we wait in line. We stay quiet for the next few minutes before I order coffee for both.

Decaf for me. And black for her. I pick up two packets of sugar for her, just in case, and pay for our drinks.

Later, we exit the store, cross the road, and take a stroll in the park.

"So... Have you satisfied your curiosity?" I ask before taking a sip.

"It's not about that," she murmurs.

Oh, yes, it is.

We both sit on a bench under a leafless tree, the view of the street stretching out in front of us as she continues.

"I know you want to be independent and all that. And do things differently, but you're too young and inexperienced. And you don't know much about life."

"Isn't this a not-so-subtle hint at how comfortable my life would be if I married Mick?"

Her gesture brims with irritation.

“This isn’t about Mick. Someone else will get that man. I’m sure of that.”

“I hope it’s not my younger sister.”

She glares at me.

“And even if it was, what is your problem?”

“My problem? I have no problem. Just leave her alone. You’re stressing the hell out of her, and she’s not even out of high school. Let her dream of boys and kisses and not feverishly look for ways of avoiding an arranged marriage.”

“No one is forcing her to marry Mick. I couldn’t make you marry him.”

“Not for lack of trying.”

She looks away, gesturing dismissively.

“You get on my nerves sometimes,” she says before her drink meets her lips.

She takes a sip.

“You don’t know what a good man is...” she murmurs, watching a little boy chasing a dog around. “I’d marry Mick in a heartbeat if I were you,” she goes on. “Your father, God bless his soul, was a good man too, but he got easily distracted and needed too much nudging.

Nudging.

The magic word.

“A man like Mick was what I needed when I was your age. Had I found someone like him, I would’ve gotten a lot more done.”

“You’ve got a lot done.”

“Yes. And here we are. You thought you could simply pick up and leave.”

I laugh, unaffected.

It’s taken me years to decondition myself and not be affected by my mother’s attempts to make me feel guilty for whatever she considered undesirable behavior.

“It was more than that. I actually did it.”

She looks at me, her frown suggesting she dislikes my retort.

“So what is your plan?” she asks.

I drink coffee, averting my gaze.

“You know my plan. You see it. I’m here in New York. I have a job, and I’m trying to make a living.”

“Uh-huh... Is that the same retail job?”

“Yes, it’s the same retail job.”

Her eyes dip to my three-hundred-dollar shoes.

“How is your retail job paying for all this?”

She moves her index finger up and down, pointing to my attire.

I suck in a strained breath, smiling and not looking at her.

The cat-and-mouse game has begun.

“I get a discount as an employee.”

“Discounts. Okay. So if the things you’re wearing are about, I don’t know... Give or take, two thousand dollars... Even with a good discount, it’s still quite a bit of money. Not to mention your living expenses.”

“I pay for my clothes in installments.”

“Do you expect me to believe you?”

“Do you think it matters if you believe me or not?”

I hold her gaze while she looks for ways to give it all away.

Her strategies no longer work, and she knows it.

“Are you planning to work in a clothing store all your life? After spending all that money for a college degree?”

“You have more experience than me. So you must know that planning for something is often a big waste of time, and making the most of your circumstances is what matters in the

end. So let's pretend I'm no longer a little girl, and your visit here is not an attempt to rescind my newfound personal power."

"Oh... Okay. Big words there... All right. I hope you're not getting yourself into something no one can get you out of."

"Like what?"

"I don't know. Whatever you're doing to pay for those expensive clothes."

"I'm not doing anything," I say, no longer paying attention to her.

My break is quickly drawing to an end, so I check the time, drink the rest of my coffee, and push to my feet.

After exchanging a few more words regarding her stay—she's staying at a hotel and will be leaving tomorrow morning—I check the street.

Aaron is still there, waiting in the car, when two black SUVs with tinted windows box him in.

My heart trembles, and I fear the worst before the doors open and Max de Lucca walks out of one of the cars.

His long dark coat is draped over his shoulders, and he wears a suit and a tie.

He looks like he's coming from a business meeting. Frozen, I'm waiting to see what this is all about.

Oblivious to him or me, my mother seems solely concerned with the messages on her phone when she raises her eyes, sensing his presence, and turns to stone like me.

He surely takes my breath away.

The blue sky looks like a rip-off next to his azure gaze.

White shirt, dark gray suit, and silver-blue tie. Breathlessly, my mother gawks at him.

"Who is this?" she asks when he stops in front of us.

She probably doesn't notice that four men guard the entrance to the park.

“This is...”

He already extends his hand out.

“I’m Max de Lucca. Isabella’s boss.”

My heart beats in my throat.

There is no way, no way in hell, that my mother is buying this.

It’s so obscene to believe this handsome man is simply my boss, someone so concerned with me he had to follow me here, where I met my mother.

Yet, she buys every word he says, or at least she pretends she does.

“Nice to meet you,” she says. “I wish my daughter had talked more about you.”

He doesn’t look at me, his stare centered on my mother’s face—the slightest glance in my direction would probably give us away—and still holds my mother’s hand while he speaks.

“There is nothing to talk about,” he says with modesty. “I had the pleasure of meeting your daughter at a career event. She was looking for a job, and I happened to have an opening in my company, so I hired her. As you might know, she’s given her two-week notice at her current job, and I’m waiting for her to start working for me. I’m sure she’s also told you she just moved into one of our company apartments.”

My mother looks at me while I bite the inside of my cheek to look as serious as he does.

He’s dropped quite a bit of news there.

What he just said is not a lie. Well, maybe with the exception of the living place bit.

He wouldn’t let me live anywhere but in his house, and that’s a story for another time.

The job he’s talking about is real. And he wants me to quit my current job.

He could've said that on Sunday evening when we returned from Maria and Giani's house. Or yesterday afternoon when I saw him briefly before he went out.

He didn't spend the night at home, which could mean a lot of things.

In fact, I didn't know he'd show up today. He said he'd take care of it but never explained to me what he had in mind.

I'm sure Aaron told him where I was, and here we are.

I'm getting a new job while I continue to live with him, although he's mostly in and out of his quarters, and I know nothing about his whereabouts. Most days.

But even so, I consider myself lucky because, so far, I've had nothing to lose and everything to gain.

Although the way my heart tumbles in my chest every time I see him makes me disagree with this ridiculous idea.

By the time we walk toward the exit, my mother is completely enamored by him.

Everything makes sense to her now. My clothes, my quest for independence, my new boss.

The power of seduction breathing through his pores has never been more discernible.

And yet, he hasn't even done much, to be honest.

Had he asked for my hand in marriage, she would've said yes in a heartbeat.

She is that charmed by him. Now the novelty of him might wear off in time—everything is possible—although I doubt it.

Aaron takes my mother to her hotel while Max invites me to join him in his SUV.

It's only the two of us, his driver and one of his men.

He removes his coat from his shoulders and sets in on the back of the driver's seat.

Soon after the car rolls.

“You were serious,” I say, dragging my stare down and up before meeting his eyes. “You want me to quit my job?”

“You can do whatever you want, but I have a job for you at my company.”

“So you are serious.”

“Yes, I am.”

Earnestly I study his face.

“You have the option not to work, and that might happen anyway, later.”

“And that’s depended upon...?”

He gives me a faint smile.

“I don’t know. The fact that I want you home all the time.”

“You’re not home all the time.”

My response amuses him, and he gives me a half smile.

“I know...” I murmur in response to the warning in his gaze. “I’m lucky that you like me.”

“You got that right.”

“There might be other reasons,” I suggest.

He is solemn again.

“There might be. I don’t know. I thought it would be easier if you worked at my company. For one, I wouldn’t need to be there all the time.”

Ahh... That. It’s convenient for him.

He’s not there all the time, anyway.

“And it would help you feel more independent.”

