

Pandora's
Poison

Hart & Cole Book 2

SACHA T. Y. FORTUNÉ

~ Excerpt: Chapter 2 ~

Luisa

To be honest, I don't really blame Darren for what happened that night, just over two weeks ago. Even while it was happening, I was thinking it would work in my favour. That it was something I could later use against him, whether it was to brandish as a weapon in divorce court or merely as a weapon in our relationship.

—You're not giving me a divorce?... After what happened... after what you did... trust me, babe, I don't need to ask.

Already, that night, in my head, I was saying that line I finally got to use this morning.

While it was happening I was halfway there, halfway somewhere else; the good-girl in me swallowed by the only-vaguely humanoid bitch monster beneath my core. I led him to it, responding to his vicious advances one moment and then pulling away when he pushed harder. I knew what was about to happen and I let it get to a certain point before I stopped it.

I knew.

The moment he left Kady's room, chased Jordan and Carmen from the living room to their respective bedrooms... he looked at me and there was this horrible glimmer in his eye and I knew before he told me, I knew what had happened. I knew and I let it.

There, you have it. I knew.

It makes me a bitch for playing him. Yeah, sure.

So Mommy dearest isn't perfect.

Who gives a fuck.

I knew. And I let him.

Looking back on it, I think I wanted him to hurt me. To really hurt me. I think I thought I deserved it.

—You bitch. You fucking bitch.

Over and over again, a snake's hiss.

—*If that's all you've got to say to me...*

Standing up, my arms folded across my chest. Playing along, already knowing – or suspecting at least – how it had come out. Kady. Obviously. Someway or the other. Probably the stupid Dimitri. Or even Kris, Nicole's husband who ran into Kady and me at the park one day when we were meeting Gianni...

—*You fucking BITCH.*

I walk to our bedroom, knowing he would follow me. Knowing we had to get away from within the kids' earshot if this was going to play out.

He slams the door behind us.

I spin on my heels.

—*What the hell's the matter with you?*

Shaking his head. Disbelief? Fury?

—*YOU FUCKING BITCH!*

—*What the hell's the matter with you, Darren? The kids—*

He picks up the family portrait from the dresser. Smashes it to the floor.

—*Gianni. You fucking bitch.*

Silence.

I finally break it with platitudes.

—*I can explain, Darren. It's not what you think. Really. I can—*

He reaches out and pushes me down onto the bed.

I lie limply, waiting, bracing myself for the fist. He has never hit me and I have no idea why I am suddenly expecting him to. But if he did, I would not blame him. God alone knows I deserve it.

He doesn't hit me.

He pulls up my sweatshirt, tugging it over my head viciously...

I let him.

He pushes up my skirt.

I let him.

Pulls down my panties. Sensible cotton briefs. The choice of modern housewives. My thoughts are jumbled and inane.

Unzips his work pants.

I let him.

And, frighteningly enough, I realise, with jarring epiphanous abruptness, that I'm turned on. The swiftness in his motions is reminiscent of Gianni's rampant passion when it came to sex.

And it's blowing my mind to realise, now, after fourteen years of knowing him and twelve years of marriage... that Darren has never fucked me angry.

Four years ago, I had broken down and told him about Gianni... in the midst of sex. The sex, needless to say, had ended abruptly.

Not even the first time we'd done it after he knew. Not even then.

Darren has never, ever, EVER fucked me angry.

It is new.

And strangely arousing.

I am... clearly... a monster.

And I need to stop this before it goes any further.

—*Stop... Darren... please... stop... please... I'll tell you — what happened... with Gianni... let's don't do this right now... please.*

Limp lifeless arms flailing about in a lame attempt to get him off of me.

—*Luisa... please... do you love me? Tell me... tell me you love me... let me love you, please...*

His lips are fierce and scorching upon mine.

The inner good-girl stonewalls his efforts, but the monster opens my mouth, letting his tongue slide in... the monster opens my legs, letting his dick slide in... and...

And dear God dear God dear GOD if I let this happen, this will undoubtedly be the greatest sex I have ever had with Darren. Quite possibly the greatest sex I have ever had in my entire life.

But the good-girl murmurs...

—*I'll tell you about Gianni. It's not what you think. Please, let's talk about this. Darren. Stop. Let's talk about this. Please.*

—*We'll talk... baby... after... just... please, let me love you. Please. Please.*

And for all of five to ten seconds, it is strange, and new, and good. Very good.

