



Taken (Darker Steamy Shorts #1)

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Category: Action&Adventure

Description: From Strangers to Lovers: The Unforgettable Story of TAKEN

In a world where passion collides with obligation, Maria De Luca finds herself at a crossroads. With her family's business on the brink of collapse, her father has made a decision that will change her life forever—she's promised to a man she's never met. Xavier Romano, a six-foot-three possessive alpha male with a dark past and a burning desire for what's his. And now Maria is his.

As their forced marriage unfolds, Maria is torn between her instincts to flee and an undeniable attraction that pulls her closer. Will she succumb to the heat of their connection, or will she escape?

Discover the intoxicating blend of desire and danger in TAKEN, the first book in Lena Little's Darker Steamy Shorts series.

Maria

My family's business is in tatters, and the only thing that can save it is if I marry a perfect stranger. The answer is no, obviously ... except my dad already promised me to him. My soon-to-be husband I've never met, the 6'3 Xavier Romano.

I know I should run, but something about him makes me curious enough to stay. Will having him once sate my curiosity, or am I about to fall hard?

Xavier

Time is running out, and I need a wife. A business associate defaults on his loan to me, and I accept an unusual payment—the hand of his daughter in marriage.

Maria De Luca is a blond, blue-eyed spitfire, and I like her a hell of a lot more than I anticipated. This marriage is supposed to be all for show, but I can't seem to keep my hands off her.

Will I be able to let Maria go once all is said and done, or will I keep her at my side, no matter what it takes?

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Source Creation Date: July 23, 2025, 12:21 pm

MARIA

"S it down, dear. Quit looking at me like I've grown another head."

My dad is the only one sitting at the dining room table, the food still steaming in the to-go containers from one of his many restaurants. His inviting me to dinner on a random Wednesday is weird enough, but the expression on his face has cranked my suspicions up into the stratosphere.

It's not like Dad and I don't see each other often, but it's rarely ever in my childhood home, and there's always a reason behind it.

Still, I settle into the seat across from him and pluck a breadstick from one of the to-go containers, the garlic butter dripping onto the tablecloth.

"So," Dad says, grabbing his fork. "How are you doing?"

I narrow my eyes at him as I chew. "You invited me here for small talk?"

He snorts. "It's been two weeks since we've hung out. I just wanted to check in and see how you're doing. You haven't been returning my calls."

Ouch. Maybe I've been avoiding him a little bit, but things are always weird this time of year, when the anniversary of Mom's death starts to loom.

"Sorry," I say automatically, "I guess I've been distracted. Work and stuff."

"How is work?"

I sigh. "I'm between projects right now. Freelancing isn't paying what it used to."

"Hm," he responds noncommittally. Then, he takes a swig of the open beer bottle next to him and sighs, pinching the bridge of his nose. "Listen, kid, you know I don't beat around the bush. So I'm going to come out with it."

My shoulders stiffen. "Okay..."

He looks at me, eyes weary. "I'm in trouble, Maria."

"What do you mean?"

"Money trouble. Business trouble."

I frown. "What happened?"

He shakes his head. "It doesn't matter what happened. It doesn't matter what went wrong. The bottom line is, I messed up."

My heart thumps faster. This isn't like my dad.

He's always been an overachiever, driven and ambitious—the type of man who'd rather die than let his empire crumble.

He built his business from the ground up, from a tiny restaurant to a chain of thirty locations across the Midwest. He's always been the same way with everything he cares about—hard working, proud, fiercely protective.

This ... this is not the father I know. And it scares me .

"How bad is it?" I ask cautiously.

"The worst," he admits, his voice tight. "I don't want to get into the details right now. Just know that I owe a lot of money to someone who really isn't the kind of guy you want to owe anything to. So this was my only option."

"Why can't I just pay off the debt?" I ask, before the rest of his words sink in. "Wait, what's your only option?"

"I've already sold off a few of the restaurants to pay some of the debt," Dad says. "I tried to negotiate with him, and he agreed to a deal, but ... you aren't going to like it."

"Just tell me what it is!"

Dad sighs. "You have to marry Xavier Romano."

Shock hits me, but then I laugh before I can let the worry sink in. "This is a joke, right? Who the hell is that? And why does he care who I marry?"

"Xavier Romano is the man whose family owns the spirits distributorship I've been using for the past decade. He's also the man I borrowed several million dollars from."

I drop the breadstick, splattering garlic butter across my plate. "Several million dollars? What the fuck, Dad? How did you let this happen?"

"I don't know, Maria," he says wearily. "I guess I trusted the wrong people."

Or I bit off more than I could chew. Maybe a little bit of both.

I wanted to expand the restaurants, get them into new markets, and I didn't think twice about getting a loan from Mr. Romano.

He seemed like a decent guy, and the deal was solid.

I thought he was a businessman, but he needs a wife, and he saw the pictures of you on the walls of my office, and. .."

I freeze as the rest of his words sink in. "So, what, he wants to own me? "

Dad shakes his head. "No, he wants you to marry him. It's an arrangement, Maria. But he'll forgive all my debt if you go along with it. And I won't lose everything your mother and I built."

My chest tightens. I've always known that Mom and Dad started the business together, but hearing him use her as a way to manipulate me makes me feel ill. "But why would he want me? He doesn't even know me."

"Because you're beautiful and smart," Dad says firmly. "And I told him you're kind and selfless, and you'll do anything for the people you care about."

I blink back tears as a wave of panic rises inside me. This can't be real. I must be dreaming right now. My dad isn't sitting across from me, saying that some stranger wants me to marry him in order to wipe out a multimillion-dollar debt.

But Dad's expression is deadly serious. "Maria, say something," he pleads. "Please."

"What do you want me to say?" I ask hoarsely. "You're asking me to get married. To someone I've never met. And this is all so I can keep your restaurants alive?"

"Yes," he admits. "And so I don't end up in prison or dead in an alley. You have no idea how deep in debt I am right now."

My head spins. "Okay, well, how about we pay off the debt? We'll figure out a way to

pay it back slowly, and?—"

"No!" Dad says sharply. "I already tried that. It won't work. My credit is completely ruined, Maria. Everything is on the line here, and this is the only option I have left. It's my last chance. Do you understand?"

His words hit me like a slap across the face, and suddenly the room feels hot. I swallow hard. "I understand, but that doesn't mean I'm just going to accept it. "

"It doesn't have to be forever, Maria. Once I recoup my losses, I'll do everything in my power to get you away from him, but for now, this is the best option to save the family legacy. Please, Maria. He swore to me he'd never hurt you."

The last sentence makes my stomach turn. "He swore he'd never hurt me? Dad, listen to what you're saying!"

"He's not a mobster or anything. He's just ... a businessman who has connections to people who can help him get what he wants."

"Like me."

"Yes. Will you do it, kid? You're only twenty-four. This will only be a blip in your life, but it may very well save mine."

With my heart in my throat and fear settling cold in my stomach, I throw my napkin down on the table and storm off, not even bothering to grace him with an answer.

Hell no, I won't do it. I refuse to marry a stranger!

I worked so hard to start my own life, getting my degree and working as a software developer, renting my own apartment, and basically creating something separate from

the family that has caused me so much grief.

No. Absolutely not. He's going to have to find another way out of this mess.

I ignore my dad yelling after me, pushing open the front door, and rushing into the night.

What started as a sprinkle when I arrived has grown into a full-blown storm, and the sheets of rain are so heavy I can barely see what's in front of me.

I try to cover my eyes with my forearm, digging in my purse for my keys.

I can deal with being soaked to the bone if it means I get the chance to escape this place.

I almost make it to my car when a hand reaches out and grabs my arm, stopping me in my tracks. I yelp, slapping at the hand, assuming it's my dad and unable to tell otherwise with the rainwater streaming down my face. But then, I turn around and see that it's not my dad at all.

It's a tall man, at least 6'3, with dark hair plastered to his forehead, rainwater dripping from his nose, and a stern look on his face.

His eyes are so dark that I can't even see the difference between his iris and his pupil.

And even though I have no idea who he is, there's something about him that makes my heart race with fear.

"Maria," he says, his voice deep and authoritative. "You're going to get in the car with me."

"What? Who the hell are you?" I try to step away from him, but he just tightens his grip on my arm.

"I'm Xavier Romano. Your future husband."

Panic swells as he pulls me forward, and I barely have time to dig my heels in before he's opening the door to a huge, black SUV and all but pushing me inside.