“Where did you get this idea?” I ask suspiciously after having the exact same conversation with my mother. “Am I wearing a wire by any chance?”

Clumsily I tap my jacket with my hand.

“I have different methods of knowing stuff.”

Uh-huh.

Okay.

Giving up, I sag in my seat.

“I have to see if it’s working for me,” I say.

“As you say.”

We sound like two spouses about to have an argument.

I flick my eyes to him.

“Is it so important for you to have me at your headquarters?”

Cocking an eyebrow, he searches my eyes.

“I only hire people that I trust.”

“It is important,” I murmur. “Okay... I’ll do my best.”

“*That’s*... what I wanted to hear.”

I find his sarcasm entertaining, but I keep my mouth shut and my face expressionless.

Moments later, the car comes to a stop, and I’m supposed to climb out.

“Am I going to see you tonight?” I find myself talking. “At dinner?” I continue when his eyebrows knit into a frown.

He gives it some thought.

“I don’t know.”

It’s not as if I expected a different answer—nice try, though—so I push upright and shift in my seat, my hand on the door handle.

“Okay then...”

I’m ready to step out, but hesitating, I turn around to face him.

“Thank you for handling my mother,” I say.

His eyes stall on me longer than necessary, and I feel emboldened to do more than staring at him.

The space between us is not that big, so I lean to him, fan my hand over his neck, and place a kiss on his cheek.

He smells like smoke and aftershave, and my lips tingle from his skin.

“Thank you...” I say quietly again, spending another moment with him before pulling away.

His eyes stay locked with mine until I step out and close the door over that image of him suggesting that he’s unsure whether to reprimand me or brush my brazen gesture off.

I will never know what’s crossed his mind, if anything, and soon after, his car pulls away, followed by the second one.

M AX DE LUCCA

TUESDAY NIGHT.

“THIS IS the money that we made. And this is the money that we lost.”

Nor pushes a piece of paper with two numbers to me.

Naturally, I’m bothered by the second one.

A rival cartel working with the criminal syndicate responsible for my parents’ death has blown up another transport.

The criminal syndicate has been chipping away at my territory ever since. And while their initial plan was to decapitate our organization and create havoc—and so far, they haven’t been that successful—their actions suggest they’re set to accomplish their goals by any means necessary.

If they can’t hit us here—although they try to do that every time they have the opportunity—they surely mess with our suppliers.

“Find another supplier.”

He looks at me, pondering.

“I’m not saying to replace them. I’m saying I’m not fighting their war. It’s their money, after all. I’m only paying them if they can run their business properly. Anything else?”

“Two of our men are in the hospital.”

I look at him before downing my drink.

“There was an ambush in Brooklyn,” he says.

I take a long breath.

“How many times have I said we needed to take those people out?”

“And how many times have you realized this type of business fares worse during war times?” he retorts.

I gesture at him.

“It doesn’t matter. This is like an abscess. You need to excise it before it spreads. I’m not losing men every month because they think I’m faithful to the idea of peace at all costs. I don’t believe in it.”

“What do you want to do?”

“I need intel on who is doing this. It’s the same place, so an insider must be giving them the information. Then I need to clean house. Run a checkup on our people and give me your best guess. I’ll do the rest, and then we set a trap for the other motherfuckers.”

I lean back in my seat and cross my arms, listening to the clamor seeping through the walls.

“What happened to Verona?” Nor asks after a moment, sprawled in a chair across from me.

“What do you mean?”

“She didn’t show up tonight.”

I shrug.

“Don’t know. Not keeping tabs on her.”

His stare lingers on my face.

“Her family refused my protection,” I go on. “She, herself, said that to me. Not to mention her crazy brother.”

“You can’t possibly believe her. She must be mad at you.”

I stretch my legs out in front of me and prop them on the coffee table.

“She could be... Yeah. Of course, she is. Didn’t I say I wanted to stay away from that kind of drama?”

A few moments pass.

I’m the one who speaks again.

“Their dealings are separate from mine, and even without my express protection, they still benefit from being part of my circle. I don’t understand that family. I never have. My father had the same problem with them. You already know that... So, I’m not getting in the middle of whatever is going on in their lives. She’s not in danger. That much I know.”

“Yet you still have someone on her tail.”

I flash a grin.

“I trust no one. But I don’t care if she’s seeing someone. She’s free to do whatever she wants.”

“Huh...”

“What?”

He lifts an eyebrow, bringing his drink to his lips.

“Has anything changed?”

“What do you mean?”

“You used to dislike seeing her with other people.”

“She’s a free woman.”

“And you?”

“What about me?”

I reach inside the pack on the table to retrieve a cigarette but quickly change my mind.

“Something was going on with you and Isabella.”

I look at him, poker-faced, waiting for him to continue.

“In the car. When we were waiting for her.”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

He searches my eyes before chuckling.

“I was fucking right,” he says. “She was changed because of you. And now you’re changed because of her.”

I gesture in dismissal, pulling my gaze away.

“Don’t care for your stupid shit, West.”

Running my fingers through my hair, I tilt my face to hide a smile.

“You know nothing,” I mumble.

“I got her ready for you.”

I swing my eyes up.

“Seriously, now,” I say, no longer grinning, but he’s hardly convinced by my acting. “You did a good job,” I go on. “And she’s fine. But use your judgment. What did I say about her being my future wife?”

“She is your future wife.”

“Yes, she is. But my life hasn’t changed in a damn bit. And it won’t for the foreseeable future. It’s all I know. And you know...” I say, smiling darkly, picking up a cigarette at last but not lighting it. “There are only a couple of ways to end a life of crime. One is with a bullet in your head, and the other is serving a life sentence. How many retired crime bosses do you know?”

“Some have lived long lives.”

“Some... But most are dead or rotting in jail. And it’s not only the long arm of the law that gets you. Eventually... It’s the other criminals. The syndicates. The endless power struggle. The few crime bosses who hadn’t lost their lives had managed to stay away from the corrupt politicians and built strong alliances, so they could be forever protected. You need to hold onto power to have that kind of system in place. That’s

all it takes, yet it's the hardest thing to do. And being vulnerable makes it even more difficult. So now you know my logic. I've laid it out for you so many times. But back to her... If I really liked this woman, why would I want to be the end of her?"

His eyes stay trained on me.

"So what's your plan then?"

He drinks the last drop of liquor and places his glass down.

"If things go all right... She'll live with me for a few years. There are so many factors tied into this, and some are hard to predict. Things may end before they begin. Or I may end. You never know. Regardless, let's say it lasts for a few years. Whenever that moment comes, I'll let her go. She'll be a rich woman and live somewhere else. Someplace safe if I'm still alive. Or you can take care of her if I'm gone."

I flick my unlit cigarette in his direction.

"If not, someone else," I say seriously. "I'll make sure she knows nothing about the crime business. For her own protection, of course, so she can never be a target for anyone. Be it the law enforcement agencies or my rivals."

"You've thought about it a lot."

"Yes, I have..."

My eyes go down.

Staring blankly at the table, I try to look into the future.

"She might not want to go," he says, and I move my gaze up, a cold smile tugging at my lips.

"She might not want to go now," I mutter. "I don't know what will happen in the future. Hard to tell if she's that kind of woman. If she'll stick with me. Despite her age, she's still a kid. Hasn't been around a lot."

I stop before saying something he might've figured out on his own.

He locks my eyes.

“What if she’s not alone?”

“What do you mean?”

“What if she has kids?”

My chest hurts a little.

I tear my gaze away and root it on the tip of my cigarette.

“You mean if I consummate my marriage?”

“Isn’t that a possibility?”

Looking straight at him, I slide my cigarette between my lips, flick the lighter open, and run the tip of the flame across its end.

