



HART & COLE BOOK 3

Pandora's
PRICE

SACHA T. Y. FORTUNÉ

Pandora's
Price

Hart & Cole Book 3

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Pandora's Price

...Go big or go home...

Darren gambled everything for love –
for the woman he's loved his entire adult life...
and the only person
he can never seem to truly understand.

Luisa can pinpoint exactly when
the shift happened in their marriage –
shortly after Darren hired his protégée Nicole on a whim...
a 'reckless decision' that he never knew
would cost him their marriage.

But what if she can get the love
she so desperately needs...
just not from her husband?

Told from both points of view, "Pandora's Price" explores the forces that bring a marriage to its breaking point – vulnerability, mistrust and resentment – and seeks the redemption that can pull them back from the edge of destruction, and salvage everything in the face of crisis.

"HART & COLE" SERIES:

*The books in this series share characters and events,
and should be read in chronological order for the optimal reading experience.*

"Climbing The Walls" is Book 1, available here: mybook.to/climbingthewalls

"Pandora's Poison" is Book 2, available here: mybook.to/pandoraspoison

"Pandora's Price" is Book 3, available here: mybook.to/pandorasprice

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Darren

13th February 2004

Psi means pounds per square inch.

Shotcrete is pneumatically applied concrete.

'Pneumatically applied' means delivered by compressed air.

The compressive strength of the concrete is 3000psi when delivered. Within the first three to seven days, the applied concrete will reach about 80% of its full strength. It will rise to 4000-5000psi after about four weeks of curing.

Applying shotcrete like this makes it more resistant to shrinkage, cracking, freezing, thawing, and general wear and tear. After this, the next step is applying concrete to the walls over the steel rebar reinforcement, and adding fibermesh to the concrete to prevent the cracks from becoming too large while it cures.

After the shotcrete has been applied, it's advisable to hose down the pool shell three to four times a day for five to seven days, or install a sprinkler system to keep the concrete consistently hydrated. This slows the curing process down, and prevents the surface from developing even more cracks.

Needless to say, from the multitude of random facts I can now spout at a moment's notice, the pool has been a welcome distraction.

I've been neck and neck with the contractor since last Tuesday, deciding on designs and then overseeing the excavation of a ginormous hole in our backyard. I'm currently standing at the edge of it, watching the shotcrete pour out from a massive hose-like contraption to form the shell of the pool.

I'm here at 10:29 a.m. on a weekday, instead of at the office. I've mentally justified this due to the fact that I may perhaps write a 'How To Build Your Own Pool' article for *Sunrise* later this year. I might as well do something with the knowledge I've gathered.

Over the past ten days, I've learnt far more than I ever thought I would about the process of building a pool. I've actually done a fair deal of manual labour, falling in with the contractor's team of eight to ten guys that have been in and out over the past few days. Since I've made it clear that money is not my

primary concern, but time is, the contractor has been more than happy to have his guys work later hours. At night, I'm exhausted after being out in the sun for half the day and bleeding magic out of my employees at *Sunrise* the other half of the day, and driving up and down at least four times a day to be present at both home and work.

It's kept me busy. Busy is good.

Busy seems to make it less obvious that my wife is barely speaking to me, after that night in the kitchen.

Busy helps me forget that my marriage is a ticking time bomb, until Gianni makes his move.

Today is Friday the 13th. *Black Friday*. I've never been the superstitious kind, but today also happens to be a Gianni day. After over a week and a half of sitting on pins and needles waiting for the phone to ring, I've been driving myself crazy. I've made no further offers to fill in as the babysitter on Luisa's behalf, so he's seen her twice since the day I basically told him to throw himself at her.

I'd rationalised it to him:

—I've fought this... for four years. Maybe I shouldn't have. I didn't know exactly what her relationship with you was. I've always loved Luisa — far more than I think she ever loved me, if we're being totally honest here.

Hell, I'd rationalised it to myself:

—Time changes you. Marriage changes you. Life changes you. Sure, she picked me, but maybe only because she thought she had to. She's a good girl, who did a bad thing, and then she tried to fix it. But not everything is meant to be fixed. And since then, I've been holding on to her with this death grip, scared she'll pull away again. I'm tired of fighting this. If you and her were something special, and that was meant to be, then I don't want to get in the middle of that.

I'd even promised him I wouldn't fight any forthcoming divorce proceedings:

—I repeat: we never have to tell Luisa. I'll walk away... and I'll give her whatever she wants, whatever she asks for, whatever she wants to take from me. I'll walk away. You have my word.

Poor guy. He didn't know what to do with that crazy offer.

—Just to be clear... I want to hear you say the words... Darren Hart, you... you are giving me... permission... to sleep with your wife?

—I am giving you permission to try your very, very best.

Okay, so it wasn't the best plan in the world. But for the past four years, I've been struggling to forgive my wife for her affair, and to raise her love child as my own without overthinking it every day. Then, for the past two months, I've been struggling to cope with Kady's biological father reentering her life and demanding time with her. Fair enough, we'd kept him in the dark; he deserved that much. But I just couldn't wrap my head around him – the *issue* of him – being in our lives again, and not knowing if my wife still wanted something with him. I'd worked up the nerve to have the ballsy conversation whereby I'd asked him the questions I never dared to speak aloud, until that day. And then I'd given him free rein to break my entire soul, if she *did* choose him and I had to walk away.

Yep, not the best plan in the world... but the only one I could think of to stop the insanity. I'm just tired of struggling, of fighting against this raging tide of uncertainty. I need this to *end*, one way or the other. And now Gianni holds the threads of my marriage in his fingers, and all I can do is wait.

—*Tell me... as it happens. I don't mean the next day, or the same day. I mean, the first chance you get. Before she has time to even reach back to me. The instant she leaves. Do you understand? She took months to tell me last time, so I don't trust her with this. But I trust you. To gloat, if nothing else. And that's fine. Call me... if it happens, when it happens, as it happens. And I'll walk away.*

Granted, I didn't think he'd take this long. He said he loved her. He'd gotten my blessing. What the fuck was he waiting on? I keep looking at her for signs that something has changed, something has *happened*... but there are none. And, while of course there is a chance that he could have tried something and just not told me, I honestly doubt it. I pride myself on understanding people. If he was an ass that looked at her as a conquest, he would call to gloat. If he truly loved her, he would call to see if I would keep my word about walking away. But in either case, *he would have called*. I am certain of this. So no, nothing's happened. Except that, since the night in the kitchen, Luisa's been very cautious around me.

I'm not entirely sure what got into me that night. After leaving the park an hour later than usual, I'd spent another hour or so driving around aimlessly. From the backseat, Kady had kept up a piping singsong nonsensical chatter, and I'd chimed in at the right moments in response to things she'd said or asked. And, I'd *thought*.

I'd thought about what it would mean, if Gianni was successful in his attempt.

I'd thought about what it would mean to walk away from Luisa, like I'd promised.

I'd thought about explaining the end of our marriage to our older kids Jordan and Carmen – not to mention to poor Kady, who is already going to have so much to deal with one day, when she finds out Gianni is her father.

I'd thought about what it would mean to no longer have Kady in my life. About leaving our contact up to Gianni's prerogative – if he kept up his end of the bargain, that is.

By the time I had made several circular patterns and was finally nearing our street, Kady had fallen asleep, exhausted from her impromptu playdate with Khailam Gellar. I'd noticed she'd gotten quiet, and confirmed by looking in the rearview mirror that she was asleep, her head hanging forward with her chin to her chest, strapped in by the car-seat. I'd stopped the car, gotten out and climbed into the backseat with her. I had just sat there for about fifteen minutes, stroking her hair, running a finger lightly over her chubby little cheek, and saying nothing. Eventually, I'd gotten back into the driver's seat to head home. I'd looked at her again in the rearview mirror and muttered, more or less to myself: "I really hope I'm doing the right thing, baby."

And then... I went home and fucked my wife like there was no tomorrow. Because, with an offer on her head like the one *I'd* just made, maybe there wasn't. If it was going to be the last time I had sex with my wife... then by God, it would be memorable.

I'd been more daring in the earlier stages of our marriage, but even back then was no match for what went down in the kitchen last week. I'd been afraid of her, since I knew about Gianni – afraid that I was sexually lacking. But I'd also been afraid of myself. I'd suspected I was angry at her, and kept the lid on it by being extremely safe whenever our clothes came off in the post-affair portion of our marriage. Yes, I'd forgiven her; yes I was trying to move on from the infidelity; yes I was trying to save my marriage.

...But my body knew better.

My suspicions were right, as I'd discovered last December when I'd lost control and started using my body to punish her. After holding it back for four years, I'd discovered that I had the capacity to be a raving lunatic. So my instincts had been right, all along. I'd known I was angry, a deep-seated anger you can never really get rid of, so I'd been extra careful to be gentle. Last week, however, was anything *but*.

For the first time since *ever*, I hadn't held back.

I was a man that had reached my breaking point, that day.

I had spent my entire day in primarily testosterone-fueled environments that were extremely emotionally heavy – first, the balls-out conversation with Kris Gellar, in which I'd admitted that I was attracted to his wife – my best friend and former employee, Nicole. And then, at Kris' suggestion, I'd decided to take the same approach with my other issue. Immediately. I'd spent the evening peeling

the layers back and pulling apart the very fibres of the last four or five years of my marriage, with every word that had passed between Gianni and I on the bench at the park.

It had been... a *devastating* day.

It had been one of the most difficult days of my life. Of course, there had been worse days – finding out about Gianni, finding out Luisa was pregnant, finding out Kady wasn't mine, finding out about Gianni *again*, and finding out that I am a monster that can physically hurt my wife.

But that day last week had been another one of hurtful discovery. I'd kept it together while in the presence of Gianni, but it started to unravel shortly after Kris drove off. Yes... I know why I'd put the issue of Gianni into a locked box in my mind: to avoid *this*. But now I'd finally yanked the lid off of the Pandora's box that my marriage had become after the affair – and the evils it had unleashed were unspeakable.

