

“Luli. My grandmother intended you would be looked after. That’s proof of it.” Gabriel pointed back to the billionaires found to be not quite good enough for Mae’s surrogate daughter.

“She wanted to hand me to a stranger like I’m a...a thing.” Her eyes were bright and angry.

“I don’t think that’s true.” He had taunted her earlier that she was one more asset he was inheriting, though. And he might not need this inheritance from Mae, but if he intended to accept it, he had to take all of it—including the treasure she had confined to this house like an heirloom jewel tucked in a safe.

His grandmother had valued Luli highly enough to think her good enough for her only grandson. For that reason alone, he couldn’t throw Luli away.

“You’ll honor the dowry if I marry one of them?” she asked with dread, glancing at the papers with desperation and anguish.

Repulsion gripped him at the thought of gnarled hands setting themselves against those luscious curves. If anyone touched her, he wanted it to be *him*.

“No. I want you to marry *me*.”

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UNTOUCHED UNTIL
HER ULTRA-RICH
HUSBAND

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UNTOUCHED UNTIL
HER ULTRA-RICH
HUSBAND

This book is dedicated to my son Sam and his schoolmate Luli. Sam mentioned Luli on a call home and I said, "I like her name. I might steal it for a heroine." He said, "It's actually Lucrecia." I said, "Even better." I later had the good fortune to meet Luli and she's lovely. Along with her name, I lifted Luli's vocation of computer programming and the fact her heritage is Venezuelan. The real Luli, however, has much nicer parents.

CHAPTER ONE

BORN IN THE Year of the Dragon, Gabriel Dean was dominant, ambitious, passionate and willing to take risks. He jumped for no one.

His signature detachment, however, was not impervious to his grandmother's ringtone.

The distinctive tinkle of a brass tea bell might have struck some as a sign of affection. And yes, he had seen her shake such a bell on two of the three occasions he had spoken to her in person, but sentiment was not a gene either of them possessed.

No, the bell was a practical choice, being odd enough to draw his attention no matter what was going on around him. Mae Chen's missives were financial in nature, time sensitive and always lucrative. He didn't need more money, but he hadn't joined the eleven zeroes club at thirty by ignoring opportunities to make more.

Therefore, at the first peal, he held up a finger to pause the roundtable discussion of an energy takeover that would make him the de facto owner of a small country. He turned his titanium smartphone onto its custom-made back and touched the sapphire crystal screen.

Transmitted from Luli: Your grandmother has experienced a medical event. Her instructions in such case are to promptly advise you that you are her designated heir. Contact details for her physician are below.

That was new information.

In one fluid move, he tagged the doctor's number, picked up the phone and rose to leave without explanation. He moved with purpose from the room, more disturbed by the label heir than by his grandmother's condition.

For one thing, Mae was far too bellicose to suffer anything for long, particularly ill health. She would be on her feet before this call was picked up.

As for Gabriel being her heir, she wouldn't stipulate such a thing without attaching a symphony's worth of strings. She had been trying to maneuver him into a beholden state for two decades. It was the reason he had kept his interest in her fortune objective and made no assumptions about his entitlement to it. He

religiously returned her invitations to invest with equally advantageous opportunities of his own. Tit for tat, scoop for scoop. No obligations incurred on either side beyond reciprocal courtesy.

“A stroke,” the doctor advised him seconds later. “It’s unlikely she will survive.”

Her transfer to the private clinic had been swift and discreet, the doctor continued.

“I expect this will cause ripples through the financial districts when it’s announced? I didn’t know *you* were her grandson.”

While Gabriel’s agile brain sifted through the implications of his grandmother being incapacitated, possibly disappearing from his life altogether, the inquisitiveness of the physician’s tone penetrated. He could hear the man’s thoughts buzzing like an annoying mosquito. Buy? Sell? Were there properties that could be snatched up before they were officially on the market? How could the fine doctor take advantage of this news before anyone else?

Thanks to their mutual exchange of information over the years, Mae had expanded from relatively stable investments in real estate to tech and renewable energy, precious metals and that fickle mistress—oil. None of that could be left without a sitter.