The tiny leaves of tobacco crackle as I take a drag.

“Anything is possible, but not now. It’s too early. She knows I won’t be her husband in that sense.”

A smile lines his lips.

“She’s so smitten with you.”

“Which means...” I gesture at him, blowing the smoke out. “She’ll do whatever I say.”

“For a while. They all do it for a while,” he says, and we grin when the doors burst open, and Nor and I jump to our feet simultaneously, guns drawn as fucking always.

Two of my men fill the doorway.

“What the fuck is wrong with you?” I thunder, watching the man panting like crazy. “You want to fucking get yourself killed?”

The shorter one catches his breath first.

“It’s Verona. She got shot.”

I shoot my eyes to Nor, putting my gun back and collecting my jacket. He does the same, his expression saying it all.

‘Didn’t I say so?’

Yes. He fucking did.



ISABELLA

THERE'S this horrible foreboding feeling following me around as I enter my bedroom with several shopping bags dangling from my hand.

This is what happens when I talk to my mother.

The first thing I did when I went back to work was to actually use my employee discount and put several outfits on my credit card. The one I'm not paying for and has no credit limit.

It's the same bad feeling I had when I moved away from the car and left De Lucca inside, thinking about the kiss I placed on his cheek.

My heart jumped up and down even then.

And now that I'm home, the obtrusive feeling is back. Hard to define, it could mean anything.

Frankly, I'm hoping to see him tonight.

It's only eight thirty, so there's still time.

People move around the house, giving me this feeling that I'm not alone, and I'm grateful for that. But besides hearing them talking in the kitchen, walking up and down the stairs, and doing stuff around the house, there's no sign De Lucca is expected home.

A knock on the door makes me swivel my head.

"Come in."

Lina pushes the door open.

"Do you need anything from me?"

"Like what?"

She flicks her hand toward the bed.

“Any extra pillows, blankets? It’s cold tonight.”

“No, I’m good.”

“Are you okay with sleeping in this bed?”

She runs her hand over the covers, smoothing the fabric.

“Yes. Everything is fine. Thank you.”

I drop the shopping bags on the floor and turn to her.

“Do you need help with that?” she asks.

I drag my gaze back to the red and golden shopping bags.

“No. I’m good. Listen... “

I shift my eyes back to her, and her eyebrows move up.

“Do you know by any chance what time Max is coming back?”

She slowly shakes her head.

“No. I have no idea.”

“What time does he have dinner?”

“Most nights, he eats out.”

Whatever that means.

“He rarely spends the evenings at home,” she adds.

My heart sinks.

That must’ve been before.

And seemingly, she doesn’t see a problem with me being here and him not changing his ways.

“Okay. Thanks.”

“Dinner is ready downstairs,” she says before tilting her head in a soft nod and leaving the room.

I put the things I bought in the closet and take a shower before I throw on some sweatpants and a hoodie and walk downstairs.

It’s late. For dinner anyway. I only find one of the women in the kitchen, and she asks me what I want to eat. The dining

room is dimly lit and looks gloomy without the other people.

I ask her if I can get fries and mayo instead of what they cooked for dinner and eat them in the breakfast nook.

“Yes. Of course,” she says.

I appreciate her catering to my whims.

She does her best to bring me what I want, adding butter lettuce, horseradish sauce, slices of onions, and tomatoes to the big pile of thick-cut fries seasoned with salt and pepper and some herbs.

They’re absolutely delicious, and I eat them, preoccupied, forgetting I’m alone, dipping the fries into mayo and horseradish sauce while staring vacantly at the courtyard.

At some point, I open the door, breathe in the crisp air and listen to the muted noise of the city, thinking that not far from me, De Lucca spends his night in one of these buildings, most likely not alone, doing whatever men like him are doing when they’re not home.

No one else is in the kitchen or the dining room, and I feel all right, although not completely removed from that foreboding sensation that something is not right.

I may be wrong. No one in the house thinks that him being away from home so often is a problem.

The old clock in the dining room strikes midnight when the silence is savagely broken by squealing tires, a cacophony of voices, doors opening forcefully, and steps pounding up the stairs.

My heart jerks in my chest when whatever has prompted the unusual noise brings people to the floor.

They all zip past the kitchen, moving in an unknown direction, and I can’t tell if they’re going to the upper levels or heading to the adjacent building.

I’m still not familiar with the layout of this house.

No one seems to mind me—I doubt anyone knows I’m here—as I witness the loud voices in the hallway and the

orders barked downstairs.

Is he here?

Frozen, I look at the door opening into the hallway.

Shadows dash past the entrance, the noise reminding me of the rumbling hail storms of the summer.

One woman darts into the dining room, heading to the kitchen.

Lina's gaze is thick with worry.

"You should go upstairs," she says, her eyes dipped to my food. "I'll bring the rest of it to your bedroom. You can use that door."

She signals me to a different exit, one I haven't noticed before.

"Is everything okay?"

She shrugs, busy collecting my food.

"Max?"

"Go upstairs," she says rather firmly, and I no longer linger.

Minutes later, the house becomes quiet again, and I find myself in the bedroom with a tray of food, my phone, and more questions than answers.

The night falls thick over Manhattan, and I start to reconsider my idea that he is somewhere doing something that most people do.

I'm more and more convinced it's nothing like that, and the tremor of my hands suggests my foreboding feeling has had everything to do with him and very little with me.

I SABELLA

COME FRIDAY MORNING, I own my story.

I never thought I'd grow thicker skin and adjust to a world more puzzling than anything I've dealt with before.

I haven't seen him since Tuesday. He's okay, or so I think.

No one's talking about him like he's dead. No burial arrangements have been made, and that's a good sign, I guess.

I haven't felt in danger all this time, and my schedule has stayed the same. I went to work, ate alone when I came home, and struggled to sleep in my isolated bedroom.

The staff is not particularly helpful when it comes to sharing information about him.

My messages to Nor have remained unanswered, and that's another clue he is not allowed to talk to me about Max's whereabouts.

It makes no sense to text De Lucca. He is the kind of man you hear from when he needs or wants to talk to you.

So... I've gotten used to living in a big house with staff catering to all my needs and a driver who's taken me anywhere I wanted, even to see my mother for lunch on Wednesday and take her to the airport later that day.

She kept her mouth shut, never asked about Max, and for sure, didn't make any nasty comments about my clothes.

All these days, I've made an effort to enjoy my new dresses, shoes, and the light blue coat I bought for myself.

Although I'm not usually a fan of breakfast, I've started to eat in the mornings. Maybe because I can't sleep, and also eating downstairs is the only way I can connect with people.

It's seven o'clock in the morning, and I need to be at work around ten—earlier today because I'm filling in for Ramona—and here I am, sitting at the table in the dining room, wearing a red dress, a black scarf around my neck and matching shoes when an unusual noise comes from outside.

It's different than the chaos that briefly took over the house this past Tuesday. A door opens, someone talks quietly—seemingly a woman—and then footsteps move up the stairs.

Elbows resting on the table, I listen carefully with my fingers wrapped around my coffee.

Whoever that woman is, she's not a staff member. I can tell by the way the people talk to her.

I stiffen in my seat, holding hope for a clue. Everybody in the house seems to be anywhere else but here.

I set my coffee down and push my chair back when Marge walks in, and I freeze.

“Something happened?” I ask, noticing a woman's coat draped over her arm.

She sets it on the back of a chair, temporarily, I assume, and fixes a plate of food before pouring a cup of coffee.

“Who is the new woman in the house?” I ask and quickly realize she's been instructed not to talk.

I'm right.

Carrying a breakfast tray, Marge strolls away without giving me an answer.

As self-assured as I was when I woke up, I'm nothing like that right now.

I'm thinking about grabbing my coat and leaving even if I get to the store too early. I'll find something to do in the back. There's always stuff to do.

