

Faux Vows True Desires Chapter 1 - 10

Chapter 1

“Ms. Moore, what’s your monthly income?”

Lucinda Moore was stirring her coffee when she heard this. She paused for a moment, then looked up at the man sitting across from her. This guy was her participant in a blind date for the day. The matchmaker had told her he was a great catch, a supervisor at a big company with a salary close to ten grand a month.

At only twenty-four, Lucinda was being pressured so much by her mother to get married that she was afraid to go home. Reluctantly, she had agreed to another blind date to meet this so-called ‘great catch. Unexpectedly, the first thing out of his mouth was a question about her income.

“I own this coffee shop, Lucinda answered, maintaining her composure. When he looked around and seemed satisfied, she added, “But it’s not making a profit yet.”

His face fell at this. “So you’re operating at a loss?” The man asked.

Lucinda nodded.

He frowned, “Did you invest your own money or did you borrow? How much is the loan?”

“I invested with a friend and borrowed some. I owe tens of thousands,” Lucinda answered honestly. His displeasure was clear, but she was not particularly fond of him either.

‘Ms. Moore, this is your pre-marital debt. I won’t be paying for it after we’re married. I assume since you’re in debt you don’t own any property? I own two houses, and they’re my pre-marital assets. You can live there after we’re married. We can pay the mortgage together but I won’t add you to the title.

“Ms. Moore, I’m not getting any younger. My parents are waiting for grandchildren. After we’re married, I hope you can have kids soon. My parents had a hard time raising me and my siblings, they’re not going to babysit. You need to take care of the kid.

“I can’t cook and I’m busy with work, so you’ll need to prepare all meals, I can’t help with housework but I like a clean environment. I don’t want to come home to a messy house. And also...”

“Fabian.” Lucinda interrupted him. He was clearly annoyed, but she no longer cared. “Sorry, you got the wrong person. I can’t meet your demands. Please find someone willing to be your unpaid housekeeper. This coffee is on me.”

She then gestured towards the door.

His face turned beet red, probably because he didn’t expect Lucinda to be so direct. He always thought he was a catch, had a high salary, and meeting Lucinda was doing her a favor. He thought Lucinda was young and beautiful, so he was willing to marry her, but he didn’t expect Lucinda to turn him down.

He stood up abruptly, took out his wallet, and slammed a bill on the table. “I can afford a cup of coffee. I don’t need Ms. Moore to treat me.”

He put his wallet back in his pocket, pushed away his chair, and walked out. After a few steps, he turned around and said, “A woman like Ms. Moore who’s unwilling to sacrifice for the family and lacks manners will have a hard time having a husband.”

Lucinda picked up her coffee cup and threw it at Fabian, along with the coffee. “Get lost!”

Fabian did not expect Lucinda to throw her coffee. He was hit square on, his white suit stained with coffee. Furious, he stomped his foot. The other customers were all looking over. He didn’t want to argue with Lucinda in public, so he said, “I don’t deal with unreasonable women,” and hurriedly left.

“What a jerk, thinks he’s some hotshot!”

Lucinda felt like she had wasted her time. She would rather stay single for life than marry such a man.

A few customers who were about to leave stopped to watch the scene.

After everything was over, one of the men said something to the others and they left first. The man then approached Lucinda.

“Lucinda.”

The gentle call entered Lucinda’s ears, and she instinctively looked at the man walking towards her.

She immediately stood up and smiled brightly, “Stefan, what are you doing here?”

Stefan Coleman answered with a smile, “I was meeting some friends here. You weren’t around when I came in.” That’s why Lucinda, as the owner of Serendipity Cafe, didn’t see Stefan come in.

“May I sit down?” Stefan asked politely.

Lucinda immediately invited him to sit down, called a waiter to clean the table, and said to Stefan, “Wait a moment, Stefan, I’ll make you a cup of coffee.”

“It’s okay, just a cup of water is fine.” He had already had a cup of coffee. If he had another, he wouldn’t be able to sleep at night.

Lucinda got Stefan a cup of water herself and asked the waiter to bring over some cakes.

Stefan was a college friend of her older brother, Ike Moore. During Ike’s college years, he would return to Pinehurst from Harborville for the holidays every year. Stefan, though not particularly close to Ike, would go back with him since they were from the same place.

Lucinda was five years younger than Ike. She would always go with her father to the station to pick up Ike and would also see Stefan. Even though they only met briefly each time, and she didn’t even know where Stefan lived, they had known each other for eleven years. Even though she hadn’t seen Stefan in recent years, she recognized him instantly.

“What happened just now?” Stefan asked gently.

When the conversation turned to what just happened, Lucinda wore a helpless expression and complained to Stefan, “Stefan, I’m only 24, but my mom’s practically chasing me out of the house with her constant match-making. Whenever she bumps into anyone she knows, she’d ask them to introduce men to me and set up blind dates. I’ve been bombarded with daily phone calls and have been on dozens of blind dates recently.”

Stefan replied, “Your mom is just a bit anxious.”

When he first met her, she was only thirteen. Now, in the blink of an eye, she’s twenty-four.

“Seriously, today’s blind date was supposed to be a ‘top-notch’ guy, but I think he’s more of a weirdo. No wonder he’s still single in his thirties. He always expects others to give and he just sits back and reaps the benefits.”

Stefan looked at Lucinda, “With your qualities, you don’t need to be set up. There should be many men pursuing you.”

He watched the girl he knew since she was young grow into a mature and charming woman.

Lucinda pouted, explaining, “I had a boyfriend in college, we were together for four years. Half a year ago, he dumped me for a rich woman. My mom thinks I’ve been hurt by a bad guy and worries that I won’t want to get married again, so she’s always looking for a suitable man for me.”

She’s in the process of starting her own business and doesn’t have the time to focus on relationships. She admitted that the four-year relationship couldn’t withstand the lure of money and status, which hurt her deeply.

Hearing Lucinda talk about being dumped by her boyfriend, Stefan’s eyes flickered, becoming deep and complex.

Chapter 2

Lucinda's phone buzzed. Tugging it out, she saw her mom was calling. With a wry smile, she said to Stefan, "Mom's about to give me another lecture. Must be that weirdo ratting me out."

Ever since her mom started setting her up on blind dates, almost every one ended with the guy complaining about her.

It wasn't like she was too picky, she just wasn't willing to lower her standards. Marriage is a lifetime deal. If she ended up with a weirdo and had to bring home the bacon and be a full-time housemaid, she'd rather stay single.

Stefan chuckled, "You can try explaining it to her."

Lucinda complained, "My mom doesn't give a darn about my explanations."

Still, she picked up the call.

As soon as she answered, her mom started lecturing, "Lucinda, haven't I told you countless times, you're already 24! **If** you don't act quickly, all the good guys will be snatched up by younger girls. Being so pick like this, you'll end up regretting it.

"Fabian is a good catch, why were you so rude to him? What happened to your manners? You've really embarrassed me. I never taught you to throw cups at people. Fabian said he'd forgive you if you apologize.

"Olivia is two years younger than you and she's already married into a wealthy family. I'm not asking you to marry a rich guy, just find a suitable man and settle down so I can stop worrying."

Lucinda waited till her mom finished before responding helplessly, "Mom, I'm only 24, still in the prime of my youth. My brother is already 29, but why aren't you nagging him?"

Her mom snapped back, "He's a tough nut to crack."

Lucinda sighed, "So, I'm your punching bag? The scapegoat? It's so unfair, mom. You have no idea how weird Fabian is, it's a long story. I'll tell you when I have time. And you want me to apologize to him? I'd rather stay single than be his wife.

