

**SARA PROFETA**

**18**  
**Days After**

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## DEDICATION

*For every woman who was taught to endure in silence.*

*For every woman who carries scars no one sees.*

*This is for your strength, your truth, your becoming.*

## BOOK SAMPLE

### CHAPTER 1      **The plan of seduction** **December 08, 2005 - 18 days before**

I met Makis on PerfectD, a sketchy chat site. His profile picture was blurry but oddly captivating – broad shoulders, tall frame, big hands, black hair. The kind of guy that makes your mind wander.

His little chat window popped up right as I was telling another guy to go to hell – one of those who can't wrap their heads around the concept of "Yes, I have a webcam. No, I don't feel like turning it on, dude, get over it." Jesus.

My colleague Pantelis told me that turning on your cam basically equals consent for online sex. Like... what? Seriously? Why not just have actual sex then?

**HotButc385:** "Damn... what are you, mama?"

**Me:** "Well, I'm definitely not your mama."

**HotButc385:** "I know what you are."

**Me:** "Oh, you do? Enlighten me,"

I already knew what was coming. Round five of idiotic replies. the kind I'd been collecting ever since I discovered online blind-date hookups. Super trendy...

**HotButc385:** "You're like a two-liter Tropicana – juicy, sweet, the kind you want to drink straight from the bottle and pour all over yourself."

Aha... He touched on all the hot-button topics – subtle, sure, but clear enough. Yes, I'm tall, curvy, and seriously irresistible by male standards. And that whole "pouring» reference? A wet wink, no doubt. That was the first time I actually smiled. Now we were getting somewhere.

At that point in my life, my brain had its own metric for intelligence in men: how ready they were for the kind of games that made sex truly delicious.

**Me:** "Say more, come on... just don't call me mama again."

**HotButc385:** "I am Romeo."

*Of course. Every self-proclaimed alpha on these apps thinks he's Shakespeare.*

**Me:** "Juliet here."

**Romeo:** “Juliet? Is that really you, girl? Where’ve you been hiding?”

**Me:** «Where've you been looking, Romeo?”

**Romeo:** “Oh, Juliet... I was just a skinny boy when I first showed you, and now you wouldn’t even recognize me. I grew up — I’m six-three now, 214 pounds. Grew out my hair — I tie it back. Got discharged five months ago. Special Forces.”

And that was like an alarm siren that went off in my head. My screen was flashing numbers: six-three, two-fourteen... and “Special Forces”? Damn, the guy’s a paratrooper. And he knows nothing about Shakespeare, but who cares?

**Me:** “I’m right here, babe. Come to mama.”

**Romeo:** “So you are my mama?”

**Me:** “Long-lost... if that brings us closer.”

He lived about 135 miles away — of course, he did — and after the army, he worked in his father’s butcher shop.

And just like that, my imagination took off: this towering man, nothing but a white apron in front of a butcher’s block. One massive hand — damn, I had a thing for big hands — gripping a lamb leg, the other lifting a cleaver, his eyes half-closed, gazing at the meat before slicing it clean in two... The fantasy was vivid and cinematic, a full 360° view. Glutes flexing, back muscles bunching, his shoulder blades flaring every time the cleaver came down. His legs rooted to the ground, quads swelling in perfect rhythm with every other hard, perfect part of him.

I’d burst out laughing every time that fantasy popped into my head. I’d close my eyes and let the tingling wash over me, savoring those seconds. Shame? None. Shameless and proud. Because you know: life is just one day — today. That had been my motto for years. Really, what else was there to enjoy? Romance? Love? Flowers?

I gave him my sex phone number, the one I keep just for hookups, and he called right away. His voice was nice, a little deep, not particularly special, but it fit the image I’d built of him in my head. He, of course, melted instantly. My voice? Total dream factory. One of my major assets.

“I’ll be the one calling you, baby girl. Don’t waste your credit. Just tell me how often I get to hear that velvety voice of yours — cause if I can’t, I swear, it’ll ruin me.

I’d heard that kind of talk plenty. But let’s be honest — what woman ever really gets tired of flattery? Even if his accent was a little... provincial.

“My name’s Amalia,” I told him — a lie, of course. “Juliet’s just my stage name.”

He laughed. “Mine is Maki.”

Short from Gerasimakis, I presume. He had that heavy, masculine tone that made me forget he sounded like he just stepped out of a village fair. *Damn it girl, stop drooling. You’re a grown woman.* Then came the age question.

“How old are you, Maki?”

“Twenty-five. You? Just don’t tell me you’re seventeen, or I’m *gonna* have to become a monk. Wait, let me guess... You sound like you’re either my age or twenty-eight tops. At least that’s what the pic and your voice tell me.”

The little flirt... and he wasn’t wrong. Even if the photo was blurry and purposely distant, that’s exactly how old I looked. “I’m twenty-nine, Maki,” I said.

“Perfect,” he declared, thrilled.

And I really was twenty-nine — if you consider that I never, as a deeply democratic person, acknowledged the seven-year dictatorship in my life, plus one or two years that all women quietly shave off... So, yeah. What’s thirty-eight versus twenty-nine? Same difference.

Then that other voice in my head chimed in: “*Oh sure, sweetheart. What’s next? He’s almost young enough to be your son. You’re a forty-year-old woman.*”

“I’m not forty, I’m thirty-eight. And he just barely qualifies as my son. So, back off.”

We agreed to meet up soon. He’d swing by the city every once in a while, delivering homemade sausages — handcrafted with those magnificent hands — and he said he’d make it happen ASAP.

He kept texting and calling almost daily for about a week. Not that we had much to talk about. He wasn’t exactly a spark plug. But I wasn’t looking for a damn philosopher. We’re all out here chasing sexy bodies.

I took a break from the shady chatrooms — as Pantelis called them — reined in my wild nights out and focused on prepping for my paratrooper. That’s exactly how I saw my life: if it had a soundtrack, it would’ve been Mambo No. 5. Only instead of Monica, Erica, Rita, Tina, it’d be Giannis, Sakis, Takis, Makis.

Christmas was near. People were shopping, planning trips, dinners, family gatherings... None of it meant anything to me anymore. Hasn’t for years. The only part I looked forward to? Double paycheck and shopping.

On my day off, I visited Mania, my go-to hairdresser and manicurist. She grumbled something like, “Bite your nails again, and I’ve got nothing left to work with,” which made me burst out laughing.

“Do them nice,” I told her, “and I’ll tell you all about Makis.”

Her round face lit up, and she took my hand like a co-conspirator.

“Oooh, who’s Makis? Do tell. Age?”