Past conversations I'd had with Luisa – past fights, past moments I'd ignored my instincts and believed her lies. Days I'm sure she must have met up with him. Things she had said to me on those nights. Those crucial months where I'd ramped up the sex, and she must have come home from his bed and into mine.

Smiling, beautiful, radiant wife. Cooking dinner for our children with the hands that touched his naked body. *Lies, lies, deceit.* It all came rushing in, moment after moment after hurtful moment.

Every pore in my body was throbbing with pain.

I'd felt like all my nerves were raw and open.

I'd just wanted... to stop feeling, for once.

And so, for the first time since *ever*, I hadn't held back.

And I'd scared my wife in the process.

I don't think it was so much that I'd scared her, but perhaps that she'd scared *herself* as well. I'd been polite enough to ask, this time, if she wanted me to stop, but there was no need. There wasn't even a vestigial memory of last year's debacle on her mind, at the time. She'd wanted it. I was vicious, and she'd been ready and waiting and practically begging for it.

My epiphanous theory, which I'd had when Gianni discussed what he'd said to get her into bed, had proven true. And while the average man would have been thrilled to finally figure out – after twelve years of marriage – exactly what really made his wife tick, I was... shell-shocked. Amazed that we'd been having mediocre sex and *I hadn't known*. I'd been fairly impressed with our early-marriage, pre-Gianni sex, and had no idea she had a higher octave to hit. Amazed that I'd always handled her with kid-gloves, when what she really wanted – and had no idea she wanted – was to be *handled*. I have no idea what Gianni did for her sexually, but I'm pretty sure that the pretty boy hadn't gone as 'all out' as I had last week. Most men who can, *don't*. Not with women they love

and respect.

I'd checked my emotions at the door, the moment I handed the child that wasn't mine over to her uncle and asked him to take all three kids out for a bit.

Love, respect, anger – it all left me, the moment I'd walked into the kitchen, the moment I'd said her name. I wasn't angry; I knew better than to bring anger into the kitchen with me – that had been my mistake, in December.

I was... letting go. I was letting go of all I'd ever thought about who she is, who she was, what she wanted from me. I was letting go of what she'd done to me, what she'd done to our family. I was letting go of myself. I was letting go of control.

It was long overdue.

It was... cathartic.

It was frightening.

She loved it.

She hated it.

And she's still thinking about it, almost two weeks later. There's been no mention of that day, and no nudge from either of us in the direction of anything sexual since that day. We've coexisted. She's been wrapped up with her brother Alejandro, and getting the ball rolling at their new business. I've been caught up in planning for my company's event tomorrow, which occupies the scarce time I've spent at the office recently, and in getting the pool built for the kids, which occupies my time at home.

And, of course, with thinking about Gianni.

Whichever way things go next, I have to stick with the decision I'd made, that day on the bench at the park. I have to walk away, if she chooses him. It will be the hardest thing I have ever had to do in my life. I'm not sure I'm capable of it. I'm not sure—

Pllllrrrrrrriiiiiinnngggggg

The phone's ring cuts through my reverie and the clanging, grinding noises of the shotcrete installation crew. I fish my phone out of my pocket and look down at it – a number I don't recognise. *This is it*. Of course it could be any one of at least a couple dozen of other people. I'm head honcho of a media empire. And yet, I know. *This is it*. My fingers are already shaking as I press the button to answer it. "Hello?"

"Hello." There's the lilt of the foreign accent, and the tentative greeting of a man with something important to say.

Now that the call has actually come, I realise I am terrified to actually have this conversation. But it's too late for that now. "Um – one sec. Let me get away from the construction zone." My swift walk to inside of the house buys me about ten seconds to compose myself and mentally prepare for this. It's not enough time. I walk into my bedroom and sit on the edge of the bed. It's poetic,

somewhat. Waiting for bad news, in this place. “Yeah... I’m here.”

“Construction zone?” he asks.

“We’re building a pool,” I explain.

“Ahhh.”

“OK.” I exhale through my teeth. “I’m ready. Give it to me.”

“Nothing... has happened.”

I hadn’t realised my heartbeat had stopped, until his words kick them back into rhythm. “Well, what the hell are you waiting on?”

“You have had quite some time to rethink this. I just want to make sure that you are sure that this is what you want me to do.”

Perhaps I should have chosen a different place to take this call. I’m sitting in our bedroom on freshly laundered sheets – Luisa did the laundry last night and changed the sheets this morning before she went to work. A pair of her shoes – kicked off from yesterday – are near my feet as I sit on the edge of the bed. The bathroom door is ajar, and I can see her blue towel hanging on its bar on the shower door.

“Darren?”

“Yes.”

“This isn’t the way I saw this happening. I’ll admit... since I saw her last year, it brought back up those old feelings... but I’ve been working on moving past this,” he says. I can hear noise in the background – a low hum of dialogue on a television and a fan spinning. “One second.” There is a shuffling noise, and then the background noise shuts off abruptly. “I just wanted to say to you... look, it’s not too late to change your mind.”

“I’m not a man that changes his mind very often. Are *you*?”

“No,” he says. “I am not.”

“Okay, then.” I swallow the lump in my throat. “So... until I hear from you again?”

“I don’t want to ruin—” He clears his throat. “I can continue, without doing this. I can—”

“Gianni.” I say it with an authority that stops his babbling. “I respected you, because you told me you loved her, without hesitation. Now, you’re hesitating.”

“Of course I’m hesitating,” he snaps. “You think this is *easy* for me?”

“You think this is *easy* for *me*?”

There is silence on the other end of the line.

My chest is heaving, and the lump in my throat is back. “Look, I didn’t mean to yell at you. Civil doesn’t exactly come easily to me, in this particular situation.”

“You don’t have to be sorry,” he says, quietly. “And I want you to know that I respect you, as well. That’s why I gave you... awhile, to reconsider... before.”

“Okay then... so... until I hear from you again,” I say, with finality this

time.

Today is Friday. Today is a Gianni day. I realise now, that he called to *warn* me. Today. *Dear God. Today.* I hold the phone away from my ear, about to hang up.

“Darren?”

I’m still processing the silent message he has just transmitted to me when I raise the phone to my ear again. “Yes?”

“I have to tell you something.”

Six words you never want to hear from your wife’s lover. The lead ball on my solar plexus is suddenly back in charge and pressing into my abdomen.

“If I’m going to do what you said, I have to tell you something.”

“Why?” I ask. “*Why* do you have to tell me something?”

“I wouldn’t feel right, with you not knowing.”

“Okay,” I say, and wait for it.

“I want you to know... I’m not doing this to hurt Luisa. I would never want to hurt Luisa. But I don’t like how things have been going with... keeping secrets. It’s nothing bad... it’s just – something.”

“Okay,” I say again. “Please stop building it up. Just say it.”

“Kady met my nephew. Her cousin.”

I’m confused. “What?”

“I started to tell you... when we spoke... that I’ve been pushing for more, with Kady. My half-sister’s son Raffaele has been visiting me. He leaves today, actually.” His voice is tumbling over the words. “I ran into Luisa at a club a few weeks ago, the first day Raffaele was here. Perhaps if not for that encounter, I would not have pushed the matter. But I told Raffie that I knew her, and he sensed that there was some history, but I couldn’t explain any further. That night, he and I got into an argument... a pretty bad one, actually. He said I was keeping secrets from him, and his family is so filled of secrets and he hates the way everyone lies. He almost cut his trip short, because of that argument. We were screaming at each other, and he started packing his suitcase. So, I told him... about Kady, about Luisa... and he wanted to meet her. So I asked Luisa... I told her to talk to you about it, but I realise she did not, at least not yet. I’m sorry. I’m sorry for the omission, on her part. So, if it comes up later on, I take full responsibility for that. Please don’t be mad at her for that. He was only here for three weeks... and I wanted to tell someone in my family that I have a daughter. No one else knows... no one else, and it’s been very difficult for me, to not be able to share it with anyone I know... because of Luisa, because of you, and who you are. But... I asked too much, too soon. Blame who you want for the affair, but please... please, blame that on me.”

No, it’s nothing bad, as he’d said. It could be so much worse, but we’ve already been through so much *worse* that I’m not sure there’s any *worse* left. So

no... it's nothing bad. But it's just one more straw on the camel's back. One more omission.

Smiling, beautiful, radiant wife. Lies, lies, deceit. I can feel it rushing in again.

"Darren?"

"I'm still here."

"Should I have let her tell you?"

"No, no... this is fine." I lean back until I'm lying on the bed, and pull my feet up, feeling the dizziness swirling in my head. "I'm fine. I appreciate your honesty. Thank you for telling me. I should go." I let the phone fall away from my ear again.

"Darren?"

It takes an extra second or two for me to regain the presence of mind to pull the phone back to my ear. "Yes?"

"I want you to know that part of me is hoping... she's over it," he says. "It would be easier for everyone. The day she left was – was hard on me. I wondered over and over... if she just panicked when it broke, or if she would still have ended it that day, or shortly thereafter. But I believe in fate, and maybe that was fate intervening. So – so now, I just hope we're not tempting fate by manipulating the situation, at this stage. I just hope—"

"I'm sorry... *what* did you just say?" Suddenly I'm sitting upright, feet on the floor again. There's that prickly feeling crawling up the back of my neck. *Smiling, beautiful, radiant wife. Lies, lies, deceit.*

"That... we are tempting fate?" he repeats, confused.

"No... *no*." I can feel the heaving in my chest starting up again. "What you said before *that*. She panicked when it *broke*? When *what* broke? Did you just say what I *think* you just said?"

There's a deathly silence at the other end of the line.

"Gianni?"

"I should... hang up now," he says quietly.

"Don't you *fucking* dare." My fingers are gripping the phone tightly. "Say it *again*."

"I thought... you said... *she told you*... about that day. You said *she told you* about the day she broke it off with me. You said *she told you* how it ended suddenly... and that she had been with me, that day. You said *she told you* about that day." He's saying the same thing over and over, as if trying to convince himself that I am supposed to know this little fact.