“And about Olivia, she didn’t marry, and she’s just someone’s mistress. You think I’m clueless? That guy is old enough to be her dad and he’s not even that rich, he just owns a couple of rental properties. The richest family is...”

Stopping, she covered the phone to ask Stefan in a whisper, “Who’s the richest family in Pinehurst?”

Keeping his voice low, Stefan answered, “The Andersons are the richest family in Pinehurst. They own Ascend Global, with businesses all over the country.”

Lucinda immediately told her mom, “If Olivia really has the ability, she’d marry into the Anderson family. You see her being someone’s mistress and you’re jealous? Do you want me to be a mistress too?”

“Absolutely not! If you can’t get married, I’ll support you for life. I won’t allow you to be anyone’s mistress.” After angrily retorting, her mom quickly added, “Tomorrow’s Saturday, close your shop and come home. There’s a new guy I want you to meet. I’ve seen his photo. He seems nice.”

Lucinda groaned, “Mom, you’re not giving me a break, are you?”

“If you don’t want me to nag, find a boyfriend yourself. I had someone do a fortune telling for you. The fortune teller said if you don’t get married this year, you’ll never find true love, and you’ll be alone forever.”

Lucinda was shocked that her mom’s actually buying into fortune telling now.

“Lucinda, are you listening? Don’t make me waste my breath.”

“Mom, I’m listening. How could I not take your calls seriously? But, most fortune tellers can only predict past events, the future’s hard to pin down. If he’s really that magical, ask him for tomorrow’s lottery numbers. I’d bet all my money on it.”

Stefan was chuckling at their conversation. When Lucinda glanced at him, he quickly feigned a cough. After hanging up, Lucinda slumped onto the table, looking utterly dejected. “Stefan, how much longer do I have to endure this? Now every time the phone rings, it gives me the heebie-jeebies.”

She sat back up, ready to vent about her mom to Stefan. Seeing Stefan’s amused eyes, she blinked and gave him a once-over. Stefan was incredibly handsome, with a refined air

and gentle personality. All things considered, Lucinda would give him a high evaluation. After a thought, Lucinda blurted out, “Stefan, are you the same age as my brother? Are you married?”

Stefan responded gently, “I’m the same age as your brother, 29, single, no girlfriend.”

Lucinda asked, “Don’t your parents nag you about getting married? You’re already 29, how come you don’t have a girlfriend?”

“I told my parents I’d consider getting married when I’m 30. As for not having a girlfriend...” He looked at Lucinda, and said softly, “Maybe I haven’t met the one I want to marry yet.”

Lucinda asked again, she studied Stefan for a while, hesitated a few minutes, then finally decided to test the waters, “Stefan, can... can I ask you to pretend to be my boyfriend?”

Seeing Stefan’s surprised face, Lucinda quickly added, “Don’t worry, I’ll pay you a sufficient compensation. I won’t interfere with your personal life, we can sign a contract. When you turn 30, we’ll call it quits, no strings attached.”

Stefan was silent for two minutes, his eyes locked onto Lucinda as he asked gravely, “Are you sure you want me to pretend to be your boyfriend?”

Lucinda nodded, compared **to** the guys her mom introduced, Stefan was undoubtedly a better choice. He’d definitely shut her mom up.

“And if your mom approves of me, and pushes us to get married?”

Lucinda laughed, “**As** soon as I have a boyfriend, my mom won’t nag me about getting married for a while.”

Even though her mom was always nagging about her marriage, once she actually has a boyfriend, her mom would definitely take some time to observe, to avoid her running into another bad guy.

Stefan picked up his glass of warm water, took a couple of sips, and set it down. His slender fingers tapped the table as he contemplated for a while and said, “Maybe we should just get married directly

Lucinda blinked, she was confused for a second.

She asked in confusion, “You mean, Stefan, like a fake marriage? But without a marriage certificate, my mom won’t buy it.”

Stefan was straightforward, “I can go with you to the vital records office to get a marriage certificate.”

“If we get a marriage certificate, it’s not a fake marriage.

Lucinda wasn’t a fool. Once they go to the vital records office and do the paperwork, they’d be legally married. This whole thing will become real.

Stefan chuckled. Didn’t you say you’re willing to pay me? We can sign a contract.”

Chapter 3

Lucinda thought for a moment, then looked at Stefan, she had been friends with him for eleven years. She wouldn’t be at a loss even if they became a real married couple.

“So, let’s sign a contract shall we?”—

Stefan’s eyes sparkled, “Okay, so should I draft up the contract or you?”

Lucinda immediately responded, “I’ll do it. After it’s done, you can check it out. If there’s no issue, we’ll sign it. This sham marriage can finally shut my mom up and give me some peace.”

Stefan laughed, “Alright then, start writing. Once it’s done, I’ll take a look. If there’s no issue, we can head to the vital records office this afternoon. I happen to be free today.”

Lucinda was a bit surprised. Why did she feel like Stefan was more anxious than she was? It must be her imagination. Stefan was just doing her a favor. “Okay, I’ll start writing now. I’ll print out two copies later. Stefan, just wait here for a bit.”

As she spoke, Lucinda stood up. Stefan smiled and nodded, indicating for her to get on with it.

Only after Lucinda stood up did she remember where they were. She nervously looked around. The other customers were either tasting their coffee or chatting with friends. No one was paying attention to her. It seemed that their conversation hadn't been overheard.

Lucinda breathed a sigh of relief and quickly started to draft the marriage contract.

After Lucinda left, Stefan took out his phone and made a call. Once connected, he whispered, "Iris, push back this afternoon's meeting to 9 a.m. next Monday."

Iris was a bit taken aback as the afternoon meeting was quite important, but she didn't question it and respectfully replied: "Alright, Mr. Coleman."

Stefan ended the call.

Half an hour later, Lucinda brought two copies of the marriage contract over. She handed one copy to Stefan, sat down, and quietly said to Stefan, "Stefan, check out the agreement I've written."

Stefan took the agreement and read it carefully.

Lucinda listed four conditions.

First, Stefan will act as Lucinda's boyfriend (or husband), with a monthly salary of \$500, including board and clothing for all seasons.

Second, during the contract period, if either party meets true love, they can break the contract without compensation.

Third, during the contract period, both parties will not interfere with each other's private lives.

Fourth, if neither party finds true love during the contract period, the contract will remain valid for one year.

Lucinda, a bit awkward, explained, "Stefan, the coffee shop I opened last year is still in the red. Although it's not losing money this year, **it's** not making any profit either. The salary I can offer you is only that much, but I can cover your living expenses."

Stefan casually replied, "No worries, I have a job."

Then, he asked Lucinda, "Can I make changes to this contract?"

Lucinda quickly nodded, "Of course, if you see anything inappropriate, just point it out."

Stefan borrowed a pen from Lucinda, crossed out the third condition, and handed the paper back to her. He told her, "We only need three conditions. Print out another two copies and we can sign."

So, he was now being "kept" by Lucinda.

Lucinda looked at the crossed-out third condition and frowned thoughtfully for a while. In the end, she complied with Stefan's request and printed out two new copies. They both signed them.

Stefan checked his watch and said to Lucinda, "It's still working hours for the vital records office, let's go finish the paperwork now."

Lucinda hesitated, "But, Stefan, I only have my ID. My birth certificate is with my mom."

If she had to go back and get her birth certificate, it would take several hours back and forth. By then, the vital records office might have already closed.