“Seriously? Is age the only thing people care about? Okay, okay... twenty-nine”, innocent little lies for daily pleasure.

“Well, twenty-nine is fine if you’re thirty-four. But younger than that? Girl, you’ll need a parent-teacher meeting.”

Now, you might be wondering how I haven’t gotten tangled up in all my lies by now. Honestly, I wondered too. But I didn’t really care. I had categorized the people in my life based on how close they were allowed to get to the real me. A few coworkers, just three actually, and my two childhood friends from kindergarten were in group TWO. I used to call them my brothers and sisters — I was an only child, after all. They were part of my «before» and «after». Named Family.

Group THREE was made up of people from my past who knew who I used to be. Most of them drifted away — they couldn’t handle who I’d become. Mania was in group FOUR. She knew some parts of my present self, but nothing of my past. Makis and the rest of the Mambo No. 5 crew? Outside the scale entirely. As for group ONE... there was no one left.



I left Mania’s place just before ten at night. That sneaky devil... I told her — stupidly — that none of my ‘group twos’ would be around for the holidays to keep me in check. Or stop me from tumbling down the hill, as Rahil would

say. And she took it as her sacred duty to take care of me. She blackmailed, threatened, guilt-tripped me until I promised – committed – to go out with them to one of those flashy night spots down by the Athens Riviera on Christmas Eve.

“Christmas Eve blowout, babe!» she shouted from the balcony, triumphant, her moon-shaped face beaming behind my helmet.

I don’t do that stuff. I don’t go to noisy bouzoukia<sup>1</sup> and nightclubs; I don’t cry along with tragic ballads in public. If I want to sob, I can do it just fine on my own. Still, I left her a little window open: work. She slammed it shut, saying she knew my shift schedule. So, I cracked it open again:

“You never know how a day’s gonna unfold in my line of work.”

I let her win me over, because I knew she cared, and I like her a little. I just didn’t want anyone to feel pity for me. I’m strong. Independent.

When I got home, there were seven missed calls on my sex phone, all from the six-foot-tall treat. And a message:

**Makis:** “Why aren’t you answering? Are you ignoring me?

Trying to get me hooked like a postage stamp? »

I thanked whatever cosmic force had blessed most men with such predictable clichés – mentally bankrupt, creatively void. It made me feel clever by comparison. I could tolerate it for a bit. Then I’d get bored and send them packed – figuratively – to the ends of the earth. Makis was already halfway there before we’d even met.

He sounded pissed when I finally called back.

“I had something important to tell you, but I couldn’t reach you”, he said.

“Well, you’ve got me now”, I purred. “And I’m about to take a bath, so unless you want me to catch a cold sitting here naked, spit it out so I can dive in.”

Bang. His anger hit the floor with a dramatic thud.

“Oh baby, you’re killing me,” he sighed and groaned and moaned, eventually getting to the point: he’d be in town on the 24th for his cousin’s engagement party.

“And after that? All yours, baby. Why so quiet? Don’t you want me?”

Finally, something’s happening. Makis’s trip to the ends of the earth got a short extension. I remembered my promise to Mania. Maybe I could fit everything in. Work, the giant, sex, and the damn club. Anything’s possible.

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<sup>1</sup> Greek nightclubs featuring live folk music, dancing, and flower-throwing.

I hung up, and like clockwork, my annoying inner voice started whining:

*“Great, great... is this really how you’re gonna keep wasting your life? You don’t even know this guy. What if he’s dangerous? And even if he’s not – have you no shame? Your place is turning into Grand Central Station, full of passengers.”*

Yeah, well... not just any random passengers. Gorgeous ones, who knew how to do the job right. And honestly? If anyone was in danger, it was probably them, not me. Truth was, barely any of them made it to my place. I preferred theirs, or a hotel if needed. But for the village butcher, I was willing to make an exception. Besides, I had ways of erasing his memories. Not that it’d be easy to forget a goddess like me...

I drowned my inner madness in a hot bath full of salts, bubbles, and oils. When the heat numbed me, I smiled with quiet satisfaction

*Oh, butcher boy... You have no idea what’s coming for you.*

At that point in my life, I was overflowing with high-grade, realistic cynicism, shameless self-worship, and bulletproof confidence, which, by the way, aren’t bad things. Lust and audacity? Also not bad. I floated through the present, gave zero fucks about tomorrow, and convinced myself it was wisdom – the kind you earn through scars.

I’d say to that other voice inside me: *“You did it”*. And she’d snap back: *“Yeah, right... You fucked it all up.”*

When things got bad with my inner voice – when she just wouldn’t shut up – I’d crank up AC/DC at full blast and ride the noise into a short-lived happiness. Not because things got better. Just because I couldn’t hear her.

Even music wasn’t the same anymore. I used to think with music – really. Melodies shaped my thoughts. I heard harmonies in my mind before I spoke. I felt rhythm in my chest, like a second heartbeat. I used to see the world in notes.

Now, music doesn’t talk to me. I just heard it. Nothing more.

## **CHAPTER 2      The ox** **December 24, 2005 - 1 day before**

The plan was to meet Maki at my place around eleven-thirty at night. I had everything ready. First-tier supplies like music, booze, and nuts. And second tier, of course: whipped cream, chocolate fondue, handcuffs, ice cubes, and a few other fun surprises, toys included.

I'd given him directions, and Mania was already in the loop – she totally got it. We'd meet up later. Either I'd join them after the boytoy left, or I'd just drag him along. They weren't heading out till late anyway.

I know what you're thinking. Was I seriously not worried about letting some random guy into my house? He could've been anyone, like from Gary Ridgway -not that he'd cross the Atlantic for me- to Jack the Ripper... But me? Afraid? Please. I was a fearless Amazon. The bride, who would kill Bill or, to keep it real, a decorated officer of the Hellenic Police Department.

I'd downed a generous glass of gin, followed it up with a smooth tequila, and was vibing to «The Man Who Sold the World» when the boy showed up. I told him my buzzer said 3. No name. I liked keeping things simple.

“You're taking the stairs on your right, up to the third floor.”

“What? Third floor with no elevator? Damn, Amalia.”

Excuse me? What did I miss here? A paratrooper who can't make it up three floors?

Didn't think much of it at the time. I waited with the door open and the lights just right, ready to stun him with my goddess-level appearance. My hair was shining, makeup light (no need for smudges), red lipstick, tight black dress with spaghetti straps, red heels... Femme fatale, thank you very much.

The building was dead quiet. So quiet, I could hear his footsteps all the way from the ground floor, slowing down with each step. And with them... a sound. Was that panting?

Panting? I run up those stairs every day, all fifty-one of them. I live here, remember?