Gabriel assured the doctor he would be there as soon as possible. He messaged his executive assistant to reschedule the meeting he'd abandoned. He also told her to clear his calendar and notify his pilot to ready the jet. As he headed to the elevator, he glanced at the nearest face at a desk and said, "My car, please."

The woman quickly put her call on hold and his chauffeured Rolls-Royce Phantom arrived at the curb as he pushed through the revolving door at the bottom of his building.

The humidity of a New York summer hit him in the face, but it would be monsoon rains in Singapore. His butler kept his jet packed for all climes and occasions, though. His grandmother kept a room at her house for him, not that he had ever used it. Invitations had come periodically, maybe to discuss the fact she was designating him her heir. He also owned a building of flats in that city. The top one was designated for his use, so he never took his grandmother up on—

"Gabriel!" A woman moved into his path and dipped her sunglasses to reveal her fake lashes and waxed brows. "I thought you might like to take me to lunch. It's Tina," she reminded after a beat where he only stared, trying to place her. She splayed her hand on the

upper swells of her breasts where they were revealed by her wide-necked blouse. “We met at my father’s retirement party last weekend. You said you liked my song.”

He must have been speaking out of politeness because he had no recollection of her voice, her father or the party.

“I’m traveling,” he dismissed, and stepped around her.

If there was one thing he needed less than more money, it was another social climber throwing herself at him.

He slid onto a cool leather seat and his driver closed him into the air-conditioned interior.

Gabriel glanced at the square face of his gold Girard-Perregaux and calculated the approximate time until he would land.

Such affectations as vintage watches and Valentino briefcases meant nothing to him, but appearances mattered to everyone else. He always played to win, even at “who wears it best?” so he ordered hand-sewn suits in rare wools like vicuña and qiviut. He had his leather shoes lined with the softest materials when they were custom cobbled in Italy. He hung all of it off a body that he ruthlessly kept in peak athletic condition.

He wore sunscreen and moisturized.

And he genuinely didn't care that folding his grandmother's net worth into his own would tip him into the exalted echelon of world's first trillionaire. All it meant, quite inconveniently, was more work—yet another thing he didn't need.

His grandmother was his only relative of note, however, despite being both strange and estranged. He might lack strong feelings toward her or her money, but he did feel a responsibility to preserve her empire. He respected what she had built in her seventy years. He might be progressive by nature, but he didn't tear down institutions for the sake of it.

He flicked back to the original message and brought the phone to his chin as he dictated a text.

Who is Mae's business manager?

Transmitted from Luli: I assist Mrs. Chen in managing her transactions. May I help with a specific inquiry or instruction?

Artificial intelligence was so delightfully passive-aggressive, always deferential when it was being obstructive.

Send me the contact details of the man or

woman who carries out Mae's personal banking transactions.

Transmitted from Luli: I perform those tasks. How may I help?

Gabriel bit back a curse. Once this news was released and his connection to Mae Chen made public, a global circus would erupt around her financial holdings. The clock was already ticking, given her doctor had learned of their connection.

He switched gears and began sending instructions to his own team of advisors and brokers to reach out to hers. Once he was on the ground, he would learn exactly who ran things for Mae Chen and firmly take the reins from him.

“Luli.” The butler introduced her last, since she had deliberately positioned herself at the end of the line of staff, after the housemaids and cook. She was practically standing around the corner of the house where vines grew against the wall that ensured the privacy of Mae Chen's colonial-era mansion.

His mansion now.

“You're human.”

If she was, Gabriel Dean was the first to notice in her twenty-two years of existence.

Of course, Luli experienced very human reactions as she shook hands with Mae's grandson, bowing slightly and murmuring, "Sir," as she did. Her heart was pounding, her skin coated in cold perspiration, her stomach churning like a pit of snakes.

Aside from the married butler and the gardeners, she rarely saw men. Not this sort of man, especially. His black, glossy hair was precision-trimmed and disheveled with equal precision. He was clean-shaven, his cheekbones a masterpiece, his mouth—she didn't know what to compare it to, having never studied a man's lips before. They weren't the feminine peaks and sensual fullness with corner curls like hers. They were thinner, straighter and as much a statement of unspoken authority as the rest of him.

"Is that your full name? Luli?"