Stefan smiled, “You have your ID. We can go to the police station for a temporary certification and that will do it. Plus, I have friends working at both the police station and the vital records office.”

Lucinda was once again puzzled. It seemed like Stefan really wanted to get it done by today.

A few minutes later, Stefan led Lucinda out of the café. He walked her to a Mercedes, unlocked the door, and gentlemanly opened the door for her to get

1. in.

Lucinda stared **at** the luxury car. Thanks to her brother’s influence, she knew this type of car was worth hundreds of thousands. Was Stefan rich?

Stefan seemed to see Lucinda’s confusion and took the initiative to explain, “I bought this second-hand car from a friend for just a few tens of thousands. It helps to boost my image when I’m out and about.”

Lucinda silently looked at him. This car, even second-hand, was worth more than tens of thousands. Besides, it looked almost brand new.

However, this was Stefan’s business. She didn’t ask further.

Once Lucinda got in the car, Stefan closed the door for her and then took out his phone to make a call.

Less than two minutes later, Stefan got **in** the car. He buckled his seatbelt and told **Lucinda**, “I’ve already contacted **my** friend. We’ll head to the police station for the certification now, and then we can go **to** the **vital** records office.”

Lucinda nodded, “Stefan, your friends are really impressive.”

Stefan smiled. His friends were indeed very impressive.

As the car started, Lucinda cautiously asked about Stefan’s situation. Even though they had known each other for eleven years, they weren’t close. Even her brother didn’t know much about Stefan.

“Stefan, where do you live? Where do you work?”

After asking, Lucinda quickly clarified, “Hey, I’m not prying or anything, but we’ve known each other for quite a while now and I still have no clue where you live. Now that we’re getting married, I think I should know.”

Stefan replied in a good-natured manner, “I rent a place in Diamond Ridge Estates. It’s a bit of a trek from where I work. I work at Ascend Global.”

Upon hearing that he was just renting, Lucinda let out a sigh of relief. She was worried that his family background might be messy and she could land herself in hot water. Like his folks might think she’s not good enough and give her a half-million dollar check just to get lost and leave their son. “You must have a good job at Ascend Global. Those apartments **in** Diamond Ridge Estates don’t come cheap. The rent must be pretty steep each month.”

Not like she had that kind of dough to rent a place in Diamond Ridge Estates anyway.

Stefan patiently explained, “My work is indeed not bad. I’ve been there since I graduated college. Been there for quite a few years now and the pay is decent enough for me to get by.”

He glanced sideways at Lucinda, adding, “Even after we’re married, I can still provide for my wife and kids.”

Lucinda gave him a compliment, “That’s for certain, Stefan. You’re a real catch.”

Stefan grinned and accepted her compliment.

An hour later.

The Vital Records Office.

A man about Stefan’s age was waiting outside the Vital Records Office. Seeing Stefan’s car slowly approaching, he quickly walked over with a big grin. Once the car came to a stop, his smile could have outshone the sun.

Stefan and Lucinda got out of the car, one after the other.

The man looked at Lucinda and jokingly asked Stefan, “Stefan, is this your girlfriend?”

Stefan turned to look at Lucinda. Lucinda, not at all shy considering they were just playing house, confidently extended her right hand towards the man and said, “Hi, I’m Lucinda.”

Chapter 4

The guy glanced at Stefan, noticed that Stefan didn’t object to him shaking hands with Lucinda, so he extended his right hand to Lucinda and introduced himself, “Hello, my name is Gabriel Turner. I’m a good buddy of Stefan’s.”

Lucinda replied with a smile, “Mr. Turner, you can call me Lucinda.”—

As Gabriel welcomed them inside, he said to Stefan, “Never thought I’d get the chance to do this for you, I’m so happy. I figured once Ruby Scott was out of the picture, you’d be a lone wolf.”

Lucinda tuned into their conversation. Ruby? Was that Stefan’s ex-girlfriend? Why hadn’t he ever mentioned having a girlfriend before?

Before Stefan could say anything, Gabriel, aware of Lucinda’s presence, quickly explained, “Don’t get it twisted. Stefan and Ruby go way back. They grew up together, and Ruby moved abroad ten years ago and rarely comes back.”

Lucinda generously laughed it off, “I don’t mind.”

She only hired Stefan to play her husband to dodge her mom’s constant matchmaking and hopefully restore her peaceful life. Whether Stefan had a girlfriend in the past or now, she didn’t care at all. If a catch like Stefan didn’t have any women falling for him, she’d find it weird.

Seeing that Lucinda genuinely didn’t care, Gabriel breathed a sigh of relief, scolding himself for running his mouth about Ruby.

In their circle, everyone knew Ruby and Stefan were childhood sweethearts. Ruby had been smitten with Stefan since they were kids, and everyone thought they’d end up together. But ten years ago, Ruby suddenly left the country, and no one knew why. They’d asked Ruby, who wouldn’t spill the beans, and Stefan, who only said that Ruby had her own life and it had nothing to do with him.

When Gabriel mentioned Ruby, Stefan first looked at Lucinda, a bit of anxiety flashing in his eyes. But Lucinda wasn’t focusing on him and missed his look. Seeing that Lucinda didn’t mind, Stefan also breathed a sigh of relief, then shot Gabriel a glare, warning him with his eyes to shut his mouth.

Gabriel gave an awkward laugh, knowing he had said something she shouldn’t and hoping Stefan would let it slide. Afterwards, Gabriel, although curious about when Stefan and Lucinda had gotten together, didn’t pry further, afraid he might blurt out something he shouldn’t.

Stefan was already 29 and hadn’t been in a serious relationship. Ruby liked him, but Stefan never admitted to being in a relationship with her. Their friends thought Stefan

was emotionally unavailable, and then out of the blue, he went and registered for marriage.

He sure knew how to keep a secret!

With Gabriel as their witness, Stefan and Lucinda successfully got their marriage certificate.

Gabriel wanted to see the newlyweds out, but Stefan declined his offer. So Gabriel could only say to Lucinda, “Lucinda, you should bring Stefan to visit sometime. My wife would be thrilled to meet with you.”

Lucinda politely responded, “Sure.”

“Well, I won’t keep you. See you around.”

Even though Gabriel said he wouldn’t see them off, he still walked with them for a bit. When Lucinda wasn’t looking, he sneakily punched Stefan and whispered, “You owe us dinner tomorrow night. You can’t keep something this big from us.”

Stefan whispered back, “I have to meet the parents tomorrow. I don’t have time.”

Gabriel asked, confused, “You guys got your marriage certificate without meeting the parents first? Was this a spur-of-the-moment decision?”

He suddenly realized that the two had come in to get a marriage certificate, and Lucinda didn’t even bring her birth certificate. Even with a police station issued certificate, it was clear, they had decided to get their certificate at the last minute.

Gabriel was surprised to find **out** Stefan had a rushed marriage!

However, even though he had many questions, Stefan didn’t give him the chance to ask.

Once in the car, Stefan gently asked Lucinda, “Do you want to grab something to eat? Or should I drop you off at the coffee shop?”

Lucinda looked at her marriage certificate, at the photo of her and Stefan. After hearing Stefan’s question, she replied without looking up, “Just drop me off at my shop. They’ve got food there.”

Stefan smiled, “Sure.”

Lucinda put away the marriage certificate, stuffing it into her pocket, and said with a smile, “Stefan, I never thought I’d be getting this certificate with you.” Looking at her beautiful face, her smile natural and bright, Stefan couldn’t help but smile too, “I never thought my wife would be you.”