Panting? Wheezing? Is that a steam engine I hear? What the hell is huffing and puffing its way up to me? And then... I saw it.

An ox in a suit. I swear, that's what I saw. A huge, hulking ox, with a head *\*this\** big. And that head... a proper ox-skull, with five sad little hairs tied into a bun. That's what snapped me out of it.

"Maki?" I asked, clinging to the frail hope that maybe he'd sent his cousin ahead to scope things out.

The ox-head nodded, still too breathless to speak. The rest of his ox-body was plastered against the wall, clawing at it for support so he wouldn't collapse in a sad, sweaty heap.

"Damn, baby... wh-why didn't you... tell me you were... on the third floor..."

*Gods, why the hell am I on the third floor? How can I escape? Where can I go? Where the hell do you hide from an ox in a suit?*

"Come on in, catch your breath," I heard myself say, stepping all the way aside so Maki the ox could fit through the door, barely, if at all. Meanwhile, the panicking inner voice in my head was screaming: *"Get him out. Shut the door. Lock it. Bolt it. Swallow the damn key."*

He collapsed on the first couch he found with a whoof so loud I swear it stirred the ashes in the fireplace. And there he was, red-faced, sweaty to the point of nausea, wrinkled-yes, he was wrinkled-, with limp strands stuck to his scalp and two beady pig-eyes, the man I'd been fantasizing about for eleven damn days.

At that point, I genuinely wondered what I'd misunderstood. If I could, I'd have run to my computer and dug through the logs for one simple thing: I must've flipped the numbers. No way he was 6'3» and 214 lbs. — more like 21,4 inches tall and six-foot thick. Whatever it was, I mentally facepalmed. Twice.

"Good thing this armchair is comfy," said the ox, now catching his breath slightly.

*"You know he meant the two-seater couch, right?"*

I stood frozen by the door, and only snapped back into reality when I felt my jaw starting to hit the floor.

"What can I get you, Maki? Water? A towel? Anything?"

He nodded. I headed toward the kitchen when I heard him call out, "And baby, while you're at it, maybe grab a beer, some cheese, a bit of salami if you've got any. My legs are still kinda shaking..."

*"Oh, baby girl, it just kept getting better."* Shut up.

*Olympian gods, Kailash gods, Everest gods, gods of every tall mountain ever, show me the way out, and I swear I'll be a good person.*

I grabbed my phone and typed at light speed:

**Me:** Come get me now no matter what I say you insist life or death situation  
onkringscreamjustmakemecomedownbutDOITNOWSAVE ME!!!!!!

No tones, no commas, no periods. Just pure, raw panic with five exclamation points at the end.

I sent it three times, just to be sure, and started slicing whatever I could find in the fridge. I calculated how long it'd take Mania to get here. Not far — four to five minutes, tops. Maybe seven if she didn't see the message right away. Worst-case ten, if she had to throw on clothes first. The ten longest, most panic-drenched minutes of my life.

"Amaliaaaa..." came the call from the living room. The ox, sounding almost fully recovered. "Come, let me admire you, I haven't even get to hug you yet."

Oh no. He's recovering. For once, my inner voice was in perfect sync: "Slice that pepperoni stick. The good graviera from Amfilochia. Add green olives, feta, and the Metsovone. No holding back. Give him the whole damn stick if it'll buy us time."

"Just a sec, Maki, I'm fixing up your tray."

"And bread. Don't forget the bread. Get garlic bread as well."

Wait! Should I eat the garlic bread myself? Or what if I just ate three whole garlic cloves raw right now, so he couldn't get anywhere near me?

"Get a grip, you fucking idiot. He's an ox, not a vampire."

I grabbed some glasses, two beers, started lifting the tray, and then the kitchen air shifted. Thickened. I turned around slowly and tensed.

There he was. In the doorway, staring. Still with those same piggy eyes. The shirt is damp in patches. Lips forming a smile. If he's missing teeth, I swear I'm launching this tray straight into his face and diving off the balcony. The end.

But no. He had them all. Small and stained, but all accounted for. I even saw his molars, the way he smiled. It was the grin of a butcher about to behead the prey.

"Such a juicy little lamp...» Oh gods, it's happening. Even my ears shivered. "I figured you'd be hot, but this? Total jackpot."

"You and me both, Maki. Come on, let's sit down, have a drink."

“Screw the drinks, baby. We didn’t come here to talk— the sooner we start, the better it gets.”

If I weren’t holding the tray, I’d have slapped myself.

Just then, I heard my phone buzz. Please, please let that be Mania. Did she decipher? She understands? Was she on her way? Already here? I couldn’t read it now.

I set the tray down, and Makis pulled me in by the waist, dropping me onto the couch beside him. Now what?

He angled his body to face me. Grabbed my arms and turned me fully toward him. Under the layers of fat, he didn’t seem that old. Not that I expected wrinkles, but come on... twenty-five? Really? Apparently, yes.

“Eat, Makis, look what I made for you,” I said, glancing toward the tray.

He grabbed three pepperoni sticks, half a slice of bread, shoved them into his mouth, stared at me lustfully, and tried to speak, while crumbs flew into my hair.

“Immah eaaaf youuu...”

He downed half a beer to clear his throat, then flashed those stained teeth now decorated with festive bits of meat. “I’ll eat, baby — but I think I’ll start with you.”

I shoved the cheese plate under his nose. He’d smell it and pounce. He did. His thick fingers picked four sticks and the rest of the bread slice, just so it wouldn’t feel left out. He chewed with a grin, mouth wide open, full exposure, loud and proud. My brain was spinning like mad, and instead of helping me find a way out, it decided to latch onto something completely irrelevant. As usual.

“I’m *Red Riding Hood*, the *Three Little Pigs*, the *Seven Baby Goats*... hell, even *Bambi*. That last one’s got nothing to do with wolves, but he showed up anyway. Momentum.

And then: *I’m suffocating. Air. Air. I need air.*

Makis had pinned me to the couch, collapsed half his body on top of me, one hand grabbing my breast, the other wrestling his belly to the side, trying to find... I don’t know what. His thing? Mine? No idea. All I could hear was the sounds of an ox in heat, groaning out guttural, slobbery sounds, half breath, half steam, smelling like sour barley and stale spice, trying to say something sexy and failing spectacularly.

“Wait, wait, slow down, let’s just take a minute,” I groaned, pushing at him. But seriously, have you ever tried to move that much, man? Not happening.

“Wait for what, baby?” he said, spraying saliva. “We gonna waste the whole night?”

“Nice going, you genius moron,” I was mentally flogging myself now, “thinking you’d seduce some stud and live out a fantasy of unspeakable passion.”

