



HART & COLE BOOK 2

Pandora's
POISON

SACHA T. Y. FORTUNÉ

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Pandora's Poison

Darren forgave his wife – or tried to –
years ago, but surviving the affair...
even raising her lover's child as his own...
is an entirely different concept
than actually having to deal with the man
pushing his way back into their lives
to seek his rightful place
with the daughter he never knew...

...If that really is all that Gianni wants...

Luisa felt it the moment she finally met the formidable Nicole –
the woman who had always crawled under her skin,
long before she herself developed a dangerous attraction
for a less complicated man
than the granite bastard she married.

But, as this beautiful man once told her:
there is always a choice...

Told from both points of view, “Pandora’s Poison” explores the forces that tear a marriage apart – infidelity, insecurity, and doubt... and brings to the fore the question faced in one’s darkest hour: Can you trust yourself?

“HART & COLE” SERIES:

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

~1~

Darren

1st January

Thursday 1st January. Happy New Year to me.

“Hello...?” I’m not sure what I expected when I finally came home, but it wasn’t this: silence.

The unfortunate thing about having a lot of money – and a wife who knows all too well how to spend it – is that you end up living in a very large house that echoes, making you feel even more alone.

I grab a soda from the fridge, and walk aimlessly around the house as I sip it. I’m delaying the inevitable. I need to make the call.

“What?” Luisa demands, after four rings. “I don’t have time for this, Darren. I’m not home—”

“I know. Because I am.”

“How long have you been back home?”

“About fifteen minutes. How long have you been not home?”

“About fifteen days. Look, I don’t have time to—”

“You’re at his place?”

“I’m not... obviously. You really think I’d take the kids and—” There’s an exasperated scoff, and then she says: “See... this... is why I don’t have time for this.” Click.

Somehow, that didn’t quite go how I’d planned. I’d had an image of me returning home to hugs from the kids and, most importantly, Luisa and I, the love of my life, sitting down and figuring out what to do about our marriage. I sigh, dialing her number again.

“Darren, listen—”

“No... you listen. I’m sorry for all that happened, and especially for just now. I just didn’t expect you to not be here. I’ll be home waiting for you, whenever you’re ready to come back.”

“Darren... I’m at a lawyer’s office.”

Feeling my feet give way, I sink into the living room sofa.

“Darren?”

“Where are the kids? Can I – can I talk to my kids?”

She sighs. “Darren—”

“Please.”

“We’re at my parents’ house,” she surrenders, finally. “I need some time. I didn’t want to be there when you came back.”

“Leave the lawyer’s office. Come home, Lou. Please.”

“Darren, it’s long overdue. Admit it.”

“Lou, I’m not giving you a divorce.”

“You’re not *giving* me a divorce?” she repeats, incredulously. “After what happened... after what you *did*... trust me, babe, I don’t need to ask. I gotta go.” *Click.*

My first instinct is to call Nicole. My stunningly beautiful best friend, best worker, best everything. But calling Nicole is no longer an option. Instead, I search my contacts for Luisa’s parents’ house.

“Hi!” sings the bright, piping voice of my seven-year-old.

“That’s not how you answer the phone, stupid!” Then, into the phone: “Hello, Galeota residence. May I help you?”

“Jordie.”

“Dad!” His professional voice dissipates.

The piping voice comes back. “Daddy?”

“Hey, Carm.”

“It *is* Daddy! Kady, it’s Daddy! Come say hi!”

“Dad-dy?”

“Hey, baby.” The twinge I get whenever Kady calls me ‘Daddy’ has dulled to a numb pain over the years.

“Miss you,” she says; then, hopefully: “Come to Grandma’s?”

“No, sweetie. You come home.”

“Mommy said—”

“Tell Mommy you want to come home, okay? Now, give the phone back to your brother.”

“Hey.” My ten-year-old’s casually-cool voice is back. “What’s up, Dad? You alright?”

“I’m good. I missed you guys at Christmas.”

“Yeah... the girls missed you too.”

“You didn’t?” I ask, sceptically.

“Nah, it’s cool to be the man of the house.” His tone drops into one of confidentiality. “Look, I know you and Mom are fighting. But she’s being all secretive and shit, y’know. Talking to me like I’m a little kid. Like I believe the bullshit she tells the girls.”

I ignore his language, which Luisa usually scolds him for. “What did she tell you guys?”