"Clearly," I say, tightly, "there are a lot of things she never told me. You know what? I hope she's *not* over you. You can fucking *HAVE HER!*"

With that, I fling my phone against the wall. The resounding smash is comforting, somehow.

And then I get up off of the bed, and go back out to the large hole in my

backyard that is currently being filled with concrete.

Psi means pounds per square inch.

Shotcrete is pneumatically applied concrete.

Pneumatically applied means delivered by compressed air...

~2~

Luisa

“Lou, phone!” Alejandro calls, thumping on the dividing door between our offices.

“I didn’t hear it ring,” I answer.

“*I* called *her*. Now, pick up.”

Curious, I reach for the phone on my desk. “Hello?” I hear the click that indicates Lee has hung up.

“Hey, gorgeous lady,” Victoria Mendoza chirps in my ear. “As charming as your little brother is, I’m quite tired of shop talk. He’s paranoid that his account took a backseat at *Subero/DaSilva* with Darren’s big affair tomorrow, and there’s only so much handholding I can do. *Please* convince him we’ve got you guys covered, and your campaign is right on schedule and will be everything he needs it to be and more.”

I chuckle. “He’s a pain in the ass, but he has a lot riding on this. Give him a break.”

“Fine. But only because he’s such a cutie.” There’s a beat. “Single?”

“Engaged.” *Last I heard, anyway.* I know things are rough with his fiancée since he basically abandoned her and moved a two-hour drive away to crash in his big sister’s media mogul mansion while he launched his new business. I should ask him how things are with Melissa. I’ve been so wrapped up in my *own* drama with Darren and Gianni lately that I’ve neglected my needy little boss/brother.

“Damn, all the good ones are taken.” She huffs.

“Gross! He’s twenty-one,” I inform her.

“Precisely. A man’s sexual prime.”

“Argh.” I grimace. “I do *not* need to think about his sexual prime. Shitty diapers, remember?”

“But you’ve seen him naked, right? Topless, at least? Recently?”

“Er... unfortunately, if so.” Since my very first encounter with Vicki, almost every conversation has centred around men, and I’ve realised it’s easier to just indulge her. I think about it objectively. “Well, he’s been working out ever since he met his fiancée – her ex was buff, so he took that to heart and tried to bulk up, and now he’s not as scrawny as he used to be. And his last girlfriend thought he

had a cute ass.” I pause. “And I’m going to *kill* you for making me have this sick conversation, particularly when he’s a stone’s throw away.”

She laughs. “I’m kidding... relax. I have no intention of jumping your little brother. He’s our client. An annoying one, at the moment, which is why I begged him to talk to you instead. *Plus...* well...” She hesitates for a moment. “I feel insulted that you and I haven’t spoken in awhile... and our last conversation kind of ended abruptly. Any chance you want to hit *Club Prohibition* again?”

My answer is a chortle. “Hell *no*.” My run-in with Gianni that night left me with enough mortification to last a lifetime.

She laughs. “I thought not. How about that coffee, then?”

“Coffee?”

“Yes... it’s what female friends do,” she replies, in a coy lecturing tone. “Especially after they’ve gotten drunk together and shared horrible, horrible secrets they thought they’d take to their grave. In fact, they usually *start* with coffee, and work their way up to that hard-core stuff.”

I smile. It’s a shame that I’ve gone most of my life without knowing this woman. I’d choose her genuine scandalousness in a heartbeat over my longtime friend Rebecca’s bitchy manipulations. “Sure, when?”

“I’m five minutes away from your office.”

“Oh, *now*.”

“Yes, *now*. I just got permission from your cute-ass boss.”

“Ha, ha, funny,” I reply. “Sure, meet me at *Olivier’s*. It’s on the corner of Heymar and Louis.”

“I know the place.”

Ten minutes later, Victoria Mendoza is sitting on a wooden stool in *Olivier’s*, her hands wrapped around a massive cup filled with a caramel cappuccino. Today she is wearing fitted cream-coloured pants, and a black flowy top that looks like a kaftan. Her long cornrow braids hang open past her ass. It’s a curious combination that comes off as a sexy, chic hippie.

“Casual Friday?” I chide, nodding at her top.

“I *am* working today. I had some errands for tomorrow’s event. Kris and I were doing décor at *Carrina’s Classix*.”

“Oh yeah, right, Darren’s thing.” I nod, raising my own cup – a chai latte – to my lips.

“Look, Luisa, I commandeered this meeting today because I have to ask you something serious.”

There’s a long pause, while I wait patiently.

“Please, pretty please... share something diabetic-coma-inducing with me.”

She grins, pointing at the desserts display. “Please, pretty please? I can’t eat it alone.”

I laugh. “Seriously? *That’s* the big ask?”

She nods emphatically. “Plus I missed you, you crazy drunk bitch. I’ll take that for a yes...” She smiles. “One sec, lemme go order.”

A few minutes later, I’m gaping at the three-tier chocolate cake that the waiter deposits on our table. “Er... don’t they sell this in *slices*?”

She grins broadly in reply, and hands me a fork. “This was my *big* ask, remember? Please give me moral support in my time of need.”

“Your time of need?”

“My little sister just married my ex-boyfriend.”

“Oh God!” I clap my hand over my mouth, dismayed. “I’m sorry... I am a *terrible* friend. That was... you said Saturday; that would’ve been January 31st... two weeks ago. *Shit*. I didn’t even call you.”

“No worries, babe. You clearly had a *lot* going on.” She smiles, wiggling her eyebrows. “So... how’s that fine piece of *culo Italiano*?”

“Ugh, don’t ask.” I look around *Olivier’s*, frantically searching for a change of topic. The small coffee shop is decorated with everything flowery, red, pink, purple, and heart-shaped. “I’d forgotten about Valentine’s Day. Sorry, I should’ve picked a less nauseating place.”

“We just changed the décor for Darren’s event tomorrow – we had a lot more red and pink, but we eventually decided to go in a different direction... hence the last minute errands,” she notes.

“Oh, yeah... this event tomorrow,” I muse aloud. “I guess it’s gonna be a big affair.”

“You’re not going?”

“Well... I told him I would. So... I guess so.”

“Fab! I could use the company.” She grins. “Darren Hart is a big client, so all eyes are on it. Usually I wouldn’t be personally involved so hands-on with an event like this, but this project ended up under ‘Special Events’ after Kris went to our bosses and requested a project team. This means some of the more senior staff are on it, regardless of title... Kris, Bryan and I are all on it, with Kris running point of course. We also have a pretty big team... we get to hire our own little army to run it. It’s actually quite cool. We have codes and everything.”

“Codes?” I query.

“Like... ‘Code Blue’, ‘Code Red’; stuff like that. We have sayings that the entire team is trained to adhere to. There’s an actual bible for these events to ensure they run smoothly: protocols, emergency measures, whatnot. It’s all very structured. We haven’t had one of these in ages. I think the last one was when we ran an event for a political campaign. So... yeah, well... your husband’s a whale.”

“I guess he is.” I manage a smile.

“So...” she continues. “Considering this *whale* planned his shindig on Valentine’s Day, I’m guessing you guys aren’t big on V-day?”

“Darren Hart?” I reply sceptically, rolling my eyes. “Please.”

“Not a romantic, then?”

“I think we’re past that stage. I wasn’t really the type. He tried to be... he tried *very* hard, actually, when he thought I wanted stuff like that. When we were dating, he hunted me like a wolf on crack chasing pussy.”

She bursts out laughing, then widens her eyes mischievously as she leans forward over the table. “I could do with a wolf chasing my pussy, right about now.”

I cover my mouth, putting my cup on the table with my other hand and giggling like a schoolgirl. “You did *not* just say that.”

“I’m serious.” She pushes her empty cup to the centre of the table. “But I’ve sworn off men... now, I eat chocolate, instead. And trust me, it’s for the best.” She sighs dramatically.

“Since...?”

“Yep.”

“I’m still struggling to believe that even happened, by the way,” I note aloud, then add: “Not judging. *Soooo* not judging... but...” I lower my voice, as if I’m afraid of being overheard. “...*Kris*?”

“I know.” She covers her face with both hands, her elbows on the table. “Trust me, *I know*. It was the last thing I expected.”

“How’s it been... working with him, since?” I ask, curiously.

“Surprisingly... not awkward at all. At least not for him. *I* on the other hand...” She rolls her eyes. “He acts like nothing happened... I guess that’s for the best. He’s trying to *not* deal with it... I’m sure he has enough of a mess to deal with, at home.” She pauses. “The worst part is... I can’t even talk to anyone about it. My two best friends are Kris and Bryan... and Bryan hates us both, now.”

“Bryan *knows*?” I’m flabbergasted. “Okay... our last convo ended *way* too abruptly! Details, please!”

“He called me, looking for Kris... and heard Kris’ voice... so he came over.” She’s covering her face again.

“Oh my *God*.” Every piece of the story is making my jaw drop in increments. “If you don’t mind me asking... how long ago was this?” I demand. “Because you said Bryan hates you *now*. This is... this is *recent*?”

“December.”

“Oh my *God*. Vicki! This *just* happened!” My jaw is hovering dangerously close to the table.

“Yeah...” she trails off, uncovering her face. “So it’s been interesting, at the office. To make it worse, my *other* close friend is Bryan’s wife Stacey... I don’t think he told her. She’s lovely, but a bit of a prude, so it’s not like I’d talk to her about it anyway... she will look at me differently, if she knows. So I’ve been

avoiding her. That's kind of why I called you. Just to talk to someone who won't hang up on me, I guess."

"Well, dear, I've been there." I reach for one of the forks and unwrap it from the cloth. "Hang in there... it'll get better."

"I guess." She sighs, viciously digging her own fork into the enormous chocolate cake that is picking up almost the entire space on the table between us. "I feel... I don't know. I see myself as this very confident, in-charge-of-things person... and then so much fucked-up shit is happening, y'know?"

"I know the feeling." I wield my fork and dig into the cake with slightly less gusto than she did. "It looks pretty from the outside... and on the inside... whole different tune."