Despite their sudden marriage, Stefan didn’t regret it at all.

“Stefan, we’re only play-acting. You can still call me Lucinda, you don’t need to call me ‘wifey’ or ‘honey’.”

Stefan didn’t get upset, instead he asked, “Can I call you ‘wifey’ or ‘honey’ in front of your family?”

Lucinda replied, “Try not to. It sounds kind of weird.”

“Alright.”

Stefan started the car and a few minutes later asked Lucinda, “Where do you live? I’ll move in with you tonight.”

“What?”

Stefan reminded her, “You promised me five hundred dollars a month, providing food, room, and clothing to me.”

Since it was all-inclusive, of course he was going to move in with her.

Lucinda, “Aren’t you living in Diamond Ridge **Estates**? The environment there is awesome, my place is definitely **not** as posh as Diamond Ridge Estates.”

“You also mentioned how the rent in Diamond Ridge Estates is a fortune. Even though I can afford it, I’m married now, gotta pinch some pennies, right? If I move in with you, it saves so much time and money I can save on rent and it still falls within our agreement.”

Lucinda couldn’t argue because she was the one who drafted this agreement to have him pose as her boyfriend, she felt like she’s shot herself in the foot.

“The place I’m renting now is a one-bedroom apartment. It’s only a 2-3 minutes’ walk from my coffee shop. I’m staying in the room, if you decide to move in, you’ll be crashing in the living room.”

While driving, Stefan chuckled and said, “If it helps me save some bucks. I don’t mind sleeping in the living room. Or I could just stay put, you can help me with the rent, it’s about five thousand including utilities.”

Hearing this, Lucinda promptly replied, “Drop me off at my coffee shop first, you can eat something there, then you can head back to cancel your lease and start packing.”

Stefan’s eyes sparkled, a smile tugging at the corner of his mouth. He said, “Got **it**.”

Chapter 5

Lucinda heaved a sigh of relief. Now she wouldn’t have to pay for his rent.

Stefan’s phone started ringing out of the blue. He was driving, so he couldn’t pick up, but the caller was relentless, the phone kept ringing non-stop. He had no choice but to take out his phone from his pocket with one hand and handed it to Lucinda, who looked puzzled.

“I’m driving, can’t answer the phone, can you check who it is?”

Lucinda felt awkward about it, but she couldn’t say no. When she saw the caller ID was “Ike“, she felt nervous.

Ike had no idea that his sister Lucinda was the one holding Stefan’s phone, neither did he know that Stefan was driving when he called again. Stefan looked at Lucinda quizzically, “Who is it, Lucinda? Why didn’t you pick up for me?”

“Stefan, I can’t take the call.”

Although Lucinda had prepared herself for how to face her family when she decided to rent Stefan, she still felt a bit flustered when her brother Ike

called.

Well, she needed some time to compose herself.

“It’s my brother.” Lucinda added.

Stefan was a bit surprised. He and Ike were college buddies, but they weren’t close. They just kept in touch sporadically over the years since graduation, and occasionally met up for a few drinks. That was it.

“I’ll take it.” Stefan slowed down and pulled over, luckily, parking was allowed here.

He took the phone from Lucinda and answered Ike’s call.

“What’s up. Ike?” Stefan’s deep and sultry voice was music to Lucinda’s ears.

Even without his good looks, just hearing him speak, Lucinda felt that renting him as a husband wasn’t a bad deal at all.

“Nothing much, just got a call from Gabriel saying you got married. It’s such big news. As your friend, I’ve got to congratulate you right away.”

Ike laughed, “Stefan, who’s the girl? She’s incredible, even you couldn’t resist her. When are you introducing her to us? And remember, save a best man spot for me at your wedding.”

Stefan was quite popular at school, although he appeared to be amiable, he was actually quite aloof. Many girls had crushes on him, but he never paid them any attention, and there were no rumors about him. Upon hearing the news from Gabriel, Ike couldn’t resist his curiosity and immediately called Stefan, curious about what the girl who attracted Stefan looked like, she must be quite something to have tamed this lofty character.

Stefan was speechless. He had forgotten that Gabriel was not only his friend but also his **junior**, so Ike also knew him.

“Stefan, you’re married now, why hide it? Indulge me in my love for gossip, tell me.”

Stefan glanced at his newlywed wife, Lucinda.

Lucinda immediately got his drift. She took a couple of deep breaths, then took the phone from Stefan again.

“Ike, it’s me.”

Ike, hearing his sister’s voice on the other end, was taken aback. He pulled the phone away from his ear and checked the screen, it was definitely Stefan’s number, and the call was still connected. Why was his sister answering the phone?

“Lucinda? This is Stefan’s number.”

Lucinda had collected herself. She responded to her brother seriously, “Ike, Stefan and I are married.”

She had heard everything her brother said earlier, his voice was pretty loud.

Ike was so startled he dropped his phone. He must have misheard, his little sister couldn’t possibly be Stefan’s wife!

The next moment, Ike bent down to pick up his phone, and asked loudly, “Lucinda, say that again? Who did you marry to? Stefan? Do you know what he’s like? You actually dared to marry him, you have guts!”

The thought of his sister marrying Stefan made Ike extremely upset. Even he, who had been classmates with Stefan for four years, didn’t fully understand Stefan, let alone know where he lived.

All Ike knew was that Stefan wasn’t as easy-going as he seemed, he was a scheming person. When he was smiling his brightest, he could be calculating everyone else’s downfall.

His sister was straightforward and naive, how could she see through Stefan?

“Ike, let’s talk about this tomorrow when we have time. Mom wants me to come home tomorrow, so I’ll bring Stefan home to meet our parents.”

As long as her mother saw Stefan, she wouldn’t set up any more blind dates for her. Otherwise, even if she told her mother she had a boyfriend over the phone, her mother wouldn’t believe her. **Wasn’t** the purpose of renting Stefan to shut her mom up and live a peaceful life?

Lucinda hung up after saying that, to prevent her brother from asking a string of questions. Although she didn’t know Stefan very well, they had known each other for eleven years, she believed Stefan wasn’t a bad person.

Ike, whose call was cut off by his sister, paced anxiously in his office, mumbling to himself, “Stefan you bastard, you tricked my sister. Lucinda, you’re bold, daring to marry Stefan, how ridiculous! When did they get together? How did they kept it a secret?”

In short, Ike was in a state of agitation, wishing he could fly to his sister’s side immediately to get to the bottom of things.

After the call with Ike, Lucinda and Stefan sat silently, neither of them spoke.

When they returned to the Serendipity Cafe, **as** Lucinda was about to open the car door to get out, Stefan asked her softly, “Lucinda, will you regret it?”

Lucinda turned her head to look at him. He was refined and courteous, his elegance couldn’t **be** hidden even in casual wear. The way he spoke was always so refined, clearly a real gentleman. Why did her brother make Stefan out to be a big bad wolf, like she’d be devoured if they were together? Lucinda felt her brother was seriously overreacting..

“Stefan, we’re in a contractual relationship, everything’s by the contract. How could I possibly regret it?”

Lucinda replied, then, after a brief pause, she added, “I don’t do things that I’ll regret later.”

She’d given it a lot of thought before she proposed the whole rent–a–boyfriend thing to Stefan.

Stefan cracked a smile, “Alright, I got it.”

Lucinda blinked, feeling like there was a deeper meaning to his words, but try as she might, she couldn’t figure out what it was.

Chapter 6

“Lucinda.”