“That we’re visiting Grandma and Grandpa for Christmas, but you couldn’t come because you had to work. And Carmen was like: ‘Over Christmas?’ – you know how she whines! Mom said that you had legal issues at *Sunrise*, and the world of work doesn’t care whether it’s Christmas or not. I know about the lawsuit, but it’s not the *whole* truth. I heard her talking on the phone to the lawyer.”

“And... what do you think about that?” For all his youthful bravado and macho pride, my son is more sensitive than he lets on.

“Most marriages end up in divorce nowadays,” he states, matter-of-factly. “If you split, can I stay with you? School starts next week...”

“Since when are you anxious to go to school?”

“I’m *not*, but Grandma and Grandpa live too far away. So, can I live with you?”

I’m secretly flattered. *Wait*. “Why do you want to live with me?”

“I don’t want to switch schools. I’ve got friends, and... um... cuz you’re my dad... and... I love you?”

I’m tempted to burst out laughing, but I realise the absurdity of our hypothetical situation. “*Bull-shit*.”

“Would the truth affect my chances of getting to live with you?”

“Well—”

“Off the record,” he chimes in quickly.

I grin despite myself. I am our town’s resident media mogul. Not super-famous, not super-disgustingly-rich, but my name and my company are recognisable – and here’s my ten-year-old challenging me with the classic zeitgeist of the business. Chip off the old block. *Well, at least this child is yours...*

“Off the record,” he repeats. “Say it.”

“Fine, off the record.”

“I’ll be eleven soon,” he begins, speaking rapidly. “I don’t want to live with a bunch of girls. Mom’s home all the time; you’re not. You work a lot, so I’d have more freedom – which would be great when I hit puberty within the next year or eighteen months—”

“You’ve *decided* when you’ll hit puberty?”

“I have underarm hair.”

“Oh... er, congratulations, I think...”

“It’s not fuzzy yet... just a couple strands. No hair down *there* yet, but I’ll keep you posted. Anyway, I’d have a lot more freedom,” he gushes on. “And I love our house. It’s huge. And you’re the one that makes the money, right? So you’d get to keep the house? My friends are always super-impressed when they come over. Mom doesn’t work anymore... and even when she did, it wasn’t a cool job like yours.”

“Thanks... I think. Are you done?”

“I figured... y’know, a house with two guys... well, it’d be cool, if you and Mom *do* end up splitting up.”

“It’d be an absolute mess.”

“So? You can afford a maid.”

“I don’t want a maid.”

“I’ll clean it.”

“Hah!” Hilarious.

“Seriously,” he insists. “If it means I get to stay with you, I will.”

“Be careful, I may hold you to that. Hey, kiddo, where’re the girls? I really don’t want them hearing you talk like this...”

“They went to tell Grandma you called.”

“Oh.” More like: *Uh-oh*.

In a hushed whisper, he continues: “Yikes... she’s coming down the stairs now. Don’t worry, I’ll cover for you.”

“Thanks. Hey, Jordie? Take care of the girls for me, okay?”

“Sure thing,” he chirps. “So... you want us to come home, huh? No worries... I’m on it. Bye, Dad!”

I smile as the line disconnects. I love my kids. They’re funny, sweet, annoying, horrible, and amazing, all wrapped up in each of them. *Even the one that’s not yours.* The thought that I may lose them is terrifying. *Especially the one that’s not yours.* Luisa can take Kady away from me. Her real father has a biological right to see her; I don’t.

Over the last few days, my recent conversations with Nicole have been going through my mind on a constant loop: me telling her how much I need my wife and kids, and can’t risk losing them, especially Kady; her telling me to trust my gut and confront Luisa, even though I didn’t have proof she was cheating on me again.

Nicole is the only thing that’s held me together over the past six years she has worked for me, when my marriage began to gradually crumble to pieces. Meanwhile, I’d watched while *her* marriage blossomed from its initial honeymoon phase to a full-blown modern love story, and the dark ball of confusion in the pit of my stomach kept growing, sprouting new emotions of its own.

Envy. Anger. Resentment. Greed. *Desire.*

...Which, clearly, was not healthy.

Neither was me butting heads with her husband... oh, *several* times. I’ve fucked up royally. I realise this now, but it’s much too late.

Because stupid, idiotic, unhinged Darren found a weak moment – the tiniest crack in her armour – and viciously attacked it. I didn’t even realise I’d been waiting six years for that very moment... till I’d already done something stupid and it was too late to take it back.

So... what next?

No kids. No wife. No Nicole.

I do a mental search and discover, sadly, that the only thing left is work. I know I have to go back, but apart from the glaring lack-of-Nicole problem at the office, currently my job is a disaster zone.