I slide my phone into my purse and drape my coat over my arm, suddenly concerned with finding Aaron.

I could make my own rules and get a cab, but that would be a terrible risk. Maybe I'll find someone else to give me a ride.

Hunched over my bag, with a hand sunk deep inside to retrieve my phone, I hear nothing before a voice rings out behind me, sending me into a spiral of panic.

“Where are you going?”

Suppressing my reaction, I pivot to face De Lucca, straightening my back at once.

My mouth is open to speak, but my brain freezes as I take him in. He wears different clothes than the ones I saw him in on Tuesday.

Okay, he has a second home with a full wardrobe... I guess.

We're not even married, and we live separately. And we're not even fucking, and we pull away from each other every time we get the chance.

Or he does.

“Work,” I say in a clipped voice.

He wears a suit, no tie, and his neckline is undone.

Despite the stubble on his jaw giving him a hard, dangerous look, his clothes look sharp. The shirt is pressed and illuminates the room—it's so white.

Instantaneously I don't want to know where he's been all these days and who the woman in the house is.

I shoot him a look as if we talked minutes ago, not days ago, and make my way past him.

“Who's taking you to work?” he barks in my wake.

I stop.

No, no. Oh, no.

After three days of absence, I'm not going to have a stupid conversation with him. We won't beat around the bush and pretend he only went out to have a smoke, and now he's back.

I don't know how this works, and I may not have many rights in his house other than collecting my money, and we'll have to see about that—I still haven't put my signature on the dotted line of the final agreement—but I'm not going to be stripped by my sanity in the process.

We've only talked about our marriage arrangement in principle. And that was that.

What good is the money if my brain becomes collateral damage?

"Aaron. I, um... I'm texting him now. And I'll wait for him."

Crushing my revolt, I spoke softly to avoid an altercation. I want to get out of the house more than I want to be right.

He has the power to confine me, and I'm not interested in spending my morning here while he attends to whoever he's brought home.

I thought these people had hard rules and, above all, valued their families. That's what I've heard.

"I'll take you," he says.

"You don't need to. Your guest probably needs you more."

There's not the slightest inflection in my voice, and he's looking long and hard for one.

He probably doesn't know, but southern girls like me have perfected our sweet like peach talk, and sometimes it comes just before putting a bullet in someone's—who's crossed us—chest.

It's not the case with him or us.

If anything, I want this man alive. I want a lot more from him, but being alive does it for me for now.

Not commenting, he gestures for me to follow him.

We take a different exit than the main one, and he leads me to an indoor garage where he walks me to a dark bulletproof—that's only a guess, but I'm sure I'm right—car and opens and holds the door for me before sliding into the driver's seat.

He must be breaking one of his hard rules—traveling without his men—and that should flatter me somehow, yet it fails spectacularly and doesn't make me feel that good about this story.

As soon as we enter traffic, he rolls the car window down, and the crisp morning air starts nipping at my face.

I expect him to light a cigarette just to fill the silence and disperse the awkwardness in the car.

Other than steering the wheel and driving the car with a blank stare pointed to the road, he is not present in the moment, and I have no desire to begin a conversation with him.

He seems... far, far away for reasons that have nothing to do with me, and that's exactly why I try to insulate myself from whatever shit is going on in his life.

“What time does the store open?”

“Eight.”

He checks the time on the dashboard. It's early. Too early. Besides, they're not even expecting me to show up at eight.

He rolls the car past the store and draws it to a stop next to the park, where he met my mother.

He finds a parking spot that faces the alleys, benches, and thick piles of red leaves and turns off the engine.

We haven't been alone since the day he held me, and I was naked in his arms.

He looks away while I wait, convinced he has something to say.

“I brought Verona home.”

I wish he hadn't said that. It's like he put a blade into my chest and twisted it.

Home? As in his home? Their home?

It's not our home, for sure.

What is he talking about? And why do I care? Maybe we're done. I wish we were done. I can still get a good chunk of money, enough to forget about him.

“She's had some problems.”

I can't make myself speak. But my thoughts? Oh, boy, they swirl and buzz like bees.

Her problems have kept him away from me and his home. So now it's her home too?

“She'll be in the house for a few more days.”

I take a long breath and push out a strained exhale.

“Okay. It's your house.”

Moving away from the idea of him is the best thing I can do to preserve my cool and not lose it.

I don't want to know what happened to her, why she has to stay in his house, and not even why he feels the need to give me an explanation.

I have my own room in his house, and I can eat in the dining room when she's not there.

And the rest of it...? Whatever. Now that she's there, I guess he won't spend the nights out anymore.

She's not his girlfriend. Of course she's not. She is the woman who should be in my place, but he is too much of a coward to admit it. And now we, the women, are both in his house.

Go figure.

He seems unhappy with my answer and searches my eyes, but that's all I've got.

There is nothing else to say. I expect this to unravel. Fast.

I hope he does the honorable thing and pays me before he lets me go. And then we can both erase that bullshit talk about us being part of a big family.

And then my mother... Oh, I can't even believe it all happened only three short days ago—him charming her and asking me to work for him.

That was swift. And now that I think about it, maybe Verona had plotted to do something about being the other woman, and her ploy to make him pay attention to her had finally worked.

“She’s not there for me,” he says in a guttural voice that suggests he hasn’t slept in a while.

Am I supposed to ask something about her now?

“She’s going through some stuff, and she needs a place to stay for a few days.”

I bite my lip. He said that already.

And he’s not actually saying this to me. He’s saying it to himself.

She is the reason he’s been gone. And she is the reason I’ve been alone, and now he’s asking me to believe him?

It’s all a ruse, and he doesn’t see it or refuses to see it and expects me to believe it.

What am I supposed to say?

“I hope her problems go away, um... soon,” I manage to push out.

“You don’t believe me.”

He clears his voice and runs a slow hand through his hair.

He’s tired, for sure, and I get that feeling again that I would love to have him rest his head on my chest and hear him snoring quietly, my fingers threaded through his hair.

Where is that coming from?

“Do you think it’s easy to believe you?” I ask.

“I’m not lying to you.”

“You’re not telling me everything, and I understand...” I raise my hand demonstratively. “I know it’s stuff I’m not supposed to know, yet she knows more than I do.”

“Yes, she does... And that’s exactly why she’s now recuperating at my place. Because she knows much more than you do.”

“Recuperating?”

“I told you she was going through some stuff.”

Our eyes stay locked as we converse with each other, and that alone does more than anything else to correct the course we’re on and close the rift between us.

“Listen...” I start. “You think you’re protecting me. Maybe you are. I don’t care what you do. It’s your house and your money. If we’re done, just say so. If we’re not, then lay down a different set of rules. The old ones no longer work. I think you’ve screwed up,” I say, looking straight into his eyes.

His gaze darkens at first and then twinkles with curiosity while I continue.

“You wanted me in her place because you didn’t want to deal with what you’re dealing with her now. It didn’t work, did it? You picked me and put me in her place, thinking that you could avoid a problem. And the problem is now at your door. I don’t know what happened to her, but whatever it was, it pulled you right where you didn’t want to be.”

What exactly has triggered me to say that remains a secret to me. It’s not like I’ve given it a lot of thought. It’s something I have felt before, and weirdly it has weaseled its way out of my brain.

He’s probably too tired to kill me, but I see the sick desire in his eyes to do just that.

This man could easily take bullets and the pain coming from a blade with a smile on his face, but the truth?

The truth is more pervasive than a real weapon, and it shows in his eyes he’s not used to having it thrown in his face.

“There are things you don’t know,” he says. “And if you want to stay, you need to accept whatever explanations I toss your way. As I said... I’m not lying. Everything I say is true. She’ll be gone in a few days. I didn’t bring her home to fuck her. And for sure, I didn’t bring her home to make you look bad.”