And then the dark glimmer in his eyes catches mine again, and I see my reflection in it, and it scares me. This is not intimacy. This is not Gianni. This is not passion. This is anger. This is rage. This is hatred. This is Darren. This is... a very, very broken man, about to hurt me, physically and very very badly, if I don't stop it now.

And the good-girl pulls away... and he pins both the monster and the good-girl to the bed with his arms...shouting...

—*You don't want this? You don't want me? Is that — is THIS — (He punctuates with his penis) — what you get from him... SEX? Is this — (Thrust) — what you want? Am I not DOLING something right?... Is that — (Thrust) — what*

you need him for?... God... would you just tell me, please... I want to know... I need to know...

I need to stop this. I need to stop this.

—It's not what you think, I swear. I don't need him, for anything, Darren. Baby, just listen. I'll tell you, but you have to listen. Get off of me, please. You're hurting me... you're hurting me! Stop it... stop it...

His punctuation is no longer good. It is very, very bad. Not painful, really. Just... very, very bad. He keeps at it, still screaming...

—You want to be another man's whore... what is it you want from me then?... Is that what you want from him? (Thrust) —Is this what you want from him? (Thrust) —Does he do it different, does he do it better, DOES HE FUCK YOU GOOD?

Looking back on it, I think I wanted him to hurt me. To really hurt me. I think I thought I deserved it.

But then he was above me, his fingers gripping my arm and his body fiery-hot with rage, and suddenly the darkness in his eyes was scaring me.

And before I knew what was happening, my body twisted itself out of his grasp and my knee pressed forcefully into his crotch. And he was lying there on the tiled floor in our bedroom. And the moment of mania was over.

It was a moment I'd been anticipating for months.

The relief that surged in my chest was not that I was safe, not that he was no longer hurting me, not that the madness that had possessed him had slipped into oblivion.

The relief was that it was over. It was out.

Finally.

—Darren?

My voice is shaky. The weirdest idea pops into my frazzled head — that I've turned my husband into a eunuch.

—Darren?

—I'm sorry.

He manages to squeak out the words, his voice several octaves higher and sounding very far away.

—You OK?

—Uh-huh.

—Your boys okay?

My abnormal attempt at a joke.

His response is a bizarre noise midway between a guffaw and a choking noise.

I sit up, rubbing my arms at the red marks where his fingers had ploughed into the fleshy skin. Offer him a hand to help him up.

He looks at it and looks away.

I withdraw the proffered hand and use it, instead, to adjust my bra, pull back on my sweatshirt, pull up my sensible cotton panties, and pull down my skirt.

—*Darren... we should talk.*

A barrage of words, tumbling over each other:

—*I'm... so, so sorry. God, baby... please forgive me. Please. I would never, ever, EVER...*

—*I guess I deserved it.*

I'm not aware that I am saying this aloud till the last word reverberates around the room.

—*I hate – to hear... you know... about things like this... stories like these...*

Good Lord. There are tears rolling down his face.

Darren Hart.

Tears.

Oh. Dear. God.

I've made the granite bastard cry.

—*Thank you... for stopping me... before I did anything worse.*

The little monster within me smiles. The lines about to exit my mouth sound rehearsed. Some bad soap opera or poorly-rated movie.

—*I think this is as worse as it gets, Darren. As worse as we're going to get, anyway. I'm sorry I lied to you... I'm sorry you had to find out this way... but if you can't trust me – not to cheat on you again, then we shouldn't be married.*

Would that be the right moment I'd told Gianni that I was waiting for? What would that beautiful specimen of a man think of me, if he knew I'd had this scene half-scripted in my head... while he played with Kady and I sat at a distance, brooding, thinking. Thinking that the only way I could come out of this situation with anything worth salvaging was to get Darren to flip out and do something irrevocable that I would forever be able to hold against him.

But in the script, Darren was too revolted to want to have sex with me. In the script, I was a filthy whore and he didn't ever want to touch me again. The script was, quite obviously, based on his reaction on the night he'd first found out about Gianni. The thought of sex as part of the equation had never entered my mind, never even fleetingly flitted into the script.

In the script he would slap me. No wonder I had been lying there on the bed waiting for him to hit me. It was in the script.

I guess you can't plan everything.

So, as I was saying... I don't blame Darren for what happened that night.

Women are a lot of things. Foolish is not one of them.

I knew I was playing with fire when I ran into Gianni and hid it from Darren. It was sometime last July or August. The two older kids were at camp, Darren was at work, and I was walking back to my car from the dentist's office after Kady's check-up.

I'm fumbling in my bag to find my car keys with one hand and balancing Kady on my hip with my other arm, when I suddenly look up to cross the road and stop dead in my tracks.