"Precisely. I didn't expect my sister's wedding to hurt so much... but I won't lie... it was *brutal*," she adds, around a mouthful of chocolate cake. "I kept saying to myself – *Well this isn't so bad* – and then, something horrible would happen right after that. People kept saying... 'Vic, didn't we meet this guy already? Wasn't he *your* boyfriend?'... or trying to set me up with someone, since clearly I am a hot mess that can't find my own man. The worst part is, they're right... when I *do* pick a guy to clear out the cobwebs in my hoo-hah, it's my very *married* coworker!"

"Well, you're a hot *beautiful* mess," I reply. "You left quite an impression on Raffaele, Gianni's nephew. He was sorry he didn't get to talk to you properly, that night at *Prohibition*."

"Oh, yeah." She widens her eyes. "Wait... nephew? So... you *met* him?"

"Yeah..." I realise suddenly that I'm not supposed to have met him. *Shit*. "Long story... please don't ask."

"You and Gianni...?"

"No... *not* what you think." I'm tempted to explain, but the conversation has been so refreshing that I loathe redirecting the course of it now. "Please don't ask. Forget I mentioned it."

"O...kay," she says. "Fine. Well, was Raffaele at least as fine up close? I saw him for just a few seconds, it was dark, and I'd been drinking. I'm sure he must be a swamp creature."

"Not in the least." I grin. "Delicious man. Good genes, I guess."

She giggles. "Thank God... because he looked positively scrumptious that night."

"He's just visiting, though. But if you want, I can—"

"Oh, no. Man-fast, remember?" She shakes her head. "But... *damn*. That man makes me forget about the whole swearing-off-men thing. I don't know what it is, but you know how some men look like they can really... rock your world?"

I laugh. "Oh, I *know*."

"I miss sex," she admits next, resting her chin in her hand as she glances

around cautiously. “Proper *good* sex, y’know?”

“Kris wasn’t... good?”

Victoria touches the tip of her index finger to her mouth, dipping her head downwards and peeking at me mischievously.

“Sorry!” I say, immediately. “I was kidding. I *so* don’t want to know the answer to that question. I actually know this guy, and I quite like him. You don’t have to – please don’t—”

“No, it’s fine. I haven’t gotten the chance to talk to anyone about it, so I might as well tell you.” She pauses. “And... to answer your question... to be honest, I wish I’d gotten a better chance.”

I’m confused, which must be evident from the blank look I give her.

“Stale-drunk, moping over his wife... yeah,” she explains. “It was over and done with before I’d gotten a chance to process it. Totally not his best, I’m sure. Gosh, I *hope!*”

I’m giggling now, unable to control myself. “I find *that* hard to believe as well. He looks... well, come on, he’s... seriously, it was... *bad?*”

“It was... not *bad*, just not what I expected.” She bursts out laughing. “I’m terrible... I know! I did *so* much damage... and I’m here complaining I didn’t get properly laid! But going into it, it must have crossed my mind that I was going to ruin my relationships with all of my closest friends. I know his wife Stacey through mutual friends, so when Bryan joined the company, we clicked easily. Bryan’s a fine piece of ass, but – probably *because* I knew Stacey – I never really looked at him in any kind of way. But when Kris came in, I was like – *hmmm*. Sure, he was dating someone, but I didn’t think it was that serious, to be honest. He was barely out of college. This was his first real job. Nicole was a damn waitress, for God’s sake! And she was his college girlfriend; that hardly ever lasts in real life! I kept waiting for them to break up, so I could ease up with the shameless flirting – which he brushed off, obviously – and make a proper move on the man. *Then* he got married, shortly after he joined *Subero/DaSilva*. I got over my wishful thinking... but I had a little work crush intermittently. We were close friends, all three of us; the musketeers at the office. Two married men... and me. I was like one of the boys. Which I like; don’t get me wrong. But I don’t think Kris ever looked at me like... a woman.”

“Well, being with Nicole probably put up blinkers to everything else with a vagina,” I note, pursing my lips.

She nods. “*Exactly*. So – we’ve worked together for several years, and he’d never looked at me *like that*. And then I finally had my chance – a crazy chance, but a chance I never really expected would happen, y’know? And going into it, I *knew* it would end badly. So afterwards I thought... if I was going to ruin my relationships with my best friends and coworkers... by God, the sex should have damn well been *better*.”

I shrug. “Well, that’s to be expected though, right? Maybe all first time sex is bad...”

She fixes me with a *look*. “Was first time sex with *Darren* bad?”

“Not at all. It was—” I feel my cheeks flush at the point-blank question, but I go on. “I know you must think I cheated on him because of the sex, but really... even though we were fumbling around at first when we were less experienced, it was always... well, pretty good.”

“See! And... first time sex with Gianni?” she prods. “Bad?”

“Oh hell *no*.” I laugh. “Gianni was... intoxicating.”

She grins. “Intoxicating? Well *that’s* a marked difference from how you described Darren. Go on, do tell.”

“No, no, missy. We’re not done with *you* yet,” I scold. “Don’t try to change the topic. So... mediocre sex with Kris? Start over... you started to tell me the story last time we had lunch... but I never understood exactly what happened. He was drunk, and some woman called you?”

“Oh... right.” She shoves a large chunk of cake into her mouth. “So... yeah. He had a huge fight with Nicole, he left, and then his car broke down, and he ran into this woman he knows, Michelle. She helped him with the car and took him to a bar nearby – I think she was trying to get into his pants, to be honest... she was a slutty-looking thing, and had on this mini-skirt with her titties bouncing over her top. But then Kris got *really* drunk, and she realised she was in way over her head. My phone number was in his call log... when she told me what was going on, I told her she had the wrong number and to call his wife... and she told me, she couldn’t... I asked why, she said it was a long story and she’d tell me when I got there. Then, when I got there she didn’t even help me get him into my car! She got into her car, and she’s telling me: ‘*Thanks for coming... he’s all yours now. Tell him I said good luck with everything*’ And I’m like: ‘*Wait a second. You can’t just leave me here. Not before you tell me what the FUCK is going on.*’ That’s when she told me... he left Nicole.”

“Oh my *God*. He... he *left* her?”

She rolls her eyes. “An exaggeration. He left her for like, a minute. Anyway... so I somehow got Kris into my car... we were two blocks away from my apartment when he vomited all over my car’s backseat, all over himself, all over me... I was literally carrying his entire body weight – little me! – because he was passed out... and I managed to get him into my kitchen. Where he promptly vomited *again*.”

“Wow. *Kris*? Damn, Nicole really did a number on him.”

“EXACTLY!” she exclaims. “So Kris was sick, and he had all these marks all over his body – he’d been in a fight.”

“With Nicole?!” I gasp.

“No, no... with his friend. Let me *finish*!” she insists.

“Sorry. Go on.”

“So yeah. I already knew I couldn’t call Nicole, from what Michelle said. I was so worried. I thought about calling Bryan, actually... and if I *had*, perhaps none of this whole mess would have happened. But I didn’t know what the hell was going on – he looked terrible, and with him passed out, I had very little context. And I didn’t know if he’d want *anyone* to see him like that. Bryan would have never let him live it down.”

“I can imagine,” I breathe, awed.

“So I got him from the kitchen and into my bathtub... got his clothes off – no easy feat, I tell you! – and did my best to clean him up.”

“So he was... naked?”

She fixes me with a stare. “Yes, you perv! He was naked. In my tub. Covered in vomit. Not quite my sexy fantasy scenario! I wasn’t exactly *checking him out*, at the time. I’ve heard stories about people who died from alcohol poisoning. So I was worried sick. And he was fucking *heavy*.”

“So he was comatose and then you guys started... going at it?” I grin. “Kinky.”

“No! Oh, for God’s sake, let me tell it!” she insists, waving her hands to shut me up, but she’s laughing heartily at my comments.

I laugh. “Sorry, sorry... go on!”

“Right!” She shoves another large chunk of cake into her mouth with the fork. “So I got him cleaned up, dragged him into my spare room and dumped him on the bed there... and spent the night cleaning up my entire house. It was *disgusting*. By the time I’d finished cleaning up, I hear him vomiting *AGAIN*... on my nice clean sheets.”

I’m laughing uncontrollably now. “Sorry, sorry – so sorry, *so* not funny. Go on.”

“So I dump him out of the bed, and then go to clean the sheets... and that’s when he woke up. He panicked – he remembered Michelle hitting on him, and then he woke up naked... so he thought something had happened with *her*. I explained how he got there... and I wanted answers. I chased him to go shower... and I was being the good supportive friend, kissing his forehead and saying nice things... but it wasn’t weird or anything – I just felt so *bad* for him,” she reminisces. “I wanted to take care of him. I got him an Alka-Seltzer, and when he was clean, he crawled into my bed in a towel.”

“And all this time – no naughty thoughts?” I ask, smirking.

“You’d be surprised... absolutely *never* crossed my mind,” she insists. “He was moping about Nicole, and I was convincing him to go back to her. I told him all kinds of gushy stuff I’d never really told him before – it was just the time, I guess, to be super-supportive... I told him that he had no idea how much he was loved, that he was fucking amazing, but he takes on too much, that marriage is

hard, that he puts up with too much bullshit, that while I was the least likely person to *ever* be on Nicole's side, he needed to talk to her..."

"So... how did it get from *that* convo to... whipping off the towel?"

"I guess it's been a kind of running joke among the three of us – Kris, Bryan and me... that I sleep around... but I don't, not really. Not anymore, at least. I had a... well, a scare... a few years ago." She looks up at me, all joviality gone from her face as she adds in a whisper: "I think... I think I might have... had something happen to me."

I clap my hand over my mouth, dropping my fork with a clatter onto the ceramic plate. "Vicki!"

"I'm not sure. I'm still not sure," she whispers. "I can't believe I'm telling you this. I can't believe I told *Kris* this."

"What... what happened?" I ask.

"I went to a party... a friend of a friend of a friend... and I woke up feeling drugged, in the bathroom. I had my clothes on but everything disheveled. The party was still going on. I fled downstairs and hopped in a cab. I ended up going back the next day for my car and my purse."

"Oh my God," I murmur, and again: "Vicki!"