Makis had pulled one strap down and was slobbering all over my shoulder, trying to kiss it, bite it, eat it – I honestly had no idea. I groaned as he moved in on my mouth, and I jerked my head back like I was dodging slime in a Rick and Morty episode.

Whatever he was digging for under his belly, it was taking a while. But he’d find it. Eventually.

“So do something. Now! A Muay Thai lock, a chokehold, a kick to the crotch – come on, girl, anything!” I looked around in despair. The swords were too far. All I had nearby were ashtrays, snack plates... and the beers. Just as I reached for the Heineken, the intercom buzzed – loud and constantly.

He jumped up in a panic, freeing me from his weight so fast I hit the floor like a sack of potatoes. “Who’s that? You are expecting someone?”

“Me? No one,” I said, trying to stand. The relief hit me like a small explosion inside my chest. “This night was all about you, Maki...”

“You’re pushing it,” my inner voice screamed. “I know, I know – you’re right.”

On top of the door buzzer, my phone started ringing too, and of course, I picked up instantly.

“Yes? Oh hey, Mania...” Her voice could’ve reached the Acropolis. “Yeah, yeah – what? Oh no! He fell off the balcony? Poor guy... Oh, you’re downstairs? Yeah, yeah, I’m coming right now!”

A few minutes later, Makis was storming down the stairs, way faster than he’d climbed them, fuming like a bull. I followed, heels in hand, trying to calm him down.

“Maki, wait, it’s not my fault if Pior fell off the balcony and now he’s in the ER on Christmas Eve, and what was he even doing, dragging us all into this”... or whatever. I had no idea what I was saying,

At the front door, he spun around, red as a boiled lobster and furious. “I showed up ready to fuck, and I’m walking out with my dick in my hand!»

*“Like he’d even found it...”*

*Shut up, you.*

“I got money. Lots of it. And I don’t know if I’ll ever forgive you. You fucking slut!”

I had no clue what his money had to do with anything, but I stood there, speechless, three steps up, watching him throw the door open and march out, head down, smoke trailing behind him like an angry cartoon.

Through the glass entryway, I saw Mania standing with her mouth open, looking at the raging ox storming off, then back at me. And I must’ve been quite the sight, hair like wild forest, face flushed, shoes in hand.

“Who the hell is Pior?” was the one question that fit the scene.

“Ugh?”

“Yeah, the guy you said fell off the balcony.”

“I said Dior, silly. I was putting on face cream when I got your message, and that’s the name that popped in my head – I went with it, okay?”

My blonde guardian angel of the day. Glowing, fragrant, and utterly luscious, she’d swept in and saved me from certain slaughter, Makis-style.

I hugged her and leaned on her for a while, not saying a word. And then we burst out laughing.

### CHAPTER 3      James December 25, 2005 - Day Zero

Later that night at the bouzoukia, the hysterical laughter between Mania and me had mostly worn off. I'd patched up my "wounds," swapped the black dress for a deep green one that looked almost the same and was drowning my pain somewhere between a screaming singer's prelude and a glass of black-label Johnnie.

Right then, I was seriously considering whether Mania deserved to be promoted to a higher category. I mean, she came through for me. She saved the night, which could've gone to hell for Makis, but also, secondarily, for me. Of course, it was possible she hadn't done it out of love or care, but out of that impulse most people have, the one that makes us crave the flaws, secrets, and scandals of others just to feel better about ourselves. These are the kinds of ugly thoughts I've been having the past few years about anyone who gets even remotely close to me. And sometimes, I get mad at myself for it.

Our table was a whole circus cast: A hopelessly single one, a born nympho, two bored blondes almost identical, a cheerful hairdresser with her happy husband, and me, the lone brunette at the table, maybe in the whole damn place. The superior one: stunning, brilliant, gifted, humble, modest, and full of countless other minor virtues.

I felt my sarcastic alter ego wake up. To beat it to the punch, knowing my mood swings and the voice inside me could crash into the moment, I admitted:

*"Alright, I'm joking. But at least I'm self-aware."*

*"Oh, the delusion..."*

I shut down the internal communication, the only way I could. I climbed up on the chair. That's right. No second thoughts, no shame. I, a thirty-eight-year-old, thank you very much, just so we're clear.

"Rixe sto kormi mou spirto"<sup>2</sup>. The Greek *\*tsifteteli\** — sensual, slow-burning, heartbreak, and heat rolled into one. Once, I had danced it, sung it, believed it, and made it mine. And now I was giving it away.

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<sup>2</sup> Strike a match to my body.

I swayed, luring stares. My arms floated slowly and lazily, emphasizing hips that rolled in deep, deliberate circles, my head tilted low, hair cascading side to side. I danced like a priestess from Babylon. I danced with my eyes closed, just for me. I was glorious. I knew it. I knew it from the lights clinging to my skin. I knew it from the hundred eyes I didn't see but felt pricking at me with envy or awe. I knew it because this was my moment.

The moment, I'd exorcise all the Makis, Lakis, Takis, Sakis, and the rest of them. The moment I'd burn away the body that scorched me, marked me, derailed me, turned me to ash.

They say a woman is a creature of deep emotions, stormy feelings, bottomless wells of love, and an endless thirst for affection. Not me. Not anymore. I became her again, just for two minutes on a chair, under a rain of flowers thrown at me and thirsty and jealous eyes, just for myself. I was a memory of the woman I used to be.

When I stepped back down and landed in my flower-crushed seat, the air felt suffocating. It was like everyone around me had crawled into my aura, trying to drink me in. I downed the last three sips of Johnnie in one go and pressed a half-melted ice cube to my neck and chest.

Dancing through that song had helped me keep it together. Barely. I needed air. I couldn't breathe. I needed to leave.

I looked over. Mania was watching. Now she'd come sit next to me, hug me meaningfully, tell me how stunning I looked, how many guys were eyeing me, how many heart attacks I'd triggered, and so on. I waved her off and stood up, followed by at least forty eyes.

Right outside the bathroom — aka “self-reinvention center», the usual queue of young chicks. Plotting, revising tactics, fixing makeup and hair... but definitely not peeing.

A few heads turned and stared at me. Their thoughts, nearly visible, projected straight from their eyes:

*“There, there she is...”*

*“Big deal...”*

*“Ugh, I can dance like that too...”*

*“Not so pretty up close, is she?”*

*“Did you see her hair? Total split-end disaster...”*

*“I swear, she's like my mom's age...”*

“Check out that ass.”

I stopped short and nailed them with a stare. Little heads swiveled away like synchronized swimmers, diving into each other’s ears in fake whispers. One of them giggled. Just one.