I bite my lip so hard I taste blood.

“All right. I believe you.”

A few moments pass before I continue.

“Moving away from that, I want to start working at your firm on Monday. I’m sure someone in the company can find me something to do, in case you’re busy with other stuff. And I’ll also keep the retail job for the foreseeable future.”

Making a quick calculation in my head, I realize that would put me out of his place from seven in the morning to eight at night. That’s enough to stay away from his place, let him deal with whatever he needs to deal with, and get me tired enough so I hit the bed at night without caring whether he’s home or not.

“You don’t need to do that.”

“It works for both of us. I stay away from whatever else is going on in the house, which is high on your list. You don’t need to keep track of me. You know where I am at all times. I’ll work in the office in the mornings and at the shop in the afternoons. Any social obligations I might have, I’ll be there for you.”

He says nothing, piercing me with his clouded, almost gray eyes.

Despite my inflamed rhetoric, I still feel like giving up on acting and winding my arms around him, giving him some comfort. Which is strange, so strange I decide it’s better to just leave.

“Okay. We’ll talk later...” I say, fidgeting for a second, convinced I have no reason to kiss him goodbye or do anything else... *of that nature.*

“I’m leaving now. I can walk a few steps.”

It’s not only a few steps, and he doesn’t move, watching me spin in a dance of panic. I even grab the handle and start tugging at it, although it’s not working, to my desperation.

His hand comes to mine as he summons my eyes to him.

“Don’t lose it, Bella.”

I turn to him and freeze.

“I don’t want to be home, “ I say, obsessed with what’s bothering me. “I want to work long hours for as long as she’s there.”

“You can work if that’s what you want, just don’t panic.”

“Why is it so important to you that I don’t panic? Do you have the slightest idea how panicked I was this week? And how no one wanted to talk to me about you?”

“They weren’t supposed to.”

My eyes make tiny trips to his eyes and lips.

“You know, I thought something bad happened to you on Tuesday night. Men came to the house, and I was there, and no one told me anything. When they rushed in, I was convinced they’d tell me to just leave because something bad happened to you, and I was no longer safe at your place.”

He holds my eyes.

“And then I got used to the idea that you weren’t home and would show up at some point, but not because of me. Of course not because of me. And then you did. And now you’re asking me not to panic?”

My eyes slide over his lips again and then his neck and the spot where a tattoo peeks from inside his shirt.

He observes me for a few good seconds, and then suddenly, looking fed up, he tears his gaze away from me, turns on the ignition, and peers into the rearview mirror before backing the car out of the parking spot, turning it around, and rolling it back to the store.

He deposits me in front of the building minutes before eight without saying another word, and I remain there on the sidewalk, waiting for the store manager to show up, stricken with grief like I've never been before.



ISABELLA

NEXT MONDAY.

MY OFFICE IS SPACIOUS, has a great view and fresh flowers on the desk. The woman who gave me the orientation this morning has been helpful so far.

Max has an office across from mine, but no one expects him to be here this morning or any other day of the week.

I was told his executive department takes care of running his empire.

This is my first day at a new job, and I specifically asked to be tasked with whatever the managers see fit, no matter how trivial or basic.

In fact, I prefer something that doesn't require too much brain power. I want to stay away from any complex thoughts.

At lunch, I meet Mara at a restaurant in midtown, and we have a blast talking about our new jobs and whatever else is new in our lives. She's seeing that man from work while I'm quite reserved about my relationship with my benefactor.

I can tell from her puzzled look that things don't make sense.

"So why are you keeping the other job?"

"I love it," I say before taking a bite of my tuna sandwich.

I also tell her what I've told my mother. Buying high-end clothing at a discount is a big incentive for me.

She moves her eyes over my buttercream dress and red jacket.

“I see what you mean.”

She wears a black skirt suit tailored to her body and heels, like half the women having lunch here.

“So, the man... What is going on with him? He doesn't mind that you work so much?”

“He works too. A lot.”

Smiling, I pick up a slice of tomato and delicately shove it into my mouth.

“Are you together, or...?”

“Or what?”

“I don't know. You sound like a bitter couple after many years of marriage.”

She flashes a grin.

“Do we?”

I chuckle.

She doesn't buy my nonchalance, and there's a good reason for that. I'm rarely so cool about anything. I'm usually neutral or bitchy, but giddy?

Never.

Plus, my reaction sets a horrible contrast to the circumstances.

“You sure do,” she says, popping a cherry tomato into her mouth. “At least I didn't move in with my crush. And now I'm afraid to do it. I might end up like you... two.”

She studies my face while I avert my gaze.

“You did hook up, didn't you? Tell me that you did. Otherwise, this is weird.”

I chew on my food and drink water, thinking about an answer that makes sense.

“We are taking it slowly.”

She taps the table only once, yet loud enough, a woman at a nearby table shoots an aggravated look at us.

“I fucking knew it,” Mara says.

Suspicion grows on her face.

“The way it goes, you’ll need a place to stay soon.”

I flick my hand in disagreement.

“No. No way. No need to worry. I’m not in that situation right now, and if it happens, I’ll find something.”

“I am worried. You work two jobs. And now you two are taking it slowly.”

“They’re both part-time.”

“They’re still two jobs.”

I move my fingers dismissively.

“Seriously. Don’t worry about me. I’m handling it.”

“Good to know.”

Shaking her head, she brings her drink to her lips.

“Why are you taking it slowly?”

“Didn’t you take it slowly with your crush?”

“I had a reason. I wanted to see some commitment on his part. You have this guy’s commitment. You’re living at his place.”

I tip my gaze down, my cheeks flushed.

“What’s the reason, Isabella?”

I swing my gaze up.

She reads my eyes for a second before her hand flies to her mouth.

“No fucking way. I thought you’d taken care of that? Didn’t you sleep with... What’s his face? Brad. Brandon?”

“Brady.”

“You said you did.”

“Because I wanted to put it behind me.”

“How can you put it behind you if you didn’t do it?”

I shrug.

“It wasn’t meant to happen.”

She nods several times as if having a realization.

“That’s why you work two jobs. You’re nervous as fuck. I would be too. Why didn’t you tell me?”

I laugh and drink water.

“And do what? Pay someone to get it done for me.”

“No. Find someone. You had men. You didn’t like any of them? They weren’t good?”

“A little bit of both.”

“Oh, my.... Unbelievable. All this time, I’ve shown you dick pictures.”

“Oh, shut up. It’s not like I haven’t seen a dick. I’ve seen plenty of dicks.”

“Right.”

She twists her mouth into a dismissive grin.

“So this man... What does he think about it?”

My smile dies out.

“Nothing. He knows. Has no problem with it.”

“Of course he doesn’t. For whatever stupid reason, they like this shit.”

“I don’t see why.”

“Me neither. I was nervous as fuck the first time I had someone on top of me. And by the end of it, I was sure I’d never let another man rock his body on top of me.”

We both laugh.

“I’m not afraid of it,” I say.

I lie a little.

A little more.

Although it's not exactly that I'm afraid of it.

“Oh, baby. It's not about being afraid. It's just weird. The first time is weird. It was for me. I'm sure other people are different. Have a different experience, I mean... Well, I don't know what to say. Congratulations...?”

She is so funny, I can't stop laughing.

“I spend little time thinking about it. And it has nothing to do with Max.”

“Max. Such a cute name. So, if he's not sleeping with you...”

She moves her head from side to side as if asking me another question.

“I don't know,” I answer, no longer laughing.

Or smiling.

“He says he doesn't have a girlfriend beside me.”

That's not what De Lucca said to me. He might have eight women on the side, for all I know. He said he's not Verona's boyfriend, but he sure takes care of her.