Half-leaning on my car, his beautiful ass pressed up against the glass on the passenger's side of my black Volvo, is Gianni Alessandro Benedetto.

Fuck, even his name is sexy. Somehow, the would-be English translation – John Alexander Benedict – doesn't quite dampen the shorts in quite the same way as the Italian does.

From twenty feet away, he's absolutely stunning.

I haven't seen him in almost four years, and there he is, larger than life and sexier than I even remembered, leaning on my car.

He hasn't seen me and for a split second I consider turning around and running back into the dentist's office. I half-turn towards the building behind me – and that's when he looks up, flips the long dark silky hair behind his ear, and waves.

All the while I'm walking up to him, my knees are shaking and my palms are sweaty.

—*Hey.*

—*Hello, Luisianna.*

My full name is Luisa Anna, but saying it together sounds like the American state, a joke which got old after the fourteenth millionth time. But the first day he met me, I used my full name. And now he uses my full name more often than not, always meshing them together into one word. Especially when greeting me. Hearing it still sends shivers down my spine.

He shoves his hands in his pockets and smiles at me. He has perfect teeth, and his – I do a quick mental calculation – thirty-two years only show up in the crinkles around his eyes.

—*So...*

I trail off, shifting Kady from one hip to the other.

—*Luisianna... I thought about you... I wanted... to see you... but I didn't think that would go over... too well with him.*

The European jet-setter abandoned his home over nine years ago and still, there is always the slightest trace of the very sexy accent. His accent is sexiest when he says things hesitantly like that, as if he is forming the English words in his head. Which I suppose he still does from time to time, even after all these years.

My voice is wooden and wavering.

—*No... it wouldn't.*

—*And then I was on my way... to my uncle's house... when I saw your car here... in the parking lot. I figured... I'd wait for a few minutes, see if you come back... I was hoping that since it was two in the afternoon, he'd still be at work... And I said to myself... if ten minutes passed and you didn't show, I'd leave... but...*

Long pause, while my heart thuds in my throat.

—*But... here you are.*

I switch Kady back to my other hip.

—*Here I am.*

Another elaborate silence.

I feel compelled to break it and get the hell away from him.

—*Gianni, I have a lot of things to do; I should go. It was – nice – seeing you again, but...*

This is the moment that Kady – who usually isn't good with strangers... or maybe the better way to put it would be: is a screaming lunatic with strangers... not that I blame her because I've been with her 24/7 since birth because I never went back to work after a year as I'd originally planned, and thus she's never been exposed to a lot of new people especially kids her own age...

...This is the moment that Kady chooses to look up at him, with one hand shading her eyes from the sun which is blistering down on my bare shoulders in my sheath of a summer dress...

...And she says politely:

—*Hello, Mister.*

The blood freezes in my veins, and I swear I stop breathing.

Gianni looks at her and it fully registers suddenly. He had noticed her, obviously, but hadn't thought much of it. He knew I had kids. Mentioning their ages and their habits and their lives was not what we did in our spare time. The children had always been irrelevant.

And Gianni looks back at me, then to Kady again. Kady is smiling her father's smile, her perfect milk teeth (ironically, I should reiterate, we are standing outside the dentist's office) glinting as they form her father's heart-stopping smile. And he looks back at me again and his mouth yaws

open and shut a few times before he says to her, while still studying the horror that is emblazoned across my crimson face... he says:

—*Ciao, bambina... hello, little girl... how old are you?*

Kady smiles wider, and holds up three fingers.

And Gianni looks backs at me, the question evident in his raised eyebrows. The words tumble out of his mouth, unbridled. His speech is no longer slow and sexy, but very, very fast, and jumbled:

—*You would have told me... if... if... God, Luisa, you would've told me... so she's not — she can't be... you would have told me, right? Right?*

—*Gianni, I — I have to go, okay?*

My fingers fumble in my bag again and thankfully clasp my keys, I yank open the door and buckle my daughter into her car-seat and leap into the driver's seat and drive away like a bat out of hell. Praying and hoping to God that it was over.

My cell phone number had changed — I had purposefully changed it shortly after I'd broken it off with him — and our home phone is unlisted, but Gianni is resourceful. He called my house the next day, around 1:00 in the afternoon. I wouldn't pick up. He left messages every day for over two weeks, begging me to call him so we could talk. Gianni had never been a patient man. He quickly grew exasperated with my silence.