He shuts the door behind me, but before I can scramble for the handle to try and escape, he's climbing into the driver's side and hitting the lock button.

The locks click down, trapping me in here with this strange, intense man who apparently wants me to marry him.

I whip my head to look at him. "Get me out of this car right now or I'll scream bloody murder!"

Xavier doesn't even turn to look at me. "Go ahead, Maria. No one will hear you."

I grit my teeth, trying to ignore how deep and warm his voice is.

I don't know what this guy thinks he's doing, but I refuse to let him intimidate me.

He reaches into the center console and offers me a small towel, which I reluctantly take.

Dabbing the water away from my face, I'm finally able to get a good look at him, and really seeing him for the first time hits me like a ton of bricks .

The attraction is instant and powerful, like some sort of connection shoots out of me and locks onto him the moment we make eye contact.

I knew he had dark hair and eyes from the limited view I'd gotten of him outside, but I'm not prepared for just how attractive he really is.

His eyes are a deep, rich brown, his nose strong, and there's a frown on his surprisingly soft-looking mouth.

Xavier's hair is jet-black and cut close to his scalp on the sides, longer on top.

At the moment, it's soaked, but so is the rest of him, so it fits.

Even in the less-than-flattering lights of the car, I can tell he's tan, and there's the dark shadow of stubble on his jaw.

There's an old, white scar just above his upper lip that I have the wildest urge to trace with my tongue, and he's staring right at me, like he knows exactly what I'm thinking.

I tear my eyes away and clear my throat, forcing myself to remember how angry I am about the situation he put me in. I'm sure I look a mess, hair soaked and dripping, mascara probably smudged across my cheeks, and my clothes soggy.

"What do you want from me?" I ask, my voice trembling slightly. I hate that it betrays even the slightest hint of fear.

"The fact that you aren't screaming and trying to escape the vehicle tells me you already know the answer to that, but I'll humor you anyway.

My name is Xavier Romano, and I'm the man whom your father promised your hand in marriage to.

You, Maria De Luca, are going to be my wife in less than forty-eight hours, so I came here to get you and make sure you didn't attempt some sort of escape.

" A hint of amusement softens his frown.

"Your father did say you were a wild one, and I can see he wasn't lying.

Now, buckle up. You're coming home with me. "

My heart races as he turns back to face the front and shifts into drive. I can't believe this is happening.

I glance at Xavier out of the corner of my eye and try not to let my gaze linger on the sharp curve of his jaw or the broad set of his shoulders. He's tall and strong, probably close to a foot taller than me.

I can see why my dad chose him to ask for money.

The SUV reeks of money, and so does the man sitting next to me.

I can smell the expensive cologne wafting from his skin, along with something else warm and masculine, and when I look down, I notice he's wearing a Cartier watch that probably costs more than my college education.

"This is stupid," I blurt out. "You don't even know me."

"No," he concedes, "but I have a problem, and you're going to help me fix it, sweet Maria. Now, sit back. We've got a long drive."

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XAVIER

M aria De Luca is the most beautiful thing I've ever seen. She smells like vanilla and sun-warmed skin, and if I let my guard down, she might rip my throat out.

I don't know why that turns me on so damn much, but just the thought of her launching herself across the SUV and putting her hands on me has me hard as stone, and I have to discreetly adjust myself when she takes a second to look out the window.

I'm thirty-three, not a damn teenager, how in the hell am I letting a woman have this kind of effect on me?

I didn't really give a damn what Franco's daughter looked like when he made the crazy deal to marry his daughter.

All I knew was that I'd been struggling with something, and an easy marriage to any woman would solve it in an instant.

Considering Franco looks and behaves like a toad at the best of times, I was more than a little shocked to see that his daughter was an absolute knockout.

I knew she was pretty from the pictures I'd seen on the walls of his office, but the photos didn't do her justice .

She's gorgeous, with long blond hair darkened by the rain, big blue eyes framed by thick lashes, full pink lips I can't stop looking at, and curves for days. It's almost

enough to make me wish this marriage wasn't going to just be for show.

I've had control of the family business for years now, but it wasn't until recently that my father became sick.

As much as none of us liked to admit it, the old man is looking worse by the day, and we're all afraid he doesn't have much time left.

I'd do anything for my father, but the one thing he's been asking of me lately seemed impossible right up until Franco De Luca offered me his daughter.

My father wants me to settle down and get married, so one day my child can carry on the family name.

Pops has been obsessed with the idea lately, and it was killing me that I couldn't give him what he wanted.

There is just no time for me to date, make some poor, unsuspecting girl fall in love with me, and marry her.

And that's how Maria fixes all my problems. Sure, I'm out a significant amount of money, but money is meaningless compared to family.

Plus, we made our fortune two generations ago when our spirit supply company was just a front for something more nefarious. We've been out of the crime game for a long time, but the reputation remains.

I don't hate it. Having people terrified of my family name is useful for business. Hence, Franco being so scared of me that he offered up his daughter.

I'll marry Maria, Pops will get to attend my wedding, and he'll be happy. As long as

Maria plays along, things will be just fine. I'm not an animal. I know there won't be anything real between us, but I never wanted to get hitched anyway.

Well ... until I got a good look at Maria, but surely that feeling has to pass .

As soon as our eyes met, I was drawn to her so powerfully that it almost overcame my better judgment.

I wanted to give her the world in that moment, kiss her senseless, and make her mine.

She's nothing to me but a beautiful stranger, but I feel like I've known her for years, like she was always meant to be my wife.

Not my wife in name only, but my real wife. It's a stupid notion, and I set it aside before I could dwell on the thought of the connection any longer. Luckily, Maria speaks, breaking up my thoughts.

"You can't really expect me to go home with you and just be fine with it. Even if I went along with this stupid plan, all of my things are still at my apartment." She huffs.

I shrug. "Your father can bring your things. My main concern is getting you home without causing a scene."

Her eyebrows lift, and she crosses her arms over her chest. "So, you're telling me that you're kidnapping me? You don't think that's illegal?"

"It's not kidnapping," I correct her. "You're going to come willingly, aren't you?"

She barks a laugh. "No!"

"Even if it saves your father's businesses?"

"No. He dug his own grave with that one."

"Hm." She isn't wrong, but that's something between her and her father.

She's mine now, and there's no escaping it.

Maybe I can make her new predicament seem a little less horrific, though.

"What if I tell you that it's temporary?"

You only have to be my wife for a short time, and when it's over, you're free to go. "

She looks at me suspiciously. "How long is 'temporary'?"

I think for a moment. Telling her the truth means I have to reckon with my father's mortality, and I'm just not up for that tonight. "Two years max. "

Maria blinks. "Two years?"

"Two years," I confirm. "And your father's debt is erased. Plus, you won't have to worry about any sort of bills, rent, or anything else."

Maria seems to consider it for a moment, and then she says simply, "No."

My hands tighten on the steering wheel. "All right, let me phrase this another way.

You're marrying me. There's no getting out of it.

We can be cordial to each other, or you can approach the altar kicking and screaming,

but the outcome is going to be the same.

I can make this good for you, Maria, or I can treat you like a prisoner. Your choice."

She blinks at me, and I can see the fury building behind those pretty blue eyes of hers.

I don't blame her for being pissed off, but that doesn't mean I'm going to let her ruin my plans.

This marriage is going to happen whether she likes it or not, and if I have to be the bad guy to get her down that aisle, then so be it.

"Fine," she snaps, "but also, fuck you. Why do you even need a wife, anyway? What's in it for you?"

I chuckle. "Only my friends get to know my secrets. Are you ready to be friends, Maria?"

"No."

"Then it's none of your damn business. Hey, if you're cold, the seats have heaters."

"Fuck you."

This time, I actually laugh. "Yeah, I know. Fuck me is right."

Maria continues to not make things easy for me when we get back to my family estate by the lake, but I can tell she's calmed down some.

Still, I make sure the security system will alert me if she tries to sneak out a window

in the middle of the night.

Maria De Luca isn't a petulant teenager, though.

I think now that she isn't at the spitting mad stage, she can see the sense of my offer.

And the futility of trying to get out of it.

I've lived here all my life, so I've grown immune to how it must look to people seeing the place for the first time.

Maria, as mad as she is, still lets out a small, "woah" when we pull up.

There's a security gate, the entryway with huge stone columns on either side, and a drive that circles the rose garden in the center of the front yard.