The memory of that woman awakens a pestering pain in my brain.

All these days, I've gone through hell.

She and I have rarely met. At least she didn't have dinner with us. Marge took food to her room. Max didn't eat with us.

He was out most evenings.

So it was only some of the staff and me. I asked them to eat with me because I didn't like being alone at the big dining table.

I wanted to see Verona and ask her if she was okay, but Max shot down the idea, so he kept us apart. I'm sure he had his reasons, and they were different than mine.

I didn't mind it, to be honest.

At night, I spent time in my room, texting, talking on the phone, or reading. Her bedroom was right under mine, not far from Max's office on the lower level.

He hasn't spent one night at home since he brought her to his place, and something tells me his nights out have little to do with her.

That's good and bad at the same time.

I haven't seen him since Saturday morning. He walked in at around six in the morning. I heard his footsteps in the house.

He went to her first, and they talked for a few good minutes before he came up and headed straight to his bedroom.

He didn't come to my room, and I didn't go to his.

He probably took a shower and changed his clothes.

Later, he made the trip back and exited his home. That was the last I heard of him.

No one talks about him in the house, but as long as they don't make burial arrangements—as I said before—I have faith he's still alive.

I think less and less about the fact that another woman might be the reason he is out at night.

The woman I suspected to be his crush lives with me at his place. We are like two birds living in golden cages, and I don't know about her, but I have a feeling we're both waiting to be released.

“Well... If he said he doesn't have another girlfriend, you should believe him. Men are trustworthy like that.”

I breathe a chuckle.

“You're cute. I'm fine.”

She ponders something, searching my eyes.

“You're fine now because you don't have that chemical bond with him yet. Wait till you have sex with him and go

crazy over every little thing and experience withdrawal every time he walks out the door.”

“Is that how it was for you,” I ask, munching on a chocolate cookie.

“To a degree.”

She flicks her forefinger up.

“Once. I liked that guy. I told you about him.”

“Yes, you did. I remember him. The one who made a trip overseas and forgot to come back.”

“Yeah. That’s him. I’m sure he’s found someone. Anyway... Okay. Well... I’m glad we’ve got to catch up.”

She checks the time on her phone.

“I need to go. I have a meeting at two.”

“I’ll give you a ride.”

We’re both rising.

“You don’t need to. I’ll walk.”

We hug each other in front of the restaurant before going separate ways.

She walks briskly to her workplace on 34th street while I go straight to the car.

Aaron swerves the vehicle into the traffic as soon as I claim my seat in the back.

“You know where to go,” I say.

His eyes meet mine in the rearview mirror.

“Yes.”

With that, I’m getting ready for my afternoon job.

I SABELLA

THURSDAY EVENING

THE FURIOUS SHEETS of rain pelting the car window and the wind blowing outside accompany me all the way home.

I enter De Lucca's place at eight-thirty. As always, I go straight to my room.

Normally, Lina or Marge would knock on the door and ask me if I wanted dinner. Since Verona lives here, I sometimes eat in my bedroom if given the option.

Tonight things seem to be different. No one knocks on the door, and I hear more voices than usual inside the place.

Some noise comes from the corridor, so I drop my purse and coat on a chair and exit my room before looking up and down the hallway. Light glows under the door in Max's room. He can't be home, can he?

Hesitantly I take a few steps in that direction.

Two women chat inside his room, and one of them is Lina.

The door creaks open, and I step back in a rush, hiding in a nook, my ears perked up.

She's talking to someone else about the sheets and the covers, and I quickly figure out it's about making his bed.

Is he coming home?

She exits his bedroom and enters one of the rooms assigned to the staff before returning with an armful of bed sheets and pillowcases.

I ponder my next move and eventually head that way.

Lina spots me first. I'm standing in the doorway, looking around the room. The windows are open, and the smell of drizzling rain and moody wind blends into the lavender aroma of the fresh sheets.

"Miss Isabella?" she asks, surprised. "Is everything okay? Do you need anything?"

Lina looks at me, waiting for an answer, while my eyes dip to his bed.

"No. I'm good."

"Dinner is ready for you downstairs," she offers anyway.

"Thank you. I'll go there."

My hesitation registers with her, so she stops and stares at me.

"Is Mr. De Lucca coming home?" I ask as if he's returning from a specific destination.

"I wish I knew. Marge asked me to get his room ready as well."

"As well?"

"Yes. Miss Verona left today, so we changed the bed sheets in that room too."

I turn to stone.

"Was she supposed to leave?"

The woman shrugs. No one knows these things, why would she?

"Did he pick her up?"

“I don’t know. I was at the market, shopping.”

“So you don’t know if she went home or...”

Her puzzled expression gives me the answer.

“Or if she’s coming back.”

“I don’t think she’s coming back. We cleaned her room, and there were no further instructions. I think she’s gone for good.”

I don’t know how to interpret her words.

Does she feel relieved too?

The truth is Verona didn’t bother anyone. A doctor attended to her, and the staff brought food to her room. Things have changed these past few days, and she’s left her room and spent some time alone in the courtyard downstairs.

The weather wasn’t always bad. The mornings were sunny. The afternoons sucked, though, like today.

“Okay. Thank you.”

I spin around and go back to my room.

Tonight I’m choosing something different to wear. A soft jumpsuit with tiny buttons at the front. The fabric is warm and soft, not itchy, and molds to my body. It fits tight over my bust, waist, and hips, but the bottoms flare leisurely.

There’s no one in the kitchen at ten at night.

Most people are already in their rooms, and they’ve been instructed—by me—not to wait around for me.

I like to eat at odd hours, so they can retreat and enjoy their evening as long as there’s food for me in the kitchen.

I pull out a clean plate from the dishwasher and pile greens cooked with olive oil, garlic, and lemon juice, creamy mashed potatoes, and grilled fish.

From the cupboard, I retrieve a glass. And from the fridge, I snatch out a chilled bottle of wine.

My eyes go to the breakfast nook. I’m tempted to eat there, but I quickly change my mind. The cold, wet view is

depressing, so I get settled in the dining room.

I light a candle and pour myself a glass of wine when the main door opens on the first floor.

The silverware, napkin, and plate of food are on the table untouched when I push my chair back and rise to my feet.

The dining room has no windows, so it's impossible to know for sure if cars have stopped in front of the house, although the noise suggests that.

I listen, undecided, not knowing whether to peek down the stairs or wait for the noise to die out.

The house becomes quiet fairly quickly, and then steps resonate up the stairs. No voices. This could be him. How many times have I said that?

My pulse races as I fall back into my chair.

Frozen, I wait.

The door to the corridor is wide open, and with every step, my heart beats faster.

A shadow grows across the floor before his silhouette looms in the doorway.

It's almost a week since I saw him last time.

He wears a coat over his suit, and his hair glistens from the rain. I don't know what to say, and he stands there as if thinking about something.

I'm not sure whether he was looking for me or wanted a bite to eat.

"Are you hungry?"

My words nudge him out of his stillness.

The floors creak under his weight as he makes a beeline for the table. Slowly he removes his coat and drops it on the back of the chair he usually occupies across from me at the other end of the table.

Without saying a word, he moves around the table, pulls a chair beside mine, and sits.

His hands go over his face, hiding his blue gaze.

“Are you?” I ask.

He seems exhausted, and I can no longer remember him any other way since this whole ordeal with Verona started.

Something tells me this is a more complex story than I thought. Her staying here. Him missing at night.

Without waiting for his answer, I leave the table and go to the kitchen, where I fix him a plate, pour a glass of wine for him, and bring everything to the table.

I set the food and his drink in front of him before making a second trip to the kitchen and bringing the bottle of wine to the table.