I smiled and kept walking toward the door. The cold hit me like a blessing. It sealed the pores I was sure had been steaming and cut the alcohol fumes clouding my brain. I walked a few steps down the sidewalk, stopped, wrapped my arms around myself, and tried to shove all the images parading through my mind back into that filthy memory box where they belonged.

Expected? Yes. Manageable? Also, yes. I’d trained for this: Clenched fists, closed eyes, deep breaths. Clear everything out. Make space for the void. Incrementally, my eyes blinked open as the pressure faded.

And then a sense kicked in. A scent. *Gucci*, my brain whispered. A jacket fell across my shoulders. I froze. Didn’t turn. Didn’t breathe.

“Found you...» A deep voice. British accent. London, not Manchester.

*Oh Merlin Almighty...* Is that Jason Statham? I turned and smacked into a chest. Nope. Not Statham.

I had to tilt my head way back, and I’m no shorty. I’m five foot seven—add four inches of hell-born heels. I tried to stay calm, but as I was staring at the vision in front of me, in my head, the first notes of the Cranberries kicked in: “*Oh, my life is changing every day, in every possible way.*” Great choice, brain — I actually congratulated myself — and in the very next second, I thought, almost in shock: *I’m hearing music inside me. I’m hearing music again.*

“James,” the vision said. And then Shirley Bassey shoved Dolores aside. Internal chaos. Mood whiplash.

“Bond?” I asked brilliantly. Because I’m so quick-witted.

He smiled, one of those devastating, multi-degree smiles that melt titanium. And my entire inner world launched into a rave. My subconscious DJ was spinning like mad. *Pick a genre and stick to it, you idiot.*

But I couldn’t think. Because I looked into his eyes. Blue. The kind of blue that burns colder than fire.

“No, princess. Just James. I left Bond at home.”

He had humor. He had taste. And he had me. His jacket hung over my tiny green dress, and suddenly I felt that elusive thing my subconscious kept

craving – to feel small, delicate, tucked inside a warm, safe chest and left there. Alright, the dress was short. But let’s go with the romantic angle.

“Shall we leave?” he asked.

Whoa, this was fast. Even for me. So, I played dumb. “But we just met...” I said, batting my lashes like a discount Audrey Hepburn.

He meant to go back inside, of course. It was freezing. But my mind? Pure innocence.

His smile again. Passionately lethal. He motioned to the entrance, and we stepped into the nightclub furnace. His hand on my elbow – hot enough to brand me– guided me through the crowd, parting it like Moses at the Red Sea.

The hopeless single one spotted us and nudged Mania, wide-eyed. I must’ve had the look Kobe gave when he surpassed Dominique Wilkins on the All-Time scorer list.

James pulled out the chair, and I sank into my throne of triumph like a queen. He leaned close and whispered in flawless Greek:

“Would another thirty minutes be enough for our acquaintance to feel old?”

“Give or take,” I said, playing it cool, though his breath against my ear gave me chills in all the right ways.

“I’ll be waiting outside at four,” he said and walked off, leaving behind his Gucci scent, his jacket, and me, mesmerized by the sight of him walking away.

“Pinch me,” I whispered to Mania as she sat down beside me.

“Where?” Of course, she asked.

“Doesn’t matter, just pinch me anywhere. I must’ve had one too many, because I swear, I just saw god Apollo taking a late-night walk.”

“Girl, you’ve got some serious energy tonight, and a crazy magnet,” Mania laughed, but pinched me all the same.

That half hour felt like two, maybe three. I glanced around, discreetly searching for him, but no luck. If he’d been close, I would have seen him. A guy like him doesn’t go unnoticed. I also checked my elbow on the sly. Wouldn’t be surprised if there were his fingerprints. I mean, those hands? Come on.



Half an hour later, he was waiting for me outside, hands in his pockets, head tilted as I stepped out. Posture: flawless. The pants? Definitely tailored. Or maybe his legs were just sculpted like that — like temptation wrapped in wool.

“So?” he said. “Shall we?”

I handed him his jacket and slipped my arm through the one he offered. Solid steel under fine fabric. I threw a mental knock-on wood. No way I was about to jinx this very promising descent into sin.

He didn’t ask for my name. I didn’t ask where we were headed. Balance. We walked in silence, down an empty street. Up ahead, the sea stretched out in shadows, and that long, empty stretch of stone that led straight into the night.

Of course, I was sneaking glances. His profile? Perfection. Clean lines, strong features. One brow slightly arched above the eye, the only one I could see. His nose was straight, just a little longer than ideal. But you know what they say about men with long noses... means big shoes -checked- and even bigger surprises under the belt. Pending.

“Leo,” he said suddenly.

“Excuse me?”

“Your zodiac sign. You’re a Leo, right?”

“I am. But that one’s easy.” I smiled.

“Valentina.”

“No.”

“Calliope.”

“Nope.”

“Rhea.”

Oh, we’re going ancient now. No way he’d guess it.

“Wrong again.”

“Aglaia.”

“Aglaia? Seriously?” I laughed. “Do I look like an Aglaia?”

“Yes, why not? You could be any of them. But Aglaia... she’s all fire and charm. She gets what she wants — always, and exactly how she wants it.”

So, this was his angle. Make me feel like I was some mythical force of nature, untouchable, irresistible, in charge. Just enough flattery to hand him the reins without realizing it. Clever. Almost good enough to work.

“And Rhea?” I raised a brow.

“Rhea’s a force of nature. Sensual, intense, she blinds whoever looks at her.”

His eyes half closed as he said it, and I figured he must’ve been dazzled by my glow. And that worked. I actually considered using one of those names the next time I went full seductress mode on someone new. I was just about to ask what the rest of the names meant when he suddenly stopped and turned toward me. His eyes pinned me in place.

“Zoe,” he said. “Your name is Zoe. I think I’ve got it.” I blinked. “Zoe,” he repeated, softer this time. “Means life. Full of fire, full of pulse. Full of everything. That’s you.”

My brain slammed back into place and ducked behind my temples, fully alert. I took a step back.

“You know me?”

It was a name I held dear. Anyone who knew me before... knew Zoe.

He looked genuinely surprised at my reaction. And honestly, so was I. It was just a guess, I knew that. But it wasn’t about the name. It was the way he spoke, the way he approached me. Thoughtfully. With charm. It was his voice – warm and deep – and the way he looked at me, like he’d just found something rare. Something priceless. And that... that set off every internal alarm. I liked him. And that was dangerous.

“Zoe’s really your name? Nailed it?” he asked again.