"Lucrecia," she provided, tacking on the other half of a name she had nearly forgotten. "Cruz."

His gaze flickered down her pleated-neck dress. Its straight cut was belted with the same pale yellow cotton and the hem ended just above her ankles, revealing her bare feet in sandals. The maids wore an apron over theirs and looked efficient and smart. Luli wished she had that extra layer of protection,

but even a plate of armor wouldn't hide the fact she was significantly more endowed in the chest than the delicately built Malaysian women beside her. On her, the fabric pulled across her hips and required a higher slit to accommodate her longer stride.

Gabriel was taller than she had expected. No wonder Mae was always telling her to sit. It was intimidating to have someone look down on you.

Gabriel's gaze came back to her face, taking in features she knew to be striking. It wasn't just that her skin was paler than the rest of the staff's, or her eyes distinctly Caucasian. Her light brown hair was naturally streaked with ash blond and her nose slender and elegant.

Gabriel's eyelids were distinctly Asian, his irises an unexpected gray-green.

She had seen enough photos to expect him to be beautiful, but she had not expected this radiation of power. She should have. His grandmother possessed a version of it, but this man's force of will nearly knocked her off her feet and all he had done was step out of his car.

Now he relaxed his grip so she wasn't sure if the handshake was over. She took too long to draw her hand from his. It made her feel

ignorant and foolish. The maids would be laughing at her later, but she couldn't help this weakness of fascination that overcame her.

"May we offer refreshments, sir?" the butler asked. "Your room has been prepared, if you wish to rest."

"I'm here to work." He glanced toward the front of the house. "Coffee will do."

"Of course." The butler clapped his hands to send everyone filing back to their duties.

Luli breathed out a subtle sigh of relief and started to follow.

"Luli." Gabriel's voice jolted her. "You'll show me to my grandmother's office."

He spoke English with an American accent, not the British one she was used to hearing and copying. He waved for her to join him as he climbed the front steps.

She was disturbed by it. She struggled to find acceptance here as it was. Mae gave her special treatment in some ways, but Luli never liked to do anything that made it seem as though she was *trying* to rise above everyone else.

Besides, her guilty conscience wasn't ready to confess to him what she'd done.

She concentrated on her breathing and maintaining a tall posture. She ensured her expression was serene, her movements grace-

ful and unhurried despite her unsteady pulse and the shakiness brought on by sleep deprivation.

She had had twenty hours to react to this sudden change in her circumstance. It was her habit, through years of boredom and confinement, to mentally plan for every conceivable situation. Thus, she had known from the first call of alarm into the garden what she would have to do.

Executing those actions, however, had taken nerves of steel and hours of careful coding into the night. There was no room for error—and likely no forgiveness from this man no matter how things played out.

Gabriel paused inside the opulent foyer, taking in the mosaic tiles beneath their feet, the inlaid wood in the stair banister, the priceless art and the arrangements of fresh flowers. All his now.

Luli halted as well, waiting until he glanced at her expectantly.

“Mrs. Chen’s office is the third door,” she murmured with a nod toward the hallway.

In a confusing war of chivalry against her effort to be subservient, he waited for her to go first then fell into step beside her.

“I’m very sorry about your grandmother,” she said. “We’ll miss her deeply.”

“It sounds like it was very swift.”

It had been. They’d all known the quick, anxious efforts of Mae’s nurse were futile. Even as Mae’s helicopter had airlifted her from the garden where it had happened, a blanket of subdued reflection had hung over the entire house.

Luli brought him into Mae’s office. The room was designed along spare lines, more staid than the other rooms, but still had feminine touches in the pastel color scheme and the English teapot that Luli filled for both of them every afternoon.

It felt terribly empty in here. Who would she drink tea with now? What was going to happen?

Her future was no longer in the tight, but secure hands of Mae Chen. Luli could kid herself that she was taking her destiny into her own hands, but that wasn’t true. The way this man reacted once he learned what she had done would dictate how the rest of her life proceeded.

His hands were long-fingered and lightly tanned. They looked powerful. Deadly.

Luli stood beside the rolling chair at the delicate writing desk that was her workstation, waiting for him to sit. He took in the room, glancing beyond the windows to the

garden, and gave each painting and vase a brief, incisive glance.