“Thank you,” he says, looking down, his voice with more asperities than sandpaper.

We eat in silence like a married couple after years of living together.

Mara was right. We’re doing everything backward.

He hasn’t even touched me, and we haven’t even slept together, let alone done other things married couples usually do, and here we are, living the cold gray days of a doomed marriage that hasn’t even happened.

“How are things?” he asks, setting his fork down and drinking wine.

It’s like the food and wine have given him a boost of energy.

He seems more present in the moment, and more focused on me this time.

“At work...” he murmurs before focusing on his food.

“Things are good. How about you? Is everything okay with you?”

I avoid his eyes.

“Yes. Everything’s fine.”

I wish I knew why Verona leaving his place and him returning home are connected, but there's no way I can find out, so I keep my mouth shut.

As dry as our conversation is, it's so much better having him here than not.

The rain taps on the kitchen windows, the logs crackle in the fireplace, and time slows down.

We talk about work and my mother, safe topics that can do us no harm.

Later, I bring the dessert to the table, warm apple pie, and ask him if he wants some. I think he eats pie to keep me company. Despite how delicious it is, he can't make himself react to it either way.

Nearing the end of our quiet dinner, I have to ask him.

“Do you still need me?”

Running a napkin over his lips, he shoots me a puzzled look before it registers with him that I'm talking in general.

He drinks wine, sets his glass down, and replenishes both our drinks.

“Yes...” he says softly. “Nothing has changed. We'll announce the engagement next month.”

I almost choke on wine, not because I didn't think it could happen so quickly—we've already discussed that—but because stating it makes it real. And frankly, given the circumstances, I thought things would change.

That's why I asked him if he still needed me.

On the one hand.

And on the other hand, wouldn't it be nice to get proposed to? Even if it's fake.

I imagine he's set a wedding date too.

“We'll discuss the details and the prenup. I had my lawyers draw it up.”

He rests his elbows on the table and threads his fingers through his hair.

“I need you to quit the second job. I want you home,” he announces without allowing me to contest his decision.

He moves his eyes to mine.

“Understood?”

I nod.

These past few days have been a time of rebellion. I wanted to prove a point, and I did, but now he’s putting an end to it.

“Yes,” I say.

“Good.”

He pushes his chair back, empties his glass standing, and picks up his coat.

“I’ll talk to you in the morning.”

For a few long moments, I sit at the table, sunk in thought, happy that he’s back, resentful that things can’t be different.

We’re still on. The arrangement is on. The money will surely hit my account before we get married, and yet, I’m more twisted than a pile of snakes.

Mournful, I push the chair back, clean the table, take everything to the kitchen, and go upstairs.

Once on the upper floor, I force myself not to look toward his bedroom. Even so, I notice the door is open.

Not looking, I walk straight to my room, stroll inside, and close the door.

It’s only later, when I put on my nightgown and slide onto the bed, that I grab my phone and check the news.

As I said before, his house has no TV sets, and I’m not actively looking for headlines, but this time some local news catches my attention.

It’s about some New York shootings that are gang-related according to the police. But this is not the only thing.

Several arrests have been made in a sting operation that involved corrupt politicians, business people, and straight-out gangsters.

“Fuck...”

Livid, I scroll down.

Several agencies have been credited with the success of the operation. People have been indicted, and NY Attorney General has promised to continue fighting racketing and white-collar crime. Oh, this is way more than I imagined.

My hand is stiff on my phone as I try to put two and two together. Verona must've been collateral damage, and this might be about a war between groups of people.

Is he in trouble with the law? Or other gangsters? Or both?

Suddenly, I wish I could talk to someone.

I'm thinking of lying down and forgetting about it, but I can't stay still. At least I should find out if he's okay. If we're okay.

I swipe the screen before I drop the phone on my bed and walk outside.

The lights are still on in his room, and a sweet smell of tobacco wafts through the air.

Barefoot, I tiptoe to the entrance and peer through the open door.

Eyes closed, he lies on the bed, the covers pulled up to his groin, his arm dangling over the edge, his lit cigarette between his fingers.

I can't tell if he's asleep or not. He looks gone, his chest moving slowly up and down.

“You can come in,” he says without opening his eyes.

I jerk back.

How could he tell?

I wasn't even breathing, let alone making a noise.

Quietly I walk to his bed. He rolls over to put his cigarette out and disperses the smoke with a quick motion of his hand.

“Open the window and turn the lights off.”

I do as I’m told, and the only illumination in the room comes from a reading lamp on the nightstand and the fireplace.

The scent of smoke vanishes quickly, absorbed by the humidity and whisked away by the wind. It’s getting chilly too, and I hug myself.

“Come here.”

He taps the mattress beside him and makes room for me to sit.

I lower myself with care like I don’t want to put a wrinkle in his sheets.

“What’s bothering you, Bella?”

A pillow lines my lower back while he rolls onto his side to face me and buries his cheek in his pillow. His eyes are closed again, and I can tell he can’t wait to fall asleep.

“I just checked the news.”

He cracks an eye open and holds my gaze.

“I wanted to know if you’re okay,” I say in response to his questioning look.

He closes his eyes and relaxes his features.

“I am now.”

Only he knows what that means.

“Were you...?”

“I can’t talk about that, Bella.” He rubs his nose as if something is bothering him. “Besides, you shouldn’t waste your time thinking about it. If something happens to me, you’ll be taken care of.”

If only it would be that easy.

I struggle with a breath that barely leaves my chest.

“I don’t want anything bad to happen to you.”

My stare is rooted to his face when he opens his eyes and looks at me.

“You know that’s not how these things work.”

“I know. It’s just that I don’t want that to happen.”

He shuts his eyes, leaving me bereft without an answer, and I wrestle with a deep need to touch him, run my fingers through his hair, and stroke him tenderly.

I don’t know why I feel that way, and I won’t find out by staring at him, so I move up to leave.

He grabs my thigh, and I fall back.

“I want to say something to you. Something that will help you deal with this situation,” he murmurs in a quiet gravelly voice.

Every beat of my heart feels like a punch in my chest.

He takes his hand away and looks at me.

“It’s easier if you don’t have feelings for me. You can hate me if you want to. In that case, if I go, you won’t regret anything.”

No tears rush to my eyes, yet my chin quivers. His gaze is locked with mine, weighing heavily on my soul.

How could I not feel for him? I live in his house, and whether he likes it or not, I am part of his life. I was groomed to play a role and pretend I was his wife.

And I’ll be his wife.

“That’s what’s working for you. And that’s why you’re paying me,” I say.

He muses over an answer.

“I’m paying you because it’s safer that way.”

It’s not safer because he’s paying me. It’s safer because he’s not involved with me.

“You saw what happened to Verona...” he says, breaking his gaze away from mine and closing his eyes again.

A drop of poison shoots through my blood.

“What happened to Verona? You never told me,” I say, triggered.

I know something bad happened to her. That’s why she needed a place to stay... and a doctor.

“You don’t need to know the details. You can go now.”

His mood shifts so fast that I get whiplash here.

He turns his back to me while I get swept away by more of the same poison.

“Are you telling me something bad happened to her because she mattered to you, and whoever did that to her wanted to hurt you?”

It’s not like this is the first time I’m dancing with this idea, but it’s the first time I’m drowning in the pain of it.

He punches the pillow with a clipped move and squeezes it under his head while I hopelessly stare at his bare back.

“Go, Bella.”

His voice is like thunder on a starry night. It makes no sense.

Before I could do the sensible thing and just move out of his bedroom, frustration shoots out of my lungs.

“Ugh... You’re unbelievable,” I say, pushing up.

I’m loud, and he swiftly reacts, rolling over and lunging at me, pulling me down, and clamping his hand over my mouth.

I fight him, and he tops me in a second, squeezing me under his weight.