I stared. “Do you know me? Did someone tell you about me?” I asked, buying time to calm the sudden chaos inside. What I should really do is close my eyes. Stop looking at him. What is happening to me?

“No one told me. I didn’t ask anyone. I just found you an hour ago.”

The words didn’t register right away. “Found me”, again. That was the second time he’d said it. I couldn’t make it stick.

“I could be Zoe,” I replied, trying to tame the knot twisting in my gut.

I started walking ahead without waiting for him. Should I grab a cab? Or just walk away and vanish? Why is it that anything this beautiful always carries a bite?

“Wait, what’s wrong? Did I say something?”

I mumbled something about the time, the exhaustion, the headache — hell, I even said I felt nauseous. And I kept walking, trying to piece myself back together.

“*You need to go!*” “James, darling, it was a pleasure. Arrivederci.”

“Whoa, princess, hold on”. In two long strides, he caught up to me before I crossed the street. He stepped off the curb, bringing his height closer into my line of sight, and took both my hands. He held them firmly, not enough to hurt, just enough to stop me.

“An hour ago, I was just hanging back with my friends, drink in hand, when something hit me hard. At first, I thought it was the booze. That dream, swaying ten meters away, couldn’t be real. But then you looked at me. Really looked. Your whole presence screamed: *I’m here*. And I stood there, stunned, seeing only you. Not one of those dozens of girls shaking their hips. Just you.”

He angled his head slightly, catching my gaze, and in his eyes, I caught a smile, not tension.

“An hour ago, I didn’t know you existed. But then you stood up. So I rush out to find you. I didn’t know anything else. Just that you were there... for me. A dream of a woman.”

After a line like that, what’s left to say? I had recovered from whatever weird spell I thought I was under earlier. Maybe I’d been wrong.

“Well?” he asked.

“I really need to pee,” I answered, brilliantly. Just to remind him, dream women come with bladders.

He laughed. “Come on. I know a place nearby.” I followed, hoping he didn’t mean the bushes.

The glass doors of the Majestic Hotel swung open, and we stepped into the warm hotel lobby. As he led me toward the elevators, I caught the staff glancing at us: respectful nods for him, a barely veiled smirk for me. Yeah. They think I am an escort, or a hooker.

“This is the key to my room,” he said, handing me a sleek black card. “Ninth floor, 918. I’ll be right here.”

Holding my coat as collateral, he turned toward the lounge and picked up his phone from his pocket.

So, hotel. Not local, then. The suite smelled like him, rich, spicy, expensive. It was just messy enough: two crisp white Charvet shirts draped over a chair,

a robe tossed across the made bed, two unopened packs of black 2(x)ist briefs.

My bladder reminded me who the boss was, and I dashed into the bathroom. Heavier dose of Gucci in here. Razor, open toiletry bag, everything on marble. I freshened up, lipstick on cheeks and lips, fluffed my hair, a touch of mascara. Voilà. Goddess mode: on.

Still, I couldn't help but note the trust. Leaving me alone up here? Either very dumb — which he didn't seem to be — or very generous.

He was right where I left him, still on the phone. Hung up the second he saw me.

"I wasn't long, was I?" I said with a little flirt.

"Not at all." He helped me back into my coat, and we headed out. "Did you like what you saw?"

I gave him a look. Of course, he knew I'd see it. "Very bold," I said, pretending to grimace, which wouldn't be a grimace if he were wearing only those briefs. He laughed out loud.

The further we walked from those beds — and that hotel — the more my built-in killjoy voice purred with relief at how shockingly proper the night had stayed. Or maybe it was my stomach. That was it. Empty for the last fourteen hours.

"Soup?" he asked. "I'm starving. You know a place around here that's still open?"

I jumped half a meter away. "You're freaking me out. Are you reading my mind?"

"Why, princess? Your stomach's roaring loud enough to wake an elephant fifty meters away. You expect me to ignore that?"

His eyes looked innocent enough, but, fully aware of what he was doing. And clearly, so did the rest of me. Then he ran a hand through his hair, brushing it back — a simple move, utterly obscene at that moment. My mouth filled with saliva.

"No, let's eat." Eat each other, more like. "There's a soup place just down the street."

"Lead the way, princess."

While we waited for our soups, the awkwardness kept growing. So did the man, apparently. He seemed even taller now. And me? I'd managed maybe twenty sentences in two hours. Me! Seriously? I talk more during sex.

What the hell was going on? I'm supposed to be the cool one, remember? The one who lives for today and shrugs off tomorrow. So why was I sitting there, biting my nails like some awkward teenager?

It wasn't just his face or his body. I met plenty of handsome guys. But they never reached me. Never even scratched the gates of my fortress. But this one... There was a shift in him. In the way he moved, how he spoke, how his mind worked. It all got to me. Something in him scratched hard against the surface of my wall, trying to dig a hole through. And he just kept watching me unravel in my awkwardness, smiling.

I couldn't pin down his age. One of those men who look thirty at their twenty, and forty at their fifty.

"So, Iakove<sup>3</sup>... what brings you to Athens?"

The smile moved from his mouth to his eyes. "No one's called me Iakovos in years. Only my mother still does."

Ah. So, the mother's alive, sharp enough to remember his full name. That puts her at just the right age, which means he must be close to thirty. Damn it, another younger guy.

"Whenever she remembers, that is," he added, a shadow crossing his face.

*Oh, so older...*

"Alzheimer's?" I latched on, not ready to let this one get away.

"Just age," he said. "Mild dementia, maybe. She's not that old."

*Younger?*

"So how old are you, actually?" I asked, already exasperated. This age roulette was exhausting.

"Turned forty last month. And I'm loving every bit of it."

His grin said he was having fun. That soft flutter in my stomach could've been the soup. Or relief. Now this was interesting: a man comfortable in his age.

Through the rising steam of our chicken soup, he walked me through his life. Born in Thessaloniki, his family moved to London when he was a kid, and his father took a post as a university hospital professor. He studied there,

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<sup>3</sup> James in Greek

grew up, and now co-manages a medical research institute his father had founded with two colleagues. Never married, had a long-term relationship that ended years ago. He visited Greece often, mostly for holidays, but this time, he came to spend the holidays with his family; they'd all moved back to Athens...

His voice was deep, resonant, like a palette loaded with vibrant colors, painting every emotion as he spoke. I found myself watching those colored words dance around him. Velvet, I thought. He was telling me a velvet story. Of love. About his father, who passed down his passion for research. His mother, wrinkling gently in the warmth of her memories. His two younger sisters, both married. His nieces and nephews, whom he clearly adored.

He had me laughing more than once, tossing quips about red phone booths, royal guards' hats, and of course, the spy who shared his name. He answered every question with a wide smile and painted vivid snapshots of his world.