The house itself is three stories, made of white stone, with tall windows and an expansive balcony that looks out over the lake.

There's a gazebo down by the water, and the yard stretches on for acres in either direction.

My mother would have loved to fill the house with children, but things just never panned out.

Now it's all on my shoulders to continue the family ...

or at least pretend to while Pops is still alive.

"It's even more impressive during the day," I tell her.

"I bet," she grumbles.

I get her settled in one of the guest rooms, throwing her a pair of my sweats when she complains about having nothing to wear but her wet clothing.

My estate is in Evanston, just outside of Chicago, and it wouldn't take long to get her things, but I'm not in the mood to risk her trying to flee if we're in public.

Plus, I have something else I have to do before I can rest tonight.

Maria lingers in the doorway of the bedroom, one damp curl falling over her cheek, tempting me to reach out and touch it. I don't, but I also don't leave right away, looking down at the woman who will be my wife in a matter of days.

"I'll make this good for you," I tell her, and Maria flushes bright red.

It takes me a second to realize how sexual that must have sounded, but instead of apologizing, I bend down enough to brush my lips over her blushing cheek before stepping back.

That should give her a little something to think about tonight. "Goodnight, Maria."

I don't look back, but I can hear that it takes her several seconds to close the door behind her. It's good to know she's just as affected by our strange connection as I am. Maybe I can use that to my advantage in the coming days ... if she doesn't figure out how to first.

My smile fades as I make my way to the other wing of the house, my parents' wing. It's late, but I know my father doesn't sleep much these days, and my suspicions are proven correct when I see the light shining under his study door.

He looks up from where he's sitting on the couch, a blanket over his legs and a book in his hand. He sets the book down and gives me a tired smile.

"Xavier. What are you doing here so late?"

I shrug. "I came to see you."

Pops's smile turns wry. "Don't worry, your mother made sure I ate."

My mom has been trying to keep Pops fed and healthy for so long now. She's tried every possible combination of diet and health regimen, but nothing seems to work. "That's not why I'm here. I, ah, have some news, Dad."

He leans back, giving me a look. "Oh yeah?"

"I'm getting married."

My father's eyebrows lift, and there's so much hope in his expression that it makes my chest ache. "Really?"

I nod, swallowing hard around the sudden lump in my throat. "Yeah, Dad. Her name is Maria. You and Mom will meet her tomorrow. We want to get things done fast."

His eyes tear up, and I look away before I lose my shit too. It's been so fucking hard watching him slowly get worse, and as much as I want him to get better, I know he won't. The doctors have already given us the prognosis, and it isn't good.

"Thank you, son," he says softly, "for doing this for your old man. It means the world to me."

"It means a lot to me, too, Pops," I manage to reply.

"This girl must be something special." He looks at me with an expression I've seen on his face a thousand times before. It's pride, pure and simple, and I've never felt more like a man than when I see that look from him.

"She is," I tell him truthfully. I might not know Maria well, but I recognize a spark in her. "I think you're going to love her."

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MARIA

It's weird. There are a million ways I can potentially get out of this sham marriage, and I think there's a pretty high chance of success with some of them—throwing a fit and refusing to go down the aisle, finding some way to call the police and report myself kidnapped, or make an enormous scene in front of the wedding crowd.

I can easily make myself the worst sort of bride, more trouble than I'm worth for someone as seemingly put together as Xavier Romano.

But ... I haven't made a single move. Not yet, at least. Maybe it's that I'm still in shock from all of this happening so fast, but I haven't left.

And before I know it, I'm being fitted into a wedding gown.

Like most women, I imagined what I wanted my wedding dress to look like from a young age.

I keep telling myself that this isn't a real wedding, just something unfortunate I'm being forced into, and I shouldn't care what kind of dress I wear.

Still, I turn down four dresses before I slide into the fifth and finally feel a spark.

"Huh," I say, turning back and forth in the mirror of the guest room.

Xavier didn't trust me not to leave, so he had a local bridal shop bring me a small selection to choose from, and the attendant who delivered them already looks

exhausted.

She perks up when I finally display interest. "This one ... isn't so bad. I like it, I think."

The dress is off-white and strapless, with a plunging neckline. It's form-fitting through the torso and then flows down to my feet. The skirt isn't big or fluffy, but it does have some volume to it. There are no jewels or crystals, just simple elegance.

"Oh, this one is perfect on you," the attendant gushes, hurrying over to adjust the veil pinned to my hair. "What do you think?"

I tilt my head at my reflection. The dress isn't fancy, but it makes me feel beautiful, natural, and not overdone.

"It will work," I tell her after a long moment, feeling my heart clench in my chest. I think about my late mother, the businesses my father is trying to save, and the sacrifices I have to make to ensure that happens. It isn't fair, but life rarely is.

I try to focus on the positives—all the money I'll save, never having to worry about bills. It will be okay. I'll have my real first wedding someday, and this will all be something to look back on and laugh at.

It's hard to feel amused right now, though, when I'm looking at myself in the mirror as a bride, set to marry a man I don't even know.

"Okay," the attendant says cheerfully, unaware of what a mess my life is currently. "Let's get you out of that dress."

Once I've changed back into Xavier's sweats, I head downstairs to the kitchen.

My stomach is growling, and it's been hours since I've eaten anything.

I was too nervous to go down to the kitchen when I woke up, despite the amazing smells wafting up through the floor.

When the wedding dress fitter showed up, there'd been an enormous muffin and bottle of water outside the door, along with a note reading, 'You're not a prisoner. '

I ate the muffin, but I still felt like a prisoner. Still, if I was going to be brave enough to pick out a dress, I needed to be brave enough to explore the rest of the almost-mansion.

When I descend the stairs, I run into the last person I expect to see, and I stop dead in my tracks. "Dad?"

He looks miserable, half sheepish, half guilt-ridden. "Hey, kid." He hefts the luggage at his feet. "I helped get some things from your apartment. You gave me a key last year, and ... well, I figured you'd rather I go through your stuff instead of someone you didn't know."

I cross my arms, relieved to see my things, but not my father. "Okay. Well, thanks, I guess."

Dad rubs the back of his neck. "I'm going to stay here tonight since, uh, the wedding is tomorrow. Did you want to invite any of your friends?"

I think about the girls I had gotten close to in college and blanched. "Hell no. This is humiliating enough with you here, and you're the one who got me into this mess. In fact, you can leave. I'm not exactly happy with you right now."

Dad's expression is wounded, and he opens his mouth to speak, but someone else

beats him to the punch.

"He's staying. If this facade is going to work, this wedding needs to look legitimate, and that means your father has to walk you down the aisle."

I turn to see Xavier coming out of the other room, and in the daylight, he's even more intimidating ...

and even more gorgeous. It's infuriating, really.

My husband-to-be is wearing a T-shirt and jeans, and somehow he still looks like he walked straight off a fashion runway.

I think it's something about how he carries himself. There's an aura of power around him.

I'm flustered, feeling self-conscious in his oversized sweats, my hair in a neat bun at the back of my neck, so I could try on the veils. "Why, uh, does it need to look legitimate?"

"Have your father take your things to your room and get dressed. Something ... nice. I'll explain everything, and then there's a few people I want you to meet."

I agonize over what 'nice' means, finally settling on a butter yellow sundress.

I let my hair down, loose waves falling over my shoulders.

Part of me wants to dress exactly the opposite of what Xavier requested, but something tells me it's going to be in my best interest to play nice and get the worst part of this ordeal—the wedding—done and out of the way.

After dabbing on some mascara and a coat of lip gloss, I head downstairs once more, where Xavier is waiting for me.

My dad is nowhere to be seen, which I'm glad for.

I'm struggling with how angry I am with him, and annoyed with myself over how much empathy I feel for him.

Oh well. That's an inner battle for another time.

Xavier looks up as I come down the stairs, and his gaze changes from bored to sharp interest. I feel my cheeks and chest warm as he looks me over, starting at my painted toenails and working his way up.

I swallow, my heart fluttering in my chest like a caged bird.

I'd been so attracted to him that I hadn't even realized that he was into me, too.

That could make this easier or harder. I guess I'll find out soon enough.

"Maria," he purrs, the sound skittering across my nerves and making me shiver. "Good choice on the dress." He offers an arm, a gesture so old-fashioned it throws me for a loop. Gingerly, I loop my arm through his, letting my hand rest on his inner elbow.