"It was a long time ago." She looks away, focusing her eyesight on the waiter as he delivers a tray to the table beside us.

"You didn't report it?"

"I have no idea what happened, I don't even remember anyone. Maybe I'd been totally into it, maybe not. *Something* had clearly happened – I certainly felt it *down there* – but... complete blackout. There was nothing I could say of any use... so I just... buried it. It happened in December of 2000. I did all the pregnancy and STD testing and I was fine but... yeah, it put a screeching halt to my partying."

"Well, *that* explains the camera taser," I say, with a grim smile. "I do remember you saying something, that night at *Prohibition*."

"Yep." She sighs. "Christmas is always the worst time for me... all the bad stuff happens around that time. So... it happened, or *something* happened. And I shook it off. I actually told Kris soon after it happened... but not in a serious way. I was joking about having sex at a party, and he teased me about my party habits. So, that morning when he was in my bed and I told him about it... he was shocked I hadn't ever *properly* told him, and he was upset that I buried it. He had something similar happen to his sister, when they were kids. So we were talking... about serious stuff. I had never felt so close to him before. And I was *still*, at this point, trying to get him to go home to his wife."

"Meanwhile, I'm guessing that intermittent crush...?"

"In full gear again," she replies, with a grim nod. "He was just so – *perfect*. Clearly, a completely fucked-up mess at that very moment in time... but *my*

fucked up mess, y'know? Just for a bit.”

“Aw, Vicki.” I can feel her pain. Unlike *my* husband who was always rough around the edges (which is a nice way of saying he can be a total dick), Kris Gellar is the man you bring home to your family: sweet, thoughtful, and easy to love. A difficult crush to harbour for several years while you spend almost every waking moment working alongside him.

“So I gave him his underwear, which was the only thing that had finished washing and drying, and my roomiest track pants. He got dressed. We were goofing around. He said he knew how much I wanted him in my bed – a joke. And I said that’s what I get for my hospitality... and then he said no and he hugged me... kissed my cheek...”

“Oh, Vic.” I regard her with a pitying look.

“Yep.” She exhales, then drags a hand across her mouth. “But nothing happened *then*. I left the room to call in sick to the office – I was going to take the day off... and when I came back in, Kris was looking at a photo I had on my dressing table... a picture of me and him, taken some years back at the office Christmas party. It was just a cute pic, and one I’d kept because we look – well, together. It was dumb. But I just liked the pic... wishful thinking, I guess. I forgot I even had it there. So he saw that I’d kept this picture of him and me on my dressing table for years... and accused me of having a thing for him. First, I tried to brush it off, but he kept pushing the issue...”

I’m enthralled, my empty fork clutched in my hand as I stare at her.

“I pushed him to get him to move away from me... and then he grabbed my wrist and kissed me.”

“Wow,” I breathe. “Wow! He kissed you first.”

“So...” She trails off. “So, yeah. I would *never* have... I was trying to get him to go back to Nicole! I was trying so hard... and then there he was, kissing me. And touching my face.”

“Wow.”

“I asked him what he was doing... I couldn’t even look at him. I told him stop it; he was drunk. And then he was facing me, and he pulled me closer to him – and he was...” She looks up at me. “Well... *hard*. In my pink track pants!”

“Oh *God*.” I clap both hands over my face. The neglected fork clatters noisily again.

“He apologised – *apologised!* – that he was a horny drunk. And then...” She exhales. “Yeah. The end.”

“The *end?*” I ask. “You’re kidding, right... what happened next?”

“That was it.” She shrugs. “Clothes came off, it was all lips and tongues and skin and hair and sweaty and hot for like – a few minutes. ”

I snicker. “Seriously?”

“*Literally*... I called him ‘five-minute man’, but sweetie... I was being *so*

generous. I think he barely made it past *two*. He hadn't been with anyone but Nicole for the better part of a decade. So it was hot, and then it was *so* not. It was just... *awkward*. It was like... he knew what he was doing was wrong, but he'd already made up his mind to do it, so he just wanted to get it over with. And then he like, *collapsed* on top of me, and was this big hunk of a sweaty, sad mess on my bed. Like, he just withdrew into himself... like he wasn't mentally *there*. So I pushed him off and crawled out from under him, and he was just lying there staring at the ceiling like a dazed zombie for a bit before he found words. It was literally... like, the worst sex ever. Okay, maybe not the *worst*... I mean, I'm sure I've had even more awful experiences in college when keg parties practically turned into orgies... but... yeah. Really, *really* bad. And then he kept apologising, and I was desperately trying to spare his feelings... meanwhile, all I could think of was... I let myself cross the line... for *this*? Just such a *huge* disappointment. But anyway, we laughed it off... I told him I wish I could keep him, but I knew it wasn't real. And that I'm sure he has much better sex with Nicole... and I didn't want it to be awkward with us at the office."

"Well, he took what you said to a tee," I point out.

"I know." She groans. "I know I was *saying* it, and I meant it at the *time*... but... still. Anyway, we stayed in bed for a while... just talking. I told him about my sister's wedding. It was so great... I didn't need the sex, to be honest. It was the companionship that I was craving. If it wasn't for that picture... and him *realising* I was attracted to him... then maybe the day would have been perfect. We were gonna spend the day like that... talking, cooking, chilling out... but then Bryan called... and then he showed up... and he said Kris' daughter was missing. So Kris left with him... he went back to Nicole, hours after he'd just left her."

"Wow," I utter again. "Well, obviously, they found his daughter."

"Oh, yeah... she'd gone by Carrina's place – where Darren's shindig is happening tomorrow," she replies, waving a hand dismissively. "I found out from *Bryan* that she was okay, so I called Kris – I was a little pissed off he hadn't even given me a call since he left my house. But... he was back home. Brought home by his little brat, granted... but he stayed. It's what I *said* I wanted... what I wanted... what I *should* want..."

"But...?" I probe, gently.

"But *now*... now that I've had the mediocre sex with the man I used to be infatuated with... I can't get his ass out of my mind," she adds, in a fierce whisper. "I know – incredibly unhealthy! But he has the cutest star-shaped birthmark on his ass, and every time I see him now, at the office, it's all I can think about!" She buries her head in her hands again. "It's been torture... these past few weeks. I seriously thought about quitting."

"Oh, no!" I exclaim. "Seriously? Oh, Vicki. That's crazy."

“I *know*. But I’m just so mad at myself... for getting into this situation. I’ve always gotten along better with men – and Kris and Bryan were my boys... y’know? I can’t believe I fucked that up. For what? Five – well *two* – stupid minutes? And I knew... I *knew* he would never leave Nicole. It was... stupid,” she states, flatly. “I mean, I knew *that*. I didn’t *expect* him to leave her. But I thought he’d at least stay away from her for a little while. I never *saw* myself as a home-wrecker... it’s not exactly in my big, grand plan for myself... but I thought, I guess I must’ve thought... hell, I don’t know *what* I thought. I just didn’t think it would be over and done with and wrapped up so tidily; so quickly. But he slept with me and was back in his house with her the same day, like nothing had happened. *The infamous Nicole.*” Her last words have a nasty tinge.

“Ahhh, her.” My smile is rueful. “Infamous indeed.”

“I’m guessing... you’re not a fan of Nicole?” she asks, smiling.

“I... well, I barely know her.” I admit, and then, striving my best to be politically correct, I add: “I’m sure she’s a lovely person.”

An amused smile tugs at her lips. “Oh, please. You don’t fool anyone, Luisa Hart. Come again.”

“I met her... literally, once,” I say, defensively. “And she was sweet, that one time. But I...”

“You fucking *hate* her,” she finishes, nodding emphatically and pointing her right index finger at me.

“*YES!*” Now that I’ve said it aloud, shared it with someone else, it is a relief to laugh about it. “I know it’s crazy... trust me, I *KNOW!*”

Victoria laughs. “No worries, babe. I hate her too. For no reason except... she exists.”

I chuckle along with her. “Precisely.”

“*That bitch* gets to have him!” she exclaims. “Why? For the love of God, why? Any woman would dream to have a guy who looks even half as good, or is even half as sweet, or who does even a quarter of what he does... I mean, have you *seen* this man with his kids?”

“I *have*, actually,” I affirm, amused. “It’s cute.”

“Cute? Oh, hell. My ovaries *explode* every time he brings his kids to the office. Last year when we worked late because of the VivaSalon account, and also when we did that pro-bono ad shoot, I offered to watch his son... honestly, just so I could see Kris whole evening, as I knew he’d keep checking in on him!” she admits, and then wails: “Luisa... *I don’t even like kids!*”

“Oh, my God.” I clap my hands over my mouth, trying not to laugh. “Vicki!”

“I know!” she moans. “Kids are sticky and smelly – no offense, Mama Bear! – and honestly, the older I get, I’m not entirely sure it’s the path for me. But... if I had a man like *that*... lordie, I’d have his kids in a heartbeat.”

I chuckle at that. “Well, I guess that’s how Nicole probably felt. She doesn’t strike me as the mommy type, either. But with Kris...”

“I guess. But if I *did* have a guy like that, I’d hang on for dear life. And she just... argh.” There’s a pause for a beleaguered sigh before she continues. “She’s pretty, hell she’s sexy – I get *that*. But... *argh!*” She grimaces. “It’s been hard, being his friend, hearing the odd tidbit he would drop about her... and knowing that he is this awesome guy that I would have loved to have a chance with... to treat him better than she does.”

“Well, try being *me*,” I say. “It’s easy to fade in comparison to Darren’s star girl.”

“Ahhh. Hmm,” she says, but doesn’t comment further.

“I suppose you assume, I can tell you do... that I cheated on Darren for the sex,” I state. “But that was never the problem.”

“Why *did* you, then?” she asks, curiously. “You keep emphasising this point, but at the end of the day... affairs are usually about sex.”

“Once Darren is up for it, he’s all in,” I admit. “He’s... zero to a hundred and fifty, in a split second. Very... er, what’s the word?... *responsive*. I’ve never had – well, *lazy* sex with him. So *that* wasn’t the problem. The problem was—”

“Let me guess: Nicole.”