As Lucinda entered the coffee shop, her business partner and friend, Cecilia Yates, came up to greet her, pointing to the man sitting at the corner table and whispering, “Your ex–boyfriend is here, and he’s been waiting for a while.”

Ex–boyfriend?

Lucinda looked over, and sure enough, it was her ex–boyfriend George Mitchell, with whom she had been together for four years before he left her for a rich girl.

“What’s he doing here?” Lucinda murmured.

They had broken up half a year ago, and she was slowly emerging from the shadow of that split, but that didn’t mean she wanted to see George.

Cecilia frowned, “I dunno why he’s here. He asked for a glass of water when he came in and has been sitting there like a statue.”

Cecilia and Lucinda were friends, and she had witnessed the entire relationship between Lucinda and George. She had no respect for men like George, who dumped their girlfriends for their careers.

When they broke up, Lucinda was devastated, barely speaking, which worried Cecilia and made her resent George.

“He’s a customer, so you should treat him well. But remember, we’re charging him for that water.”

Half a year later, Lucinda was able to remain calm upon seeing George.

As Cecilia had once comforted her, “**If** someone else can take him away, he’s not for you from the beginning. It’s better to see his true colors before marriage than being betrayed after tying the knot.”

Cecilia chuckled, “Don’t worry, I’ll make sure to charge him.”

Lucinda took a stride, heading into the store.

“Lucy”

George noticed Lucinda and immediately stood up, calling her affectionately as he used to.

Stefan, who had followed Lucinda into the shop, just heard George’s affectionate call for his wife, “Lucy”.

His eyes suddenly turned icy cold.

George’s eyes were only on Lucinda, and seeing her ignoring him, he quickly got up and headed towards Lucinda.

“Lucy, can we talk?”

George tried to grab Lucinda’s hand, but she dodged him.

“Lucy,” George said, his face full of plea, “It’s been a long time. We should catch up.”

Lucinda had matured and become more charming over the half year since they last met.

George, deep down, was reluctant to break up with Lucinda. After all, they had been together for four years and had a solid emotional foundation.

However, both he and Lucinda came from average families. After suffering in the workplace for a few years, he resolved to be successful no matter what. As it happened, his boss's niece fell for him and insisted on marrying him.

The niece's parents were both deceased, but her aunt and uncle treated her like their own daughter, even giving her shares in the company.

How could George resist such a woman? As soon as he secured a relationship with her, he left Lucinda.

Now, his position in the company was rising, and those who once oppressed him now had to respect him, all thanks to his new girlfriend.

"I have nothing to say to you, Mr. Mitchell."

"Lucinda, are you still angry with me? I know I treated you poorly. I want to apologize."

George apologized with a smile, but Lucinda could not sense his sincerity. Even if he was genuinely sorry, she had no intention of accepting his apology.

"Mr. Mitchell, I barely know you. Please stop calling me Lucy," Lucinda said, preparing to leave.

George quickly reached out and grabbed her arm.

This time, Lucinda did not dodge his hand in time and was caught by him.

Then, a large hand came over, grabbed George's hand that was holding Lucinda. Perhaps the grip was strong, Lucinda noticed George's face change, and then he let go of her.

Stefan stood beside Lucinda, he was tall and towered over George. Although his handsome face showed no sign of anger, his deep gaze on George sent a chill down George's spine.

"Who are you? Mind your own business!" George tried to pull his hand free but couldn't. He tugged hard but still couldn't succeed, his face turning red from the effort.

Stefan looked at him with disgust. When George tried to pull his hand free again, Stefan let go.

George lost balance from the sudden release, stumbled backwards, hit a table and hurt his waist, causing him to gasp in pain.

George quickly steadied himself by holding on to the table, then stood up straight, adjusted his expensive suit, straightened his tie, **and** glared at Stefan, “Who the hell are you? I’m talking to my girlfriend, why are you butting in?”

Stefan glanced at Lucinda, then back at George, a smirk playing on his lips, “Your girlfriend? Sorry to break it to you, but she’s my wife.” George was dumbstruck.

Lucinda thought to herself: Stefan is quite the actor.

George looked at Lucinda in disbelief, pointing at Stefan, questioning Lucinda, “Lucinda, is what he’s saying true? I thought all your blind dates failed because you’re still in love with me!”

George swung by today because he heard Lucinda had been on a bunch of blind dates with zero luck. He figured Lucinda was still hung up **on** him. Now that he’s loaded and has some social status, and he thought he could make Lucinda his side chick to make up for the fact his current girlfriend is not as pretty as Lucinda.

Stefan took two steps forward and grabbed George’s tie, yanking him closer. His words were filled with a warning, “Mr. Mitchell, let me say it one more time, Lucinda isn’t someone you can just have when you like. She’s my wife, and the only guy who gets to call her Lucy is me!”

Lucinda felt like applauding. Stefan was killing it! Hiring him to play her husband was a brilliant idea. Not only did it shut her mum up, but it also humiliated George.

But, hearing Stefan call her “wife“... it made her feel a bit uneasy.

They only just got married and she was still adjusting to it.

“Do you know why my Lucy didn’t hit it off with any of her blind dates?”

Stefan turned to Lucinda, flashing her a gentle smile. Lucinda’s heart skipped a beat, Stefan’s smile was becoming more and more irresistible.

When he faced George again, Stefan still wore that smile, his voice as calm as ever, as if the guy who just threatened George wasn't him. He said, "Because Lucy was waiting for me, that's why none of her blind dates worked out."

George was left speechless.

Lucinda wondered to herself, was that a love confession?

Cecilia, on the other hand, was excited to watch the show.

George took a moment to find his voice, then snapped at Stefan, "Besides your pretty face, what else can you offer Lucinda?"

Chapter 7

George wouldn't dare to call Lucinda "Lucy" anymore. The man had a grip that made George's wrist ache, and he could still feel it even now. Stefan chuckled coldly, and George's face turned beet-red. Stefan's scornful laugh was even more unbearable than direct mockery.

"Mr. Mitchell, you might wanna look in a mirror. Compared to me, your looks do fall a bit short. The term 'kept man' seems quite suitable for you." George was even more speechless..

Lucinda couldn't help but burst into laughter.

Stefan shot her a glance and she quickly covered her mouth, stifling her laughter.

George couldn't accept that Stefan had stolen his ex. He and Lucinda had four years of history together. He believed that Lucinda still had feelings for him. Standing tall, George challenged Stefan, "Can you provide a good life for Lucinda? Judging by your outfit, I doubt you even make 500 bucks a month. I've heard Lucinda has tens of thousands of dollars in debt. I can help her out right now. Can you?"

Stefan didn't directly say how much he made, instead, he turned around and left.

The intrigued onlookers were a bit disappointed to see Stefan leave without putting up a fight against George.

Even Cecilia couldn't help but ask Lucinda, "How much does he make a month?"

Lucinda shook her head, whispering, “I don’t know. He works at Ascend Global and lives in Diamond Ridge Estates. His rent and utilities alone are over five thousand dollars a month.”

Who in their right mind would think that a resident of Diamond Ridge Estates makes only 500 bucks a month?

Cecilia tilted her head and looked at Lucinda. Didn’t that gentleman say Lucinda was his wife? And Lucinda doesn’t even know how much her own husband makes?

Cecilia fell silent when she realized that she spends every day with Lucinda and didn’t even know she was married.

“Lucinda, he can’t even help you pay off your debt, but I can. Can we start over? If you give me another chance, I’ll pay off your debt right now.”