"Where are we going? "

"I figured I'd give you a tour while I explain what's going to happen over the next few days."

I have a million questions, but I hold my tongue as he leads me through the house.

It's large, but not as huge and intimidating as I thought when it was dark.

I can see the huge expanse of Lake Michigan out the windows on the back of the house, and it distracts me enough that I have to ask Xavier to repeat himself a few times.

He shows me the living area, the hallway where his office is, the two-level back deck overlooking the small private beach, and finally the wing of the house where he says his parents' room is. We don't go down that hallway, and Xavier seems stiff when he mentions it.

At the end of the tour, Xavier steers me toward the kitchen. My stomach growls in response, and Xavier chuckles.

The kitchen is spacious, with light-wood cabinets and modern appliances. There's a dining area attached to the kitchen, and a smaller breakfast nook tucked into the side where Xavier motions me to go. "Sit. I'll get you something to eat."

I do as I'm told, willing to listen if it means I'll get to eat, and I watch the waves lap at the shore out the window for a few moments before Xavier returns.

He sits down with a hummus plate with cucumbers and squares of pita bread, and a glass of water.

I dig in eagerly, and we're both quiet until I've finished.

"So," he finally says, watching me with those eyes that see far too much. "The wedding is tomorrow. We'll get married in the morning, have a quick lunch reception, and then we'll fly out for our honeymoon over the weekend. We'll be back in Chicago by Monday."

I take a long sip of water, buying myself some time. "Why do you need this to look real? Like, what's going on here?"

Xavier leans back in his seat, expression tightening slightly.

"My father ... is very ill. He isn't going to make it much longer.

He was upset about me not being married, and it's important to him to see me settled before he passes.

I'm an only child, so the family legacy is all on my shoulders.

I thought I had more time, but I guess not.

Which is why your father's offer was so appealing to me. "

That ... is not what I was expecting. At all. I try to swallow down the guilt building in my chest, looking down at my hands. "I'm sorry."

He shrugs, but I can tell he's not really as unaffected as he pretends to be.

"It's been a long time coming. I just ... still feel unprepared.

Seeing me take a wife is the only thing he's asking of me, and since he won't be around long enough to see me have kids, I can give him this at least. Even if it's an illusion, he never has to know. "

I shift in my seat, uncomfortable. "So you're going to marry someone just to make him feel better?"

"I'm going to marry you just to make him feel better," he corrects. "But yes, I am."

"Why me? There must be tons of women who want to date you. I mean, look at you," I blurt out, waving in his direction.

One side of Xavier's mouth quirks up. He leans forward. "What about me?"

"You're..." I flush again as he raises an eyebrow, daring me to go on. "Handsome. And tall. And successful. And probably rich. So why do this for my dad when you can get anyone?"

Xavier sighs. "Time. Sure, we have plenty of family connections, and there are plenty of women who'd be happy to let me court them, but even if I could talk them into an instant wedding, they'd expect we'd stay married after my father passes.

The last thing I want is some simpering heiress.

You, on the other hand, want out of this just as badly as I do. "

I'm not sure why that stings, knowing he wants out of our future marriage as soon as possible, but it does.

I feel the same way, so that reaction makes no sense.

"Yes, well, I still think this is barbaric, but it's this or familial ruin for me, so.

.." I sigh, resting my chin on my folded hands. "What now?"

"Now you get to meet my parents."

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Source Creation Date: July 23, 2025, 12:21 pm

XAVIER

My mother and father loved Maria, just as I knew they would, and she played her part perfectly. I could tell she was starting to come to terms with what was about to happen between us, and it was a relief, knowing I wasn't going to have to drag her down the aisle.

This morning, the hired staff is setting up the site of the ceremony down by the water while I watch them from the windows. It's a gorgeous day, sunny with a cool breeze, and my stomach is in knots.

It's almost time to get married.

I tug at the sleeves of my tux, wondering how my bride is handling everything.

She refused to have anyone else present for her besides her father, and knowing she's getting ready all on her own makes me feel a hint of unexpected guilt.

I'm pulling this woman's family business out of the gutter.

I shouldn't feel bad for her, but that hesitation creeps in anyway.

Maybe I should go and see her. It's not like we need to worry about the bad luck of my seeing her in her dress before the ceremony. Every bit of this is a sham .

Restless, I make my way to her guest room and knock once. I can hear her inside, shuffling around, and after a moment, I hear her call, "Come in."

Her tone is watery, so it's no surprise when I open the door and find her dabbing at her eyes with a tissue.

That's the only thing that isn't a surprise, though.

Maria is fully dressed for the ceremony, hair done up in an artful pile of curls at the top of her head, makeup applied with expert precision.

Her dress fits perfectly, the neckline dipping down just enough to show off the swell of her breasts and the delicate curve of her collarbone.

The skirt clings to her hips and then falls loose to the floor, making it look like she's gliding as she turns to face me.

"Hi," she whispers, pressing a hand to her throat. "Um, does everything look okay?"

I have to clench my hands into fists to stop myself from reaching for her. She's fucking stunning, and my brain can't seem to comprehend that while she is my bride, it's fake. I'm hit with that attraction from the first time I saw her again, but this time the force of it is tenfold.

I want to kiss her perfectly painted mouth.

I want to hike up her pristine white dress and thrust into her until she's screaming my name.

"Xavier?"

I realize I've been silent for too long, and while I don't grab her the way I want, I still come into the room and shut the door behind me. "You look perfect."

She gives me a small, unsure smile, but the wobble of her bottom lip tells me tears aren't far.

"What's wrong? "

It's a stupid question. I'm forcing her into a marriage, into leaving her home and moving into mine, but asking is instinctual. She makes me want to protect her, even if deep down I know I'm the one causing her pain.

"I..." Maria inhales in small, gulping breaths as she tries to hold back her tears. "I think I'm losing my mind, because I'm not upset that this has to happen anymore. Now I'm afraid I'm going to mess this up in front of everyone and disappoint you, and..."

She can't finish, but my chest feels tight, even as I come forward and pull her unceremoniously into my arms. "Hey," I murmur, stroking the back of her hair, "you're not going to mess it up. It's a wedding. Simple. Scripted. No pressure."

"There is when your dad is dying and he wants you to be happy!

" Her voice rises, panic clear as she presses her face against my shoulder.

"I'm already letting him down by not being someone you actually care about.

I don't want to mess up and make him think you're miserable or disappointed with me.

Then all of this will have been for nothing! "

Gently, I lift her chin so she has to look at me. She's wearing some kind of makeup that makes her eyes even bigger and darker, and they look impossibly wide right now.

"I wouldn't worry about that. My father adores you."

"He's only met me once."

"Trust me," I tell her, letting my thumb drift gently over her cheekbone. "You make one hell of a first impression."

Maria's hands have come up to rest on my chest, fingers spread, and I wonder if she can feel my pulse kicking into overdrive even through the tuxedo. "What do you mean?"

"Do you really want to know?"

She nods .

"My first impression of you was how damn bad I wanted to do this."

Her face is still tilted up to mine, and it makes it all too easy to slant my mouth over hers, uncaring about her lipstick or how goddamn awful my timing is.

Maria gives a small yelp of surprise, but she melts into me immediately, that invisible bond between us surging forward until neither of us can resist. Her hands grab fistfuls of my suit jacket while one of mine goes to the back of her neck, careful not to mess up her hair, no matter how much I want to pull it down and feel the curls running through my fingers.

My other hand goes down to her gorgeous round ass as I haul her against me, making her moan against my lips.

It's been torture having her so close over the past few days and not being able to touch her.

I knew from the jump that wanting her so badly was going to be a problem, but I'm a stupid man sometimes.

I nip at Maria's bottom lip, dragging another whimper from her throat as I grind her hips against mine.

She can probably feel how hard I am for her right now, and the thought of that makes my cock throb.

I go back to my earlier fantasy of fucking her in this silky little dress, but one glance at the clock on the wall has that idea quickly dying.

Maybe I can have half of that fantasy, though. Maybe there's a way I can see this dress up around her hips without us being late to our own damn wedding.

The kiss has grown frantic, and I suck at a tender spot behind her ear while she gasps and quivers in my grasp. Maria is so sensitive and receptive that it's making it hard to control myself. I know she'll take everything I can give her, and I'm starving to see pleasure overtaking her face.

I back us up until Maria's knees bump against the wooden vanity, and before she can register what's happening, I've hauled her up onto it, her legs spread where I stand between them.