“Shut the fuck up. You have no idea what you’re talking about.”

My eyes go wide, my hands clawing at him as I scream under his hard grip, unable to breathe. His eyes send bolts of lightning into my soul.

For someone half asleep moments ago, he surely is fired up, and I rapidly get dizzy from the lack of air.

He shakes me hard to stop screaming, and my heart wants to slide out of my chest and zip away.

“You have to listen to me, Bella. Do you understand?”

Saying my name, he somehow sweetens the nightmare I’m living under him. But with his eyes darker than a pool of ink and features drenched in a deep thirst for blood, he is the man everybody fears.

Trembling under him, I have tears in my eyes and fears in my soul that this might not work after all.

What was I thinking? He’s fooled me with his calm and impeccable control, but this...

What I’m seeing right now makes me shudder in horror. He could snap my neck in a moment with a quick move.

And for sure, he can smell my fear.

The stunk of my fear overpowers the incense of rain and clean sheets.

“I can’t breathe,” I cry out under his hand.

Aside from blocking the flow of air, he presses his hard chest against my breasts.

And there isn’t only that.

The terror flowing through my blood comes with a mountain of sexual tension, only swelling more through me.

I’m not alone in this strange, painful sexual purgatory.

He’s hard against my lower abdomen and also naked while I wear only my short nightgown, the now open robe, and a pair of panties with side strings tied into little bows.

The heat in his body meets the horror in my bones. His hand slackens over my mouth only because he’s now sexually aroused, and he’s coming back, and he’s more present in the moment.

His fingers splay over my mouth while I watch him frozen, numb, and tingling at the same time, not knowing what could happen next.

I can't remember a time in my life when I felt so vulnerable and had so little control over what happened to me.

He nestles himself lower, his balls touching the soft sensitive flesh between my thighs, his hand wrapping around my neck, his weight supported by his elbow.

His eyes go down, hungry, shot, intoxicated with something that might not be me.

He touches my neck as if wanting to know how sensitive I am or how easily he could rip the life out of my body.

His touch is harsh and has no finesse, and his erection starts throbbing. His breaths quicken and are hot, and a battle is brewing in his heart.

He has no qualms with dragging his fingers down to my collarbones and then to my nightgown, pulling at the neckline and ripping the delicate fabric to expose my breasts.

My eyes don't leave his face while he looks down at my chest, wraps his hand around my left breast, and instantly makes me wet between my legs.

Stiff like a slab of concrete, I witness everything as if it happens to someone else, experiencing my first real sexual arousal.

From my lips to my toes, I'm crisscrossed by swiftly moving arrows of pleasure.

He slides two fingers inside my nightgown and runs them down toward my navel, and the fabric gives way to his unrefined touch, opening to my waist and revealing my breasts in a split second.

My heaving chest.

He kneads my breasts so hard it hurts, and his cock swells even more, pressing against my panties.

I feel like zapping away.

Only I can't move.

He drags his other hand to my mouth. His thumb goes between my lips whether I want it or not, and his fingers wrap

and tighten over the side of my neck.

He's grinding against me, and my center pulses like I'm about to come. That has never happened to me.

I've never had someone bringing me so close.

It could happen now. Maybe because the fear is morphing into sexual tension. Or the sexual tension is morphing into debilitating fear. Whatever it is, the sensation is intense, and my experience in the matter is minimal.

When he pushes his thumb into my mouth and grinds against me, I'm losing it a little.

Without saying a word, he tears his hand away from my breast, slides it down between our bodies, and gives his cock a few of pumps before reaching between the edge of my panties and my thigh.

When his fingers slide straight over the edge of my folds, my thighs automatically close.

"No, no... Baby Bella..."

His voice rumbles like a bolt of thunder.

He runs his fingers down and up, making more room for his touch until he slides his thumb inside my panties, and I see the gates of heaven.

He moves his finger inside the soaked fabric between my legs and my folds, and I can't help and shudder.

His hard length twitches as his thumb slides deep into my mouth. I don't see how they're connected, but I learn pretty fast when my lips wrap around his finger, and my cheeks tighten, my tongue giving it a stroke.

"Learning fast... I see."

He sounds inebriated, and with one flick of his hand, he pulls my panties to the side to expose my slit. The bow unties on one side, and the panties fall open.

When he lays his cock against my clit and runs his hand around my butt, and grabs it, I'm pulled into a thousand

directions. I'm nervous, hot, and scared, and I quickly find myself without options.

He alternates from squeezing my backside to running his hand up my ribcage and fondling my breasts.

His force is not adjusted in the slightest, as he leaves little puddles of pain along the way.

He removes his thumb from my mouth, and I'm lying still like a dead leaf only burning inside, expecting him at any moment to wedge himself between my legs and run his thick cock through my rigid hymen—that is hardly a scientific fact, more like a guess.

I wish I could laugh, but I'm tense like a rocket loaded with fuel, ready to launch.

As he grabs both sides of the nightgown and rips it open, I find myself naked under him with my crumpled panties pulled to the side.

Still propped on his elbow, he drinks my body in with a glint in his eyes, something I've never seen before.

There is nothing soft in his stare. It's all animalistic, like he knows he could make me bleed on his sheets and put a big hole in my soul, yet he wants to send me away.

His warning is well received.

There is no emotion in him for me to fight for.

This arrangement is one hundred percent what he said it would be.

And my fear is that the more we get naked with each other, the more he'll pull away from me and prove to me every single time that he won't be weak because of me.

This was the whole purpose of pulling me into a fake marriage. That's why he got so mad when I voiced my frustration.

He doesn't want me to become a problem for him.

Having a normal dynamic with push and pull doesn't work for him. I push. He'll pull hard. I push harder, and he'll pull

even more.

But there is something else. I've never been with a man, and he hasn't quite taken that into account. And I don't know who he is fucking these days and if he has time to fuck. Maybe he does. And perhaps she's a different flavor. Or maybe I am a different flavor, so he's tempted to break a rule or two but doesn't quite know how to play his cards.

How to make it work.

How to have his cake and eat it too.

For now, he runs his hand from my parted lips to my chest, my navel, and over my slit.

“Are you shaving for me?” he asks, staring at my smooth folds.

“Who else?”

He flicks his eyes to me, his hard cock pretty much resting on my hand.

“Who's touched you before?”

“This wasn't in the questionnaire. I was only asked if I liked—“

“Answer me.”

“Some men.”

“What happened?”

“They thought I was frigid.”

He looks at me, straight-faced for a few moments before a quiet laugh travels up his throat.

“You're fucking with me.”

“I wouldn't dare to do that.”

My humor is lost on him, and something else captivates his mind, something that brings back that solemn look on his face I know so well.

He palms his dick, and I have a feeling the moment is gone since he no longer touches me, and I just wish I could turn

back time and feel him on top of me again, angry and hard.

“Go to your room, Bella. I want to sleep now.”

He pulls the sheet with him and rolls to the other side of the bed, and that tells me he is serious about keeping this what it is.

A business arrangement with erections and wetness occasionally and outbursts of fury and explosive frustration.

“Can I sleep here with you?”

He shoots his arm toward the door.

“Out.”

Without trying that again, I pull my ripped clothes around my body and slip out of his room like a ghost.



THE STORY CONTINUES and concludes with [My Obsessed Husband \(The Forbidden Husband Book Two\)](#).

I hope you've enjoyed this story so far.

As always, reviews, ratings, and spreading the word are highly appreciated.

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ALSO BY SHAYNE FORD

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Shayne is a voracious reader and a prolific writer. She writes what she likes to read, and people who share her taste devour her books. Her love stories are layered, character-driven, have a dash of mystery, and a lot of depth. They feature hot-blooded men and adventurous, soulful women.

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