One of my columnists had misquoted a powerful political asshole, and I'd signed off on hundreds of thousands of copies before he threatened to sue me for all I was worth.

Over the last two weeks, the only time I'd left the hotel was to meet with lawyers. On Christmas Eve, I finally agreed to pay an exorbitant sum and print a retraction. When I got back to the hotel, I fired Regina O'Halloran – the 'red-haired witch' as Nicole calls her.

Her boyfriend had answered the phone.

—*You're gonna fire her, aren't you? For fuck's sake, it's Christmas Eve.*

Usually I'd fall on my own sword to protect my staff, but in this case, getting rid of her was part of the non-negotiable deal I'd signed to save my company from financial and reputational ruin.

—*You know I have to. But I'm giving her a lovely severance package...*

While she took her cool time to get to the phone, he added:

—*That doesn't change the fact that you're a cock-sucker.*

My voice, devoid of any trace of Christmas joy, responded:

—*Believe me, kid, I know.*



Luisa

“If he fights you for custody, he might win. The mothers usually do, but he has access to good lawyers, the money, the high-profile job... and you've admitted to having an affair—”

“It was four years ago—”

“And apart from the incident—”

“Could you stop calling it that?”

“—Which amounts to ‘he-said-she-said’—”

“You think I'm *making it up*?”

“There’s no proof, there was no examination, and I’m sure there weren’t any significant... uh, indications. You need more.”

“He hasn’t been around the kids much. He works a lot.”

“Of course he works *a lot*. In comparison to you, who’s been home with them for the past few years, of course he’s away *a lot*.”

“I used to work—”

“*Used to*, past tense. You haven’t worked for almost four years, and seem to have no intention of doing so in the immediate future.”

“I’m going back to work as soon as possible, no matter what happens with us. How do you think I planned to support the kids?”

“Frankly? With your divorce settlement.”

“That’s a wee bit rude, don’t you think?”

“That’s a wee bit *honest*. Look, I’m not discouraging you because I get any pleasure out of it. I’m stating facts. You want to be my client. I want to be your lawyer. But I don’t think you have the resources to go up against Darren Hart, financial or otherwise. I know who he is, what he does, and how he operates. Whether or not you go back to work *tomorrow* is irrelevant. It’s too late. You can go to a dozen lawyers and they’ll tell you the same thing.”

I stand, my cheeks flaring. “I think we’re done here. Thank you.”

“Wait! Luisa...”

I turn back to my friend Rebecca Morgan-Miller, who I spent the better half of my childhood trailing behind; to whom my mother constantly measured me up my entire life because she was one year older, was getting top grades and was always stunningly beautiful, managing to bypass the awkward phase and morphing from cute preteen into the leggy brunette that all the boys chased. Her mother always boasted she’d become a doctor or a lawyer. And here she is now: a lawyer, thirty-eight, on her third tacked-on hyphenated surname, still childless, and still living in our hometown.

“You came to my office. You said to be a professional.”

“You’re getting pleasure, knowing that my marriage is a crock of shit. I remember when you were throwing yourself at Darren.”

“I was *not*.”

“It’s okay; everyone was. He was a fledgling media tycoon. Sexy, dynamic, and charismatic. I know what Darren was like back then. But I – I can’t do this anymore.”

“Well, sweetie, if you go up against Darren Hart—”

“Can you stop saying his name like he’s a movie star?”

“—If you go up against *Darren Hart*...” She grimaces. “You’re probably going to lose, and even with the greatest friend-reduction lawyer benefits... you’ll be broke at the end of it.”

“Maybe I should get a better lawyer,” I state, pointedly. “At least if I end up broke, I’ll get a good settlement.”

“Or you can get a better lawyer—” Rebecca smirks, ignoring my blatant disparaging of her career “—and get broke even faster. And *still* end up with nothing. It’s a gamble. The moment you serve him those papers, his stardom will explode. He’ll get the pity vote, and you’ll be the bitchy, money-grubbing wife. Farewell, pedestal... hello, fallout. If you marry a high-profile guy, your divorce is high-profile. No one will believe anything bad you say, even if you *did* have proof. And proof of *your* infidelity is toddling around calling him ‘Daddy’.”

“Fine. Score a million for Darren. What’s in my corner?”

“The good news is, no pre-nup. You were two fools in love. He didn’t even imagine how his career would take off. So if you *do* go up against him and manage to win... yeah, truckloads.”

“And what are my chances?”

“I’d say... 10-20%. A better lawyer—” Rebecca throws me a withering look. “A better lawyer would tell you 30-40%, because they want the case. I’m being honest. I want what’s best for you.”