—*I know you're there, Luisa... and if you don't talk to me, I'm going to start calling you in the night when he's home... I'll start leaving messages when he's home... I will make your life a living hell, if you don't speak to me. Listen. Tell me the truth, if she's mine. If she is, and you want to play hardball, I'll fight for custody. I'll get visitation, at the very least. And your children will find out what you did, what we did. Goddammit, Luisa... talk to me, and we'll arrange something I never wanted to have a child, especially not with you... but if that little girl is mine... if she's mine, I'll love her, the best way I can. I won't even want to see her all that often, I won't be a nuisance to you or your family. I sure as hell don't want her calling me Daddy. I don't expect you to ever tell her who I really am. I just — I just want to have the chance to get to know my little girl. Come on, dammit, I missed three years already. You know about my family history. You know why this is so important to me. You owe me this much. Look, we can arrange something, if I can see her just a couple times a month, I promise I won't make things difficult for you. Pick up the phone, goddammit.*

Like I said, women are a lot of things. Foolish is not one of them.

I knew damn well what I was getting myself into when I finally picked up the phone that day. I knew damn well that it would blow up in my face in the very near future. I knew what I was doing.

Gianni is... a beautiful specimen of a man. He is – was – a very, very, attentive, sweet lover. And a genuine, all-around, good guy.

For the four or five months our ‘arrangement’ regarding Kady went on before it exploded that night roughly two weeks ago, Gianni spent most of the time begging me to tell Darren. He had grown since I’d last known him. He’d been working in an audio-visual production company for over two years. When I met him, he was flighty, careless, excessively emotional. Everything Darren wasn’t – and everything I’d needed, then. Only a few years younger than me, but very much a child still in many ways. He had never held a job for longer than six months. He was still figuring out who he was. He was full of passion – for everything, and indecisive about what he wanted to pour that passion into.

For over four months, I watched him pour some of that passion into the daughter he was now getting to know. I would meet him, on average, three or four times a month. Usually in the daytime. We met at the park and rarely moved out of a one-mile radius of it. We chose the park because I figured no one I knew would run into us. I have no idea how he got the free time from his job. We never spoke about that. They spent roughly a couple of hours together – I figured that any longer would be pushing it. I was there but absent, virtually silent most of the time. Brooding, thinking. He ignored me. Eventually Kady and I went home. I hoped she was young enough to not understand anything. And I hoped Darren would work like a fiend. It meant that he stayed away from her. And staying away from her meant that she did not tell him about Gianni.

And Gianni pleaded, several times, for me to tell Darren. He wanted to be a part of her life. A friend, nothing more. But he didn’t want it to be a secret from my husband. He said he was sorry for ever being with me, knowing that I was married. He told me that he had regrets. And the utmost respect for Darren, for staying with me, knowing what I’d done. For staying with me in spite of the fact that Kadeisha served as a daily reminder of what I’d done. He wanted me to tell Darren. He said he’d seen Darren in the newspaper at some media event or the other, said he’d seen the name under the picture: ‘Darren Hart’. And that he’d thought of me. And wondered if I’d ever told Darren I’d cheated on him. And wondered if we were still together. He’d even wondered if I was still with Darren and had found a new boy-toy since breaking it off with him.

And then in October he asked me, very blatantly, to give him a whole weekend with her. Said I would stay at his place. In his guest room. Told me to make up an excuse to Darren if I had to. Say I was going to visit my family or something.

I don't even know what possessed me to agree with it. I spent the four-day weekend – from Friday into Monday afternoon – in his guest room, staring at the walls and wondering what the hell to do with myself. He lived alone in a sizable three-bedroom apartment, tastefully furnished with hardwood floors and beautiful rugs. I remember thinking that he really had grown – the smaller apartment we'd had sex in (and, admittedly, lots of it) was haphazard, with bits and pieces of mismatched furniture, and it had an aura of capricious youth about it.

On Sunday night, while Kady slept, I sat like a zombie at his kitchen table, sipping hot chocolate splashed with a finger of brandy I'd discovered under the kitchen sink, both hands gripping the mug in a futile attempt to transfer its warmth throughout my entire body.

I didn't hear him approach. He'd probably been standing by the kitchen door for several minutes.

—You have to tell him.

I turn my head and register the lean hardness of his naked torso. He's wearing plaid pyjama bottoms and nothing else. I can see the flaccid bulge through the flimsy, faded material, and the responding jolt somewhere in the region of my lower intestines disgusts me. I should no longer feel such a jolt. I should no longer feel a lot of things.

—Luisianna, please.

—Go back to sleep, Gi.

—I cannot sleep when your misery is seeping through my walls.