"What about you?" he asked, catching me off guard.

Just like that, the vibrant pictures in front of me faded, vanished, and I found myself suspended above a deep, dark void.

Normally, I'd launch into one of my standard backup stories like I always did with every one or two nights, man. A fake life and a fake name. This time's identity was already lined up, ready to go: firefighter. She was next after Amalia, the version I'd used for Makis.

But what nearly came out of my mouth instead was: *I'm nobody, I'm a lost cause. A burned-out match.* And this time, my unease wasn't cute or flirty. It was raw, paralyzing. I froze.

"*You're slipping... hold on.*"

The box of memories, locked deep in the vault of my soul, cracked open an inch. Who is this man sitting across from me? And why aren't my defenses working? Was it his eyes? That deep blue? No, no, it wasn't the color. It was the way his gaze held me. The depth behind it. Only one other man had ever looked at me like that, as if his whole world was folded into a single glance. And with him... came my unraveling. I slammed the lid on that memory box hard, panic rising. Why now? Why him?

"Zoe?" His voice faltered just enough to show it. He hadn't missed a thing.

Maybe he was thinking I was some kind of supported life form that had just lost battery. I mumbled an apology and slipped off to the restroom. Eyes

shut, fists clenched, I wrestled the demons clawing their way back up. Where's the void? Deep breaths. I needed to get out. Away from him. Fuck, fuck... I couldn't find the void.

*"Just leave. Leave now. Get out."*

This night wasn't just about flirtation or sex. This man wasn't just who he claimed to be. Or maybe he was... but he was also something more. And I was in danger, for the first time in a very, very long time. I felt it. Everything I'd built, everything I'd managed, every bit of balance I'd clung to—twisted or not—had saved me, sustained me twenty-four hours a day for two thousand, nine hundred and forty-nine days. Days without love, without sharing, without giving, without feeling. Days seemingly empty but filled with bitter sarcasm — the core material of the fortress that kept me safe. In all those two thousand, nine hundred and forty-nine days, never once had anyone gotten close enough to touch my aura.

I repeated it to myself like a protective chant: *Nothing gets past the fortress. Nothing peeks behind it. Nothing is real. Nothing loves me like I do.*

I returned to the table. I must have looked worse because he was watching me, concerned.

"I'm feeling tired. Maybe something didn't sit well. It's getting late... Can we go?"

I blurted it all at once, hoping at least one excuse would land.

"Of course we can." He paid while I braced against the fourth wave of alarms in my head.

"Can I take you home?" he asked politely.

"You can take me to a taxi," I replied, flat.

There was exactly one waiting a little further down. He stepped in front of me, and his eyes held a shadow of sorrow.

"Didn't go all that well, did it?" I kept my head down. "I know I'm not supposed to ask for your number. And I know you want to go far away from me. What I don't know is why. And I'm pretty sure it's not because you're tired." I remain silent. "Something pulled us together tonight. That wasn't a coincidence. And I don't believe in luck. For the first time, I felt like I was in the right place, with the right woman. A fascinating woman."

I couldn't understand how he saw anything fascinating in me. How could he see anything in just a few hours? All he'd seen was a woman dancing. And if

that was what he was judging by, then maybe his expectations were bedroom-bound, or stuck in some dance hall fantasy. But I would've felt that. I would've sensed that. No. No. I needed to get away from "him."

The taxi was still idling. I sat frozen, counting heartbeats between breaths. He opened the front door and said something to the driver. Then he turned back to me.

"Tell me you didn't feel it. Tell me I imagined it all, and I'll believe this night never happened."

I climbed into the seat without looking at him. Without answering. I was in danger. *I had to get away.*

"Zoe?"

"That's not my name, I said quietly, before I closed the door.

The taxi driver didn't speak the whole route. He didn't take my money either when he stopped outside my place. "The gentleman pays already."

It was five-thirty in the morning when I collapsed into bed dry-eyed, my heart sinking in the swamp of itself.

I'm broken. Burnt. Refuse to think. Refusal is mercy. I finally found my void and slept almost instantly.



The phone had been yanking me out of sleep on and off for a while. Each time, I let it ring and sank back into that sweet, numbing void. The pager was silent next to me, so whoever was calling could go howl at the moon for all I cared.

When I finally woke up for good, I figured it was well past noon — it was too warm. The timer had kicked the radiators on. The phone shrieked again, right by my head. I picked it up without speaking, my mouth so dry I could barely peel my lips apart.

"How do you call the Red-Hot Chili Peppers in Thessaloniki?" came Irini's bubbly voice.

I was still clawing my way out of sleep when she shrieked in my ear, "Boukovo!<sup>4</sup>"

"I don't want this," I rasped and hung up.

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<sup>4</sup> Boukovo is the local name for hot pepper.

The phone started ringing again, like it was singing her name. I knew she wouldn't stop calling until I answered.

"Babe?" Her voice now sounded worried.

"I'm sleeping," I replied, one eye half open and my voice groggier than my brain.

"Did you take anything?"

"Angel dust..." Honestly, what kind of question is that?

"Did you take anything?" she insisted.

"No, nothing. I'm telling you, I'm just sleeping."

"It's four in the afternoon. You never nap in the afternoon."

"I always nap in the afternoon when I've worked a night shift. And you're clearly trying to ruin my life."

"You didn't work last night. You'd be complaining for a month if they had you working on Christmas Eve."

"What do you want, Irini?" I growled, instantly regretting it. "Are you okay? Is something wrong?" I added, softening my voice and steering the topic off me.

"I just called to wish you Merry Christmas and to say I am planning to come tomorrow," she added — yep, decided right this minute, no doubt.

"Sit your ass down and stay put with your kids. I'm working every day straight through to 2015. You won't even see me."

"That's fine," she cooed. "I'll take what I can get."

"I don't need you," I said in a last-ditch attempt to fend off her arrival. "I'm fine."

But it was useless. She hung up, and I stared at the ceiling.

What even happened last night? A black stiletto was on the nightstand, and something pointy was stabbing my neck — an earring. My left eye was desperately trying to unstick my upper lashes from the lower ones. I'd slept in full makeup, fully dressed, with one heel still on... I'd passed out for hours, only to wake up more drained than before.

The memories came crashing back all at once, sinking me deeper into the mattress. I curled up, motionless. For a long while, my mind chased the nothingness of the void.

Eventually, I hobbled to the bathroom. Greeted the female Paul Stanley in the mirror and figured I only needed two more brushstrokes to pass for a

member of Kiss. Threw on sweats and headed downstairs when a piercing shriek cut through me.