“Precisely. I know it’s ridiculous – trust me, *I know* – but since she walked into his life, something just kind of shifted... with us...” I trail off, looking away. I’ve never voiced this aloud to anyone else. I’ve barely dared to form the thought to myself. “She seemed... like the sun in his world. I guess – I wanted to be that. And Gianni—”

“You were his sun,” she breathes, fascinated. “Well you *would* be, girl. Look at you.”

“I got caught up in being that, to someone. I think I used to be that, to Darren. Until Nicole.” I pause. “How well do you know Nicole?”

“Well enough, I guess. I mean, we’ve been *around* each other often enough. She’s been to his office, and at the photo shoot for the VS project. And I’ve been to their house. A couple times, Kris managed to cajole me into staying for dinner. Bryan and Stacey are pretty good friends with them, and we’ve tried to be a big happy group... but I was always the odd one out. Couples with kids... and single, childless me... yeah, it never really meshed well. Nicole and I never really hit it off, and Kris eventually gave up on the whole group love thing.” She shrugs. “So I guess I know her *enough*. She’s certainly not a fan of mine. She wasn’t, *before* I slept with her husband, so imagine *now*.”

“Well... imagine being married to the male version of her.”

She leans back, shrugging off a shudder at the thought. “Seriously?”

“Darren has always been this... force of nature. I know he’s good-looking enough to get away with a lot... but I still can’t figure it out, sometimes,” I

explain. “I’ve known him for so long, and yet he can still be... unpredictable. His brain... how he thinks... he’s brilliant. He has a way of talking to people that can get them to do *anything*. And people respect him, even when they hate him...” I wonder if I dare go further. I’d almost told her, the last time we’d had lunch together, but I’d been interrupted by Lee. *What could it hurt?* “Hey... remember you said, once, that you can keep a secret?”

“Yeah...”

“I’m about to tell you something.” I take a deep breath, place my fork down on the table and look her in the eye.

“Okay...” She mimics my gesture, putting her fork down and placing both palms flat on the table between us. “Well, I’ve trusted you with my gory story... so, by all means...”

“My youngest daughter...” I take a deep breath. “Well... that’s why I met Raffaele, recently... and that’s why I see Gianni, still.”

“Oh my God!” she exclaims, both hands flying to her mouth. “*No.*”

“We did the test soon after she was born.”

“We?” she repeats. “So Darren... Darren knows?”

“There was a chance... she could have been his,” I add. “A pretty good chance actually... so... I hoped... we hoped... but... well, yeah.”

Now it’s her turn to say it: “*Wow.*”

I nod. “So... I’m all kinds of shades of more fucked up than you.”

“Yep, you’ve got me beaten there. So Gianni always knew?”

I shake my head. “I broke up with him almost four years ago, and told Darren it was over. He decided to stay with me... and *then* we found out I was pregnant. He still stayed. When I broke up with Gianni, I didn’t know what would happen when I told Darren. I thought he would leave. I took the risk to be alone. But that was *before* I knew I was pregnant,” I explain. “I never really told Darren much about Gianni – maybe he always assumed Kady’s father was a fly-by-night asshole who wouldn’t take care of a kid. To be honest, I had no idea *what* Gianni would have thought. He was young; we’d never talked about kids, not even my *existing* kids. I’d deleted his number out of my phone. I had no intention of *ever* telling him. But then... then I ran into him last year.”

“Wow,” she says again. “So... what happened?”

“Kady was with me, when I ran into him. Needless to say, he was angry at me for never telling him he had a daughter. He threatened to contact my husband, if I didn’t let him see her. So for a few months, I arranged for them to spend time together. Then he gave her this teddy bear. Darren found it last December... and he flipped out.” I hesitate, not wanting to go further. Sure, she’d just told me about her possible rape a few years back, but this is different. She *knows* Darren. He is her client. She’ll never look at him the same way, if she knows about the incident in the bedroom. “He was... angry,” I add, shortly. “We

had a big fight... he left... and I took the kids and went to my parents' house for a few weeks over Christmas break. I thought about getting a divorce but my friend Rebecca, who is a lawyer, warned me it would get nasty and I might lose custody because of the affair. So... I went back to him."

"Luisa... wow. That's a – it's a lot to take in." She manages a tiny, supportive smile. "Well, *now* I see why you didn't have time to call me after my sister's wedding. You've been dealing with a lot, sweetie."

"I have," I admit. "Darren's met Gianni, now."

She quirks an eyebrow. "*That* doesn't sound good."

"And it keeps getting weirder." I hesitate. *Should I tell her... even more? She's taken everything I've said so far pretty well...* "Last week, he volunteered to be the babysitter at one of Gianni's visits."

She picks back up the fork again, and viciously spears a large chunk of chocolate cake. "Seriously? He... wow..."

"*And...*" I add, holding her gaze to make sure I get her full attention. "*Then* he came home and threw me down on the kitchen counter."

"*What?*" Her eyes widen. "You mean – he hit you?"

"Nope." I shake my head. "In the... other sense."

"Wait... wait. He spent time with Gianni, and then..."

"Yes." I can't believe I'm sharing this with another living soul – I can barely believe I called *Gianni* after it happened. But I do need a sounding board. Someone has to make sense of this. And Vicki Mendoza seems like she would have a clue.

"Let me get this straight. Darren Hart..." She says his name like Rebecca does, with the awed undercurrent of referring to a celebrity. "Darren Hart spends the afternoon with your former lover... and his baby's real father... then comes home and has *sex* with you?"

"I wish it were that simple." I lower my voice and lean forward over the table, aware of the surrounding chatter of *Olivier's* that has risen swiftly as the lunch hour unfolded. "He didn't just come home and *have sex* with me. Darren came home... and reenacted a *porn movie* in my kitchen, okay?"

She pulls her lips in to halt the laughter, but her eyes are dancing. "Well, girl... was it good?"

"It was – mind-blowing." I pause. "And scary."

She snickers. "Scary, good?"

"Scary, *scary*," I emphasize. "I was like, who the hell *is* this man? *That's* not my husband."

"So... what's he usually like?"

"Like I said, we've always been good," I say, cagily. I'm not the type of woman to discuss sex with anyone, but I've long since taken a detour from the usual friendship cycle with this woman. "I mean, we used to have more sex at the

beginning, before kids, but that's to be expected. But generally, once we *do* get things going, he usually makes sure... well, that I'm happy by the end of it. And I know I'm fortunate, as far too many women complain about their men in *that* department! But... well, let's just say he's obsessive about things... so after the first few times, when we were still kind of getting to know each other's tastes and preferences, he soon learnt what worked and what didn't... and we found our rhythm, our stride. So... yeah... that night was a whole different ballpark."

"I'm sorry... this is really personal," she admits. "But I'm also in dire need of living vicariously through someone else since I've been having very little sex recently, and terrible sex at that! So... what was different? Come on, woman, talk plain. Don't be a Stacey!"

"I'm a Luisa," I reply, with a smile. "And I'm a lady too, you perv!"

She laughs. "Hey, you brought it up."

"No, no – *you* asked me, earlier! 'First-time sex', remember?"

"Well, you brought it *back* up, out of nowhere. Clearly you want to talk about it. So if you're gonna talk about sex with your husband – sex with your hot husband – hot sex with your husband! – then you'd better stop dancing around the issue!"

"Fine. Do not tell a *soul*, or I will kill you." I inch closer to her over the table, lowering my head and my voice. "It was... crazy. It was wild. It was fast. You've seen him, right... well, he's a big guy – strapping guy, tall and broad-shouldered and *solid*. Large hands... grabbing me everywhere."

Twisting my breasts. Dick-slapping me in the face.

I choose not to add these.

Pulling up my top just enough to cover my face and pin my arms, so I couldn't move... holding me up to go down on me, while I was practically upside down.

I can't bring myself to say any of this. My face is growing warm just reliving that night. But Vicki is eagerly leaning forward, wanting more.

Picking me up, my legs around his waist, and slamming my back against the fridge, while I'm clawing at him desperately, in agony from the debilitating urgency of need, of desire. Grunting. Taunting me. Asking me if I wanted to get fucked.

I can't tell her, or *anyone*, any of this.

...And *this* will go to my grave:

...A hiss of a whisper in my ear, moments before I came:

—*I am fucking you, Luisa, so that you'll stay fucked.*

A large hand, clutching a fistful of hair at the back of my head...

—*I am fucking you, so that you'll remember me the next day, and the next, and the next. I am fucking you, Luisa... to scratch my name on the wall of your cunt...*

Thrust.

—*DARREN.*

Thrust.

—*WAS.*

Thrust.

—*HERE.*

The last word had pushed me over the brink, and I'd buckled against him, with my mind and body feeling like they had broken open. It was the most powerful orgasm of my life. The shuddering tremors, the surging pulse of explosions rocketing through me... his ragged breath, the agony of pleasure in my ear... his hands flexing on my ass, his eyes dark and delicious... his clenched cheekbone grinding into my cheek that still smarted from when he'd bit me... the solid weight of his body, crushing and slamming into me... the tight, steady rhythm of rocking that was abruptly halted by the clenching of the barrel-stomach above me... my own coiled tension surging towards unraveling my soul... the slickness of sweat that fused us together as my brain sparked and fluttered its submission: *colour and light, power and pain, desire and damage, love and lust.* His fingers, reaching down to touch the top of my clitoris and feel its last shudder, as if for verification; then slipping around his penis to touch between my legs to coat his fingertips in my sweet, sticky victory, before he leaned back to ease himself – inch by hot, thick, hard inch – out of me, which only intensified my aftershocks...

—*DARREN.*

—*WAS.*

—*HERE.*

I swallow, hard, at the flood of the memory. My face is ablaze. No, I'm certainly not sharing *that* with any soul, living or dead.

I barely know this woman, and despite our inappropriately sudden closeness, she *knows* my husband. She's doing *work* for my husband. She knows him *professionally*. I've already said far too much. Some things that happen in the bedroom – or the kitchen, in this case – should stay there. I reel back in the memory swiftly.