He is the type of man that says shit like that. I used to think it was charming, sexy. But I'm older now. And more damaged.

—Oh, shut up.

—If you do not tell him, I will.

—You wouldn't dare.

—Try me.

I look up at him, and the brandy is swimming in my red eyes. I haven't slept for a single night at his place. My weekend had been full of jolts.

—You know he will find out eventually.

He walks over, picks up the bottle of brandy, and puts it back in the cupboard under the sink.

—You should not drink this.

—You told me to make myself at home.

The good-girl guilt I expect to feel does not register within the cold knot that has settled over my heart.

—We have a beautiful, amazing daughter, and I need you to take care of her.

—We don't have anything And relax, Gi, I only put a dash of it in with my hot chocolate, and only to help me sleep.

—It eats away at your insides.

He shuts the cupboard door and pulls a chair out to sit across the table from me.

—Oh, for God's sake, I haven't drunk a damn thing in months. I don't even like brandy. Or alcohol, in general.

—I was not talking about the brandy.

I sigh, putting the mug down on the table.

—I plan to tell him. I'm just — waiting for the right moment, okay? He's a very busy man.

—There will never be a right moment, Luisianna. You have to tell him before Kady does. She is three years old. She knows what's going on around her. Do you really think she's never going to mention me to your husband?

—She hasn't yet. Works for me.

—Luisa—

—Darren... is never home, okay? He works — a lot. Even when he doesn't work, he's never there when he's home. He lives on another planet, okay? You have no idea what it's like. What he's like.

—Luisa... if you don't tell him, I will.

—Gianni—

—No, listen to me. I am sorry for what happened between us — not that it was not good because it was very, very good... but that it happened in the first place. I knew... you were married. I'm sorry I... interfered. But I'm not the juvenile creature you cavorted around with four years ago. I am also not a stupid man. If you don't tell him, Kadeisha will. And even if she does not... it is going to come out on its own. If you tell him, you have some level of control about how it plays out. If you don't...

—I know. Do you really think I don't know that? Do you have any idea what it's like... having her around, a constant reminder that I'm a cheating bitch? Fine, I cheated. I'm not the first woman in the world to do it, and he's not the first guy in the world to forgive his wife for doing it. But we will never get past it. He will never truly forgive me, because he can't forget it. Kady is — there. She's always there. And the moment that I even mention you... coming back into my life, wanting to spend time with her... what do you think he's going to think? That you're her father and want to see her — and that's it? No, Gi. He's going to think I'm screwing you again.

—I don't want this to go on, not like this. I don't want you to have to lie to him so I can get a few days or even a few hours with my daughter. If you don't tell him, I will. And soon. Goodnight, Luisianna.

He stands, once more giving me a breath-taking shot of his narrow hips and beautifully-sculpted lower torso muscles.

I ruined my marriage for his chiselled beauty and trigger-truculent passion.

Then again, Darren had ruined it long before that, with his obscene fascination with Nicole Gellar.

We left Gianni's early on Monday afternoon.

Gianni hugs Kady, kisses her forehead, and presses a brown-and-white teddy bear into her hands.

—*This is for you.*

Kady looks at the bear in muted awe. She had never been given a toy by anyone in such a manner. Her room is filled with toys but most of them just seemed to appear there after she'd pointed them out when I carried her to the store, or she'd unwrapped them for some birthday or Christmas present or some other occasion. Never before had a toy been given directly to her by anyone.

—*What do you say, Kady?*

I nudge my daughter. I am already mentally mapping the existence of this new toy in her room. Surely, Darren will not notice another toy proliferating among the hoards.

—*Thank you, Johnny.*

He smiles. She can't yet form the proper pronunciation of his name.

—*He has... a name?*

She asks this, her imploring gaze locking onto her father's eyes.

—*Uh—whatever you want to name it.*

—*You... name him.*

—*I—um...*

—*NAME HIM.*

She insists at an increasing decibel.

—*Well... I used to have a teddy called Dimitri when I was your age. Can you say that? Dimitri?*

—*Dee-mee-tree.*

She repeats it, nodding. Looks at the bear.

—*Hello, Dee-mee-tree.*

While her attention is focused on her new toy, Gianni looks at me over her head.

—*I have decided... that I will be fair to you. Give you a chance to tell him yourself. You have a couple of months. Until the end of December. Then I will start to call during the evenings until he answers the phone. If you change your number, I will show up at your house. Please don't make me have to call my bluff, Luisianna. Do you understand?*

I nod, numbly.

I was fifteen days away from his deadline when the shit hit the fan.

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