It's been the longest our lips haven't been connected since I first kissed her, and now she's looking at me with a dazed expression on her face.

"Xavier..." Her voice is breathless. "We can't do this now. We have to get ready."

"We'll make it," I assure her, leaning in to press my lips at the swell of her cleavage. "Trust me, baby. You're going to feel so good, and I promise we won't be late."

She lets out a long breath, and I can hear the moment she gives in, her whole body relaxing under my hands as she spreads her thighs a little more.

Just like I'd been thinking about since the second I walked into the room, I push her dress up her thighs, careful not to damage the delicate fabric, but almost frantic to see all of her legs and thighs bare for me.

She lifts herself up just enough, and finally the skirt is bunched around her waist, and I can be body to body with her once more.

I barely have time to take in the fact that she's wearing white lace panties before her legs are snaking around my hips and pulling me close. My cock grinds against her core, and I groan at the friction, gripping her ass to maintain the connection.

"God, I've been thinking about this," I admit, rocking against her, my lips at her ear. "About getting to touch you."

Maria makes a strangled noise, her hands gripping my shoulders as if they're the only thing tethering her to the earth. I ravage her mouth, my tongue gliding against hers, my fingers creeping up over the elastic band of her panties as I start to work them down.

"What," she pants between hot kisses, "what are we even doing?"

"I'm gonna take the edge off," I tell her, coaxing her to lift her ass up. "I'm gonna make you come, Maria, so I'm the only thing on your mind for this wedding. "

She nods as I slide the lace down her legs, and then I'm back between her thighs, pushing them apart so I can look my fill. Her pussy is swollen and wet, her clit begging to be touched. Begging to be licked.

"Fuck, baby, you're soaked," I mutter, my voice low and rough. I let my fingers glide through the wetness. "Have you been thinking about me?"

"I'd be lying," she manages to say, bracing herself with her hands on the vanity top, "if I said no."

I grin at her, loving that she's not being shy, that she's giving in to this. "Good." I push one finger inside of her, watching her bite her lip. "From the first second I saw you, I wanted to get my mouth on you."

"Oh, God," she gasps as I push another finger inside her, stroking her inner walls as her cunt squeezes around me. She's so tight and wet. I can't wait to fuck her, but right now I need to taste her too badly to worry about myself.

"Grab onto the edge," I command as I fuck her with my fingers. She does as she's told, leaning back against the mirror as her hands grip the wooden sides of the vanity. When she's situated, I push her thighs apart and kneel, burying my face between them, licking a hot trail up to her pussy.

She bucks, crying out as my tongue brushes over her clit, then my lips wrap around it and suck.

Her whole body arches, her head falling back as she works herself against me.

It's sexy as hell, watching her lose herself like this.

She's not thinking about anything other than the pleasure I'm giving her, not her hair, or her makeup, or the fact we're about to get fucking married, and I love it.

I use my hands to keep her thighs wide open as I devour her, sucking her clit, nibbling at it, sliding my fingers back into her and setting a slow, torturous pace with

them. She writhes and moans, her pussy tightening as she gets closer and closer to the edge.

"Xavier," she gasps. "Oh God. "

I hum against her, my stubble dragging against her inner thigh as she shivers.

I can feel her getting wetter, hearing it as I move my fingers in and out.

She's so close, and I want her so badly that my cock is like iron.

But there's no time, and I refuse to be late to our own wedding because I can't control myself.

I want to drag this out, to have her a sweating, writhing mess by the time I finish, but I know I can't. So I crook my fingers inside her, finding the different texture of her g-spot, and repeat the motion until she's all but sobbing my name.

I'm relentless, stroking her, sucking on her clit, not stopping or letting up until I feel her inner walls start to spasm.

"Xavier," she says. "Xavier, don't change a thing, I'm going to?—"

Her voice cuts off with a hoarse cry, and she comes, the hands she's so carefully kept away from my combed hair giving in as she rakes her nails against my scalp, her body riding my face. I keep my mouth on her, licking and sucking her through it, until finally her shaking thighs begin to still.

When I stand, my mouth is still wet from her, and I wipe it on the back of my hand while she pants and recovers. It's a sight I never want to forget, her dress pushed up around her waist, her legs splayed open on the vanity, her face flushed and eyes

glassy as she catches her breath.

"You're so fucking beautiful, Maria," I say, unable to stop myself. "And you taste so goddamn good."

She shivers, eyes drifting closed. "I want to make you feel that good, too," she says softly.

I lean in to press a kiss to her throat, where her pulse is racing under her skin. "Later."

Her eyes fly open. "What?"

"Later," I repeat. "Right now, we've got a wedding to get to. "

She looks down at herself, pivoting on the now-shaky vanity to see her lipstick smeared and her gathered curls listing to one side. "Oh, shit."

I can't help but laugh, adjusting my throbbing manhood and helping her down from the vanity. "Oh shit is right. Let's get the lipstick off both our faces before we're late."

"But—"

I press a finger against her swollen lips. "No buts, Maria. You listen to me, and I'll get us through this."

There's an argument ready to burst out of her mouth, but she swallows it down and nods once.

"Good girl."

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Source Creation Date: July 23, 2025, 12:21 pm

MARIA

I go through the wedding like I'm in some sort of trance, my legs faintly quivering still, and everything else appearing washed out besides the man at the end of the aisle waiting for me.

Distantly, I can see that the quickly thrown-together ceremony is beautiful, with white and yellow flowers scattered across the sands and an arch made from lake driftwood.

A long white carpet leads to the arch so I don't get sand in my shoes, and the smattering of chairs lining each side of the aisle are surprisingly full.

No one I know is here besides my father, who is dabbing his eyes as he starts to escort me to my new husband, but Xavier must have instructed his family to spread out so it wouldn't look so strange.

He's so thoughtful. He even found a way to drain almost all of the tension living in me before the ceremony. Except now there's a whole host of other emotions swirling inside of me, all stemming from how good his mouth had felt on mine ... and between my legs.

I barely notice anything other than Xavier, but his father standing next to him catches my eye as well.

Xavier had no groomsmen, but like me, his father stands with him, and it tugs at my heartstrings a little.

I met the man yesterday, and it was like all the puzzle pieces about this fly-by-night matrimony had fallen into place.

Salvatore Romano is tall like his son, and the breadth of his shoulders told me he had probably been broad in his youth, too.

Illness had taken that from him, and he is thin and pale, but still strong enough to be next to his son on his big day.

He had been kind to me when I spoke to him yesterday, taking both my hands in his and telling me over and over again how happy he was to welcome me to the family.

Xavier told me when we were alone again that his father had been a hardass before he got sick, but the illness had softened him up.

The obvious affection between the two men and the joy on Salvatore's face made this farce feel almost worth it. If nothing else, I can see why Xavier is willing to go to any lengths to make him happy, even marrying a stranger.

Well, we're a lot less strangers after what just happened in the bedroom, at least.

I managed to clean my makeup up, wipe my lipstick off Xavier's face, but my hair was unsalvageable.

I pulled it down from its updo and ran damp fingers through the stiff curls until they fell into soft waves.

It looks intentional enough that no one will be able to suss out what the groom and I had been up to less than an hour ago.

Or at least I hope so.

The aisle seems a million miles long, but finally we make it to Xavier, and my father hands me off, sniffing audibly as if he doesn't know this is all bullshit. Xavier smiles, his teeth bright white, and the quivering in my legs intensifies.

Oh, it's going to be a long, long day.

The ceremony is short and sweet, our vows identical and generic, but it gets the job done. I'm infinitely glad we already kissed and then some earlier, because it took most of the nerves out of our 'kiss the bride' moment, even if we both lingered longer than necessary.

Xavier and I still haven't had time to talk about what happened between us, but I have to keep reminding myself there will be plenty of time for that later.

Once the ceremony is over, the hired staff switches everything over, adding tables, a small bar, and a carefully assembled table of hors d'oeuvres. In a flash, a glass of champagne is shoved into my hand, and before I can blink, Xavier is gone, and I'm stuck talking to his numerous distant relatives.

I rehearsed our agreed-upon story—meeting at one of my father's restaurants, falling head over heels for each other at warp speed—and I happily tell it over and over again, sneaking bites of smoked salmon crostinis and cucumber sandwiches when I can.

Everything is happening so fast, I don't even have time to process that I'm married.

I'm Maria Romano now, as far as the rest of the world is concerned, and that's who I'll be for the foreseeable future.