“It’s best for me to stay with a guy who’s been pining after his employee for years – among other things I don’t need to rehash?”

“The ‘incident’... was, understandably, traumatic. But he’s your husband. Can you honestly say you feared he was going to hurt you?”

“I don’t know. *Now*, it doesn’t seem like it,” I admit. “But then – when it happened, when it *was* happening... he was just so *angry*. And at first, I thought it’d be okay and I was going along with it – I mean, surely every woman, at some point, has had sex when she wasn’t in the mood... and if *that*

was what it was going to take to get him to stop yelling at me, fine... but I was going along and he was *still* yelling, and then I saw this crazed look in his eyes. It just *shifted*. And I tried to get away and he wouldn't let me, and he was – he's never been physical with me... I mean in everyday life, and in bed as well. We've never done – any crazy S&M or anything.”

She grins, clucking her tongue and winking. “You should try it sometime, by the way. Maybe you'd like it.”

My jaw drops. I'm not used to talking about sex, and certainly not with Rebecca. I've not been a conscientious friend, and hadn't seen her in months before coming to her office today. If ‘the incident’ wasn't relevant to my case, I wouldn't have brought it up. I have no intention of *ever* mentioning it to anyone else – particularly my mother, who's still dying to find out what brought me from my highfaluting mansion to her humble abode, with three kids in tow. I was also forced to explain the Kady situation – needless to say, Rebecca's jaw dropped. I pray my family never finds out about *that*.

“Don't look so shocked, dear.”

“So, your current hubby – or...?”

“Prim, proper Harold Miller?” She scoffs. “Even his *name* is boring. He's a great guy, but in bed...? Ha!”

“Please don't tell me you're ready for husband number four.”

“Not for awhile yet. Sex isn't everything, y'know. Though... I'd bet Darren is a good lay?” She grins. “Well, apart from the incident?”

“*Please* stop calling it that.”

“Sorry.” She smiles at me in anticipation. “Well...?”

“Can we not talk about this right now? Or *ever*?”

“Gosh, Lou. You haven't changed. You've always been such a good girl. I bet you only gave up the goods when you got married...”

I stand, placing my palms flat on her desk. “Rebecca, it's been a pleasure to see you again, and your legal advice is appreciated. Please honour your lawyer-client confidentiality, and don't go spreading my business to our mutual friends. Not to mention my folks.”

“I'll resist – even as juicy as this one is. Good luck... and let me know how it goes. And Lou, for what it's worth, I think you should give it another go.”

“Coming from the multiple-divorcée,” I point out.

“Exactly. I have regrets. You don’t have to.” She regards me with a knowing look. “Look... Darren Hart may be a lot of undesirable things – God knows, he and *I* never saw eye-to-eye... but he’s a good guy, at the heart of it. And he loves you to hell and back. You know that, right?”

Unfortunately, I do, which will make going back to him even more difficult. Watching him love someone else. Watching him *unconsciously* love someone else.

My feet and my heart are heavy as I walk out of her office.

~2~

Luisa

“So... what did the lawyer say?”

Jolted awake, I glare at my son. He needs a haircut badly but has been refusing for months, and has instead been tying it back with a bandana. He thinks it makes him look cool. I think it makes him look like a miniature drug pusher.

“Well?”

“What time is it?” I query, ignoring him as I drag my body into a sitting position on the couch in my parents’ living room.

“2:30, sleepyhead. Aren’t you a bit young for daytime naps, Mom?” Jordan teases. “Hey, Dad called.”

“What? When?” *Great, he’s probably brainwashed them into loving him more than me, and encouraged them to insist on coming home.*

“And he said that if you two get a divorce, I can live with him.”

“Oh, did he?” *Bastard.*

“Yup.” He nods, leaping over the back of the couch to sit cross-legged beside me. “I’ll miss you, Mom.” He gives me a masculine half-hug with one arm around my shoulder. “But I’ll visit often. I won’t let the girls grow up without knowing their big brother. I’ll be around to scare off all the loser guys that fall for them, I promise.”

“Strange, how quickly you’ve come to terms with this. It’s *almost* as though you’ve been planning it for awhile.” His earnestness is comically sad, but his mother wasn’t born yesterday. “In any case, I don’t know why your dad told you we were getting a divorce.”

“He didn’t. I heard you say ‘Rebecca’ on the phone last night.”

“Bex is an old friend of mine. You know that.”

“She’s an old *lawyer* friend of yours,” he points out. “And you weren’t just saying hello... you were making an *appointment*.”