Lucinda looked at George’s smug expression and retorted coldly, “Mr. Mitchell, aren’t you afraid your current girlfriend will find out you’re helping me pay off my debt and clean you out?”

Lucinda thought to herself, this man, relying on the benefits gained from climbing social ladders, dares to show off in front of me.

George glanced nervously at the surrounding guests and whispered to Lucinda, “Lucinda, can we talk outside?” There were too many people here.

Lucinda, expressionless, said, “**Sorry**, I don’t have time. Please leave, Mr. Mitchell. I have a business to run.”

Just as George was about to say something, Stefan walked back in and whatever George was about to say got stuck in his throat.

Stefan had been gone for about ten minutes and came back carrying a box. Everyone immediately focused their attention on him, eager for the drama to continue.

Some people who were about to leave, quickly returned to their seats, ordered more coffee and cakes, and prepared to enjoy the show.

Lucinda came over and quietly said, “Stefan, you don’t need to stoop to his level. It’s not worth ruining your mood.”

Stefan looked at her, his gaze deep, making it hard for Lucinda to read him.

“I’m not upset, but I **can’t** let others laugh at you.” If he didn’t stand up for Lucinda, people would ridicule her for choosing a husband who barely made

500 bucks a month.

Lucinda quickly said, “I don’t care.”

Stefan whispered, “But I do.”

Lucinda replied, “...Okay, Stefan, go ahead. I’m watching.”

George watched Stefan walk in with the box, a smug and scornful smile on his **face**. “I knew it. You dare to compete with me for **Lucinda** when you can’t even make 500 bucks a month. Do you know how much I make in a month...”

Before he could finish, George was cut off as Stefan threw the **box** at his feet, startling George who jumped up in surprise.

The people around couldn’t help but laugh.

George’s face turned red. He wanted **to** rush at Stefan, but he didn’t dare to actually do it. Stefan’s grip on his wrist had made it clear that George was no

match for him.

“Open it!”

Stefan ordered.

George wanted to argue, but under Stefan’s intense gaze, he found himself unable to come up with a retort. He obediently squatted down and opened the box.

The room fell silent, so quiet you could hear a pin drop.

It was a box full of cash. All new bills, bundled up. The sight was a punch in the gut for George.

Lucinda was shocked too. She stared at the box of cash, wondering if it was **a** prop from a movie set.

Stefan stood over the stunned George, his tone still gentle, but the words were like thorns, leaving George with nowhere to hide, “This is what I just took.

out of the bank.”

George wished he could find a hole and crawl into it to hide himself.

7/0

17:54

He thought his wealth made him superior, but Stefan had just given his ego a brutal beating. He was mortified.

Faced with such embarrassment, George hated Stefan more than ever. This man, whose name he didn’t even know, had made him look like a fool. He would make Stefan regret this!

Stefan bent down, closed the box, picked it up, and asked George with a smile, “Mr. Mitchell, would you like to leave on your own, or do you want me to kick you out?”

George rose to his feet, incapable of meeting Stefan’s gaze, his face flushed as he scurried out of the room.

Everyone thought, what a show!

Applause erupted around the room, even Lucinda clapped her hands.

Stefan scanned the room, his eyes finally landing on Lucinda, who was enthusiastically applauding. He shifted the case to his other hand, then lightly. tapped Lucinda’s forehead with the index finger of his right hand, “Lucinda, I did this all for you.”

“I know, Stefan. You’re amazing. I made the right choice choosing you. I’ve got such great taste!” Lucinda showered Stefan with compliments, all of which were heartfelt.

Stefan silently watched her.

Lucinda started to feel uneasy under his gaze.

“I’m going to go return the money. I borrowed it from a friend who works at a nearby bank,” Stefan said, picking up the case and walking past Lucinda. Lucinda and Cecilia exchanged surprised glances. So, the money was borrowed?

The onlookers all chimed in, to borrow such a large sum of money in a mere ten minutes to prove himself, he’s still impressive!

Chapter 8

After Stefan left, Cecilia turned to her friend and asked, “Lucinda, is he really your husband? When did you guys get hitched? How come I never heard anything about it?”

“But, your hubby was such a badass just now. He’s a whole lot better than that jerk George.”

Lucinda went back to the cash register and took a seat.

Cecilia followed suit.

“We just came from the City Hall, actually, he is...”

Leaning close to her friend’s ear, Lucinda whispered, “My mom keeps setting me up for blind dates and it’s driving me nuts. So I hired Stefan to play my husband and fool my mom, just so I can get some peace.”

Cecilia was flabbergasted, “Hired? You hired a husband and actually got married at City Hall?”

“Stefan thought it was best to go all in. He’s a looker and an old college buddy of my brother’s. I’ve known him for 11 years, so it’s not like I’m losing anything by marrying him. So, off we went to City Hall.”

Cecilia poked Lucinda's forehead a few times while whispering, "You're out of your mind! Aren't you afraid he'll take advantage of you? Looks can be deceiving, you've known him for 11 years, but do you really know him?"

"Not really, but he's still a familiar face."

Cecilia said, "I hope you won't end up getting screwed over."

She left the cash register area, "I need a moment to process. Your madness is giving me the creeps."

Lucinda just shrugged.

Was a rushed marriage really that scary?

"Ding, ding, ding—"

A new message popped up on Lucinda's phone.

It was from Stefan, telling her he was on his way to terminate his lease and would be back before dinner to take her out and celebrate their "marriage".

Lucinda chuckled.

It's not like they were really getting married. What was there to celebrate?

But she didn't reject Stefan's arrangement.

Diamond Ridge Estates was a community featuring both high-rise buildings and villas, boasting a beautiful environment and convenient transportation.

The villa that Stefan lived in was one of many he owned. Since it was close to his company, he usually stayed there.

His real home was the Anderson Manor, the most famous mansion in Pinehurst, also known as the Ascend Estate. Built to mirror the beauty of Norwegian forests, it was a sight for sore eyes.

But it was far from the hustle and bustle of the city, requiring more than an hour's drive from the city center.

The security system at Ascend Estate was top-notch. Without the consent of an Anderson family member, no one could enter.

It was said that the Ascend Estate was designed like a maze. Once inside, outsiders would get lost and be unable to find their way out.

Stefan pulled up to his villa and honked. Soon, a middle-aged, chubby woman came out to greet him.

“Young Master.”

As she opened the villa gate, she asked with a smile, “Young Master, what brings you back?”

Stefan parked his car in the garage. After getting out, he replied to her question, “Emma, I’m back to grab some clothes. I won’t be back for a while.”

Emma took it in stride, “are you going on a business trip again?”

Ascend Global had many subsidiaries. Even though each one was managed by other members of his family, there were times when Stefan had to handle issues personally.

“No.”

Then why are you leaving?”

In light of his newly married status, Stefan was in high spirits and didn't mind chatting,
"Emma, I've been hired."

Emma stopped in her tracks and burst out laughing, "Young Master, don't joke around.
Who could afford to hire you? Would anyone dare?"

Stefan just chuckled and didn't elaborate.

He went upstairs and into his room, browsing through his wardrobe but finding nothing
suitable.

Turning around, he walked out of his room.

"Emma."

Emma quickly appeared at the stairway.

"Emma, get Laird for me."

17.54

Laird was the gardener responsible for his garden, around the same age as Stefan.

"Okay"

Emma quickly went to find Laird. In less than two minutes, Laird was present.

Stefan was already downstairs.

"Young Master, you wanted me?"

"Laird, do you have any new clothes?"