She found herself holding her breath, waiting for his assessing gaze to come back to her, hoping for a sign of approachability in him. Approval on some level. Something that would reassure her.

“I thought you were a form of AI, but there’s nothing artificial about you. Is there?” His head turned and his expression eased, revealing a slant of something that invited and appreciated, even as it caused her inner radar to tingle with caution.

She had the most bizarre sensation of being chased, breaths growing uneven despite not moving. Her middle filled with fluttering butterflies, but they weren’t fear. They were the excitement of the unknown. Of playful pursuit.

This was sexual awareness, she realized with a pressure in her throat that was an urge to both laugh and scream. She understood sexual attraction in a very abstract way. She had been exposed to the feminine tricks of making herself appealing to the opposite sex far too young, but she wasn’t trying any of them right now. She was barefaced and the only reason she stood tall and sucked in her

stomach was in an effort to seem confident and competent.

And she had been judged on her external attributes from an early age, but hadn't *felt* it, not like this. If anything, she'd been repulsed by older men studying her and assigning her a score. Occasionally, since being here, one of Mrs. Chen's visitors had noticed her and made a remark before she was shooed out of sight. She had been an odd duck, if not an outright ugly duckling.

She hadn't realized a man's gaze could make her stomach wobble and her blood feel as though it fizzed in her veins. That a force field could encompass her like a cup over a spider, so she could be scooped into the palm of his hand to be crushed or freed on his whim.

The butler came in with the tray, breaking their locked gaze.

"How shall I prepare your *kopi*, Mr. Dean?" the butler asked, pouring from the carafe into a jade-green cup with a gold handle that he balanced on its matching saucer.

"Black." His sharp gaze touched on the single cup and swung back to Luli. "You're not having any?"

The butler didn't react, but Luli read the servant's affront in the angle of his shoul-

ders and the stiffness beneath his impassive expression. They'd been at war for years because she had Mae's confidence in ways he didn't. He'd been incensed that he had learned from *Luli* who Mrs. Chen's grandson was—*after* *Luli* had informed Gabriel.

What could *Luli* have said, though? *She doesn't trust you. She doesn't trust men.* Mae had encouraged *Luli* to trust no one but her and *Luli* had given her the loyalty that Mae craved.

None of which changed the fact that if the butler had to fetch *Luli* a cup right now, he would *die*.

If she was a small person, she would force him to do it, but she was saving her energy for a greater revolt. A more daunting target.

"You're very kind," she murmured. "But that's not necessary."

"The bell is here if you require anything further, Mr. Dean," the butler said, glancing darkly toward *Luli* before he closed the door firmly on his way out.

Gabriel waved at the arrangement of sofa and chairs, all upholstered in silk brocade, and waited for her to lower onto a cushion before he sat across from her.

Honestly, this regard he was extending to her was laughable. Her conscience writhed as

she folded her hands in her lap. He was going to explode when he realized how undeserving she was of this respect.

Despite the fact she would have to take control of the discussion eventually, she waited for him to lead. There were so many ways this could go, some of them life altering—maybe even life-threatening. Her research had revealed he was a black belt in kung fu. Her morning tai chi in the courtyard with Mae and the rest of the household was no match for the lightning-fast and lethal moves he no doubt possessed.

“After signing papers at the hospital, I met with my grandmother’s attorney,” he informed her. “My power of attorney was finalized so I could assume the helm during probate. A press release has been issued to announce our connection. Legally and publicly it is accepted that I have taken possession of Chen Enterprises. Yet, when I arrived at the head office, very few of my instructions could be fully executed. I was told that every instruction and transaction goes through Luli.”

He sipped his coffee while his gaze stayed pinned on her.

“They couldn’t even run me a comprehen-

sive list of her assets and accounts, so I could begin contacting the banks for access.”

A coal of heat burned in her center, but she said nothing, knowing that stammering out explanations when he hadn't yet asked a question would betray her nerves.

“You realize I'm not the only person under the impression you're a sophisticated task-management app?”

“I believe that is the impression your grandmother preferred to cultivate.”

“Why?” His voice was whip sharp. She had to concentrate not to flinch as it landed on her.