“Let's just say... there was nothing gentle about it,” I finish. “He was an animal... a caveman.” I don't add that I had bruises all over; that I could see his fingers imprinted in half a dozen places on my body afterwards. Not to mention

I was *sore* the next day.

“Yowza.” She exhales. “*Damn*, girl. You lucky bitch.”

My elbow on the table, I reach up to bite my fingernail. “I don’t know about ‘lucky’, Vicki. It was... something else.”

“Hm, Darren Hart. I’m not surprised, though. He certainly doesn’t seem like he’d be a *bore* in the bedroom. But *wow*. Your husband’s a sex god. Count your lucky stars, girl. Married folks don’t often fuck on the kitchen counter.” She pauses. “Well, except maybe Nicole.”

“Vicki!” I exclaim, covering my mouth to stop the snort of laughter.

She shrugs. “Oh, come *on*. It’s no secret the man is pussy-whipped.”

“Kris told you... about their sex life?”

“No. Not *me*, at least. But really, no one has to *tell* me anything.” She throws me a look. “I’m sure you’ve read her novels. They’re... well, the sex in them... dark stuff. A lot of it pulls from personal experience, I’m sure. I totally understand why you hate her.”

“I don’t *hate* her,” I mutter. “I just – I feel like... she *took* him, from being mine. If that makes sense.”

“She’s just... interesting.” Vicki chooses the word with care. “Just like Darren. You don’t forget having met a Darren or a Nicole. But anyway, we’re getting off-topic,” she points out. “*You* were telling me about the crazy hot sex with your hot husband. That’s amazing. And *good*, that you guys still get freaky at this stage, so many years later and three kids in. And you should be grateful you have a husband that can still knock your socks off, girl. A husband that, might I add, happens to run his own company, is smart, and fine as hell... add sex god to the list... I mean, come *on*. On his worst day, you have to admit... he’s still one hell of a catch.”

My quick exhale of breath is shaky. “My husband is... my greatest strength. He has been with me, from the beginning. He’s the first man that treated me right. I tend to fall for assholes... always have... but he’s only an asshole to other people – he was always good to me. Until *I* messed up, at least. I remember in the earlys, when I was pregnant with Jordan, Darren was just... amazing. I was so scared; I thought I was going to die – literally, it was *such* a bad pregnancy... and he kept rescuing me. He’s always been... rescuing me.” The emotion surges in my throat as I take a breath and continue. “Back then, and even *now*, even when he says things I don’t like to hear, even when he’s being *difficult*... he’s protected me; protected us. Darren is... a lot of things, and sure, he is far from perfect and more than a little of a workaholic... but when it comes to the big stuff... he was always *there*, even when I really didn’t deserve for him to be.” My voice is breaking, and I need to pause. “I know you see him *now* and think he’s this cold-hearted businessman, or this charismatic hotshot... and he *is*... but I remember when he *wasn’t*. I remember when he was everything I could have ever

hoped for, in someone to share my life with.”

“And... now?” she asks, gently.

“*Now*, I can’t talk to him.” My laugh is forced. “He took me back, after I slept with another man. He *stayed* with me... while I had another man’s *baby*. Do you have any idea how *insane* that is?”

“Well, sweetie... Darren Hart isn’t the rainbows and butterflies guy,” she advises. “He’s the one you call when you’re standing over the dead body with the murder weapon in your hand. You’re ridiculously lucky to have *that* guy. You can’t expect him to be the other kind.”

“I *know* that. And he was that... *is* that guy. But... it’s just never been the same, since. Because... I mean, you just said it... he’s one hell of a catch. So, what kind of asshole am I, to cheat on a man like that?”

“Oh, honey.” She purses her lips. “I mean... nobody’s perfect. He sure isn’t.”

“I screwed everything up... and now, when he acts all – *volatile* – it’s my fault.” I yank my finger out of my mouth to stop biting my fingernail. “Sex has been touch-and-go ever since he knew about Gianni. So... what happened last week... was crazy.”

“Crazy *good*... you liked it,” she points out. “You *did*... like it, right?”

“Too much,” I admit. “I was *responding*, but I wasn’t *thinking*. I didn’t *think* until it was over. He was just *going at it*, like I was a goddamned prostitute. Like I said... it was like a porn movie was happening in my kitchen. It was just so bizarre. After all I’ve been through with Darren... I don’t *get* him. I don’t understand what makes him act like a damn lunatic, sometimes. It’s just... I can’t talk to him, about things.”

“So... what happened after the hot sex?”

“Nothing... he got it out of his system, I guess. Maybe that was my punishment... I don’t know. Or maybe he was trying to please me. I have no idea. I got – good and properly fucked; excuse my language. And then, it was over. We’ve barely spoken since... or at least we haven’t talked about what happened that day. He’s been busy at work, busy planning this event tomorrow, and busy with the pool we’re having built for the kids. So... it’s just been... weird.”

“Maybe he talked to Gianni about you,” she suggests.

“That’s what I thought at first – I even asked Gianni what the hell had happened, but he said nothing.”

I pause as the *rest* of the memory of that night comes rushing back. I’ve tried not to think about that night – not just the crazy-wild-sex part with Darren, but the part where I’d called Gianni shortly thereafter. We’d had... well, a moment...

—*I promise on the life of our daughter... not a peep, after tonight.*
—*P-pink tank top, blue panties.*
—*Atta girl! Brava!*

Pissed off that I'd called so late to talk about sex with my husband, of all things, he'd inveigled me to discuss a more worthy late-night topic: my attire. I'd indulged him.

For once, our animosity over the past few months had melted away, just for a short period, while we chatted like old friends – *okay, old lovers* – for a few minutes. The call had ended with a minute of silence I'd obliged him, a minute that I'd let myself remember exactly what it felt like to be in the centre of his universe – *okay, okay... in the centre of his bed.*

It was a moment I'd sorely regretted afterwards. I knew better. Gianni Alessandro Benedetto is a man that stays on your mind, if you let him through the tiniest crack. Fuck it, I *knew* better.

He'd kept to his word, at least – he hadn't even glanced at me sideways the next couple of times we'd seen each other for him to spend time with Kady.

It was like it had never happened.

Which is what we'd said, that night. Which is what I insisted I wanted. Which is what I want. *Right?...*

I clear my throat noisily, forcing my mind to circle back to the present with Vicki. "So... Gianni said nothing had happened, and I *want* to believe him. But that's what I can't stand about Darren... he has a way with people. He figures people out, and then manipulates them to get what he wants. I encouraged him, actually, and pushed him into being the babysitter a few weeks before that last time... *knowing* they might talk. Knowing he might be an asshole, and piss Gianni off. It's what I expected... for him to be the big bad wolf to push Gianni away, or to find a solution to the mess with my daughter. I couldn't deal with Gianni, so I wanted him to."

"Maybe that's what he's doing – dealing with Gianni," she says.

"By screwing me senseless?" I ask, sceptically.

She laughs. "Well, after Gianni just came back into your lives, maybe Darren's finally facing up to the sex part of the equation. Now, he's showed you that he *knows* how to rock your world. Making sure that you don't go looking elsewhere for sex, ever again."

"I've learnt my lesson, and *that* was never going to happen," I say. "Gianni was... a distraction. I mean, you've seen the man."

"He is very distracting," she agrees, smiling. "Very... well, very *not* Darren. Darren's – well, a big strapping man, like you said."

"Precisely. Gianni's... sure, he's a few years older now... but..."

"But... you don't build a life... with a boy," she finishes for me, stating the

words with care.

I twist the side of my mouth thoughtfully. “Exactly. You do *not*. I let my mind get away from me for a moment... it was intoxicating. I’ve never been with someone who treated me like... *that*.”

“Like what?” she asks, curiously.

“He acted like I was out of his league – like I’m this refined older woman, when I felt it was the other way around – that he was this gorgeous young man who could have anyone, and that he was out of *my* league,” I continue. “He was infatuated with me. He would make fun of the fact that I had money. He thought I was amazing... sophisticated. Wonder Woman.” I laugh. “It was nice, flattering – to be thought of like that, but that’s not me.”

“Of course not. Wonder Woman is a brunette,” she teases, smiling.

I roll my eyes at her. “You *know* what I mean! I was just different, I guess, from his usual type of woman. So it was easy for him to look at me and see all the best parts of it – an older woman who was ‘fancy’, compared to him. But he was taking it too far... he wanted me to leave Darren. To be with him.”

“Wow. What did you say?”

“What could I say?” I shrug. “He was sweet, and fun, and sexy. He was the first man I was attracted to who wasn’t an asshole. At all. He was – *is* – a really, really good guy. A Kris type, I guess – without the cheating drunkenness, I mean. You know, the guy that ticks all the boxes. Charming, cute, thoughtful.”

“But...”

“But *young*,” I explain. “And I knew that those rose-tinted shades would come off the moment he grew up and saw the whole picture. I wasn’t Wonder Woman. I wasn’t fancy. I was just in a different tax bracket. A tax bracket *I* didn’t even earn – my husband put me there. I was just a girl who hadn’t really lived yet.”

“Do you still think the same about him... now that you’re spending time with him, years after the affair?” she asks.

“I try not to think about it, Vicki. I try not to remember all of that. We had fun times. He was always a thoughtful, sweet guy. Overall he is a great guy, and *that* hasn’t changed. He grew up a little, and I do recognise that. And he *is* a perfect guy... but not for me.” I sigh. “Like it or not – and some days, I *really* didn’t like it – but, I’d already chosen my guy. And sure, Darren’s a whole bag of asshole sometimes, but... on Gianni’s best day, he wasn’t my Darren.”

“Wow.” She pulls the fork out of her mouth, chewing thoughtfully. “You really love him, don’t you?”

“I do,” I say, surprising myself by the conviction in my tone, but then I decide to own the feeling. “I always have. I know I don’t *act* like it sometimes but... I went back to him. I’d do it again, if I had the chance. But I wonder, sometimes... if *he* would have made the same decision, if he hadn’t agreed to

stay with me, *before* he knew I was pregnant.”