I'm glad for the chaos, because if I think about it too long, it makes me feel like I'm going to panic.

There is no sit-down dinner or speeches, and our first dance is a quick spin across the sand while the same string quartet that played me down the aisle plucks out something slow and sweet.

Finally, people start to depart, and Xavier is next to me, linking our fingers together in a way that seems much too familiar for how long we've known each other.

He leans his head down to whisper into my ear, "It's time to go. Let's get the hell out of here."

In another flurry of activity, Xavier leads me through the thinning crowd to my room, where I shimmy out of the dress, lay it gently on the bed, and change into something more comfortable for the flight.

It's another dress, still white, but soft and flowing down to my knees.

Casual and breezy, which is the opposite of what I'm feeling right now.

The bags had been packed last night, and all that's left to do is follow Xavier out to the waiting car and let the driver take us to the airport.

Once the car doors are shut, the quiet is so intense that it's almost distressing. I look up at Xavier, sitting beside me in jeans once more, with my heart in my throat.

"I can't believe everything that just happened."

"Believe it, wife." He grins wickedly. "You're stuck with me."

"I guess so." I sigh dramatically, glancing up at the driver before staring out the window. "When we're alone, should we ... talk? About ... you know ... before the ceremony."

"No. There's no need." His tone is clipped. "Life is too short for regrets. You're mine now, Maria, and if we behave as husband and wife in all ways, then so be it."

"But, like ... you want to? Or was it just a spur-of-the-moment thing?"

Xavier's hand lands on my bare knee, and he lowers his head to my ear, whispering the words, "I want to, Mrs. Romano, and there's something you should know about me."

"His teeth graze the shell of my ear, and I'm wracked in shudders, my core tightening as I squeeze my legs together. "I get what I want."

Six hours later, we land in Cozumel, and if I thought Xavier was difficult to resist in overcast Chicago, it's going to take an Olympic level of restraint to resist him here in paradise.

That is, if I even want to try .

We're whisked to the resort in under twenty minutes, and I'm too busy taking in the gorgeous view to worry about anything else. When the driver pulls up to the hotel, my mouth drops open.

"Oh, wow," I breathe. The place is gorgeous, crafted from white stone and littered with palm trees, overlooking the aquamarine water of the Caribbean.

It's been a long day, and the sun is setting over the water, making it look like it's on fire.

Was it really only this morning that he was in my bedroom, making me come apart at the seams?

"It's something, isn't it?" Xavier asks, his voice low. His hand is on the small of my back, guiding me as we walk through the lobby, and the warmth of it seeps through my sundress.

"It sure is," I manage to reply, not quite sure what we're talking about anymore. It feels like every nerve in my body is tuned to Xavier, and he knows it.

We've only got a few days here, and I haven't even questioned why a honeymoon was necessary for a sham marriage, but everything is different now that we've given in to our mutual attraction. It certainly hasn't made our marriage any more real, but it's definitely complicated.

At least it keeps my mind off how bizarre this all is. I'm supposed to still be furious, but I'm having a hard time even being slightly annoyed with the smell of the ocean in the air.

Our suite is a penthouse overlooking the sea, with large windows that open up to let the breeze in.

There's a huge bed covered in white sheets that looks like heaven, a private balcony, and an enormous soaking tub.

While I lean on the balcony railing and take it all in, Xavier quickly deposits our luggage, and my pulse kicks up a notch when I feel him come up behind me.

I swallow when his arms come around me, one huge hand splayed over my stomach while the other traces a path up my ribs .

Suddenly, my breezy little dress feels like way too little fabric to actually separate me from Xavier. But did I even want it to in the first place?

"It's gorgeous," I say, not turning around. "The ocean looks so blue."

"Mm," he rumbles in agreement, his lips ghosting over the back of my neck. The hand on my ribs has drifted lower, gathering my dress up so he can caress the skin of my leg. My thighs clench involuntarily, and I feel my pussy pulse with need.

I swallow hard. "How long did you say we have here?"

"Two days."

"Not very long," I gasp as his teeth graze over my pulse point.

"Long enough for us to consummate this marriage. Over..." —his hand slides forward under my skirt, until his fingers rest over my slit beneath my panties— "and over."

I'm unraveling, and the fact that we're so exposed on the balcony makes it even hotter. "Xavier, we're not?—"

"Maria," he interrupts. "We both know what this is. But that doesn't mean we can't enjoy this attraction while it lasts."

Xavier acknowledging that this is all fake hurts a little, even though I've been telling myself the same thing. But I push it away, not wanting to lose this moment of delicious connection. "Right."

"So let me get you off against this railing," he whispers in my ear, sending tingles down my spine. "Let's enjoy this honeymoon before we get back to reality."

"I ... yes. Yes, please."

His mouth is on my neck again, teeth scraping over my skin as his hands push up my dress and drag my panties down my legs. My breath is coming fast, my skin electric everywhere he touches me. The air smells like salt water and Xavier's expensive cologne, and all I want is to give in.

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With a sharp tug, my panties are gone, leaving me bare from the waist down. Xavier slides his hand between my legs, spreading them and letting out a dark groan when he feels how wet I am. His fingers slip between my folds and rub circles around my clit, making my hips push back into him.

"Oh God," I moan, already starting to shake. "That's so good."

He hums low in my ear, fingers dipping lower to tease my entrance. "So fucking wet, Mrs. Romano. Look at you, getting your sweet little pussy played with out in the open."

My skirt is long enough to cover me from the front, even with Xavier's hand coming in from the side, and we're high enough up that no one can see what we're doing anyway. But still, it's so risky that adrenaline is flooding me right alongside everything that Xavier is making me feel.

"More," I demand, my breath coming fast and sharp.

"You want more?"

I nod, unable to form words as he pushes his finger inside me, curling it and hitting a spot that makes stars explode behind my eyelids. He rubs against it relentlessly, thumb stroking my clit as my thighs tremble. I have to dig my nails into the railing to keep myself upright.

"Xavier," I breathe, pressing my ass back into his hard cock.

"That's it, beautiful," he groans. "Come all over my hand, and I'll give you exactly what you need."

The promise of more sends me tumbling over the edge, and I moan out loud as he works me through my orgasm.

It's so intense that it almost hurts, and I'm panting by the time he pulls away.

My legs feel like jelly, but when he turns me around and lifts me up, I wrap my legs around his waist with no hesitation .

I expect him to push inside me right there on the balcony, but instead, he carries me inside, laying me down on the bed before stepping back to look me over. His eyes are dark, and he's visibly hard through his slacks, his shirt unbuttoned halfway down his chest.

"This dress needs to come off."

"So take it off," I challenge.

He does just that, lips crashing down on mine as he crawls over me, hands finding the zipper at my back. There's something almost reverent in the way he peels the fabric off my skin, baring me to his gaze.

When my breasts pop free from the top, Xavier groans, cupping them in both hands.

"Fuck, Maria," he breathes, pinching one nipple hard enough to make me squirm. "You're so fucking perfect."

I writhe beneath him as he kisses his way down my neck, leaving little bites that send waves of pleasure straight to my pussy.

When he reaches my breasts, he lavishes attention on them, sucking and nipping until I'm drowning in how good it feels.

When he scrapes the stubble on his cheeks against the wet, sensitive peaks, I almost scream.

"Xavier," I hiss, fingers clutching at his thick hair. "I need you inside me. Please."

He chuckles against my skin. "You're gonna have to work for it, Maria. I'm still dressed, if you haven't noticed."

I did notice. That's what makes it so hot, being naked and spread out under him while he's still fully clothed, looking like a million fucking dollars even with his rumpled shirt hanging open.

He has me so worked up that it's hard to concentrate, but I'm determined to show him I can meet him where he is, so I push up until I'm on my knees, unbuttoning his shirt .

Xavier is still, letting me work, only making a low noise in his chest once I finally have the shirt gone and can skate my hands over his muscled pecs.

He's unbelievably gorgeous, packed with muscle, and dusted with dark hair.

His skin is warm, and I wonder briefly if the vacation will be long enough for me to get my mouth on every inch of it before we go back to reality.

By the time I have his pants and briefs gone, too, I'm speechless. He's enormous, thick, and heavy against his stomach, with a broad head already leaking clear fluid. I find myself reaching for him, wrapping my fingers around his cock. Xavier rewards me with a groan.

