



Salvatore.

Did I say something wrong to her? I thought money mattered to her the most and I used that to lead her focus. Why did the desire on her face immediately fade away? I'm staring at paperwork that needs my signature but I'm utterly lost. I haven't read the papers for a second because of Lilas.

Damnation.

What hold does she have over me?

"Sir?"

"Sir?" Fiona says and my eyes widen when I realize that I'm in a meeting with the directors and managers of Lead Stones.

Each of them exchanges glances, silently acknowledging my disconcerting absence. I clear my throat, facing Fiona who is the head manager of the Diamond team.

"Can you repeat what you asked me?" I say to her.

"We were going over the competition of the designing team and how long we think it should hold." Fiona says.

"Um...we have ve designing teams in Lead Stones and at least sixty designers all together. I think there should be three rounds to it. We will remove twenty designers at each round..."

"In the rst two rounds, we would instruct them to create a design in our presence. However, we are going to judge them blindly. This is to ensure that neither of the designing teams act with nepotism. At the last round, we will give the last twenty designers an assignment."

"That sssignment will be judged judiciously by external judges. We will base them off creativity, uniqueness and versatility." I say and the board members nod their heads in agreement.

"Any questions or reservations?" I ask and Fiona faces me.

"I don't think so, Sir." Fiona says.

"Our meeting is over, then." I say, getting on my feet and leaving the room. The others in the room stand on their feets too. As I make my way out, Fiona walks beside me.

"Sir, I'll send the compiled lists of those who are participating in all departments to you soon." She says and I nod my head, my attention drifts to Richard who walks in, I sent him to make double the deal to Donatello and I'm sure that he's here to tell me how that went.

"Excuse me, Fiona." I say, heading towards my oce and Richard follows me.

"Tell me." I say, walking over my seat and adjusting the buttons of my chest.

"Donatello declined. His offer remains the same and he is bent on making Lila a stripper in his club." Richard says and I chuckle.

"What do we do, Sir? You cannot protect your stepdaughter forever. What if she's aware of the gold?" Richard says.

I place a hand on my table, tapping the table once again as I rub my temples.

"Sir, why don't you ask her about it?" Richard says.

"No, take a few men to her house and search every crook and cranny. There is no use in telling her. Have you seen how the girl reacts to things?" I say and Richard looks at me in confusion because he isn't sure of what I mean by that.

"Okay, sir..." Richard says and he is about to walk out.

"Wait, Richard. I have to ask you a question." I say, thinking about how to put the question together.

"What is it, Sir?"

"What do...young women like these days? Are they not interested in men that have wealth anymore? And are these young women attracted to older guys?" I ask, leaning towards my desk—in search of an answer.

"Well, if the older man is you in question...I would say that young women men will denitely be attracted to the exterior of your presence." Richard says and my eyes ash a sense of anger.

"What do you mean by exterior? What is wrong with the inside of me?" I ask.

"Let's see...you get angry very easily, you have a lot of money, so, you are out of touch so sometimes that could come off as arrogance...sir." Richard says, using his hands to dramatically explain what he is saying.

"You are an i\*\*\*\*t, Richard." I say.

"And sir, it could also be the young woman in question. If she is someone who takes her self worth in high regards, a man like you will nd it hard to stay by her side. You have to know her rst." Richard says and I squint my eyes.

Does he even know that it's my step daughter that I'm talking about?

"I'll go and do what you have asked me to carry out." Richard says.

"Wait...I'll come along with you to search. Get the men prepped." I say, and Richard walks out. I grab my suit jacket as I stand from the chair. I need to see how Lilas grew up, what makes her so prideful to turn me away even when I can change her life forever.

The sleek black car glides to a stop. The door swings open, and I emerge with an air of authority. We have reached the tranquil middle-class neighborhood where the houses stand as a symbol of modest comfort.

Richard gives a subtle nod and directs a few trusted men to follow suit. The click of polished shoes on the pavement resonates as they step onto the porch.

"No, take the car to another area and wait there. I'll call you when you should make your way here. We can't call attention to the neighborhood. I'll take a look at the house myself." I say and they obey without asking questions.

"Okay, sir! I'll open the locks!" Richard says, usury his skills to hijack the door which opens in a matter of seconds.

The pale blue siding and white-framed windows give a timeless touch to the structure of the porch. I can imagine Lilas living here. The living room, bathed in soft natural light, features worn-in furniture arranged for comfort. Faded rugs lie atop hardwood oors, echoing years of shared moments. Family photos adorn the walls, capturing smiles frozen in time.

I make my way up the staircase and I can immediately tell which is Lilas' room. I am invited by pastel hues which dominate, creating a soft and welcoming atmosphere. A nightstand displaying cherished trinkets. Sunlight lters through oral-patterned curtains, casting a gentle glow on well-loved stuffed animals arranged on the window sill. I did not know she was the type of girl who cherished stuffed animals.

I open her wardrobe, curious about everything that has to do with her. I don't know why. It could be because I'm a maa and I love to possess everything, even the ones that don't belong to me. I use a nger to open one of the pastel drawers and my breath stops for a moment when I nd a collection of her underwear.

A smile graces my lips. I push the drawers back in to close it but all of a sudden, the drawer falls from its placement and her underwear scatters on the rug. I bend to pick it and place them back into their rightful home.

The door of her room swings open, and I lift my head. Lilas looks at me in utter shock, as I have her underwear in my hands.

Dang it!