Laird blinked, confused, but still answered honestly, “I bought a couple of new outfits online a few days ago.”

He spent his days surrounded by plants, often getting covered in dirt, so he didn’t need to wear anything too fancy.

“Give me your new clothes. How much did they cost? I’ll wire you the money.”

“Huh?”

Laird was stunned, seriously questioning his hearing.

Even Emma was taken aback.

“Young Master... my clothes are cheap stuff I bought online.”

Laird reminded the young master.

“I know, but I need them right now. Don’t worry, I’ll pay you. Double the value.”

“But...”

Laird looked at Emma. Emma didn’t know what the young master was thinking, but she was used to obeying him, so she told Laird, “If the young master wants you to get the clothes, just get them.”

“Alright then.”

In a few minutes, Laird handed over the two new outfits he’d bought online to Stefan.

“Young Master, I’ve washed these clothes but never worn them.”

Stefan took the clothes and could tell they were of inferior quality compared to his own.

But he didn't mind. He took out his wallet, pulled out a few large bills, and handed them to Laird.

"Young Master, these clothes didn't cost that much!"

"Take it!"

Stefan's glare made Laird shudder, and he quickly accepted the hundreds of dollars.

The young master might seem gentle and refined, but that was all a facade.

Who could run Ascend Global by being soft-hearted?

"Emma, lend me that bicycle you use for exercise."

Without giving a damn about whether she agreed or not, Stefan walked out of his fancy mansion, a black travel bag slung over his shoulder.

Snapping back to reality, Emma rushed out after him, calling, "Young master, what the hell are you doing?"

Did he seriously have a sugar mama now?

But if he did, shouldn't he be dressing better, eating better, using better stuff?

Why would the young master want to go out of his way to change his image, making people see him **as** an ordinary guy, or even worse, a poor one?

"Give me the keys to the bike lock."

Emma handed the keys to Stefan," young master, you've got me all confused."

Stefan got on the bike, grinning, “Emma, I’m getting married. Your future lady boss, her name is Lucinda.”

Emma was shocked, “What?”

The young master was getting married?

Her future lady boss was named Lucinda?

Lucinda?

Where had she heard that name before?

Right, it was the girl in the photo album Stefan hid in the bookshelf.

That album, Stefan cherished it like a treasure. If she hadn’t cleaned the study, she would never have found **it**.

The album was filled with pictures of a girl from her youth to her young adult years, each one signed personally by the young master, clearly stating the date they were taken, the girl’s name, and her age.

Before this, everyone thought the young master was into Ms. Scott, Emma included, until she found that album.

Chapter 9

Emma just found out that the young master of her household has been secretly in love with a girl for a whole decade!

“Emma, I’m leaving.”

Stefan pedaled off **on** his bike.

Lucinda was an ordinary girl. Now that he had a chance to enter her world, he naturally wanted to get close to her as an ordinary guy first, then slowly win her heart.

Emma stood dazed as she watched the young master disappear into the distance.

By the time she snapped back to reality and wanted to chase after him for answers, he was already gone.

“Why would the young master act so rashly?” Emma spun around anxiously on the spot.

He didn’t leave any clues behind, which made her extremely anxious, but she couldn’t find any answers.

“I need to tell the old lady. She’s always been concerned about the young master’s marital matters.”

Emma mumbled to herself, preparing to tell the old lady, but she hung up the phone as soon as it connected.

“This is the young master’s private matter... I better not stick my nose in his business. Keeping my job is the most important thing!”

Emma was afraid that if she spilled the beans, she would be fired by the young master.

Where else could she find such an easy job with good pay?

A plane flying back from Novarica slowly landed at Pinehurst International Airport.

As the cabin door opened, the passengers began to disembark one by one, dispersing in different directions.

Ruby, wearing a long light-colored dress, her wavy hair flowing, and sunglasses on, looked around and smiled after getting off the plane. “Pinehurst, I’m back! Stefan, I’m back!”

Ruby took out her phone from her bag, walking forward while dialing Owen Martinez.

Owen, Stefan, and Ruby, all knew each other since childhood and were once close.

But as they grew older, Owen and Stefan gradually became enemies.

However, Ruby didn’t choose sides due to their conflict. Instead, she wanted to reconcile their differences.

“Owen.”

Ruby said with a smile, “I’m back. I just got off the plane. Can you pick me up?”

Owen was busy, but his face lit up with a smile when he heard Ruby was back, “You’re back? Why didn’t you tell me earlier? I could’ve waited for you at the airport. No problem, I’ll come get you now.”

“I just wanted to surprise you guys.”

Owen didn’t pay attention to the word “you guys”.

“I’ll grab something to eat at the airport. Drive safely.”

Ruby didn’t eat on the plane and was now hungry.

“Alright, have a bite to eat, but don’t get too full. I’ll take you to my hotel for dinner later.”

Owen said as he got up from his desk.

The piles of documents were nothing compared to Ruby.

Ruby hesitated a bit, then tentatively asked Owen, “Owen, if you’re coming to pick me up, can we go to the Anderson Hotel? I could invite Stefan.”

Owen’s face changed slightly, but he didn’t **stop**..

“Stefan won’t come. Even if we go to the Anderson Hotel, you won’t run into him.”

Stefan didn’t actually love Ruby. It was always Ruby’s one-sided feelings. The rumors about their relationship were just misunderstandings within the industry.

Not all boys and girls who grow up together end up as lovers or spouses.

“Alright, let’s go to your hotel then.”

Ruby sensed Owen’s dissatisfaction, so she didn’t insist.

She hadn’t been home for a long time, and the conflict between the two men seemed to be deepening.

Only if she stayed with them for a long time could she possibly resolve their differences.

“Ruby, how long are you planning to stay this time?” Owen’s mood improved, and he asked her with a smile.

“I plan to work here from now on, unless I have to travel for work, I’ll stay in Pinehurst.” Ruby answered.

Ruby had actually been living abroad for ten years.

The Anderson family has a rule. **Any** descendants who emigrate abroad cannot share in the Anderson family’s inheritance.

How could she emigrate abroad if she wanted to be the next mistress of the Anderson family?

“Really?” Owen was really happy, “Welcome back. There’s no place like home.”

Ruby smiled.

After ten years abroad, she indeed had a few relationships, but none of those men could compare to Stefan or Owen.

After comparing them with others, she realized that the one she got along with the longest was the best.

That’s why Ruby transferred her work back home. She wanted to pursue Stefan again, and as long as she could marry into the Anderson family, she didn’t care what means she had to use.

As the sun set and the evening glow was as fiery as a flame.

Stefan rode his bike back to the Serendipity Cafe.

At this time, there were no other customers in the shop.

Lucinda was sitting at the cashier’s desk. When she saw Stefan walk in with his luggage, she casually asked, “Stefan, did you move all your stuff?” “Yes.”

Upon hearing this, Lucinda immediately closed the file on her computer.

She was writing a novel.

Because the cafe wasn’t doing well, she, a bookworm, started trying writing novels to make a living. Unexpectedly, she was able to get a contract. Since she was a newbie

without any previous success, her contract was at a flat rate, only earning 3 dollars per thousand words. The publisher's editor praised her novel's opening as being excellent, so they made an exception and gave her 10 dollars for every thousand words.

Lucinda valued this part-time job a lot.

She got up at three in the morning every day to write, and would also write during the day whenever she had time, until late at night because she had to update sixteen thousand words daily.

After a month, her earnings from writing were enough to pay the cafe's rent, with an extra two hundred dollars left for living expenses.