"Christ," Xavier grits out as I squeeze him, dragging my hand up and down. "Keep doing that, and this is going to be over very quickly."

"That's fine with me," I breathe, looking up at him through my lashes. "I want you inside me. I need it, Xavier."

It's true. I'm so wound up that it hurts, my muscles coiled tight, and my whole body buzzing. The second he pushes inside me, I think I'm going to come harder than I ever have in my life.

Xavier takes control, lifting me and setting me on the bed so I'm flat on my back.

He spreads my legs and kneels between them, lining himself up, his cock fisted in his hand.

I hold my breath as I watch, eyes wide as he drags the thick head of his cock over my pussy.

My breath escapes in a hiss when he finally starts to push inside.

"Oh God," I gasp, my head dropping back against the pillow. "Yes. Fuck yes."

He exhales as he slides deeper, his hands gripping my thighs so hard I think he might leave bruises. I want them, those marks that will remind me how badly Xavier Romano wants me. I'm so wet that I'm dripping, making the way slick as he pushes in.

It's not enough. It's too much, too overwhelming to see this gorgeous, commanding man taking his time with me, whispering hot words of encouragement with each inch I take.

It's too intimate, too much like what we're doing is real.

But it's not. I know that. We both do. This is just a mutually beneficial arrangement, no matter how good he feels inside me.

My legs are trembling by the time he's fully seated, stretched and aching around him. Xavier pulls back and thrusts in again, deeper and harder than before. My fingers scrabble at his back, looking for something to hold on to, and he grabs my wrists, pinning them above my head.

"Fuck," I curse, trying to twist my hips into him. "I need?—"

"You need me to fuck you," he growls in my ear. "Say it."

"God, please fuck me, Xavier."

The words are barely out of my mouth when he starts moving, pulling out almost all the way before slamming back inside. My eyes roll back in my head, my nails digging into his biceps as I struggle to hang on.

It's not enough for him, though, and he pulls out completely, flipping me over onto my stomach. I get up on my hands and knees and look back at him, trying to keep the vulnerability off my face. I trust him fully, but I just don't trust my heart right now.

Xavier steadies himself behind me, his big hands wrapping around my waist. He lines himself up and pushes inside again, bottoming out in one thrust.

I'm gasping for breath, gripping the sheets hard in my fists as he starts fucking me faster, his hips slamming against my ass with every stroke.

One hand slides up my back, grabbing a handful of my hair and using it to pull me up

until my back is flush with his chest. He wraps one arm around me, holding me tight, and his teeth sink into the side of my neck, pleasure and pain mixing deliciously.

"Oh God," I breathe, tipping my head back against his shoulder. "I'm so close. "

"I can feel you squeezing me," he growls in my ear. "You're gonna come all over my cock, aren't you?"

My pussy clenches around him, and I let out a noise that sounds desperate and needy, even to my ears.

"Answer me," he commands, his fingers tightening in my hair. "Say it, Maria."

"Yes!" I gasp, trying to push back against him. I see stars when he lets go of my hair and reaches between my legs, rubbing his thumb over my clit in fast circles. "Fuck, please just make me come."

He growls, pulling me back onto him harder and deeper until the tension snaps, and I fall apart beneath him with a scream.

My pussy spasms around him, milking his cock, and I swear I black out for a second as he continues to fuck me through it.

Wave after wave of earth-shattering pleasure rolls over me, and if it weren't for his strong arms holding me up, I'd be nothing but a puddle on the bed.

Xavier holds off until I start to come down from my high, and now he's seeking his own.

His strokes get harder, faster, and all I can do is hang on.

When his thrusts go unsteady, Xavier turns my chin and locks his mouth over mine, tongue pressing between my lips as he groans and comes inside me in a hot gush.

I'm not sure I've ever felt so full, so claimed, and the feeling is more overwhelming than I expected.

When we're both spent, he collapses next to me on the bed, breathing hard and staring at the ceiling.

I'm completely exhausted, but I also don't want to move.

I'm hyper aware that this is my husband next to me, my husband who just fucked me so well I don't dare try and use my legs.

And now that we're both coming back to the real world, I'm not sure what to do next.

"Come here," he rumbles, breaking me out of my spiraling thoughts.

I wasn't sure if he wanted to cuddle, knowing that this is temporary, but my heart still soars when he motions me over.

My body fits against his perfectly, my head pillowed on his shoulder, and he slides his arm around me.

It feels so good to be close like this that I have to force myself not to melt into him completely.

"Sleep if you need to," he tells me, pressing his lips to my temple. "We've got time."

As I drift off, his words comfort me, even if I don't totally believe them.

The rest of the weekend is glorious. When I'm not coming so hard I can barely form words, I'm floating on cloud nine, falling for my husband at warp speed.

For a blissful few days, I think maybe this arranged marriage is fate, a way to bring Xavier and me together, but the bubble of that fantasy pops the morning we're due to head home.

It all comes crashing down when I offhandedly mention how beautiful I find the ocean-colored paint accents in our suite, and Xavier responds with, "Well, you'll have an entire wing of the estate to yourself until the marriage is over.

Go ahead and paint your room like this while you're there. Something to remember me by."

I know it's a joke, something meant to be lighthearted and flirtatious, but I feel like I've been slapped.

It's a reminder of our situation, of why we married in the first place.

I was so sure Xavier cared about me. I felt it in his touch, heard it in the dark, sensual things he'd say when we fucked.

But I guess I'm still a pawn, nothing more than a tool to fulfill his father's wish to see his son married before he died.

Maybe I'd been stupid enough to forget that we'd be done with each other when we got home, but apparently it never left Xavier's mind.

I duck my head and dash tears from my eyes before he can notice what his words have done to me. "Yeah. To remember you by. Sure."

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XAVIER

By the last day of our honeymoon, I'm sure I could have booked the weekend at a hotel down the road from my home and barely noticed the difference.

Because while Cozumel is beautiful, Maria and I end up spending most of the time in bed.

No matter how many times I have had Maria, and in how many ways, it doesn't sate my thirst for her. Instead, it just makes it worse, building the fire higher within me, until I can only find relief when I have her pressed against me or when I'm balls deep inside of her.

It's like we're in some sort of trance in Cozumel, eating, drinking, walking the beach, and fucking. To anyone looking at us, we appear like any other just-married couple. How is it we haven't even known each other a week, and already Maria has made a home beneath my skin?

It isn't just her body, either. Maria was brave enough to face this marriage with her head held high, and she's met me beat for beat ever since.

She's fierce when she needs to be, and soft when she feels secure.

She's funny and quick-witted, and I find that even when we aren't all over each other, I seek her out just to be close.

Hell, if I didn't know any better, I'd say I'm falling in love with her. But that's not

possible after such a short time, is it?

Fuck. I'm a man who's supposed to know what he wants and who isn't afraid to make split-second decisions. Not being able to admit how I feel about Maria makes me feel like a fucking coward.

Reality doesn't settle in again until we're on the flight back home, and each hour that draws us closer to Chicago seems to be pushing the two of us apart.

My Maria, with the love bites still red on her neck, leans away from me, chewing at her kiss-swollen bottom lip.

By the time the plane lands, she doesn't even make an effort to take my hand or look back as we disembark.

It's pissing me off, but it shouldn't. I told her this was how I wanted things to be. We'd fuck, get it out of our system, and go back to our normal lives, pretending to be in love around my family but being completely separate otherwise. She said yes and agreed to it.

And yet I can't help feeling that things are different now. We had our honeymoon—or maybe a better term would be a sex marathon—and it changed things. Maybe she's just feeling unsure.

Or maybe I'm just an idiot, and this is a game to her.

The drive back to the estate feels longer than it did the last time.

That means I have plenty of time to stew over Maria's silence.

Once we pull into the driveway, I'm ready to snap, and I take her arm to guide her

into the house.

Inside, I shut the door behind us and back her against it, caging her in with my arms.

"What's going on with you?" I demand, meeting her gaze. "You've been giving me the cold shoulder since we got on the plane."

Maria crosses her arms, looking away. "Nothing. I'm fine. "

"Bullshit," I snap. "Why are you so pissed off at me? Now that the honeymoon is over, you're feeling like a prisoner again, is that it? Or do you regret letting me fuck you?"

"Is that what you think?" she asks, eyes flashing as she meets my gaze. "You're really that blind? You honestly don't know why I'm upset?"