“Among other things, it forces people to express themselves in writing,” she explained in an unruffled tone. “It creates a traceable trail. She told me once that when your grandfather died, his business manager attempted to take advantage of her. She wasn't able to prove his wrongdoing and she wasn't able to take control of the wealth she had inherited. Not without a terrible fight.”

“Those who don't learn from history are doomed to repeat it. Apparently.”

Bam-bam-bam. Her heart threatened to crack open her breastbone.

“Since then, it has been her practice to maintain tight oversight with regard to her

finances. She personally approves all but the most routine transactions.”

“Does she? Because it sounds like *you* do.”

“She didn’t care for computers. I work under her direction.” And steered her direction, when opportunities presented, but that wasn’t important right now.

“Your actions strike me as empire building.” He crossed his legs, hitching his pants as he did. “You have made yourself indispensable in a grasp for power. I’ve seen it before, many times.”

“I have no empire,” she assured him.

His cynical look said he saw right through her, which shouldn’t cause her stomach to bottom out, but it did. He was nothing to her, but it was taking every ounce of courage she possessed to hold his gaze.

It struck her that she had never had the courage to defy Mae. What chance did that give her against someone like *him*?

“You live here?” The cynical twitch of his mesmerizing mouth called her a parasite.

“A room is assigned to me, yes.”

“Where did you come from?”

“Venezuela.”

“That wasn’t what I was asking, but I hear that in your accent now.” His gaze shifted as

he took in her features once again. "It's sultry. Exotic."

He sounded vaguely mocking, which stung. Her rudimentary English, taught to her by a chaperone, had been perfected here, where Mae had learned it from a British boarding school. The staff spoke broken versions peppered with Indian, Malay and Pilipino accents.

As he stared at her, the tingle of sensual, elemental awareness shimmered around her again, disconcerting her. Logically, she presumed she could use her voice and looks to charm and distract him, but she had no practice wielding those weapons. Instead, she found herself fascinated by the subtle inflections in his voice and the slightest twitch of his lips.

"How long have you been here?" he asked.

"Eight years."

"Not Singapore. In this house, employed by my grandmother."

"I came to this house when I came to Singapore eight years ago."

He frowned. "How old are you?"

"Twenty-two."

"Were you hired as a housemaid?" He was taken aback. "How did you come to be doing high-level work like this?" He jerked

his chin toward the sleeping laptop on the writing desk.

She licked her lips. How to explain?

“As I said, your grandmother found computers tiresome, but she wished to be as hands-on as possible with every facet of her business.”

“You’re her hands?”

He was skeptical, but it was true. Luli couldn’t count the number of times Mae had nudged her in the back of the shoulder and told her, *Go back. Show me that again.*

“I perform various confidential tasks at her direction.”

“Bank transfers, stock purchases...?”

“Yes. If a broker or middleman is used, I follow up after transmitting requests to ensure the task has been completed. I compile background information on potential employees and business partners, assist her in reviewing performance reports and run random secondary checks on various budgets and accounts, helping spot discrepancies that could point to misuse.”

“People love audits, especially random ones. I bet you’re very popular.” He was being sarcastic.

“A necessary evil” was probably the kind-

est thing she'd been called, usually in an email chain not meant for her eyes.

Was she evil? She would have called her mother that, until she had been backed into a corner herself and now had to think about how *she* would survive.

“As you say, most people think I’m a computer program. I’ve never concerned myself much with whether people *like* me so long as your grandmother was satisfied with my work.”

A small lie. She would love a friend, a real one, not an old woman who had forgotten what it was like to be young and curious about the world. One who was scared to let her see any of it, in case it made her leave.

“On the topic of programs,” she said, feeling clammy sweat break on her palms. “It might interest you to know that your grandmother requested I switch exclusively to using your operating system. She had reservations about cloud-based so she purchased the download versions. We use all your business modules, accounting and security, the productivity suite... She wanted to know her most important records and cryptocurrency were backed up and protected against intrusion. She liked that you claim it’s next to im-

possible to hack. I'm sure *you* could get in, though. If you had to."

There. She was inching onto the limb she had chosen.

It might hold her or it might snap and send her plummeting to her death.