Her economic condition was very tight. Her boyfriend of four years dumped her for a new girlfriend because Lucinda couldn't help him in his career **or** support him in life.

"Cecilia, you stay here and watch the shop tonight. I'm gonna take Stefan to my place."
Lucinda said.

Cecilia smiled at Stefan and replied, "Go ahead, there aren't many customers right now. I got this."

Lucinda tucked the cheap laptop she bought online into her bag, swinging it over her shoulder as she walked out of the checkout area.

"Stefan, let's go."

Stefan turned to Cecilia with a gentle smile, "Ms. Yates, sorry for leaving you alone working."

Cecilia chuckled, "Lucinda and I are partners in this joint. I've got a stake in it, too. It's no biggie to help out."

But internally, she was thinking, “what a stud! His smile is drop-dead gorgeous! He’s way hotter than most movie stars.”

Lucinda sure hit the jackpot, having such a hot guy as her fake husband!

The couple strolled out of the store.

Lucinda scanned the surroundings, but Stefan’s second-hand car was nowhere in sight.

“Let’s roll.”

Stefan hopped on his bike, patting the back seat, “My office is just around the corner. I left the car there and switched to cycling, so no more worries about traffic.”

Lucinda didn’t question him, hopping on the back of his bike, patting his backpack, “Is this all you’re carrying?”

“If you’re gonna be my sugar mama, what else do I have to worry about?”

Lucinda was speechless by his words.

Chapter 10

“How far is your place from here?”

“About 500 meters away.”

To the left or the right?”

“Just go straight ahead, I’ll let you know when we’re there.”

With that, Stefan hopped onto his bike, carrying Lucinda as they went.

Upon reaching Lucinda's apartment building, she instructed Stefan, "Just stop here, Stefan. You can leave your bike downstairs. Do you have a lock? Make sure to lock it up so it doesn't get nicked."

Stefan obediently locked his bike at the entrance of the building, taking in the sight of the apartment complex as he followed Lucinda.

It was a nine-story building built in the 90s, without an elevator.

Lucinda's place was on the sixth floor.

They chatted and climbed the stairs, surprisingly not feeling tired.

Once they reached the sixth floor, Lucinda led Stefan to the smallest apartment at the end of the corridor. "This is the place I rent, at the very end. After dinner, I'll get a copy of the key made for you."

"Okay."

Apartment 608 was Lucinda's small apartment.

After unlocking the door, Lucinda stepped aside to let Stefan in before closing the door.

It was a one-bedroom apartment and to Stefan's eyes, it was even smaller than his study.

The living room had a small table and a few stools, with several boxes in the corner. It was a bit messy.

Lucinda's place was really simplistic!

At least the floor was spotless.

"Stefan, you can sleep in the living room for a few days. Once the money come, I'll get a bed for you."

She would receive her payment on the tenth, while she needed to pay the shop rent on the fifteenth of every month.

The money she earned from her writing would only stay in her bank account for a few days before being transferred to the landlord.

It felt like she was slaving away at her writing just to pay her landlord.

Fortunately, her business was getting better.

Once she paid off her debts, things would be a lot easier.

Stefan's eyes twinkled as he nodded in response.

Lucinda said somewhat awkwardly, "Stefan, my café isn't profitable yet, and I'm in debt by tens of thousands. After subtracting the costs and paying my employees, there's nothing left. My living conditions aren't great right now, but don't worry, I won't owe you any money."

She decided that starting tomorrow, she would update her novel by 20,000 words every day.

Her editor said the data from her works' trials were good, the more she updated, the better it sold.

She could also check her daily earnings in the back-end.

Once her royalties surpassed the minimum guaranteed payment, she wouldn't need to update so many chapters every day, and her earnings would increase significantly, and her financial difficulties will be alleviated.

"It's okay, if you're really strapped for cash, you can owe me for a while. I have a job and my salary isn't low, I'm not in a hurry for money."

Stefan didn't care about the \$500 rent at all.

He was loaded.

In fact, he could buy the bed himself.

But he'd rather sleeping on the same bed with Lucinda...

Stefan placed his bag on one of the stools and said to Lucinda, "Let's go grab a bite first."

He added, "I'll pay for dinner this time."

Lucinda laughed and agreed, "Alright then, I'll thank you in advance."

They left the apartment together.

“Lucinda, I’m going to meet your parents with you tomorrow, **so** you’ll have to be more affectionate with me.”

Stefan said this calmly, as if he was really fulfilling his ‘husbandly’ duties.

Lucinda looked at him sideways.

He said, “Even though we’re pretending to be married, we can’t let your parents know **that**. Normal newlyweds are very affectionate, if you keep your distance from me like you are now, do you think your parents will believe us?”

Lucinda was speechless.

Just then, a large hand suddenly gripped hers.

Lucinda instinctively tried to shake it off.

“You see, I try to hold your hand and you want to shake it off. How will your mother believe you? If she finds out that you hired me to be your husband, she’ll be angry and scold you, then continue setting you up on blind dates.”

Lucinda opened her mouth to say something, but couldn’t.

Because Stefan was right. Even if they were pretending to be a couple, they needed to act like one.

Her mother was very perceptive.

“We need to practice now, so you can get used to me. That way, it’ll be more convincing. Even if your mom has a keen eye, we need to make sure she can’t tell.”

Stefan’s words made a lot of sense, leaving the usually eloquent Lucinda speechless.

Her hand was held tightly by him, and she didn’t dare to pull away.

Even though they had known each other for eleven years, Lucinda didn’t know him very well.

His hand was warm against hers, making her face burning hot.

She said helplessly, “It’s getting hotter these days.”

Stefan tilted his head and looked at her deeply. Her face was flushed, her eyes sparkled like stars in the night. He was most attracted to her red lips. They must be soft.

“It is quite hot.”

Stefan replied gently, pulling his gaze away so as not to make her uncomfortable.

She was shy.

Even though Lucinda had dated George for many years, it was only a campus romance, and she was very stubborn in love. George never received any concessions from her.

“Lucinda.”

When they reached the first floor, they ran into someone they knew.

A middle-aged lady greeted Lucinda with a grin. Her gaze quickly landed on Stefan, and seeing them holding hands, she joked, “Lucinda, is this your new boyfriend?”

“Yes.”

Lucinda answered confidently.

“He’s a good-looking fellow. No wonder you’re not interested in anyone else.”

Lucinda laughed, “Abbey, do you think I’m the kind of person who only cares about looks? I care more about character, that’s what really matters.”

“Looks are important too, at least it’s pleasant to look at every day.” Abbey clearly placed a lot of importance on looks.

Among all the residents of the apartment, Lucinda was the most attractive. Abbey would always share some good food with her because she was so pretty.

“Where are you guys off to?”

“My boyfriend is planning to treat me to a meal.”

“Well, off you go then, enjoy your evening.”

Abbey left with a spring in her step.

Stefan maintained a smile, not uttering a word.

Once Abbey was out of sight, he casually asked, “Lucinda, do a lot of guys have a thing for you?”

“No, not really, no one’s into me. If anyone did like me, I wouldn’t be avoiding going home because of my mom’s nagging about marriage.”

When it came to ‘no one being into me’, Lucinda felt pretty annoyed..

Ever since she turned fourteen, even though she was getting prettier and prettier and lots of boys would gush over her, no one ever pursued her.

During college, she started **dating** George, but this was all because she was the one who made the first move, leading to them becoming a couple.

However, while most people in relationships hope to be together all the time, she and George maintained their relationship mainly through texting.