I frown, confused. "No, I don't. You're the one who agreed to this plan in the first place. I told you from the beginning that we would be married, but it wouldn't have to be anything more than that. I gave you an out. I did exactly what you wanted. What the fuck do you want from me now?"

"Nothing." She pushes against my arm, trying to get past me. I let her go, watching as she stalks toward the stairs. "Just leave me alone, okay?"

"Fine," I snap. "Have it your way."

I'm too worked up to follow her. All I want to do is kiss her until she's forgotten about whatever is wrong, drag her back to bed, and fuck her until she forgets about being angry at me. But if she wants to be that way, fine. She's going to get exactly what she asked for.

My father is sitting in his recliner when I walk into his room, reading a newspaper and drinking coffee. He looks up and grins when I walk in, motioning for me to take a seat.

"Welcome home," he says. "Did you enjoy yourselves?"

"Yes, thank you. I didn't get a chance to talk to you before we left. Did you enjoy the wedding, Pops?"

"Of course, I did." He folds the paper and sets it aside. I'm glad to see he looks the same as when we left. I know he's not going to get better, but every day he doesn't get worse is a blessing. "It was perfect. Exactly what I wanted to see before I go. "

"Don't talk like that, Pops."

"No, it's true. I'm dying, and I want to die knowing that you're settled."

"I am settled," I promise him.

"I know," he agrees. "But that alone isn't enough. You need someone who can love you with everything they have. Someone who can be by your side through thick and thin. Someone who will be loyal and stand with you no matter what happens."

"And you think Maria is that person?" I ask skeptically.

"I do." My father smiles at me. And then, he says something that makes me think maybe I'm not as smart as I think I am ... something that tells me my father knows more about the circumstances of my marriage than he's letting on. "You just need to convince her of that."

Startled, I ask, "What do you mean?"

"You're a hard man, Xavier. I can't fault you for it.

I was the same at your age, but I can give you some advice that I hope you'll take—don't waste time.

It goes too fast. And don't forget to be open around the right person.

The one person who sees all the best parts of you, who makes you want to be a better person, will be worth everything in the world.

But if she can't find a way in through that hard exterior, she might slip through your fingers. "

I'm dumbfounded. "Did you already know?—"

"We can talk later, Xavier, but if the yelling I heard when you and your new wife got home is any indication, you have some amends to make. Go before she has time to realize just how difficult we Romano men can be."

He doesn't need to tell me twice.

I find Maria on the second floor of the porch, leaning against the railing in a pose so similar to the first night of our honeymoon that I have to clench my teeth to stop my cock from getting hard.

Remembering the way I'd made her come all over my fingers under the open sky is too heated a thought, and I need to keep a clear head.

She doesn't notice me until I'm standing inches away, and I reach out to grip the wooden rail on either side of her.

"Wife," I say the words into her hair, inhaling the scent of vanilla and lingering notes of coconut sunscreen. "Don't run from me next time."

She stiffens. "There isn't going to be a next time, remember?"

Those words are all I need to confirm the suspicions that my father planted in my head. I've been thinking I'm a fool for feeling the way I do about Maria so quickly, and that fear of foolishness led me to hurt her without even knowing it.

I press my lips to her neck once before whispering, "Fuck that. I changed my mind."

Her eyes go wide when she pivots in my grasp to look at me. "What do you mean?"

"It means I think we're both stubborn as hell, and just this once, I'm willing to be the one to crack first. Because Maria, I love you."

She stares at me for a second, and I start to worry I've gone too far. Maybe this isn't the right time to tell her how I feel. Maybe?—

All thoughts vanish from my head as she leans forward and kisses me, smiling against my mouth. "I love you, too."

I wrap my arms around her waist and pull her to me, kissing her until she's breathless. "You're moving into my room, and you're going to be my wife. My real wife."

"Mmm. You promise?" she murmurs, eyes sparkling.

"I fucking swear," I growl, sucking at her lower lip .

"And this still counts, right? For my dad's loan, I mean."

I laugh, burying my face against her sweet-smelling throat. "Yes, as long as you don't mention either of our fathers again for the next few hours while I show you your new bed. Thoroughly."

Maria's answering laugh is soft and needy. "You've got a deal."

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MARIA

One Year Later

After our balcony confession, I didn't return to the guest room for months. By the time we reentered to turn it into a nursery, I'd all but forgotten what it looked like.

The sideways vanity mirror made me blush, though. Even though I was obviously pregnant with Xavier's baby.

"Remember—" he started, and I had to clap a hand over his mouth before he said something ridiculous in front of the decorator we hired.

"Yes, I remember," I hissed before dissolving into laughter. "I remember quite well, actually."

The nursery turned out beautifully, but of course, baby Liam would be sleeping in our room for the foreseeable future.

Labor was as terrifying as I imagined it would be, but an epidural and my husband at my side made it bearable. And the reward—a red-faced, blanket-wrapped, miniature clone of Xavier—was worth every awful contraction.

After the parade of well-wishers, including Xavier's father, who was ecstatic to meet his grandson, have departed, and it's only Xavier and me once more, I feel like I can finally breathe again. I'm lying back in the hospital bed with Liam sleeping in my arms when Xavier offers to hold him.

"Let's trade."

"For what?" I ask, confused. Xavier's grin tells me something is up.

"You'll see. Hand over the baby."

Slowly, I hand Xavier our son, careful not to wake him, and once he's safely tucked in the crook of his arm, my husband plucks a small silver gift bag out of the duffle bag he brought from home. I take the bag from him, feeling its weight, and then shake the contents out into my hand.

It's a black velvet box, with an embossed logo I didn't recognize.

I flip it open and gasp. A single, perfect diamond ring glitters up at me, surrounded by a halo of smaller diamonds in an elegant platinum band. It's stunning.

"Oh my God," I say, my voice shaking. "Xavier, what?—"

"You can keep the first one," he says, motioning down to my plain gold band.

"But I remember how you said you preferred platinum to yellow gold, and I figured if we were going to have a real wedding this time, it should start with the sort of ring you want.

This time, your friends and family will be there.

You pick the location, the decor, everything. "

"Are you..." I shake my head in disbelief, hardly able to find the words. "Is this a proposal? "

"Yes," he says firmly, "and I'm not taking no for an answer. Marry me. Again."

I laugh, feeling tears stinging at the corners of my eyes. "I guess we are pretty good at it by now."

"I guess we are," Xavier agrees. "What do you say?"

"Yes," I whisper, watching Liam start to stir from all the excitement. "This time, try not to wrinkle my dress."

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XAVIER

Ten Years Later

It's taken ten years to finally get a week-long vacation with my wife, but from the looks of our suite and private beach, it's all about to be worth it. Our three children are with my mother, and I'm already buzzing at the thought of having Maria all to myself.

The only thing making me pause is the hesitation on Maria's face as she unpacks her new white bikini. She's biting her bottom lip the way she does when she's thinking too hard, her brows drawn together.

"What's wrong?"

"Oh, I don't know." She turns to look out the floor-to-ceiling window at the Amalfi Coast beyond. "I think I just overestimated my self-confidence, is all."

I walk up behind her, slipping my hands around her waist and leaning in close. "Are you kidding me? You're gorgeous."

"Flatterer." She smiles, leaning into me. "It's just ... it's been a decade and three kids since we've had an adults-only beach vacation, and my body certainly doesn't look like it did back then. I don't want to disappoint you."

"Maria," I say firmly. "You're hotter than you've ever been. Your curves drive me wild, and I love knowing you can take all I can give without breaking. Now put on

the damn suit and let me see you."

It's supposed to be lighthearted, but when she turns in my arms to look at me, her eyes are suspiciously misty. "You mean it?"

"Let me see you in that bikini, and I'll prove to you how much I fucking mean it. That's the only thing you're going to be wearing on this beach, and I'm going to spend all day thinking about how many ways I can rip it off you later tonight."

She laughs, shaking her head. "Okay, okay, I get the hint."

She changes in the bathroom, and I watch as she adjusts the triangles over her full breasts once she comes out. When she turns around to face me, I whistle low. Her body is a work of art to me, and the thin bathing suit fabric is a torturous temptation for what's beneath.

"You look good enough to eat."

"You already did that," she teases. "Twice this morning."

"I know. I've got a big appetite."

Maria huffs, all the tension in her gone as she grabs towels and heads toward the door. "If you're lucky, I'll let you have dessert first tonight."

"Deal," I reply, following her out into paradise.

The End

Thanks for reading!