“Thief! Thief! Aaah, thief!” Indy! I’d left him in the next room.

“Shut up, you dumbass. You blew out my eardrums,” I snapped as I opened his door. He was pacing his cage, whistling and squawking loudly.

Indy, the white cockatoo, was the one constant in my life. We’d been together since before. We matched. Same taste in music and men. We ate the same crackers during the movies. We worked out together – he perched on my head – and anytime he saw me get dressed or undressed, he’d scream “Sexy, sexy, sexy” dragging the vowels out. His mischief made me laugh, even when I didn’t want to. He was the one unpredictable, stable presence in my life.

I sat curled up on the living room couch, coffee mug clutched to my chest, staring blankly at the purse I’d flung onto the table. Another round of nothing.

Indy was perched silently, sitting at his pole, watching me, one eye then the other. I didn’t call him over. He was scanning the table for the cracker plate, finding only shriveled salami and cheese. You poor guy. The things you’ve had to witness...

The piercing ring of a phone came from his beak this time. I shot him a glare. He lit up, kept ringing and answering himself: “Yes, who is it?» thinking I’d finally give in and get him his crackers. When I didn’t, he climbed down the vertical bar, marched toward me, leapt onto the couch, then onto the backrest. Paused, then sidled closer. I knew what he was about to do. He always did it when I ignored him.

I turned just as he reached ten centimeters from my face. He tilted his head, locked one eye on me, raised his crest in silence, and bobbed his head up and down a dozen times. I kept staring back, waiting.

And suddenly he raised his crest and began to shout, “Fuck. Fuck. Fuck. Fuck. Fuck. Fuck.” With each word, the crest flared, and his head bounced as if punctuating the sentiment. He was unstoppable for more than a full minute. When he’d had his fill of fucks for the day, he climbed onto my shoulder and rested his cheek against mine, still. I liked to think that every time he did this, he simply felt my fuck-the-world mood. Maybe that was it.

Anyway, I carried him to the kitchen and handed him his cracker container.

“Go keep yourself busy and let me enjoy my coffee,» I told him, setting him down with the tub and letting him wrestle the lid on his own.

When I came back, I heard the dying beeps of the hookup phone’s battery. Thirty-nine missed calls. For fuck’s sake—who does that? The ox-boy! Right, he was part of last night too... Actually, no. Wrong. He was the only one. No one else. His calls went on till about nine in the morning. Oh, and four messages too. Bonus.

I had to Google “sarmouta». Sooo he thinks I’m a hooker. There were plenty more — full-on sentences with subjects, verbs, and all. Who knew the butcher had such a flair for language?

Under normal circumstances, I wouldn’t have bothered. But I thought about it and fired back a text: **Fuck off, asshole.** Then I took the SIM card out and tossed it into the fireplace. Guess it’s time for a new number. And maybe no more chat rooms. Makis had been my only true failure, but blind dates just weren’t my thing—not when I could get a real one anytime I wanted.

I hit the play button on the CD player and dragged myself upstairs to the bathroom. The electro-swing of Parov Stelar floated in under the water. I lay submerged in the steaming heat, listening to “Spygame» until the warmth ran out. I needed something. Something to knock me out—or wake me up. I chose the latter.

Dressed like the Michelin Man, I stepped out into the cold. It was night again. The alarm chirped, reminding me where I’d parked, and the 160 horses of the Blackbird fired up smoothly, even in the cold of winter.

I let her purr for a minute, then popped on my helmet and earbuds and launched into the night with ZZ Top’s “La Grange» syncing perfectly with my throttle hand. The streets were just busy enough for Christos and Christina’s name day, but nothing crazy. It was still early. I rode and let my mind go blank. The plan was simple: bleeding out the memories on the road, mile after mile. It never failed.

Two hours later, I was back. Even through the closed balcony doors, I could hear Indy’s whistle. I’d left him in the living room. Like a dog, the rascal could smell me or hear me coming the second I turned the engine off.

As I climbed the stairs, he squawked, “Honey, I’m home,” and I laughed. Everything’s fine. Everything’s as it was. Nothing’s changed. Nothing’s chasing me.

At the top of the stairs, I freeze. A carpet of red roses covered the doormat and the entire front entrance. They spilled down to the last step. There had to be at least two hundred of them. Huh. Interesting...

I bent down, cursing softly while I searched for a card from whatever poor sucker had gone broke over my green eyes or silky hair or serpentine silhouette, or whatever of my sensual attributes. A vain woman's arsenal is endless. Yet I found nothing. Oh well, whoever it is, they'll turn up.

I crouched again to lift one of the four big baskets and spotted it tucked around the back. I opened it, expecting a florist's name at least.

Big, clean, red letters. Slightly slanted. Two words: *\*Found you.\**

I stood up like I'd been hit. No, no. No way. That's not possible. I shoved the flowers aside with my foot and went inside, slamming the door shut behind me. If I don't see them, they don't exist. How did he find where I live?

"Honey! Honey!" Indy shouted. I'd left the living room light on, and he was still awake. I held out my arm, let him climb up solemnly to my shoulder.

Closing my eyes, I took several deep breaths to steady my heartbeat. "*Ignore everything. Calm and ignore everything.*" I walked to approach Indi.

"Bedtime, baby. It's too late for you. Tomorrow, you will get a boiled egg and apples."

He rocked side to side, shifting from foot to foot like he actually understood me. I envy you, buddy. So little makes you happy. And you're safe.

When I returned downstairs, I stood in front of the closed door. No, there's nothing out there. Nothing waiting.

My mood? Flawless — obviously. I didn't feel like calling anyone or sending any holiday wishes. Didn't feel like checking the internet or watching a movie. Even the books on the shelves felt like strangers tonight. And it wasn't even late — just nine p.m.

Eventually, I cleaned up and lit the fireplace. I wasn't hungry, even though my stomach had been empty for over twenty-four hours. A sure sign I was slipping into the shadows again. I knew it. But just like the roses, I ignored it.

I poured myself a gin, turned on the CD player, and flopped onto the couch, remote in hand. Music would fix it.

The fire had built up, and the flames mesmerized me. Red. I imagined the roses from outside growing, creeping under the door, crawling up the walls, reaching all the way to my feet... *\*Found you.\**

I shut my eyes to chase away the image that felt too real. Hit play. The first notes of \*Maggot Brain\* poured into my skull. I should've been more careful. Might as well have dug my own grave.

Deep down — far, far down — I knew. Even though I tried to ignore the thought, I knew. My memories were waking up. Not briefly, not by choice. The box where I'd locked them was slowly pushing its way out from where I had buried it.