“I figured I’d drop in on her to say hi, since I’m in town.”

He narrows his eyes. “You’re lying.”

“We’re not getting a divorce. At least, not anytime soon,” I add. “And I’d appreciate it if you didn’t tell your sisters that we are. I have enough on my plate.”

“So... I guess Rebecca said you don’t have a chance in hell.”

“Jordan.” I rub my temples. “Please.”

“Fine.” He stands in a huff, stalking off. “*That’s* why I want to live with Dad. And least *he* tells me the truth. Well, since you’re *not* getting a divorce, I’ll tell the girls we’re going back home tonight.”

“*What?*”

“Christmas is over. I want to go home. Kady’s been whining for Dad ever since he called, and Carmen is halfway there. Either we all go home... or I’m gonna call Dad to come and get me.”

The splutter that leaps out of my mouth isn’t even a proper word, but I’m sure the gibberish contains a few choice words I’d scold him for using.

“He has as much right to us as you do,” Jordan continues.

Well, as much right to you and Carmen. The thought is always, *always* there – regardless of our futile attempts to blot it out.

“And even if he *doesn’t* want me to live with him, he’ll *still* come and get me, just to piss you off.” He stands in the doorway, arms defiantly folded across his chest, disheveled hair scattered over his forehead above the bandana, barefoot in a black vest and belt-less baggy jeans that exposes the waistband of his briefs. I’ve never seen him look so much like his father in his entire life.

All three kids resemble me: soft, delicate features; with a tinge of the darker skin tone that hints at the Latin influences in my genes (and in my maiden name Galeota). It’s why no one suspects that Kady isn’t Darren’s: *none* of our kids look like him. But now, here’s Jordan – his eyes adopting his father’s piercing gaze, with the controlled fury reminiscent of Darren’s nature in his jutted jaw and pursed lips.

“Well?” he demands.

“Well... you are very, *very* grounded.”

He shrugs. “I’m ten. I have no social life. I can live with that.”

“You will *never* speak to me like that again.”

“Fine.” He waits.

“Get out of here.”

He hesitates, the Darren-ness in him slipping out as his arms slacken and apprehension floods in.

“I *said* get out of here.” I pause. “Go help your sisters pack. And if you stand there one more second—”

The impish grin vanishes as he runs off and his footsteps stomp up the stairs. “Kayyyy-deeee... Carrrr-mennn...”



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 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.

He left Kady’s room, chased Jordan and Carmen to their bedrooms... and looked at me with a horrible glimmer in his eye, and I knew before he told me. I knew what had happened.

I knew, and I let it.

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'll follow me. Knowing we have to get away from 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, and 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'm suddenly expecting him to. But if he did, I wouldn't 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 not do this right now... please.*

Limp, lifeless arms flail 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 DOING 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.

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.

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. I 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'm 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 into 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's 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.

—*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...*

There's a 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 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, 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 didn'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-round good guy.

For the 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 audiovisual production company for over two years. When I first 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 getting to know. I met 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 hoped 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 didn't tell him about Gianni.

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 said he'd seen Darren in the newspaper at some media event or the other; he'd seen the name under the picture: '*Darren Hart*'. And that he'd thought of me.

He'd wondered if I'd ever told Darren I'd cheated on him, and if we were still together. He'd even wondered if I was still with Darren but had found a new boy-toy since breaking it off with him.

And then in October he asked me 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 sizeable 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.

—*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 has 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 wasn't 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 doesn't... it's 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. 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'm already mentally mapping the existence of this new toy in her room. Surely, Darren won't notice another toy proliferating among the hoards.

—*Thank you, Johnny. He has a name?*

Her imploring gaze locks onto her father's eyes.

—*Uh—whatever you want to name it.*

—*You... name him.*

—*I—um...*

—*NAME HIM.*

—*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, as she looks at the bear.

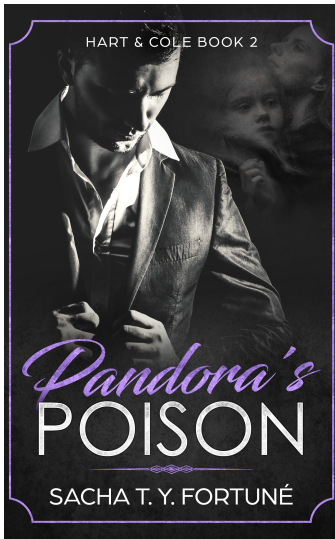
—*Hello, Dee-mee-tree.*

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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