She closes her eyes, and waits a moment before opening them again to look at me. “Then you need to *tell* him that, *ask* him that, *talk* to him. Not just sit and let that keep on festering... and then he comes home after an evening with Gianni, and thinks he has to try so hard with you.”

“I find myself at a loss, sometimes... when I try to talk to him,” I admit. “There’s so much we *haven’t* said over the years, y’know? Every time there is a chance... he would say something hurtful and throw it back to what I did with Gianni. And while I *hate* him for always, *always* going there... he’s right. I’m always going to be the bad one, the one who cheated. He’s always going to be the saint. And he’s never going to be secure in knowing that I’m done with the affair. But trust me... I’ve made my mistakes. I’ve learnt my lesson.”

“Same here,” she chimes in, placing her fork down on the table. She gazes at the cake, giggling. “Wow, we just ate half a cake.”

“Indeed.” I look at my watch. “Yikes, it’s been over an hour.”

“Time flies when you’re having fun,” she says, smiling.

“Fun? I don’t know about fun, but I do feel like a weight’s been lifted, talking to you.”

“Same here, babe.” She grins. “Should we split the rest of this?”

“Oh God, I don’t know if I can eat any more.”

“I’m sending it back for your mini-mogul brother boss, then. Add some carbalicious junk to that cutie-patootie little trunk of his.”

As I roll my eyes at the inappropriate comment, she waves at a nearby waiter, and holds up two fingers to indicate for him to split it up. He takes the platter away from the table.

“Look, Vicki... I haven’t told anyone about Gianni, about Kady... not even my parents know,” I say. “I only recently confided in my lawyer friend, and now you. And... I think Kris might know...”

“Kris? What does *he* have to do with any of this?”

“He saw me once at the park, when I was meeting Gianni... I ran into him and his son,” I explain. “He was leaving when Gianni came up to us. I don’t know if he saw. And another time, I ran into him at Kady’s school before we were going to meet Gianni, and she said his name. And though he’s never *said* anything to me – I mean, that would be *wildly* inappropriate – I just feel like he *knows*.”

“Oh. Hm.” She shrugs. “Do you think... wait... you think... you think Darren told Nicole?”

“I don’t know,” I answer. “I know very little about their actual interaction, at the office. I never saw the two of them in the same room until late last year, and then I was barely there for fifteen minutes when I had to leave. But... he adores her. And he doesn’t exactly have a lot of friends. If there *was* someone he

would tell...”

“Look, don’t overthink it,” she advises. “Even if he *did*... I don’t see why she’d have any reason to abuse the information, or to share it with a wider audience. Darren would only have trusted her if she was worth the trust. So *you*, ma’am... *you* have to trust your husband.”

The waiter returns and places two boxes on the table, and hands Vicki the bill in a folded booklet.

“My treat,” she says, chucking some bills of cash into the booklet and standing before I even get a chance to take out my wallet. “I’m parked a block away. Your office is a little further, but I’ll walk you back before I head off. Let’s go.”

“This was nice... honestly,” I comment, rising from my chair to follow her swift departure. “We should do it again sometime.”

“Most definitely.” She points at her car as we pass by it, the little lime-green VW Bug car that was my escape route that night at *Club Prohibition*. “Kris paid for a serious deep cleaning and re-upholstering.”

“Poor guy. I’m sure he’s sorry... not just the car, but... y’know.”

“Luisa, do you think... I took advantage?” she asks, stopping abruptly and turning to face me.

“*No*,” I say, purposefully. “He kissed you first.”

“Does that even matter?”

“Of *course* it matters.”

“Did Gianni kiss you first?”

I think about it. “Well... yes.”

“Was *he* taking advantage?”

“No,” I admit. “I wanted it. Hell, I was practically begging for it.”

“But *you* didn’t just walk out on your husband, like a minute before,” she points out. “So... I took advantage. Plus, he’d been drinking...”

“Look – Kris was in a bad place, sure,” I agree. “But that doesn’t mean he was stupid and had cause to do what he did. By that point, he certainly wasn’t drunk enough for it to be an advantageous situation, and it wasn’t like you jumped him. He realised you were attracted to him. *He* was up for it. He figured that if he made a move, *you’d* be up for it. And, instead of getting the hell out of your apartment, he slept with you. So no, you didn’t take advantage. Maybe *he* did... he knew how you felt, and he still went for it.”

“I didn’t think about it like that,” she replies, turning back to continue walking.

“I was in a confused place when I kept going to Gianni’s apartment. But I *knew* I was married,” I continue. “I knew I had responsibilities. I knew I had a husband who loved me, despite the frequent inappropriateness with his employee. And maybe I wanted to hurt him. Maybe that was all it was. So,

maybe Kris wanted to hurt Nicole. But Kris was *your* friend, who'd just found out you liked him... *had* liked him, for ages." I pause at a crosswalk, waiting for her to catch up with me. "So trust me, *you* weren't the one taking advantage."

"You're just saying that," she mutters, as she falls into step with me.

"I'm *not*," I state, firmly. "Look – Vicki, I haven't known you that long, and already I realise you're a good friend. Kris has known you for years. Sure, you might act a certain way, but he *had* to have known – *even if* he thought you sleep around, *even if* he thought sex meant nothing to you – somewhere, deep down, he must've known he was crossing the line. Not just with Nicole. Somewhere, deep down, he must have known he was crossing the line with *you*. So sure, you threw away a friendship for a quick thing, but so did he. *I* don't blame Gianni for what happened with us. All he did was fall too hard, too fast. *I* was the one tripping over myself to be flattered by a young boy when I knew better. So trust me, Kris is the bigger bad guy here. *You* weren't married. *He* was."

"Thanks." We're in front of *LiloHart Designs* now, and as we both stop walking, she turns and hugs me tightly.

At first, I'm surprised at the sudden display of affection – in the middle of the street, no less – but I recover quickly and return the hug.

She pulls away just as suddenly, and flips her long braids to one side behind her shoulder nervously. "Sorry. I – I just, I really needed that." She's biting her lip, and her eyes are large and glassy.

"Hey-hey," I say, choked with emotion suddenly. "You'll be fine. You can always call me – for anything. I've been a sucky friend to not remember about your sister's wedding, but I'll be better, I promise. And *please* don't quit your job. You're the Head of Finance, and I've been to that company and *seen* how they treat women. So I *know* it must have taken you ages to get there, and I'm sure you had to step on a bunch of boys' heads along the way. So, please... do *not* be that woman who throws it all away over some guy! Your job, your career, is worth more than all of this. Kris and Bryan will come around. Maybe it won't ever go back to the awesome threesome you had, but that's okay. It'll evolve into something bearable, eventually. But only if you stick it out. Give it time."

"I hope so. I guess – well, I'll see you." The confident pixie-hippie beauty is suddenly shy, floored by her own overly-emotional behaviour.

"And thanks for taking me out." I push open the heavy glass door. "It was really good. I had a great time."

"Luisa?"

I turn back, expectantly.

"I—" She's stammering, and the nervousness is back. "I wasn't going to tell you... I really wasn't... but... today's been so, *so* good to finally have a friend I can talk to." She can't look me in the eye. "And... I thought I'd be okay not telling you, but I can't *not* tell you, anymore... after... I didn't realise how you..."

how you felt about him.”

“About who?” I ask, baffled. “What are you talking about?”

“I thought – I thought you were just staying with him for the kids. Which is fine,” she adds. “I mean, people do that all the time. People have relationships, marriages, entire lives where they don’t live for themselves, and it’s all about the kids. I didn’t realise – I thought... last time we talked, you remember? I thought you fell for Gianni. I thought... you only chose Darren out of obligation. So I *wasn’t* going to tell you. But now, with what you told me about your daughter... and how Darren stood by you and how you feel about him... I can’t... not... I can’t *not* say anything—”

“Stop babbling,” I say, irked. “Just say it. Spit it out, whatever it is. Please.” I’m standing stock still on the pavement, my hand still holding open the glass door of *LiloHart Designs*, and I can already feel the heaviness descend upon me. *This is bad. Whatever it is, it’s bad.*

“Something happened with...” She clears her throat. “Darren... Darren kissed Nicole.”

“He... he *WHAT?*” My hand that’s holding the door falls limply, and I turn to face her as the heavy glass door swings closed.

“That’s why Kris walked out on Nicole, last year.” She searches my face, imploring me to not freak out. “He... he saw them.”

I can hear her voice, but it sounds distant. There’s a ringing in my ears.

“I’m sorry... I’m so sorry,” she says, her words still tumbling out rapidly. “That day we met, and I asked you what you like about Darren, and you had to think about it. I... I misunderstood. I thought... I didn’t realise... I didn’t see the whole picture. I do, now. And I can’t... I couldn’t... in good faith, continue to be your friend and not tell you.”

“*W-when? When... when did you sleep with Kris?*”

“I told you... in December.”

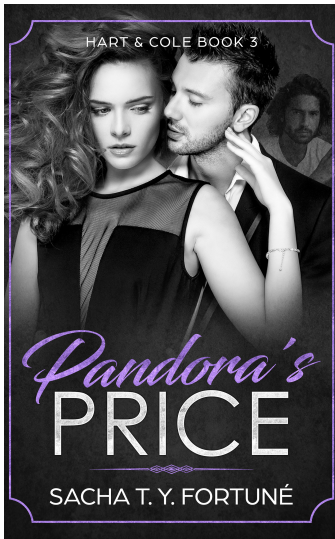
“December *when?*” I can barely get the words out, because I don’t need an answer. I already know. Already, I’m having that perceptive Darren moment – that prickling feeling crawling up the back of my neck.

“It must’ve been... a little while before Christmas, so... mid-December. The fifteenth or sixteenth, I think,” she says.

Of course. Of *course*.

“Luisa – I’m so sorry, to be the one to tell you. I should... I should go. If you’re still – if you’re still interested in my friendship, please give me a call later. Again, I’m really sorry.” With that, she walks away and heads back to her car.

And I’m left standing there, on the pavement in front of my new office, my whole world gaping out from under me.



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